

CLOUD SPOTTERS

FIRST

Her first house
lounged across the Equator,
inhaled heat and exhaled it
as thick viscous vapour
haunting the shutters
in the twilight interior
where night rested by day
and night creatures came and went
and came again
skittering, slithering.

Heat tipped her downstairs,
shrugged her off the veranda
straight into the slow
path of adders, tongues flicking
as she ran on the lawn
to the maw of the sea.
Then the house warned
the sea, and the sea
paid attention: waited with
a rip tide, gripped her feet,
tugged hard.

But she dug herself in,
disobedient, determined:
watched a crab washed away
and stayed.

Bougainvillaea welcomed her
back with a bloom.
House glanced at her once
and she clearly heard
a shutter half open
slam shut.

ARK

My animals vanished.

I was five at the time. In the night
they departed on painted paws and wooden hooves,
padding, prancing, dancing off the dresser
to go where?

They were never found.

There were searches: behind the dresser,
under the bed, in the wardrobe, outside the window.
I told the truth, said I saw them leave, but only now
do I know

where they went:

it was the ark inside me,

I keep people there too,
my departed mother, dead friends, also many
I know intimately but have never met, from other centuries,
other worlds, lives variously shaped
and ended.

Breathing creatures too, human
and otherwise, reside in my ark. Most feel contained,
consoled as if they'd been taken by the hand,
a few are uneasy, slightly queasy; seek
an exit in vain.

I avoid doves and landfall,
an emptied ark would be no use to me.
So far no storms have seriously caused me to question
my course to the ends of the earth. And
my ark sails on.

DAR TO ZANZIBAR

Six in all, they left after sunset,
silently slipped the mooring, a cutting loose
into twilight as they tacked swiftly past
dhows already dozing, palms heavy with heat.
Set out to sea, the sea, warm as breath.

Their lives were left on the steamy shore,
hot-house feelings, the routine arrhythmia
stripped off with workday clothes, weight,
for smooth sailing, a night sail, lightning trip
from Dar to Zanzibar and back.

Once the last of the light from the coast line
vanished, the full moon appeared and the wind
picked up, blew the boat like a leaf along
a silvery corridor between dark and dark,
undercurrents undone by surface glitter.

Though flying fish flew and dolphins followed,
in such vastness their free-floating minds couldn't tell
if they were still water-held or released
into space: space odyssey.

Freedom lasted 'til landfall, early morning,
too early: night customs detained them.
When at last they set foot on sandy land,
the ascending sun was blazing, a furious eye
burning away cool night vision.

Tired eyes glancing impatiently at each other
they were quietly cranky, thinking next week,
and the tedium of tacking back into the wind,
as they breakfasted at a run-down beach hotel,
then set off by road to see a slave fort.

PRETTY THINGS

It was ugly, an ugly day
wet as a wicked toad's back,
and he strayed from the road
straight into the ditch, dodging
a dirty tractor on a narrow dirt track.

A few foul words were said, and
said again, as they waited for rescue
beside a run-down farmhouse and
a ruined barn next to slurry-soiled
fields draining away into wasteland.

Creatures appeared, three mangy dogs,
menacing, baring their teeth, barking;
two scruffy cats, one raised its back,
and a dreary grey goat limping badly.
But by the door of the farmhouse

a birdcage hung, and inside the cage
was a bird so white, so light. A *colombe*.
The farmer's wife appeared, all smiles,
and said, *Elle chante, elle chante!*
And then the dove did, it sang and sang

and the farmer's wife, old but once
very pretty, said, Look, you can stroke
her little back. So they did, with one finger
caressed the soft smooth feathers on
the tiny weightless frame, and knew

this dove was the prettiest thing ever.
And though the rain deepened and
the car was worse for muddy wear,
the day was tinted differently,
with whiteness, lightness, leniency.

SHARING

I'm sharing a shocking-pink rose
with a spider. She's a snow-white spider,
pops out between petals when I'm sure she's gone.
Could be poisonous, but we co-exist:
I don't dispossess her of her home and she doesn't
sink her cobweb-fine fangs into my finger.

There are many creatures sharing this house
with me. Mice, moths, lizards on sunny sills.
Not all my living companions are alive –
when the moon touches the top of the stairs,
the phantom duck flip-flops his way down its treads,
in search of the pond beyond the locked kitchen door.

Just as the dead share themselves with us
we share our one-and-only lives willingly,
call it love or necessity; worst thing of all would be
nothing-to-share-with, an emptied-out world,
not a lively thing left to share breathing the air,
nothing shady to interest the mind after midnight.

I share this end-of-world thought with my spider,
ask her, 'last woman standing?', you or me?

ANNIVERSAIRE

There'll be a small gathering –
do-gooders, the curious, a psychologist or two –
at the mouth of the cave, no candelabra or candles,
just a raising of conch shells and cabbage leafs filled
with fresh dew, a few raindrops, feverfew.

The cave-dweller will just sit there
lost in labyrinthine logic, twisting tunnels of thought,
the dark and the winding seeking out that special place,
cavernous, cathedral-like, stalagmites,
faithful stalactites

sanctifying his communion
with handprints, red on rock: the deer and the spears,
stick figures single-file, casting shadows by oil lamps
conjuring his face, fire-lit feasts, beasts
slaughtered in his honour.

Sun behind mountains, night near,
those-who-invited-themselves will disperse down the hill
to their valley, and the cave-person, in an attempt
at good grace, will try out gratitude
for dew, raindrops, raised glances.

IN SEARCH OF A THEOREM

Us must-knows,
busy-bodies bothered by the universe's secrets,
pace blackened rooms, race chalk across blackboards,
struggling, striving
to go figure and find

a single simple insight
sublimely equated, a balancing act,
space and time entwined on the tip of the mind.
A bit of an epiphany? Some might talk of God,
we just call it an awfully good theorem

and if pressed to explain we might coyly
refer to fractional diffusion, free transport,
observed regularity, or an iterative scheme
on an entropic theme.
Maybe violent relaxation –

sounds chaotic, we know,
a mental black hole or blind-spot,
a slip of the chalk after midnight – a mistake!
But we hear music, know how the Spheres spin,
see Beauty.

To seek is to find: reality wants to tell itself.
And it speaks in numbers.

CLOUD SPOTTERS

Cloud spotters are hard to spot –
in their pale blues and off-whites they blend
with cloud-streaked skies as they stand stock-still
on hill tops, roof tops and in freshly tilled fields.
Their trance-like demeanour deflects attention: only falcons
and flying beetles observe them, people pass them by.

If addressed inadvertently, their responses are
inaudible as fog replying to rocky ground.
Yet there's loudness in their longing upward gaze
as if watching were a calling out to clouds
to come, descend and take them in, and into
cirrus, nimbus, cumulous – all shape-shifting
in an endless selfless act of self-invention.

And how cloud spotters adore this, envy it too,
stuck as they are in their sandbag bodies
pinning them to the ground when they know –
just *know* – there's sky behind their eyes, and
they were born to be up there, scudding along
with cirrostratus, altocumulus, cumulonimbus.
An error of atoms made them animal.

Being born in the wrong body is an easier thing
than being born corporal and feeling ethereal.
Best hope: reincarnation as drifting mist. Meanwhile,
cloud spotters point cloud-coloured faces at the sky,
ignore their treacherous earth-loving feet.
Dread sunny days.

MASS OBSERVATION

We watch others endlessly
to see beneath the skin the breath
of lives living themselves behind closed minds.
Observation is silent as secrets, and safe.

Other animals delight from our earliest days,
dromedaries, scorpions, newts, tree martens:
every movement, each response reveals
what *we* are, by what *we're* not.

People watching is trickier, risks intimacy,
can be alarming or lovely or lead to love.
The risk-averse watch people in books, close reading
a self-trafficking from solitude to solace.

To watch people watching is to wonder
at the yearning to see more, see it all, as if looking
is true touching. And distance means closeness:
stand back and embrace the whole picture.

But there's a rarefied risk: observation trapped
(like a bike in a tram track) in a light duct
round the world, watcher doomed to a view
of his back, as if he's turned his back on himself.

PTSD

His life, still living,
is lived out in two places: oncology,
pure poison, one week out of three,
and his club, its warm fire, the bright chandeliers.
Face cadaverous above a scarlet cravat,
he greets her, kisses her hand,
murmurs, "You look ghastly in black."
Did he say 'ghostly', she's puzzled:
all those years, countless compliments,
her courteous returns. And now?
She says, "Love that cravat."

As they enter the dining room
his ill spirit starts to dance. Waiter's met
with daft demands, cranky reprimands.
Hands clenched she stares at a painting,
gilt-framed: tiger tearing into a turkey.
He turns to her with a look just like love,
says, "Gave you Post Traumatic Stress
last time we met, didn't I." Eyes gleaming
he adds, "Then again you never have been
exactly stable." Inwardly she flares; he stares,
amused, a skeletal cat with a sparrow.

Dinner over, he dons a tea-cosy hat, winks
at the doorman as if his life were just starting,
not ending. There's a spring to his step,
"See you soon," he says, and she nods,
limps off giddy with grief.

LOST

An outing! Trip into the big beautiful city.
Train chuckles and smiles at the countryside.
Hopes are high as the corn in the fields,
sunny as the vast swaths of sunflowers.

But when they arrive she finds a credit card's
missing. Lost? She's impoverished! can give herself
no credit for energy and interest: day's in debit.
Her companion shows her cathedrals, the magnificent *Mairie*,
but all she can see is card fraud and catastrophe.

And panic's contagious: companion turns anxious,
life's losses back and biting, nipping at heels.
Leads them up wrong lanes, down others far worse,
tarmac like quicksand, their feet so slow
traffic charges straight at them, and nothing they seek
can be found. Only solution, get any early train back
but where's the station? Hides like a hag.

Returning train's solemn as a horse-drawn hearse.
Corn's been amputated down to grey stubble
and the sunflowers have given up sun-chasing.
But, as the train pulls into their station she finds
the missing card! So all's well? No, it is not:
companion's left gravely unable to un-remember
past labyrinths, their lasting and lethal indirection,

and she still feels bereft, cut adrift. Lost!
Back home she learns why: that very morning
an old friend 'checked out'. Unlike the credit card,
he can never turn up again.

JULY

It should be the most glorious time of the year.
Outdoor tables are laid, plans painstakingly made
for al fresco festivities, fox next to the hen,
call it hubris or hope, there's a bell and a candle,
a book modestly mentioned but it's weeds, not words,
in the rose bed when clouds cross the palm, then the moon
with an Arctic chill and the chance of a famine,
table legless and bare, frayed fortunes in friendship
left speechless by tea as marred leaves mark the sky
and the pond catches fire, sunset burns it alive
with wrong longings for lampreys as a lamia lurks
in the depths of the reed-bed, deaf to death threats.

Expectation can do this. But take light rain with
some sun, and it's a perfectly reasonable month.

FISH

I am lucky to be able to care
so much for a carp who cares only
for himself and water-weed, tall reeds,
mayflies, and maybe the warmth of late sun
when he surfaces, and I'm standing
stalk-still for a glimpse of the twisting
of his orange-black back, flick of a fin,
his bright orange head foraging.
Then we both breathe light, and I know
we are shining, though dark stalks the pond –
the heron is hungry. And winter's in waiting,
ice coffin assembling. I cannot keep him
and each day scan the pond for tell-tale ripples,
a lover at an uncertain rendez-vous.

WILD FISHES

Chinatown, and it's pouring.
Storm drains turn to rivers.
To get from temple to tea house, tailor's to jewellers'
is like dashing through waterfalls.
The air could be full of fishes.

We take shelter in a Chinese department store.
Ride the escalator, floor by floor,
past medicinal counters with dried herbs and animal parts,
cheongsams, satin Mao jackets, porcelain pots
to the uppermost level where, beneath pummelled skylights –
glass become stream bed –

we find an artist at work
surrounded by pots of paint, brushes of all sizes, rolls of rice paper.
He's Mongolian, not Chinese – as out of his element as we are –
and he paints, not wild horses and eagles, but carp.
They swim from his brush
over delicate water weed. Golden and at ease.

Outside it's raining cats and dogs when we leave.
There are no taxis to be had.
Under our inadequate English umbrellas,
rolled painting carefully wrapped in plastic,
we wade our way back through water-logged streets.
Reach the hotel soaked, but at least our fishes are dry.

RESCUING ROCKS

Back of the shop, a rock collection,
old mouldy case, open lid exposing
compartments, each one neatly labelled:
scoria, basalt, quartz – like fossilized eggs
from a raptor long extinct.

Who could want such a thing?
I sense house clearance, a death, old man.
And as children never forget or forgive
his offspring simply wanted rid of him, every bit of him.

An odd impulse to rescue this item overwhelms me –
to shut the lid, take it home, tuck it away somewhere
dark, a deep cupboard, out of sight. But safe.
Even though I don't like rocks.

My father collected rocks, they sat on his desk
like old toads, mica eyes glinting coldly.
Rocks were his profession, his life's bedrock
but beneath, several strata down, was a lava flow
sourced by a botched boyhood he never forgave.

I recall my mother's unsaleable items,
none of which was it given to me to save –
crochet, cracked crockery she'd tried to repair
but damage always showed, unforgettably.

Next day I'm still thinking about the rock collection
no one will buy and I couldn't buy. But I felt for it,
felt briefly a need to protect it. Maybe this was enough
for the lid to close by itself. Like a coffin lid.

GEOLOGY

Touch a stone and you touch
where a dinosaur's claw sought purchase,
where a mammoth trotted,

and the leather-wrapped foot of an early 'you'
tip-toed towards bison, bow and arrows clutched
in a weather-reddened, sooty hand.

Stone opens time-horizons like a fish-eye lens,
such scope! You're in love with
geological chronology,

you hold a smooth stone
in your digitised mind; granite maybe or sandstone,
palm-cooling, thought-stilling

and it honestly tells you how it felt,
scrape of a glacier, or the rough black caress
of cold currents in deep sea trenches.

Or the frisson of free-flying
through space in a comet, it's time turned,
you're flung backwards,

you're a bit of a star, then pre-star
as the glittering past gives way to a beginning,
that bursting forth only stones remember

and like relating to fingers that feelingly
need the whole history: how stones mattered,
how they'll end.

STARRY

He thinks only of stars these days,
says that's all that's left. He's leaving
earthly interests, loves and likes;
wants up and out,
the utter: outer space –

soul's on the move, too light,
lighter than each breath to leave his body;
won't wait to let the last breath leave,
craves stars right now. Moons after
the Milky Way

as if soul once took
light years in its stride and soared
to strange new solar systems to find
a soul-full, soul-safe place (rough out there,
black holes agape).

He says his soul sends messages
as marvellous dreams of a Goldilocks planet,
maybe not 'just right' for life (burping methane,
murky seas of mercury) but perfect for souls –
full of colour and fury.

Fantastic! says his soul. Finds the heavens
so much more interesting than Heaven.
He can't help but agree.

THE COSMONAUT'S TALE

I'm related to Icarus
on my father's side, and my mother,
of course, was an angel.

Small wonder then, that my feet
never did like being grounded;
felt the sky in my bones

dissolve bones into notions
of flight, feather-brained
but delightful.

I was light, so very slight,
paper-thin, barely skin,
could blow away in a breeze –

it was sky-hunger.
I was dying to fly.

But my needs were
super-stratospheric: I wanted
a flight path

to far-flung stars.
Sought light yet-to-come
from profoundly distant galaxies

permissive of lift-off,
of being weightless in space –
free-floating, not gravity's slave.

SIX MONTHS LATER

She'd enter the library on a gust of grey air,
pass the blind typist, mount the terrible stairs,
go straight to her lair of a carrel, concealed
in a forest of unfriendly books.

Then she'd open her notebooks, white pages
leached alive: blank, noting only
the invisible fact that without the word 'you'
not one sentence could string itself together.

So she'd stare out the window all day, just stare
at wild clouds in a wind without direction.
Her skin grew translucent, her bones hollowed,
her feet never noticed they never touched ground.

Yet the stairs still checked, end of the day,
to see if she'd written a solution to losing:
found an alphabet for absence in a suitable script
for will-o'-the-wisps among the quick.

But she was too thin to weigh up other ways.
And life, so unlived, was so simple.

TONGUE-TIED

Right next to where air makes a swoosh
down the windpipe, something takes hold of
his tongue and twists so that words can't get out.
It's a strangling of speaking

and a living curse, but maybe if he lives
to be a ghost he'll be a voluble, loquacious spectre,
enunciating, ecstatically, wonderful words
to insomniacs and sleepwalkers.

Until then, whatever he tries to say
sounds like a landed fish gasping, or a drowning bird
trying to warble through a water-filled beak.
Not one sentence a lilting straight line to a smile.

He reminds himself that stones don't speak
and newts and butterflies are beautifully mute.
Surely speaking isn't everything.
Nevertheless he seeks reasons –

could be because he cried too much as a baby,
drowning out other people's smart talk.
So is this pay-back time? Or just because
as a boy he hid for hours beneath a buddleia bush.

WORD

Words don't come to me easily
and when they do they're uneasy as small birds
and reasonably so: know that, thinking of one word,
I'll say quite another,

or the consonants stick,
some would call this a stammer,
I'd say it's hesitation in view of the fact
that so many words drift in thin air with insects,
unattended or ignored; unable
to alight and illuminate.

But how truthful are words?
Replete with dark corners and cunning dead ends,
so many ways of meaning more or less than
what they seem to mean, words circle,
circumvent events, and feelings flounder.
Hearts stay unmet.

Is silence better?
Minds in daily proximity leak intentions and opinions
one to the other without a word being said.
And bad news travels telepathically tremendous distances
to those who need to know
the worst.

Nonetheless it happens, now and then,
through someone's barely parted lips, perfect words
speak themselves, and they're
salvation.

AWOL

Things can absent themselves
without warning or explanation.

Car keys will do it, avoid
their usual haunts, side table, coat pocket;
even imaginative searches, under the azaleas,
on top of the hen house, are in vain
and only when you've got a replacement
do they appear on a shelf, in plain view.

Plants can leave when loved the most.
Midsummer a beautiful bush just withers,
leafless branches pointing their bent-bone fingers
at the pale midday moon as roots shrivel,
shrug off earth. And yet, next spring,
there it is! Lush and lively.

But, there are things which never return,
completely vanish.

Like the cat. Goes out one night and gone for good.
Some say it's foxes, others blame careless hunters
and you blame yourself for having opened the door
to the lure of the full moon, voles and moles emerging –
what wouldn't want to wild itself
with such a tempting plenitude?

Yet where's the rationale for an absence
which has never been otherwise?

Like wild-hearted people, never domestic
no matter how close at hand they stand,
looking not-quite at you nor past you,
listening with an empty ear to earnestness
or carefree comments, your efforts unable
to make memories in their minds.

Only one thing to do: try going AWOL
yourself. Might suit.

FACE-TIME

His face is reflected in the restaurant mirror
but his eyes don't see his own eyes as his own.
He has learned to breathe at a breath-taking distance
from his skin, face formed before

he was born in the dark of *their* risk,
grave risk. It did not desist.

There are extreme destinations where he's
expected to decline to leave his gun at the door,
where the look of danger-management is read,
readily and at glance, a respectful glance.

He lives behind locked doors, high gates.
Once in his place you cannot leave of your own will:
his will alone works combinations, codes
to unlock freedom of a sort. He's never free –

locked into each blood cell, his mission
to defend the dead from what they most dread:
the dying again, history's fondness for replay.
But how can just one man kill killing?

He's watchful and laconic, never says exactly,
or even inexactly, what he thinks, yet orders
wild boar, his father's wartime favourite.
Raises his glass, the Bordeaux looks black.

Then his phone vibrates, it's his son.
Face-time! Man in the mirror laughs,
sound like a bright red bandana,
and he's the youth he never was.

ALARM

One frond of the palm tree
always quivers, just one –
as if a storm went through, maybe ages ago,
and it never recovered.
Yet the rest of the tree regards the garden
with equanimity.

There's a bit of the mind
quivers, remains on high alert, unnerved
by little things: a leaf that curls,
a pen out of place, a picture
tilted to the right, a wren that's left.
Smiles smile but hands stay clenched.

Why such unease? Memory
stays schtum, but heart murmurs
what it can and does recall –
lost palpitations: the missed beat
before the storm,
the arrhythmia after.

FRANTIC

Every day a jay tries to come in.
Flings itself at the window,
beak against glass, wings flapping
like loose sails in a gale.
Am I besieged or beseeched?

Such desperation! as if it
left its life in the house
and wants it back.
Birds do get trapped inside,
die without rescue. So is this
a ghost jay from last summer?
Or, did it get out alive, but
left its soul behind as one might
lose, in a panic, a shoe?

Then again, might be attempted
smash-and-grab: bird covets
a necklace or nest-worthy sweater.
Worst case scenario, psychosis:
thing's deranged and homeless,
frantic for shelter.

Only solution – shut shutters.
At least the glass will stay intact
and I won't be shattered.

THE NOISIEST SATURDAY

Forewarning was subtle: clouds clotting together
like a visible ozone layer to protect the sky.
Then it struck: demonic din, ear-splitting.
Perpetrators must have been ear-less or deaf.
Smiled as they tore up the road, may have whistled
if anyone could hear it above diggers and jackhammers.
Then, at six o'clock, seamless handover –
not one noise-free moment between roadworks ending
and a party starting. Live band, many decibels alive.
And drumming! A few brain-battered people ran amok
in the street, hair on end, brandishing TV controls
of no use when, at any volume, football and the news
were inaudible. Would quiet ever exist again?
Silence became a metaphysical concept, celestial,
as unlikely as seeing the face of God, though,
there just might have been one noise-free moment
when the party ended and before the drunks started
laughing and singing, sharing their excitation
with the whole wide-awake street. One resident
of a philosophical nature tried for tolerance:
said noise is in the ear of the hearer: small boys
love road works, teenagers dig drumming, and
at least the drunks were happy, not killing each other,
jolly company for chronic insomniacs.
But such understanding went mainly unshared.
Most phoned the council, serial calls, bitter, lengthy.
And the sky checked itself for lasting damage –
stratosphere aquiver, satellite gone awry.
Then shrugged off its cloud cover and continued
as an unusually sunny Sunday.

PHOTO-PHOBIA

A camera for Christmas! How kind!

He gives a kind of a smile, at least, it feels
like mouth-movement, an upturn when
everything inside him slides down.

He hates photographs.

Fatal reminder of being up against the wall,
family line-ups. *Don't move before I shoot!*
Standing stock still, dead silence, not a sniffle
before the heart-stopping 'click'.

Consequence? assorted death masks,
albums as graveyards and aides-memoires (as if needed)
of his heart's pitter-patter, sick mouse palpitations,
awaiting the camera's coup de grace.

And now, he holds in his hands
this same means of destruction. Small, light,
lethal. Could be a gun, a hand grenade.
Should he point it, say *Smile!* Fire away?

To his credit he does not.

Takes the camera home, places it in front of
a mirror. Sets the timer, stands back,
watches the fatal flash

as it takes a picture of itself.
How else to kill it?

SECOND

Her second house
was a house of snow,
snow shouldered the doors,
leant hard against windows;
open a window and it tumbled right in,
froze floors into treacherous ice rinks.
Heat that she'd known had
turned inside out into cold,
deepest cold. Frost-bitten
she was snow-stuck
and smitten.

Inch by glacial inch,
snow shifted this house
to Arctic latitudes, last peak to the pole;
little laughter, eyes froze
but she saw with delight
a white prospect,
dark details leached out
as she lolled through snow
down to the fast fierce river,
its ice floes enticing
frozen feet.

She stayed snow-blind
in summer, dreamed
avalanche dreams:
igloo buried alive
a lasting vision
of a last house.

BACKTRACKING

After years of enchantment with uncharted places,
sea floors, cloud ceilings, dreamlands, edgelands,
I find myself lost to the love of being lost,

trying to find a path back to my original place
where morning met with me freshly
and I breathed with ease.

Time to turn and return, retrace the steps I took,
the flighty ones, the heavy-hearted.

But how to find the path they made? Terrain's transformed,
way stones vanished, stiles no longer there.
Memory's mist.

Instead of country to country could I plot a progression
from person to person, first friend to last night's night-hag
who seemed to know my name?

Or, maybe I've left myself a snail trail of yearnings,
that shoulder blades could sprout wings, that finger tips
could tempt entanglement.

Unless I've been nowhere, and still am where I was
before my parents were born.
Then there is no beginning

and pathfinding's a standing still like stones,
mossy stones beneath a surfeit of stars.
Time to emulate.

MAYBE

Long last letter, cranky cat-loving Gran.
Love of my life! she wrote, 'I's leaping
for joy. Not one for words, here she was
confiding. Ten pages! not the usual two.

Truth teased and tempted: could this possibly be –
love at this time of her short-tempered life?
Such a going-on, when so much was gone,
across decades, oceans, loss met with loss,

and all that baggage badly tucked away.
Like her 'Not your child!' Of course
he walked out the door. Next husband
didn't walk, just died in a difficult way.

No one called this 'love', least of all her.
And now this. *He's found me again!* for trysts
on park benches, embraces in broad daylight
which couldn't care less, not now.

So how long had this been going on?
When did it start, and where? And which one
fathered which forlorn child? Was her letter
the gift of a glimpse of an unknown man

who might have answered to 'Grandad!'
Maybe her way of saying, there was love,
life-lasting, in the making of your making.
And this counts.

PRE-NUPTIALS

Die by the sea, ma cherie, his tee shirt reads.
His intended puts white roses next to the menus,
watches clouds drifting in off the grey Southern Ocean.
Below the veranda a brush turkey scratches,
making a nest to attract a mate. Neighbour's mowing,
trying to beat the rain. His wife shouts, *Ken!*
doesn't hear, doesn't want to. Bride's mother dozes,
dreams raised voices, *You must tell me! Tell me!*
head jerks on the pillow, heart knows the reply
as wave upon wave faded faces float in
on the tide tipped with flotsam, box jellyfish.
Not the one you wanted! a fatal sting. Then it hits,
tremendous downpour. *Ken!* He dashes.
Sleeper awakes, thinks she'll tell her gardener,
tending landlocked lilacs half a world away,
Such a beautiful wedding, sur le sable blanc!
to which he'll sigh, *Ah!* that gnarled *solitaire*,
picturing something he'll never know –
the hand-in-hand, the shifting sand.

PERFECT

End of a gym class, locker room talk;
lady next to me suggests a drink at a bar
with her partner and his visiting male friend.
She adds, *You'd be just perfect for him...*
The perfect match? What could that mean?
Never perfect for myself it's hard to imagine
being perfect for anyone else. But maybe
she was envisaging two people perfectly
imperfect in just the same way. Might there be
out there and waiting for me, a man
shy as a snail, distracted as a dormouse, flighty
as a fruit bat, edgy like an elephant with a calf?
On the other hand she might have meant
a man who looked like me, tall as a tree,
pale as a polar icecap, eyes the colour
of evening just before a storm, hands
like hungry spiders, never still. That so,
we could be each other's doppelganger,
or long-lost twin, or some unknown sibling
out there. Now here? Was this incest on offer?
I quickly say what I should have said
right away, *Matter of fact, I'm married.*
Lady looks away, embarrassed; hurries off
to her boozy rendez-vous, leaving me
still pondering people's eternal search
for a suitable mate. Nature favours
mix-and-match, gene-jumbling, so maybe
the 'right one' is the 'wrong one',
a perfect opposite. An idea which makes me
even more curious about the blind date
that never was, nor could have been.

PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Midway between one room and the next,
Madrid to Giverny, garden paintings run rampant,
he sees her: straight-backed, the half-moon eyes,
but only after they've passed does it dawn on him
he knows how those eyes would have looked
if she'd looked at him. *Could that have been...?*
But Monet's water-lilies confuse him, he sinks
below their petals into wine-blue depths, wavering.
Moments later he dashes back, finds she's gone.
And all around him Spanish gardens die back,
reds go garnet, yellows brown, and gunmetal greys
seep through dark trees as a wintry reminder
that he doesn't even know if she's still living,
or dead. How could he not have stayed in touch?
He's haunted by the sin of omission, its flimsy
vocabulary, no firm word for 'sorry' or 'sad'
or uncertainty: how she lived in two places,
one all pinnacles and light, the other a pit-place
where nothing green grew. Left others outside.
Had they ever been close? Comes back,
waves of love, and a sense of abandonment.
Like now. But was that her or her ghost?
He stares at a Madrilenno oil, milky lilies
in a nightscape but nothing's black and white.
He wavers. Should he send her an email?
Does he still have her address?

DEMI-MONDE

Some are halved. It happens early on.
Looking up at the only two faces in the world
one has eyes like the wide blue sky,
other's stare is a coal hole.

Ever after such a person does everything
by halves. Put on mood music and only violins
and cellos are heard, not flutes or pianos.
Books get abandoned mid-way, bookshelves
a forest of futile bookmarks. And, as each night
is only half-slept, half the next day is dreamed away.

Then there's the strange and disconcerting
disabilities. Like being unable to see a whole
face in the mirror, just the right cheek or the left,
a chin or a forehead. Legs don't coordinate,
means a lopsided saunter, and stammers
are commonplace, sentences sticking mid-way.

Halved ones strive to be more-than-whole:
have too many shoes and contentious concepts.
Some are overly holy, others stick to sin in excess.
All fear the advent of that awful black night when
they'll see less-than-half of a blue moon's face.

MIND/BODY

Mind finds it vexing
to be born in a body.
Like being boxed for life
inside a primitive pet.

Mind lacks consideration
for its body: courts dangers,
pushes limits; leaves body
bruised and bewildered,

barely able to bear
having a mind inside
like a rambunctious parasite
making the most of a free ride.

Mind thinks it knows better
than body, but really,
body's smart, self-repairs:
mind hoards its damage.

Body is kind too,
its last night's inner light
intended to ease mind's
dread of departure.

Yet mind ignores this,
conjures up a soul to live in,
certain *it's* not leaving,
just changing hosts

from heavy to something
oh-so light.

ANGER

It's like a spark in a jar
that never quite goes out.
It's like an ember in a shoe
that no shaking-out can dislodge.

It's like a mangled match
in a sewn-up pocket,
bent but brazenly able
to ignite any time it decides.

Do other animals have anger?
Snarls and flashing teeth
mean self-defence, or predation,
but not anger: what point?

Often it's pointless. About
a door shut too quickly, a plate
out of place, eyes that avert,
phone calls that don't come.

Anger management helps
and couch-and-Kleenex can
bring into focus stale feelings.
But there's a fresher approach –

pity your anger. Surprise it
with kindness. Damps it down,
smoke goes, scorch marks too.
And the day continues, coolly.

ENVY

We reach beyond ourselves, covet and crave
what we are not. We fail to find our given skins
sufficient, graceful. We are not grateful.

This does not sit easy. Aches like a hollow place
next to the heart where something's pacing
about to bite its way through to the skin.

The choice of envy-object knows no bounds.
We envy water its waves, envy air its freedom,
envy exo-planets for being so very far away.

We can envy a tree for being as intimate with worms
as with birds. Or can envy a blood-red orange
for tasting delicious and seducing mouths.

Mainly we envy our own kind. For looks, wealth,
fame. This inspires errant emulation: building castles
on quicksand, wearing emperors' new clothes.

But what's so much better about being 'better'?
Best thing of all is having a life, many don't,
and just think how they must envy us.

SELF POSITIONING

There are two crucial questions I ask myself
at regular intervals throughout the day:

Who am I? Where am I?

Take the 'who' bit.

Many to choose from: girl-child in a dress,
grown doll in dungarees, crone clacking her clogs.
On the other hand, maybe it's truer to say,
I 'am' whatever I'm looking at: a glow worm,
a gladiola, a lamia.

Then the 'where'.

It's anywhere but here. My mind's
all over – in Memphis, on the moon, under the sea,
concocting a shopping list while trying to recall
where I saw that black beetle and where I might be
when the last white rhino dies.

Sometimes I think I'm still where I was
when my eyes first opened, a just-born image
imprinted as backdrop for the rest of my life.
I also suspect I've always been located
with my last vision, looking down on myself
as a speck on a planet lost in space.

Seems unlikely any GPS could track me down
and a portraitist would be perplexed, canvas blank.
Could be I'm the figment of a buzzing fly's imagination,
neither here nor there. Or, I should be asking this:
who was I before my parents were born,
where was I before the Big Bang?

MAKEOVER

Time for a change, you say.
Shall I make some suggestions?

Start out small. Paint one toenail
emerald green, others a glittery silver –
turns a shy sideways glance into
a siren's full-on stare.

Take your battered straw hat,
festoon it with strawberries
and finches will flock in! Then never again
will you be alone amongst brambles
beneath a self-absorbed sun.

Now those long skirts you favour,
shadows catching in closet doors –
hen at your feet or a nice white rabbit
would flounce hems and warm
your always-cold toes.

You say that you're mer-ish, yet
can't even swim. But could walk
a lobster on a long blue silk lead.
Gerard de Nerval did, so why not you?
They're serious creatures. Calming.

On the other hand, you could be truly
original, and stay exactly as you are.

FALCON

I'm handed a leather glove, dispensation
to slip the skin, birth-bone and blood.
Breath hesitates: there's wind, early warning
of wings, then he lands, a huge heaviness
pinning pleasure to unsure ground.
His great claws contain traces of sky,
remnants of rain. We're eye to eagle-eye,
breathing in unison. I'm rapt, entranced
as his alien body heat finds its way
up my arm to that place, shoulder blades,
where something shifts, reshapes the way
I wear my hands. At the flick of a feather
I might take flight. My bird-in-the-hand,
to fledge me, lifts off, scatters starlings.

REUNION

Then, quite by chance,
he finds an old painting,
hundreds of years old,
frame chipped, hard knocks,
back of a junk shop.

It's a radiant landscape:
setting sun between trees
spreading rays on a pond
so the whole painting glows,
last light of the day the best light.

He looks, nods. Buys
the painting, carries it home.
Hangs it where his mirror was.
Peers. At last a *tete-a-tete*
with himself.

EMERGENGE

Vals.

Small chapel unearthed
after hundreds of years
under black soil, mushrooms and ivy.
Now its high windows blink at the light
and its entrance, secret tunnel
through rock, has a door again.
Anyone can enter. No one will kill.
Like furtive deer, faint figures
appear on stone walls, tall and barefoot,
hands palm-out, a welcoming gesture.
Their white robes touch your feet
and wide eyes fixed upon you
are as innocent as you are. Their faith
in you echoes: breath feels graceful.
Refuge offered is received.

Florence.

Slab of marble. Something is buried
inside it. Writhes. Suffers
as the artistry drawing it forth
reveals a man extruding himself
from the life he's come to lead, its violence,
lust, anguish, impeccably carved
on his twisted stone face.
You gaze, aghast
at the beauty of the horror.

HYPERMETROPIA

My eyes don't do close-up now.
They've distanced themselves from my body.

At breakfast, coffee, buttered toast, is a blur
and potted conifers outside by the drive
are a green haze, a suggestion of greenery.
Memory informs me, eyes do not.

Even the giant pine, middle distance,
is an abstract of pine-ness; I know there's bark
and tree's needled; a flash of movement
suggests a squirrel I take on faith as existing

as vision seeks beyond the hedgerow other places,
other faces. They swish long skirts, grandmother,
great-grandmother, drifting past dahlias,
my dreams of *their* gardens in faultless focus.

Then eyes go skywards. Clouds look shapely,
and the midday moon appears to me in pristine detail.
An airplane, its jet stream, look proximate.
Will I soon see only stars?

WORDLESS

It was the pigeon that did it,
the way its head drooped.
There was contagion: my thoughts
drooped, then went silent.

Felt like bereavement,
that state worse than dying.
A dead weight pressed down
on the back of my brain

and I started to see
with sick pigeon eyes,
thin avian eyelid greying the day.
Perched on my chair,

mind wiped clean and wordless,
I was a smith with no hammer,
a dancer without feet. A violinist
with a smashed violin.

But then, the sun came out.
Pigeon woke, stretched, preened;
tilted its tiny dinosaur head skywards,
opened moulting wings; took off.

Later that day I noticed
top of a Hawksmoor steeple
a pigeon on the head of a Roman statue.
What a view they both had!

And then, so did I. Saw words
on the wing flocking back. Landing.

SEEN

to see oneself
perfectly, as perfect

in a stranger's gaze

eyes as unlikely
as a caterpillar's

is not love
but like love

unqualified
as homecoming

unusual as
skin fitting

perfectly
a perfect life