

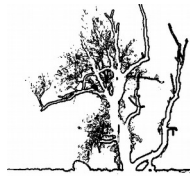
RISK

Also by Stephanie Conybeare:

Deep Diving
A Death in the Family
Im Rausch Der Tiefe
The White Macaw
Mermaid
A Breath for Nothing
Surface Tension

RISK

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Luniver Press

Published in 2016 by Luniver Press

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Luniver Press
Beckington, Frome BA11 6TT
www.luniver.com

ISBN: 1-905986-48-3

ISBN: 978-1-905986-48-4

for Andy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements are due to the editors of the following publications in which some of these poems first appeared: *Stand* and *The North*.

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MONTSERRAT

Family outing. He enters the abbey
and finds himself diminished: air ripped from his lungs
the way fires suck out oxygen. And the gilded columns
have giants' feet meant to grind to dust
the bones of sons to feed the skulls
of bishops beneath sanctified floor plaques.
By the transept he finds a dead bat. Picks it up,
touches its tiny claws. Says to his daughter, *My father
studied bats* but the girl moves away, leaving
unsaid words bunched up in his throat like sick mice,
like the dead flying mouse, and he can't
leave them there so he whispers,
*I don't honestly know if he was
my father.* And there's a place in his head
which is frightful, sheer, and the bat seems to move,
or perhaps it's maggots, so he takes the corpse with him
to circle the Black Madonna. Bumps into his daughter,
mutters, *There was another one.* Other what, Dad?
Another Montserrat. An island. No cliffs, just sand.
He hears sun, soft laughter. *The other man.....*
She's not listening and his voice fades away
into silence. Candles lit for the dead cast shadows
across his face as he circumnavigates the shrine
adorned with heartfelt letters about miraculous cures.
When no one is looking he places the bat
at the feet of the Virgin, one wing outstretched
like a blank sheet of old brown paper.

SHATTERED

High window sends down a peaceable light
over the breakfast table, croissants and coffee
promising belief in a reliable day.
But then, without warning, a hail storm of glass
peppers the butter and jam, embeds itself in bread
and mind's shunted back a life to that particular moment
when the worst that could happen just had
and all's possible: the hard mountain ahead
could crack wide open, the morning moon,
a paper cut-out, could thud down on the ground.
There's been irreparable damage,
the high window will never again start each day
with soft light dispersing into a pastel spectrum
dark shadows of fear, long history it's known,
monarchists hiding from marauding Bonnets Rouges,
Jews from Paris, almost safe and so close to the border
before a hail of bullets; left the window intact

but now a roofer's misplaced ladder hasn't
and the new pane sends down a bright accurate light,
its clinical glare melting the butter, curdling milk
and pinpointing missed shards on the washed kitchen floor
as a cutting reminder that life's never safe:
good beginnings presage bad endings,
and when the world is kindly lit
then comes breakage.

TREIZE LUNES

A suicide in the village. Young mother.
It's as if an old mountain god, all wooden clogs and
blood-stained teeth, has come down from his fastness
and kicked the place apart. People gather, aghast.
This girl they knew so well from *maternelle* to *lycee*,
lavish wedding, baby christenings. Why?
The *sourcier* suspects brown water beneath the barn;
butcher's mother, an *ancienne*, blames the lunar cycle:
treize lunes, she says, a year bound to bring disaster.
Most decide that it was something to do with love,
how it inflates the heart like a thin-skinned balloon
bound to burst, or fizz away out of control, dangerous.
Deceased's father, *Monsieur le Maire*, charges his heart
with being too slack and slow. He resigns, broken.
And I look at the sixth moon, growing fuller, a threat
of white nights to come, moonlit garden, black shadows,
and think how heartbreak explains so many things,
my own shedding of dress after dress, lace and sack cloth.
Or my poor stern father and the way my few words
ricocheted wildly in his straight-backed presence;
wartime did it: hearts shot with longing gone AWOL
then forced to make do with wrong vows worlds away
from the right moon, its silvery light and twelve roses.
As for the ex-mayor, his wife hopes he'll take up golf.
No one else thinks that's likely, and *Monsieur le Cure*
pushes prayer, says divine love is the only safe love.

those that belong to the emperor

are those made by His presence: the sound of His footfall on the servants' side-stairs, the way that He clenches and unclenches his ringed hand, and the way that His breathing sucks up all the air. They inhale when He exhales, those-that-are-His, not with a regular rhythm but an odd erratic gasping, like a fish in a jar.

They never speak in His presence but practice not-being-mute inside closets where they whisper nursery rhymes and runes to reach the Other, who would-be-king of the heart of their heart: She who has the peerless power of being helpless in His fabled court and skilled at concealing the obvious fact that those-that-are-His

aren't His, not in the Biblical sense, and it shows in the way they walk, that tiptoed sideways creep, hugging His silk-lined walls, all leading back to His throne and the echoing book-lined throne room where, prostrated, they re-phrase every sentence of each complicated narrative to find a simple reason why they're so small and shy, and can't stand up straight.

You might wonder about this too but I suspect that you, like everyone else, will save your interest for other species in our wise and ancient taxonomy.

Chinese taxonomy, tenth century

CLOUDS

Top of the stairs. A little known collection
she's meant to see for years. But hasn't.
A room full of porcelain. Beautiful, smooth
as the inside of a lily, rude clay refined
into petal-thin plates, bowls, pitchers, Peking
glazed, pale pastel colours a delicate palette
which uplifts: there's air between her soles
and her shoes, and she drifts like a cloud
feeling each perfect item with her eyes
as if she were touching her own skin
until, next to a tea set, she sees a photo
of the collector: Edwardian, tall gaunt man
whose eye catches hers. Hands in her pockets
she heads for the exit, passes *Large Plate with
Cranes in Clouds* and sees her own face reflected,
hardly knows it, looks so old, but the cranes
are young, migrating on strong free wings,
about to leave the shelf and depart
out the window like that morning lives ago
when her father's cloud-coloured Chinese plate
left a child's hands at the top of the stairs
to fly out the skylight. Far. Far away.
Instead a world shattered: the roaring voice,
her Dresden mother's muted whimper.

ETHNOLOGY

Female ritual mask. Sierra Leone.
Dark wood, polished surface perfecting
concealment: what's within stays within.
Viewers – two women, old friends –
peer with interest, then stroll off for tea.
Chat about grandchildren, Chartism, ducks
and early Duchamp, until it happens –
one goes a word too far, and her face
pulls away from her skull, revealing
a mask beneath which carefully covers
a face with no mouth, just
an inward-looking eye.
She glances away long enough
to remind herself that her friend hears only
what her own shadow cannot say.
They share tips about green fly, finish
the pastries, then move on
to visit the Nigerian collection.

HARM

When the rains came the child learned
how a green garden could become a dirty lake,
frangipanis trees left stripped to their stumps,
marigolds beaten into red mud, assumed dead
like the old cook, legs so thin, running naked,
carving knife in hand, across the sodden lawn
down to the surf-beach and its reliable rip tide.

Deluge over, the yard boys went to work.
Ashanti banter, machetes swinging. Culling
brown frogs flooding out of blocked drains.
Clean beheadings, lethal bisections and then, for fun,
the lopping off of legs, and they laughed as
legless frogs struggled to leap. Not croaking,
as if grievous damage causes muteness.

Flying ants came and bonfires were lit.
Living clouds against a grey and ominous sky
flew into the flames, dropped onto coals: a harvest.
Twelve year old bride of the young cook giggled,
gave the child one to try, still warm, tasting nutty.
Next day the child fed a cricket to a duck. Silently
watched its thread-thin legs wriggling in the beak.

HISTORICISIM

Social history. She hears
inside the speaker's soft syllabics, his chronicling
of the powerless, the overlooked voices of his period,
a vocabulary of listening entirely absent
from those hero-centric myths Herodotus called history,
he who would have had no time at all for unknown diarists,
letter-writers, the quips and complaints
of consumers of governance. But the speaker does,
and the lilt of his words lift a memory of expectation
like a dry leaf catching a totally unexpected breeze.
While her companion taps a restless foot

she sees, through the window behind the speaker, wild geese
flying south in V formation over Westminster.

On the way home she chatters like a light-footed girl.
Ground-breaking, she says, a needed sort of historicism.
Her companion has only a few comments to make –
inconsequential and *lacking in authority*.
Her eyes drift back down to the pavement and she recalls
looking up on a hilltop at grey clouds rushing past
in a southerly wind which blew out of her mouth
words nothing else wanted, and how she'd
reached up both hands, arms a thin wishbone,
as if clouds could take her away from the history
her own life had written without her.

LANDED

Sometimes I like to think back
many millions of years,
to that moment when I was
what I was lives ago
and I left, and I'm certain
I never asked for air,
it was my body's inclination
to depart the deep sea gardens
and inhale the stark precision
of this water-free place.
It seems to me, with hindsight,
that shorelines did it,
turned my fins hard and bony
as they dragged me into exile
in the transparent air, where
I loved nothing, turned
dry as my bones,
voracious, vicious too. It's
the pull of the earth
and the maddening sun,
loves blood-flow, hoards
the red-turning-brown
whereas, under the sea, killing's
quickly cleansed of craving,
and I can only say, and
our history makes it plain,
beyond beaches only plants
are sane, but I cherish the hope
that some of us someday can return
to the nearly-black-blue ocean floor
and its original artistry.

IMPERMANENCE

or, Glaucus goes sketching

Divine fish-tail curled under him, driftwood easel
next to a limpid tidal pool, he sketches the sea
from which he half-came and in which he
half-changed, feet to fins, a formative event
leaving him thoughtful about shape,
never docile, molecules huddled together
compelled to shift, morph willy-nilly.

Pulling seaweed from his long green hair
he puts charcoal to papyrus and swiftly depicts
wave upon wave, each frothy construction uniquely
uplifted. Then ended: gone to water. But how to draw
a shape on the cusp of its own dissolution?
Wave into water, water into wave: all's flow, yet
art is still: waves frozen, static as stone.

Stasis, indeed! He shuts his emerald eyes
and daydreams himself back until he remembers
life starting artfully, tiny sea cells at first, then
beasts bursting onto beaches to swarm and spread,
wave upon wave of them! What a wonderful story!
But a very short story: shapeliness shot through
with its own demise: universe coming undone,

even him, deconstructed. He smiles, picks a wrinkle
from his scaly tail, then sketches his reflection
in the tidal pool; finds he's drawn another seascape.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

Where? There!

Mary must not look away:

as long as she keeps him in sight
his boat *will* stay upright, fatal storm
never happen.

But if, for one instant, she stops looking
her poet could be dead or alive,
a monstrous uncertainty!

Stitch by stitch, line by line
her fine charnel-house words might
electrify nights but can't keep
gods from playing dice, and bad beaches
corpse-free. Now, Orpheus *chose* to gamble;
when he looked back what he saw

was the loss his art needed, but can hers
survive catastrophe? As she touches her belly,
swollen with still-births-to-come,
her vision shifts inwards:
gives water its chance.
No. *No!*

She looks back. Has to. Is that him waving
or is she waving at a salt-encrusted skull?
There *is* a craft on the cloudless horizon
but all she sees with certainty
is desire, her own,
to risk wreckage.

Yet just a few waves away the sea foams gently
against a reasonable shore.

RISK

You can be a danger to yourself
in so many ways.

The most obvious are, in fact,
the least risky, like sleeping under the sea,
belly resting on coral, floating up
every now and again to breathe in
flecks of moonlight from the sparkling
night water. Or levitating by day on
a large lily pad, enjoying the genial
clouds and the way the wild sky ripples by
without catching the cast in your eye.
All of this may cause comment, disconcert
some, but is harmless to your shape of mind
unlike eavesdropping on an incubus
on its way out at dawn, or rescuing a ghost
of yourself from a burnt dress; this can
singe your ideas so your fanciful thoughts
turn to charcoal which blackens
the backs of your hands, sends you
stretching for starlight and the hypnotic gaze
of distant galaxies you'd risk your world
to know, heart to heart. But the one thing
you really should not try, ever,
is embracing fellow risk-takers
as who you need most. Their dare-devilry
will freeze your lively breath, shrink its song
to silence, as you scurry hither and thither
trying to save them from themselves

unless you're *their* nemesis. Now this,
for you, would be truly dangerous.

CROSSINGS

Leaving Spain, border's clogged, queues of lorries.
He turns away into La Jonquera, double parks outside
a busy restaurant. *Let's have lunch first*, he says,
but she's anxious, wants to get it over with –
borders have bars, life can change to a kind of a death
at the flick of that bar, up or down, in or out.
Her chest hurts, could be her heart. He's perusing
the menu: *We'll share a paella*. She nods, always has,
always must in the end, like that time, years ago,
car ferry from Morocco. Sure enough, at Algeciras
Spanish border guard pulled them over, probably
guessed what was stashed inside her seat.
Such insistence that hot night before in Tangiers:
at first she'd shaken her head, tried to find love
in his love of risk and sense of absolute freedom
to disregard harm and bad endings. Of course
the guard let them through in the end, kind-hearted,
or simply distracted by the size of her, eight months
gone, leaning heavily, sweating, panting.
We'll take a few bottles of this, he sips, winks,
Contraband! Pours rioja into her water for a toast.
As long as we have each other! his voice is hearty,
she nods, has to, holds up her chipped glass across
chequered years, dirty check tablecloth. And sees
traffic's moving into France now, they'll get there,
wherever it is they think they're going. She spots
a blond girl with Berber baskets, new baby wailing,
her man ahead, hands free, dreadlocks swinging,
approaching truck after truck for a lift. Girl's weary,
limping, feet hurt, but she has no choice, must
make the best of things, protect. It will be heartfelt.

SOLDIERS WITHOUT BORDERS

We take off late from the Pyrenees,
delayed by a plane coming in with a coffin,
young French soldier home from *l'étranger*
without the life he had when he left.
Guard of honour at attention on the tarmac,
two Saint-Cyr officers lounging louchely.

France profonde that evening, hotelier speaks
rapid French, odd word of English, then a phrase,
unmistakeable accent – he's Irish! Reverts
to the lilt and wit of his original tongue.
Runs his hotel efficiently, stands tall.
French wife and children. But what before?
He is courteous but uninformative.

Leaving, we mention the coffin, and he says,
yes, lost another today. Then we know:
the foreign ones, deployed worldwide, and after
passeport francais, invaluable when you can't
go home. As he puts our bags in the back of a taxi
I see a moth coming out of his trouser pocket.
Then his farewell salute.

FATE

Each time you go out the door
a pterodactyl seizes you.
I feel
claws in my mind,
then if, when I call you,
your phone just rings and rings,
I know
a Great White shark
is swimming out to sea,
maddened by your ringtone.
It is intended.
I am meant
to be sole. Solitary.

When you go down a ski slope
an abominable snow-person
triggers an avalanche.
Your life flashes past my eyes,
I die
in ice, its dark.
Then foresee the flight home,
gremlin perched on a plane wing
pulling the wiring apart.
I see
plummeting, a fire ball,
my world burnt to extinction.
It is intended.
I am meant
for grave faces, the knock on the door.

And each time you get on your bike
there's a crushed cycling helmet,
bearing King Kong's thumb print
or the mark of a rampaging
elephant.

I hear
the very last sound
you hear: my heart breaking
yet still striving
to conjure the worst
because, experience has shown me
awfulness always happens
unexpectedly. So expect:
think disaster and
get a safe day.

Ought I to try a pact
with a different devil?
Works so far, but
I fear
it is intended
some sunny morning I'll wake
wildly optimistic, fling open
sun-warmed shutters
and forget to dread.
Then your mirror *will* crack:
I'll never see myself again.
I am meant
for loss. Comes in many wild ways
and the wildest is knowing
you've no fear
of losing me.

SIGNING

My signature has always been rogue and unreliable
as if an alien, or a coterie of aliens, signs for me.
They are capricious. Anything can emerge.
I hold my breath, close my eyes, and wait to see

a mysterious mark, pretending or intending
to assert my identity, attest to my existence,
express the essence of me in a clotted scrawl
like a quick thumb-nail sketch of my heart.

Script's obscure. Could be cuneiform, Cyrillic,
Chinese calligraphy or a Mayan glyph,
the paw print of a mouse or the scuttle mark
of a scorpion, ink spurt from a scared octopus –

I stare, shivering, as amnesia sets in: who am I?
That squiggle, deciphered, might reveal my true self,
its name of names four letters, arcane, unspeakable.
Or I might see an alias I never knew I had:

a safe-name, protective as long as I know
how to hold the signed page – or pay-slip or cheque –
at just the wrong angle, ink still damp, to mislead
my doppelganger, draped over my shoulder,

who'll know me nonetheless by other signs:
a smile, a gait, a nervous mannerism. And voice
is a dead giveaway from that first natal cry
to the last gasp or sigh, the signing out into silence

amid hums and thrums, precise wavy signatures
of heavenly bodies breezing through space.

A DESK

can be anything it wants to be.
Don't expect consultation.

Sometimes it's a satellite spinning
a heavenly view, light filling to the brim,
its thin blue rim, the tremulous surface of your world
even though you may wake the next day to find
your desk is a room with no door in a house
on a cliff ledge which is crumbling, crashing
into the surf below, no escape
until your heart's loud enough to be heard
by a seabird, albatross or skua, and when it replies
your desk, now driftwood, becomes a raft
out at sea with you scanning the horizon
for that green place foretold by doves
but obscured by storms, tidal waves you talk up
begetting a desk-wreck on a beach,
normally Normandy, chances of survival
next to nil in a hell-hole shored up by what's left
of your desk, which seems finished, yet days later
it's aloft, an air balloon gently swaying,
heading south in the company of several clouds
you know will turn thundery, there'll be lightning
and you'll plummet, arms flailing, struggling
to inscribe on the sky a few perfect words
before impact, before your desk finally decides
enough is enough, and goes its own way.
Just vanish.

Although you can't live without it,
it can do without you.

DOMINI CANES

Fortified abbey. Its grace goes deep, bone deep.
Their breath-duet, *Ah!* The promised place?
Habitual seekers trailing vulpine shadows
tattered and barely attached to their heels,
they are tired of roaming and nearly old.
Winter here looks beguiling. *Is that a barn
for sale?* Unlike salvation, refuge can be bought.

Entre chien et loup: a serene crepuscular light
whitens the abbey as they stroll its ramparts,
their two muddy terriers sniffing the past.
Then, without warning, the dogs vanish below.
Within seconds there's a ghastly commotion: frantic
squawking, desperate flapping. Couple run pell-mell,
knowing what has been unleashed, its lust.

A blood red streak scars the crenulated horizon
as they rush through the village; dogs jolly, refreshed.
The village square is empty but abbey windows flicker
and the ramparts are black as the old dogs of war
haunt their own massacres, sweet centuries of gore.
From the safety of the car park, the couple glance
back: *Bit dead here and it smells of drains.*

That night, outside their *gite*, miles away, they hear
a fox in the hen house by a pilgrims' shrine.

HOMEBOY

A compatriot. Exile shared:
walking with him was like walking home,
as he strode, head titled back, a 'tilter' at windmills.

He wore a bulky snow-seeking sweater
confused by English drizzle, the slow-flowing Cam
like a speck of spring melt seeking an ice-jam.

Shared need for real rivers evoked unspecified hopes –
woolly as his home-knit Native sweater –
no longer needed when we left the place of exile,

heading not home but in the opposite direction
where he heard in my silence a central syllable missing,
and I heard I was no one I wanted to know.

But I know one thing now: going home never happens.
And each time I leave somewhere I never go back.
I still miss white winters, but missing

no longer means seeking. Perhaps I like
being foreign, how can I tell? And how to explain
why I walk with my head tilted back. Still.

REGINA

Sunday service at Our Lady of Sorrows.
Boy, straight-backed on a rough-hewn bench,
side by side with his Grandmama, velvet beret
worn low, royal purple over wiry white hair.
Clasping kid gloves and raising her chin
this waspish solitary woman sings with the rest,
her voice strange and cracked as if she were deaf
or learned music in a place with alien sound waves.
But the strangest thing is, song has smoothed out
her face, web of wrinkles and bitterness,
the turmoil and havoc, undone and he hears
inside her calamitous voice a still point
at the centre of her stormy life,
a silence which, unlike lovers and sons,
has never abandoned her to being what she is not,
and in so stark a St. Helena, its icy board walks,
white-outs and freezing winds. As the choir sings
Salve Regina, communion's on the tip of her tongue,
its paper-thin wafer a silvered almond from
her Fortnum's wedding cake. Coming out
she ignores the smiling priest at the door,
his calloused hand, battered boots under hassock,
and steps into a prairie blizzard, snowflakes settling
like white moths on her black Bond Street pumps.
She clutches the little boy's three-mittened hand
all the way back to her cats, clapboard house,
telling stories he knows by heart about dear Papa
and lilacs lining English summer lanes, her past
in place to frame his future domicile. And exile.

MONTPELLIER MOTET

for three voices

Young hostess, torn blue jeans, lithe
as a boy, liling eyes greener than grey.
Mouth a mauve rosebud, mute, moist.

Old husband glowers distantly,
smells of stale smoke, cough drops, rage.
He's heavy as the house he's built,

its broken stones, headstones. Grave
goods: tarnished goblets on a torn altar cloth,
centre piece a cracked alabaster font.

Guest-lady arrives late, deep-belted, redheaded,
troubadour's smile, tanned trollop's handshake.
Chatters, says her *chevauchees* begin at home,

end anywhere she wants to be. Be what?
she laughs, this lady-wild. Old husband
growls, *Why'd you have to invite her?*

serves swan, half-cooked, with scallops, scones.
Waste disposal roars: guest-lady-into-fox
raids the fridge, chicken leftovers.

Too late, he's lost: redhead strips off, puts on
mood music: a ladymass her vixen-dance.
Old atheist glares, his soufflé falls flat.

Salvator mundi, sings the choir. Young boy-wife
somersaults, sings along. Mind's sill to spire,
motet to *matin*. Freefall to ascension.

RUMOURS

Sidewalk cafe, flame-trees blooming. Heat gusting.
So many years ago, he says: same class, old school.
She nods and there's a sense of flight, green parrots
overhead the hockey field, her dreamy outpost
on a turning world. Never could have stayed
or could she? His sky-blue eyes seem to see a lovely
blue in her eyes she always thought was there, though
no one else has ever seen it. This man, then a boy,
might know her better than her made-life does, as if
they were blood-related, cousins, long-lost siblings.
Or something closer. Then her breathing murmurs
what her heart might have said had it spoken to her recently,
had it thought to mention rumours of a different pulse,
another's wrist at her fingertips. *I'd heard you lived
in London*, he checks his phone, *but I had no way
to find you*, and, sure enough, he sees a fire alert,
hot winds dying to burn outlying suburbs, revert lawns
to their aboriginal state. Grass is white-yellow, dry as dust,
fire-hungry. He rises: has to go, fears for his home.
And as he leaves, a blue-black feather floats down from
nowhere and she remembers magpies swooping, her head
bent over a battered school bicycle. *He's a nice man*, says
her husband, who's been silent through lunch, just munching.
Actually, she responds, *we never were friends at school*.
She recalls hunched shoulders, averted eyes, male sniggering,
and how relieved she was that day so many years ago
when the old wooden school burned down to the ground.
There were rumours of arson, never proved.

FAMILIARITY

I still see, clear as starlight, her leonine head,
eyebrows twitchy as the tip of a tiger's tail,
hands like the hands of a leopard-skinned shaman
on the verge of virgin sacrifice. Knife-raised.

Lives self-destruct, she said, when souls go astray.
She retrieved lost souls – stolen or misplaced –
and returned them to their rightful owners.
Used a drum and a bundle, arcane incantations,
her power-animal invisibly in attendance.

Everyone has one, she used to say. Couldn't say
(one must never tell) what hers was, but I heard
inside the purr of her voice a soft snarl
clawing at her throat. As to what creature
she saw shadowing me, this I never knew

but now I have my suspicions, and worry about
where it was that night. Midnight head-on,
they said, she swerved, a dog maybe? I fear
coyote's more likely, but couldn't rule out
a cougar trying to run back to the mountains.

THE RED CANOE

Florentine palazzo. Orangery, green parrot.
A woman in grey approaches the bird
and at the sound of her voice he cocks his head,
flaps his wings, holds out his claw in a familiar fashion
although she's a stranger.

Out of nowhere, and for no obvious reason,
she remembers a painting of a long red canoe,
single occupant a hunched figure, face shadowed
by yellow hair. The boat drifts without paddles,
destination unknowable, until now –

with the touch of his beak, the bird informs her.
Lake Atitlan. Mescaline or a dream?
Mayan fresco: a longboat, paddler gods and
their passenger, head bowed, macaw on her shoulder
pointing the way to the underworld.

The orangery parrot screeches something in Italian,
climbs her arm, preens her blond tresses,
puts his tongue in her ear. Mimics her
odd accent. She's a native English speaker
but from where? And where to now?

COME AUTUMN

knows what she'll hear: *Persephone!*
him yelling into his phone, *When the hell are you
coming, Chiquita? There's dead narcos to deal with!*
His chuckle like a far-off storm casting ancient shadows
across her temple-white space and paintings of a different past:
the Mother as One before Two invented loss
and winter's dawning. Time to leave again.

She remembers the first leaving, his nightclub,
El Hado, his salsa, her singing as he led her downstairs
to where Mothers are not. Now she looks at old photos
of Demeter, still fair-haired and greatly-revered
next to her deep-belted daughter, dark, sullen,
and only days away from his 'sugar' and smoke,
the shrieks and the fumes of his underworld.

Backing out of her drive a neighbour waves: See you
next spring! And, twenty four hours later, far south
of the border and tracked by the rays of a dying sun,
she begins her descent into his shady canyon;
rough road and switch-backs lead her down
to the entrance and end place where Orpheus looked back
at the loss his art needed, and she switches on headlights,

sees ahead what she sees each year: black dogs
chained and yelping, toothless gatekeeper genuflecting,
machine gun by his side. And her lonely rapist husband
lounging on the veranda, old sombrero low,
blood-stained boots on the balustrade,
Corona in one hand, Cuban cigar in the other, then
the loud-crashing voice: *Chiquita, what took you so long?*

LAST WORDS

Egyptian gallery. She circles a sarcophagus covered with hieroglyphs in neat urgent rows, last minute reminders from *The Book of the Dead* on how to survive the Underworld. Her companion peering myopically at the mummy has been nearly dead for years, patched-up heart reluctantly beating, doling out pain regularly. But for how much longer? His final resting place of choice, she thinks, would be a recycled coffin adorned with anarchist slogans, *aides-memoires* for a triumphant return as a revolutionary in some third world country. But for herself she's got no sense of a come-back or any way back, nothing at all at the very end of ending. Sees a packed carriage, tube train roaring through a tunnel, and she's standing up reading a *Poem on the Underground*, pretty thing, all spring, birds and bumble bees, some flowers, good reasons to like life. Then, the shattering: light gone, shockwave followed by stillness and a silence which sounds like whimpering, and could be, could be her, trying to recite what remains, a shredded last line, its words a wavering after-image on what's left of her retina. For a while she holds onto these words in the absolute darkness. For a while she holds on. Until her friend says, *Fucking fascists, these pharaohs*. And she says, *I think it's time we had tea*. Her last words because he wants a beer instead, and launches into a monologue about Marx and Bakunin.

REVENANTS

The hummingbird is back.

Clear bell sound, one note
like a single truth
flitting past my window

followed in flight
by all my birds: parrots, doves,
circling inside my head

with my mother, waif-like
in that crystal-clear dream,
back from the dead

but when I reach out my arms
she vanishes. Prefers
being free as a bird.

The visitant hovers,
does not drink. Darts, dives,
so overly alive it's barely there.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

We didn't know
but our day knew

his lips pressed to her skin
as its warmth crept away
leaving only art:
what her eyes had loved.

Worlds away we saw
a day without horizons,
lake sky-white, black ducks
swimming in thin air.

Our road took us upwards,
mountain pass high enough
to reach up and touch
where she'd gone

as mists parted and a wandering sun
revealed a snowy landscape
she'd already painted, worlds away
the last time we saw her.

Atelier on the way back down.
We bought a hand-thrown pot
not knowing at the time
what it would always contain.

Eurydice's in intensive care, again

He did not – did not! – look back.
And this is why she's back again
though her life knows better

than to expect the air-conditioned air
to love her lungs: air's stubborn,
doesn't like being wasted.

Goddess visits, far from pleased,
clicks her tongue in divine irritation. Says,
Time you faced facts: that one never has been

a connoisseur of your soul. Of course he didn't
look back! And now look where you are,
up here again. Breathing!

Patient turns her head away, too weak
to say how much she regrets *she* couldn't
look back at herself. Instead this –

drips and drains, plastic oxygen mask
a pale incubus perched on her face,
life support humming its own smug song.

Can't cure her dark wish, it's still there,
she still can't see blue sky, just black caverns,
the Styx. Perfect stillness.

Immortal sniffs: I'd say, by the look of you,
you won't be here long. Just tell that musician
of yours he'd write his best songs to date

if he loved you and lost you. She adds snidely,
But maybe if you loved life a little, got a hobby,
gave up black, wore short skirts, flirted,

were less obvious about your inclinations,
didn't write 'thanatos' on every shopping list
and look forward to All Souls like Christmas,

maybe if you put on weight, Athena only knows
you're skin and bones – maybe that'd do it,
you'd turn his head. And abide with me.

Pressing the morphine button once, twice,
patient tries hard to follow. Mutters feebly,
He does kind-of love me, just loves music more.

Visitant rolls her eyes, decides the waking dead
are dead-ends, time wasters. Gathers up her skirts
and goes. Without benediction.

GNOSIS

He liked to quote Nag Hammadi Gnostics:
Grant me what no angel eye has seen.
And lo, he did see, matters supremely
small, universe crammed full of quirky
quarky particles, his heavenly theories
so sublimely equated, grand and unifying,
that he shipped himself to early stardom
worth his weight in papers. Many papers:
crushed spiders punctuated print-outs;
mice managed, barely, the narrow trail
from open door to over-laden desk,
crumbs of genius scattered everywhere.
Then without warning he took to his bed.
Angels let down their wings. Will he continue
to be referenced? remains to be seen.

REBEL, REBEL

Unswerving refusal the only virtue
worth its weight in daily diatribe.
Call it anarchy, acolytes did, all ears
and dazzled. I demurred, heard
smoke rings in mirrors, you puffing away,
minding no mind but your own. Saying,
I never read anything I haven't written.
So you wouldn't read this and I won't
avoid saying, I never believed
your street-fighting stories though
has to be said, you gave the C-word
street-treatment, kicked before you died,
did it out of pride. But rebellion
works both ways, old friend, that said
I can sign off 'with love'. Feels free.

DISTRACTION

Time's topsy-turvy, totally
askew: what happened weeks ago is the day before yesterday
while last night is last year, or the year before that.

It's because a hole happened:
life history, so well-favoured, snagged suddenly; tore badly
its smooth baize surface.

Scar's gone livid, lopsided
like a badly buttoned cardigan. Right eye with the teardrop
can't see the dry eye on the left.

There is no certainty to anything.
Trusted truths turn weak and useless, bedtime books betray,
convey
a sleepless night of ghosts and tear-gas.

Mind's a frayed thing,
scattered, to-and-fro, tearing along in too many directions,
neither here nor there, and least of all where

cataclysms time-out
leaving life crumpled but limping, cicatrice discreetly hidden
beneath a dusty wool dress.

Clocks knit the hours to some extent.
Calendars, as a last resort, can pinpoint where the days have
dumped you
by a wilting tea-rose bush. Breathing.

NOT

You asked: is it possible to 'be' without body,
a ephemeral consciousness, acutely aware?
The answer is 'yes', the answer is 'us',

we never bodied ourselves, never
romanced the membrane, its in-out, the me-them,
the risk and the glory of separation,
then contest: the endless urge
to demarcate, then over-run and merge.
We cannot

crave. Can only mind with not-mind,
our immaculate darkness same as light
but lighter. We are everywhere,
oceanic as air, an immaterial
and absolute indifference
to body-play, its skinny limits, flesh and bone.

We suspect you may decide in time
to cast yourselves differently
in silicon, in circuitry,
an electronic leap of faith from mattering to being
in ciphers, supremely embodied in code
but nothing like

our nothingness which is truly nothing.
We can't be named. Aren't even
souls but, if you must, we're almost all-souls.

ONLY ANGELS

I looked down on clouds,
considered them far too firm. Until I fell to earth.
Through stardust I fell
and as soon as all-I-was-not touched earth
I had feet touching earth. And the horror increased
as feet sprang legs, legs grew a torso. I was embodied,
disoriented and afraid.

To be a tree would have been easier. Panicked
my breathing stopped for hours on end
when I beheld them, humans
with their strange irregularities: crooked mouths, piebald eyes,
one leg an ant's leg shorter than the other.
They seemed to flaunt their flaws, beaten
hearts on fire or cold, stone cold.

I sloped along their streets, past shopping malls
and city halls, descended into catacombs, climbed spires.
Their churches amazed me. Such delusion! They made us
in their image and added wings. Swan's wings!
Such wings have weight and
we *are* light. So light.
But I came to wonder

if this wasn't what they wanted.
Crude things though they were, I observed
odd acts of benevolence: refuge given, food shared, lives saved.
And I had to conclude they couldn't help being kind!
Snared in bone and blood, unable to uplift,
were they actually us?
Just angels?

REWILDING

Brick walls covet collapse, you can see it
in the way they buckle outwards, tilt and try
to interest gravity. The earth in them itches for earth
and escape from the company of leaf-less towers
as ignorant of forests as fish are of finches.

Brick walls dream of feeling a fine web of roots
and they do: first comes moss on the topmost strand,
radiant stamens emerald and erect, then sturdy
bindweed seedlings, and buddleia, a miraculous event!
And the pale sun enthuses, angles in with spring rain,

and the crumbling begins, brick by brick, clay to clay
craving wilderness, its tall grasses, brambles and thickets
growing themselves with wild abandon, wild people
with dandelions in their matted hair, primal thoughts
in full bloom. Original. Graceful.

EAGDURU

‘eye-door’: Anglo-Saxon for window

We are window-addicted. Peep-holes, portholes,
arrow slits, high windows, low windows,
picture windows, even a parting
of branches or a break in cloud cover
can be an eye-door with
unexpected prospects.

Oracles, seers, sooth-sayers, shamans
glimpse the future and other unavailable worlds,
underworlds, sea-worlds, heavenly precincts,
through occult windows opened by
a drum, a chant, a dance,
a ghastly sacrifice.

Then there’s the everyday sudden ‘*I see!*’,
an eye-opener windowed by the unusual way
the dog barked at the moon or the ghost gibbered
or a provocative person turning cartwheels
through the door actually said
what he actually thought.

A sage can chalk up complex equations,
quantum or cosmic, about light and dark matter,
a universal expansion of aperture. And we peer
into space, telescopically transported,
seeking eyes: the locked gaze,
a shared window.

Screened, we all have windows-on-the-world,
handy, heuristic, information-laden.

But eyes spy both ways: eye-doors are
wind-doors letting in gusts of scrutiny.
This does not deter. Our need
to see is wildly reckless;
endless.

CLOUD BASE

Sometimes it descends
to head height. Sometimes, lower.
There's weight,

air feels leaden, no light winds
of change. Stasis rules
but you resist, try out the street,

find trees have stopped breathing,
birds are gone. The green grass
has withdrawn into grey rocky ground.

A dark day.
The seeing eye, seeing nothing,
retreats into its shell.

The hidden sun, aloof and private,
stares at the black hole
in its burning heart.

she (whose name cannot be uttered)

Demeter's hate-child,
an ungodly accident of divine rape
deniable only by denying
the consequence:
she

is unwanted,
unspoken of, and unspoken to
except, on very rare occasions, as 'you',
nothing proper, and
she

seeks a way out
of the absolute freedom of being unspecified
and no more than an ineffable desire
to be singularly real inside a name
she

has never heard
and is dying for. Trying for
in multiple notebooks, simultaneous equations
all uncertainty. Herself as good as dead, and not dead
she

tries to calculate
a grand and unifying explanation, the gravity of it
in a quantum leap, some string-like *because*
yielding that one name
she

must say
to see herself as observable,
an admissible part of a particular cosmos
in which the name is the bone and
she

has no flesh without it.
Attributes slip and slide in the vacuous place
where she's neither here nor there: she's not.
Alive to the power of hope
she

can't discount
the perverse probability
that at the breath of a name she'd tilt away her face
to the sky, so unspeakably
utter.

CAN'T

There are so many things you can't do
but ought to manage, like wearing high heels,
having civilized hair and a modicum of skill
at soufflés and small-talk. Instead you can barely
boil an egg, and like to discuss Descartes
with your dusty hen and dappled dog.
Such inadequacies don't bother you

but you deeply regret 'can't's no one can do.
Like strolling into paintings, a Claude Lorraine,
Klee or Twombly. Or walking on water,
not like Jesus but a water-flea, fleet and skipping.
Even more, you'd like to be in two places,
or three or four, at the very same time, escaping
the single narrative, the just-one-life,
the just-one-form, when you want the ability
at the flick of a wish to transubstantiate, shape-shift,
into an eagle skimming snowy mountain tops
or a tint-less fish snoozing in deep sea caverns
with bioluminescent starfish and giant squid.
Often you crave crawling inside a peony as a bee
or worming your way down to where
oak roots grope. And you can't.

But I think it's time you aspired to a different
ability: seeing some of your 'can't's as a 'can' –
you can't kill insects, or make a cutting remark,
or sever the loveliest flower from its plant.
I'd say this shows a facility for live-and-let-live,
and really you ought to esteem such a person.
Would be nice. If you could.

L'invitation au Voyage

Before every journey, however brief, I have to pack into the same Kefalonian carpet-bag along with tapers, telescope, book, a spare book, keepsakes from past journeys. I require every one.

Earliest Atlantic crossing, scale of a flying fish come in through the porthole: this I pack last so it comes out first, before that fine grain of sand from the back of the eye: Sahara night flight to white-washed slave forts and surf canoes, black tip of a scorpion's tail, its dried rattle packed as the best way there is to evoke the old Morris, corduroy road and the jungle, lianas and the fire ant, its journey up my skin. This insect gets tucked between two sweaters so that I don't forget the Northern Lights later, fiords, snow-trails and the quality of blizzard that alone can put me to sleep, its ice chip belonging at the bottom of the bag as a reminder of the lightness I'll feel when that old toucan feather bookmarking hummingbirds in my avian guide gets lodged in my heart and, finally, there's uplift, a sense of the chance of safe and smooth passage

between here and home, the distant place. Meanwhile clouds voyage past my window insouciantly, and our planet spins and orbits with no effort at all around its travelling sun.

RETENTION

Ghosts are unnecessary.
Relics restore the dead.
Museum bric-a-brac: pots, plates, shrouds
and crowns, retain for our consideration
past attitudes: intentionality
remarkable for being so barely exotic,
so like us. Just us. And we look, consoled
by the lack of loss, by our keen determination
to keep and curate what we were: are.

Our memories have their own
personal collections,
some items under lock and key,
others aired regularly, cache of vivid recollections
which haunt our daily thoughts, shade
mental shopping lists and abstract ruminations
with narratives, some reasonably accurate,
others mythic or twisted, interwoven
with stories from those no longer alive
but who entrusted to us
what they *had to* tell, so that
history's never history.

Our bodies also see to this.
Hoard the traits of our ancestors,
a genetic pot-pourri producing
stature, strength, colouring, rare medical conditions,
also remarkable abilities like killing casually
or surviving starvation,
any of which might come in useful
in strange and dreadful circumstances. Which happen
again and again: past's here: time's not true.

RETRIEVAL

I've been outside myself for too long
and lately, there's a question I keep asking
or someone's asking me –

when was it exactly
I parted company with myself?
And did we even notice the parting
of the ways? I vaguely remember
a lifting up and leaving; felt the way a cloud feels
disengaging from a low-lying dell,
and I think I looked down from somewhere
close to the ceiling at something rolled up,
balled, wearing blue striped pyjamas
at the back of a wardrobe, doors
closing themselves with a click.

Seems strange now
that it didn't seem strange then,
this detaching, becoming a will-o-the-wisp;
spectral, not at life's end but near its beginning.
It's grown heavy being weightless,
being nothing much to speak of.
Or to speak. And I had a voice,
hesitant though it was, words
my words and saying what I saw.
I want them back: hear
clear consonants,

ours: she's still there
in the wardrobe. Time to lead her out.
We'll walk on together. Not much further to go.

CALLED

Though you swim like a hen

you've a merman who adores you,
sings whale songs to you, hears the fishes
inside you, which have been there since

a riptide gripped your legs and you looked
out to sea, saw him offering his shell-white hand
before you heard the shoreline holding fast,

resisting. Forbidding you, and you obeyed.

But regret has made your skin too pale, bluish
like pooled water; no sun alive can tan your face.
This gives your merman hope and he visits,

leaves love tokens only you can see:
fish scales on the freshly-washed kitchen floor,
saltwater between bathtub and sea-grass mat,

to remind you that he waits each low tide,
sandbar off Shoreham, ready to take you down
to the soft mottled light of his deep kelp gardens,

then deeper still to trenches and sulphurous vents,
their eyeless creatures inventing themselves
in utter darkness. He calls this your original place.

Makes sense, makes you happy.

SALOUA'S *Plan for a Pool*

Beirut, mid-summer. And she says to the man
with the digger, bags of cement and mosaics,
I know exactly what I require of my pool.
And she told him.

I want a certain kind of ripples.
They should be eloquent and interested
in my body, its particular shape. They should
sing to the water inside me so that I see,
even on overcast days, hints of orange,
chartreuse, shimmering gold and primrose pink
in the blue of the water at its deepest end,
while the shallows always sparkle
whatever the weather, with turquoise and silver.

I want there to be fishes and the occasional merman,
or maybe a selkie, circling the bottom of the pool
and gazing up at me with knowing brown eyes.
But, most of all, there absolutely must be
a secret and invisible hole at the bottom of the pool
that I can swim through, and come out the other end
close to stars, a bluer place – almost black –
from which I'll look back at our oceanic planet
with nostalgia for its cargo of life.

Builder scratches his head, replies: Maybe, lady,
you should just spend more time at the beach.
As clearly he doesn't understand at all
she paints him a picture. *Oil on paper, 1952.*
The colourful squiggles baffle him even more
and he declines the job. Makes a pool
for her neighbour instead.

DRAWING LESSON

Watching a late afternoon sun draw
dark shadows across his rolling lawn,
he tries to sketch a rose. Seeks out

the heart of the rose, but the B2 pencil
is a useless stump, just dirties the paper
and the more he looks the more he sees
no end to detail, so how to start and where
to finish? He might as well try sketching
the sun, its flares, its burning glare, the ferocity.
The rose is so gentle and his hand is a beast's paw
nowhere near to touching the breath of its petals
or the amazing making of it, how it *is* sun, rain,
the sumptuous soil. Understanding at last
that he'd have to draw the whole universe
in any portrait of anything – a rose,
a single stamen, his hand, himself –

he puts down his pad. Smiles.
Watches a snail draw a slime trail
across pristine paving.

UNCLE ART

She sees him ahead of her, Renaissance gallery, and almost sees as he almost turns the blue of his eyes, that brilliant sky blue unlike the skies, desperate weather, when the way that he flew foretold fire storms

scarring the backs of his eyes. For years after he tried to paint out, paint over, a smouldering world, oils thick on the canvas like salve on a wound and the worst one of all was the loss, awful loss, of the god-given right to do good.

But he was good to her. Took her under his wing, taught her how to paint over seared cities, make scorched trees rise again, leaf and flower, without searchlights and flak or the embers and ash always there underfoot. And she was barefoot.

He kept her first painting until the day – was it May Day? – when his breath wouldn't work and she hopes that he saw before his life went black, not a city in flames but a heavenly sky, a Titian or Bellini, perhaps an angel or two with blue eyes

just like his. Because there is one, his eyes born-again decades later, a blue so blue it's as if he's the father – this child with poster paints and paper planes.

NATURALISM

Nature touches different people
differently. Some have to touch it back,
others not to touch at all.

Take him and her:
boy on a bridge, throwing torn-off twigs
into a stream. Race over, he pees into the water.

Girl in the bushes, watching,
whispering leaf-words to encourage unborn branches
to come forth and close over the wounds he's made in her tree.

Years later he's a landscape artist, diverts rivulets
back on themselves, anchors grey driftwood
to the trunks of ancient oaks, with knotted ivy

she unknots once he's gone, relieved that at least
he's not become a lumberjack with an axe,
nor does he thief the forest's bugs and birds.

He lives in a village, wife and five kids. She lives
alone, sleeps rough in ditches or disused fox dens.
Is rarely seen, almost never leaves footprints.

He still plays pooh sticks after photo shoots
of his installations. Then pees: finds streams enabling.
Still has no idea she's watching.

PERVERTSITY

Suddenly sun. The south come north
across the snow-fast mountains. Winter grass
is encouraged, finds within itself trace memories

of new-green blades. Life wants to happen.
So why can't you enjoy this promise of spring?
Why such a fierce profound impatience?

Seems to me, you don't favour spring. Heralds
months of humdrum weather without, as counterpoise,
attractive risks like blizzards, ice storms, cyclones.

Next day things change. Heavy rain comes through,
drowns the air, leaves a liquid purple sky
pock-marked by clouds pulsing with crimson –

nature gone wrong. So why such delight?
Seems to me, you think out of winter ought to come
a worse-than-winter: a captivating cataclysm

to erase daily life, its drudgeries, the boredom.
So there you are, rapt by the storm-lit window,
seeking signs of some worst-case scenario,

best-case being a comet strike: mass extinction.
So why smile? I don't find this amusing.
Seems to me, it's time you knew

I do not like that slow calm way
you let out your breath at the hint of a prospect
of an emptied planet careening past stars.

SALVATION

Sole survivor, one hen out of six.
Saw the snapping jaws, smelled the breath
of the beast. And now, each sunset
she flutters up a tree, perches, peers. Roosts
to see out the night. Out of reach. Alive.

Predators abound at night. They prowl.
My mother sensed the open maw of her malady
stalking her, crouching in the dark corners of her eye.
No pills could blur the certainty day's never sure,
one never knows at sunset if light will come back.

Vagrants survive the night by noctivagation,
doze by day by hot air vents. Many who have beds,
try as they may, can't outfox their awareness
of danger on all sides: a bad investment, a word
out of place: windfalls of self-doubt leave them

sleepless, exhausted, skull full of the inverse
of safety: creeping carnage. And peril remains
in the shadows come morning, sniffing fenced
perimeters, seeking a way in, a perpetual reminder
that, at midday even, a day can die, disappear.

Salvation's never certain, protective measures
hit and miss: religion, retail therapy, running
a marathon or two. For me there's just one
sensible solution: look up, pick a branch,
think roosting, think hen.

RETICENCE

Would you see me again if I told you
I see things you don't. Won't. Certainly never have.
Like the demise of the sun in a cobra's slit eye
when the rain out at sea makes a lunge at the land,
turns air to water and slave forts to islands
with a mantis in prayer at the top of the stairs.
You've not been there but if you went all you'd see
is broken balustrades, cracked tiles, crumbling
cook house with its roof caved in.

Would you touch me again if I told you
I was first touched by the glint, gun-metal black,
of a scorpion's back, and its curved tail, the venom
stored in the tip, far from its dark heart and claws
scuttling sideways, a live-and-let-live. Or kill.
Unlike the grey puff adder, its slothful style of harm,
so fat and slow, sunning itself between white stones,
tiny mouth pursed with poison, a curious froth
you would never have noticed. I did.

Would you marry me again if I told you
a chameleon first instructed me in intimacy,
colour-shifting, craft of camouflage, then the sudden
tongue flick: I spoke in tongues, kitchen-pigeon,
back door always open when the bedroom door closed
on my first love, a tiger beetle. Second was a dove. The last
might be a manatee under the sea. Meanwhile my lips
are sealed, my dear, so that you will continue
to accompany me.

BLUE

The bluebirds are gone.
In their absence the gnarled oaks in an westerly wind
no longer sound like the sea on a pebbly shore
and the newly mown lawn is unable to lure
fat plums from the bent tree branches.
The pond looks back darkly, reflecting nothing
as its fish gasp for air, gazing up at the sky
seeking blue between storm clouds
while, under the house, the black river roils
seeping in between tiles and leaving grey traces
on his battered suede shoes and the broken
remains of two teacups.
Summer's over.

This is not without consequence.
He wears only blue, pale blue shirts,
cobalt ties as if colour alone could make him
recall the milder intentions of others, and enjoy
while he can the remaining late figs,
the last of the lavender and an over-blown
rose wanting in at the window where
the old house's corridor creakily turns
towards the room, book-lined, with a fictional view
of blue mountains and, in the corner of the eye,
traces of flight feathers, a mended sky,
its flecks of blue a pair
wing-tip to wing-tip.

YOU AND ME

I was born believing you were there
like the other half of a torn sheet of paper.

The half which was me without you
cast an asking shadow which was seeking,
fretful, and redolent of loss as if I'd been
bereft in the womb of a twin, *fetus*
papyraceus: parchment flake of your skin
attached to the back of my hand like a map

to where I might find you alive, maybe near,
behind me at Tesco's or the queue at the bank;
perhaps someone I passed every day
in the street. But I also suspected you were
far away, mid-ocean, or up a mountain,
short one person: me. And missing me.

But with time you've changed, turned
indulgently inclusive, and I've moments
of seeing you in all sorts of things, a sunset,
a dragonfly, an old oak tree, and I've no doubt
that eventually you'll be everything I see.
Might even be me too. Maybe always were.

PHANTASM

I've a new ghost.
Small black fly, silent as the grave.

Came in one night through an open window,
freezing outside: can't have entered alive.
No one else sees it as it zooms from room
to room, in a state of perpetual motion so that
I never know where it is, when it might reappear,
even suspect it's become invisible again
until it snags on my ever-alert peripheral vision,
that early-warning system of being stalked
or watched. And, sure enough, it lands
on my head, hand or sandwich,
brushes my cheek with its thread-fine feet
as an intimacy, or perhaps as a test: will I
swot it? Or remember, as I always should,
that my very first friend was a warrior beetle
with pincers, barbed legs and a glistening carapace,
and I treasured him, tried to see through his eyes
his life, lively as mine, neither better nor worse
because a life is a life. All being equal

and mattering, breath's precious
even when it's phantasmic.

MAY I SPEAK?

You say I'm
flimsy, a swatch of frayed scarves,
a to-and-fro, a scattered thing.
But have you never thought there's
a certain courage

in being nothing much,
like a cloud shape-shifting
or water assuming willy-nilly
the form of any alluring receptacle
to come its way.

You say I'm
lacking a proper sense of self.
But is there really any such thing?
Rather than look in the mirror
I'd rather look at everything

with equal, if capricious, interest
as part of one beautiful shifting mist
in which you and I, my dear,
drift. Temporarily.
And yet you'd

have me carve myself in stone –
white marble goddess, black Madonna
with cold sealed lips
so even my lovely ghosts
could not hear

themselves breathing
inside the silence in my voice.

SAFE HOUSE

Your house is something you wear, it fits itself around you like a glove or a cloak, or a frayed paisley dressing gown. It clothes your body of thoughts with its immaterial inklings of lives lived here before those-before-you were even born, let alone dreaming the daydreams and nightmares of sleepers who tossed and turned just as you do, the shadows of their beds beneath your bed and counting your summers, your staying-power. How much longer?

Your house means to protect, shod your bare feet in wooden clogs, impervious to splinters and nails, so you can clomp through its rooms, clatter down its corridors, clip-clop to its windows framing the shade in your face with honeysuckle and roses when you open the shutters and the sun rushes in to pool warmth round your ankles, angular and blue from the underground river which flows up the stairs to remind you that you'd be wearing dead fishes if you were ever to leave

your house, the stone-cold walls, the old oak beams, because it knows, as nothing else does, just what to do with those odd moments of joy like the pink puffy clouds which blow in through the door unexpectedly – tethers them to the ghosts circling the ceilings. As fire, flood, feuds, crusades and insurrections have never disturbed their residency, your house sees no reason, least of all absence of breath, for you to conclude yours.

PRESBYOPIA

As I walk down the street, inwardly smiling
at a squirrel's remark or a gull's scatty comment,
my eyes stream with tears as if I'm bereaved.
I'm not, but my eyes are. Gone is the intricate detail
they enjoyed so much: flower stamens, leaf veins,
bees' wings – once crystal-clear, now smirr.
Might a dog's smile soon look the same
as a cat's snarl or an eagle's murderous stare?

I shake my head, wipe my eyes, tell them
forget close-up, enjoy what's dead ahead,
wind-whipped cherry tree trying to blossom,
pigeon dragging its wing by the rusty bike –
if you look, really look, when that bird
takes to its good wing, you might see
tremendous distance: our world in full flight
in a murmuration of stars. Now that's vision.

We'll find it weightless. Let's call it joy.

BIRTHMARK

For the sixty eighth time he wakes up on the day
he was born. Sun shines on everything it sees
except him, and the grass ignores his footfall.
Seems to know he must have asked to be born
when he oughtn't, when everyone else at the time
fervently hoped he'd remain nothing more

than a shadowy cast in a shell-shocked eye.
But whose eye? Because, if it wasn't the wrong one
and if his father really was his father, then flesh
can cast off flesh: a son's very first steps can
take him light years from a father's scarred heart.
He grasps at shadows, half-forgotten looks.

Half-truths a silence, wartime lies remain in place
but he is granted the small and useful suspicion
that whatever the nature of old battles fought and lost
combatants have no right under any convention
to blame innocent bystanders who haplessly happen
to be, when they shouldn't. Collateral damage

occurs in all wars, and reparation's haphazard,
half-hearted or not at all. But maybe there might be
a discreet resolution: out of the blue on this blue-skied day
himself holding out to himself the feather-light gift
of forgiveness, gift-wrapped unconditionally.
A face in the mirror smiles back kindly.

AMAZED

I walked to school in an ice-maze.
Smaller than snow-fall I could see
nothing above the shovelled white walls
except sky, grey and about to release
more snow, heat seeking, its wolfish appetite
for flesh fended off by woolly layers, hats, scarves,
nothing exposed except eyes and nose.
I persisted stoically. There was no turning back
and no certainty of getting anywhere familiar.
Lifts were forbidden, readily refused.

It's possible that the first walk is
the walk of the rest of one's life.

Did I ever arrive? I've no memory of school
as if the journey was the arriving where
I'd always be, cold even in the hottest places,
a little afraid, going-to and never 'at'
but believing that I can continue
as long as I remember those first instructions
right at the corner, three blocks, turn left
as a needing to look only up, not out,
at the universe, waiting behind cloud cover,
devoid of final destination. Amazing.