

MICHAEL BEDFORD



Long Poems and Series

MICHAEL BEDFORD
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Sometimes experience is too hard won.

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London

Bloomsbury

Today I will walk down Marchmont Street
not from any particular want or need
but because it is there, and at dawn the roads
are mine alone, and sometimes I cannot sleep.

Silence before the storm. While at King's Cross
the bustling crowds will have long since slipped away
leaving only tramps at rest in shop doorframes.
In my wandering, perhaps I will stray

into Russell Square. Dream of Woolf and Bell
lost in some bookish fantasy or such,
as the underground starts to throb and pulse
and work with its foul breath taps its watch.

Dawn Raid

Suddenly gulls. They are flying blindly.
They are mad lost gulls adrift from shore.
Maps abandoned, aloft in darkness singing
an unseemly melody. Their cry disturbs me,

I awake thinking it is Whitby. They have fooled me.
Tell it to a friend - gulls here in Bloomsbury.
Will not believe me. Makes a liar of me.
Throats spiked they soar silently, stealthily,

unerring gull bullets shot ceaselessly.
I am still in Whitby. No-one to believe me.
I have heard gulls in Bloomsbury.
In Bloomsbury. Inland. Far from sea.

Breakfast at Euston

A cold day on Woburn Walk. Staff begin
to serve the hardy customers sitting
outside the cafes. Tables aligned in
snug rows, barely noticed by the jostling

commuters who filter through the tight street.
Then a tramp arrives. Clad in congealed clothes
begging for change or scraps of food to eat.
He moves towards a lone diner who knows

the beggar will not leave without a fee.
The diner pretends to be unaware
of his presence but when the beggar sees
his indifference he leans over, stares

at him and screams that he is starving. Yet
the diner does not pay. The man bellows
as loudly as he can. To no effect.
The noise alerts people. Passers-by slow

as the aimless chatter of the other
diners, lost in their daily ritual
of fresh croissants, subsides. Morning papers
lower as they are caught in the battle

of wills now raging between the two men.
It is silent. All discourse replaced
by mute glances. The tramp shouts his case - then
the implacable response. In the face

of this relentless onslaught, the diner
starts to curl up until hunched horribly
across his table. At last, a waiter,
alerted by the noise, comes out to see

what is happening and moves the tramp on.
The commuters who had been stood watching
turn and edge forward again as along
the lane, people discuss their strange morning.

The diner, visibly shocked by events,
pretends to be unconcerned. When finished
rises slowly to maintain his pretence,
then goes. Soon winter will come in earnest

and snow will fall making a mockery
of the white dust sprayed over the shop fronts
as in some Dickensian fantasy.
Damp, windswept days will force the restaurants

to keep the metal tables and chairs stacked
in lines along the wall. To abandon
their pavement service until spring is back
and the harsh weather begins to lighten.

Working Girls

A cheap hotel in Belgrove Street.
Not stylish. A place to unload
life's debris. Toothbrush, clothes. To sleep.
At the lower end of the road

stood the underground. Its gullet
fit to burst each weekday morning
I walked to work. Narrow inlet
stuffed with crumpled bodies spilling

in a convulsive overflow.
Once cast aside an unguarded
glance. A smile at a stranger, no
more. Brief courtesy extended

continued through the dense crowd. Tried
again, to be on time. Instead,
an unseen hand grasped mine. Surprised,
I turned. *Do you want sex?* she said.

From then walked as the natives do.
Gaze stooped to avoid a loose eye.
Smiled knowingly at tourists who
might stop to talk if asked the time.

Late evening, the flood diminished
to fitful stream. Lone travellers
hauling bags, sightseers exhausted
from their wandering, labourers

tracking home. The traffic steady,
subdued. Small groups congregated
by the side road or library
windows. The under-hang sheltered.

The girls small, mostly slightly built
wore creased sweatshirts with trainers or
pumps. If cold, thick wool coats or quilt
jackets. No pretence of glamour.

The tide surveyed for single men.
Their attention flitting, faithful
only to those stood half-hidden
from view, presence invisible

until an argument arose.
The approach: cigarette needing
a light perhaps. When distance closed,
I do Spanish, oral, rimming.

A scrag end trade. That patch surely
its meanest edge. Faces ashen,
young. None mature. Absence maybe
testament to its attrition.

Sometimes the police arrived. By van
or in pairs on foot from Gray's Inn.
Blue gilets surrounding a man
as I walked by. A stern warning

or even an arrest. Duty
discharged, they would return to base.
The void around so stealthily
formed, edge lined by watchful faces,

would re-fill as the crowd drifted
back. Soon it would be as before.
When they returned - scene repeated.
Incoming waves repealed once more.

I passed one couple bartering
a price. He, short, well built. Figure
defined by a stained ill-fitting
shirt stretched uneasily over

his large build. She wore a yellow
anorak and had visibly
dirty hands and face. So much so,
that you noticed she was filthy.

You wondered why she looked like that.
Didn't clean herself. Points shouted
so those near could clearly hear what
the terms, details were. Undaunted,

they argued. There were no happy
endings there. No respite. The cold
pricing of a commodity,
no more than that. Goods to be sold.

By autumn I had changed hotels.
A much better room in Cartwright
Gardens. Swapped sirens for the yells
of students shouting late at night.

Good natured stuff. Harmless banter.
My route to work and the Friday
train home also new. Much nicer
than before. Good shops, takeaway,

tennis courts. You could stop to talk
or give directions. No need for
lowering your gaze as you walked,
to muse on what had gone before -

what events had led to that place,
the possible explanations.
Nor to deal with my own distaste
or uneasy fascination.

Yet though there was no reason why,
I would occasionally contrive
to pass there. Still astonished by
the brutality of their lives.

On Permanence and Passing

Deep Clean

Who remembers the dead?
Turbulence in the air, pictures,
a child grown in their own volley
of rant and passion?
Are they tied to walls
some mad photograph
captured in brick dust print?
Reaching from behind tarnished
silver and etched glass?
Entwined in branches of trees
sown as wood headstone?
Not this house, not now.
Not birds: crow, finch, rook, or magpie,
no-name birds plunderers of any palm.
Not plants: Alchemilla, juniper, mint or thyme.
I saw what they had grown
and dug it up.
Stripped walls to blank plaster;
painted battered doors;
culled grey seal cupboards and pup shelves.

Who remembers the dead?
Not this house, not now.
All must pass. New brooms sweep hard and true.
Swept as a blocked chimney,
pulled that ruthless brush through myself.

Wiped fingerprints off every banister.

Roots

I often worry
about their dark purpose,
collusion with the land.

Submerged under bush and tree
knitting soft clay, loam,
with needle tuber and wood thread.
Breaking boulder and rubble
with insidious charm and slow ease.

I dig.
Cut with a sharp steel blade: precision tool.
Stretch and pull nimble fingers
from muck and mire,
break twisted limbs from a bare dirt bed.

Dank warriors of the splintered search.
Mariners of grave and mud sea
burrowing in soil night; sinewy leeches
unbowed by estate or season.

In that deep communion what do they say?
Whisper to the blind dumb worm,
pray to a deaf god of breeze and cloud,
muse on pounding shoe or drum of rain?

Assault troops of the innocent leaf.

Blustery Night

Rain splattered windows painted black
kept our home warm. Walls raised from lorry
and palette stood, planted foursquare and true
by rough hands long since forgotten.

Too dark to see the cruel swell.
Shadows swayed, branches danced,
cloud billowed and fell. Mostly sound.
A plastic chair falling, bin in flight.

This house had seen more than us.
Lovers kiss and tell. Death and tales
of death. Life and death again.
It was experienced.

No stranger to a driving squall.
Wind wolf blew but piggy house stood.
Bright curtain eyes lighting this fleeting rage
as we sheltered asleep.

Starting gun crack, flash gun rumble,
nature brewed the beast but the beast moved on.
Flooded drowning wood gutters. Leapt off ski-slope
suicidal roof tiles onto pavement below.

Battered a square pane
until the clatter awoke
but when sun came, and drenched birds sang,
the building still there; we were still there.

Tools which laid that concrete base
sighed: block and girder sturdy yet.
Us too, constant in this passing downpour.
Secure inside our brick nest.

Garden Murder

Fingers full of idle desire
I scalped a railway track
bringing an electricity of scythe and decimation:
reeling the green tide in.

Small fabulously wealthy frogs,
bug-eyed limpets of dark wet places I had
not yet reached, shook their pyramid heads.

A flesh bully to them. Another day
spent in naked perfection and mud-bound grace.
Yet senseless cloth-bound tower laboured on.

Now in wood: sculpt, shape, trim.
Dishes of leaf and sap fell,
legs I could not see scurried, eyes darted, wings flew.
I wiped salt tears from a river of face.

Stood in soil I found a magic tree.
Bark flowing, branch in perfect
canopy - though not by my or any conscious hand.
Yellow fruit perfume in the brisk, clean air.

I, assassin, dug that perfect form
with dinner fork blade and spectre of vision.
Tipped deep timber and worm into a May sun.

Triangular heads fell. Even polite birds
murmured discontent. Heaven sighed.

Tower went inside a white walled hut
to preen his feathers,

animals wept.

I would like to say that magic tree sprang
from fertile earth again but it never did.
Progress is everything and sweeps everything from its path.

A Funeral of Sorts

I found rook's bones under an ordinary tree.
How quant to see its carbon frame decaying,
This king of black feather squawk.
Steel tipped beak and orb eye soldier
to rattle bag white dice
and dusted quill for other claws to find.
I swept the crowded plot,
laid those fallen sky-bound limbs to rest.
Marked them to remember
this broken, blustering pilot.
Looked up and saw, fixing me with pierced stare,
rooks: aged, thick set, and sure
who, seeing that offhand display,
turned their disdainful heads and flew.

Nature

Owl

On blunt and arcane eye
an evening dies.

Across green copse, skylines
of dancing feather spies
 - no not I
 to take a dormouse's dour life -
over picket tower, branch tenement,
blows a fitful breeze
 whose substance,
 bled dry by bush and tree,
still patrols intent.

A hunt begins.

No more the open grove,
no more
 the resting wing.
In motion, an unequal duel
poured as fury from shadow's black coils,

moon cast in a chasm of pupil.

Hare

The feather-snap stride
of spring mayhem
cluttered by passing fancy
and fable of moon,
tie love's gold charm around youth's jet feet,
speak dream and myth as consequence of blood.

In pantomime
dance deer and harvest,
tournament of snare and hound.

As an ocean lunar tide
calls canvas to master, curse softly into night

*never below ground
never below ground.*

April Shower

A stone's throw journey, no more
walking the arc of that flight
steps cascading from my bag of strides.

I stopped: the sound of nothing approaching,
dull pressure,
a space to fill with scene and plot.

Upon me then that bold commotion.
Took a wind and wrung it dry.
A clatter of pans in heaven perhaps,

shock of anger, plates crashing.

For wind read hurricane; for rain read flood.
Suddenly gone,

gathering strife as skirts behind it.

Whiteley Woods

Fallen timber splinters
spills teeming flesh onto calm ground
to strive and grasp and shed blood
and in shadows and open slopes
taste scent and the breath of it.
Without anger, kill and be killed;
without thought, drift along ribbons of runs
and track – ditch and burrow
where skilled underpaid thieves
ply their trade in an eye's spasm.

Darkness, terror, and glory lost
in the commonness of it all.

Storm at Ringinglow

Morning dressed in threatening colours
framed by a sharp wind skimming field borders.
Trees pirouette under a leaden horizon,
air calms before the coming convulsion.

Thunder clamours and rain and froth fall.
Fields bludgeoned, compressed in the squall.
Steel voltage and wire spark puncture shadow.
Each immensity held harmless by a meadow.

Clearance

A flower's bud sings
of the death of cold.
Grass, covered in
winter coat explodes.

A bleak awakening.
Last year's growth
cast aside, forgotten,
as that assault both

promises and forgets
in the rush of spring.
The fallen lay buried
marked in the ring

of trees who record
their bitter struggle.
The ruthless seed,
life's savage renewal.

Nature Reclaims a Derelict Factory on Brunswick Street

It is a colossus and the tiniest of things.

It is wearing glasses
made from the frames of broken windows
and licking tar off the road.

It has forgotten all propriety
and is wearing brick
cracking its own clay fibre.

It has drilled down
to the nub
and eat the nub and concrete
playing music and painting grass
across the dance floor.

It is all of these things and nothing.
Flexing walls with its breath
wearing a roof on its head
grinding all enemies to sand

under star and sun
which illuminate its playfulness.

It is splitting and spitting floorboards whole
with weight of bud
and taking long holidays
and coming back refreshed.

It is wearing snow as hands and feet
and hailstones for eyes.

It is taking back all things taken from it
which were never taken at all.

Truth

Totalitarian Commission

The poem will be constructed
by deliberate plan. Narrative provided
by ordinary, not literary, hand.
Individual emotion abolished
for that of the crowd. Exhortations
to be polished, then left to stand.
The framework will be ruthlessly
applied. Scanned for veracity
by many eyes. Verse will celebrate
the common man or woman.
Rhymes, a reminder of when
promises were broken - times
before the poem was spoken.
All slogans combined within
the limits of predetermined lines.
Any deviance from rhythm or style
will not be tolerated. Words
used from a list already edited.

Truth

Never what you first see
cloaked in obfuscation.
Peel beautiful skin aside to reveal the onion.
The reassuring safety of self-deception
a mill pond teeming with sharks underneath.

Corrupted in many guises
split by the prism of different eyes.
A landscape shaped to fit our view.
We pick and choose our dishonesty: a canon of lies
all of which are no less true.

What must children be told?
Those who feed us also mislead us.
Job passed on to corporate brands. Those dangerous
angels of expediency, so self-righteous
they see virtue in deceit.

Bleached in platitudes and gratitude's and *thank you please*,
in twee greeting cards that wipe its face.
Scrubs off the war paint. Adds cloying sentiment and dull line.
We laugh at its doggerel charm. Commonplace
suddenly profound dressed in homilies and *dum de dum* rhymes.

All the while it is the rarest, most brutal animal
which scrapes the lens clear of self-serving debris.
Incises that boil, plucks our cataract free.
Never a friend. Not even enemy.
Unwelcome guest we never want or need.

Four Walls Deconstructed

Sometimes an empty room is just that.
A package of space. We become trigonometry,
line and profile, block and measure. Sketch volume
on graph and plan, drunk on opportunity.
The innocent joy of expanding and being.

Sometimes an empty room is a child flown.
A picture framed in distorted feelings.
We are diminished and made old as we sift
through the wreckage of pride and grieving.
Recast as visits and irregular messages.

Sometimes an empty room is a palace of death.
Nail through a palm which pins our fate.
We are drained to black and invent smiles.
Become bearer of ash and certificate
shocked by permanence and our lack of emotion.

Sometimes an empty room is a dissected heart.
Sharp blade slicing through an embittered self.
Blood spilled a river of regret, a poison
which seeps everywhere. We place jars on a shelf
labelled *unfulfilled*, *never tried*, and *wrong decision*.

Sometimes an empty room is not empty at all.
It is exploding with Caesar's last breath - a billion
other similar exhortations. Memories of events
we cannot scrub clean or bleach. A Brownian
motion of significance plucked from absolutely nothing.

Sometimes an empty room is not even a room.
A universal rabbit hole stretching to infinity.
We stare into the boundless mirror with no hope.
It is pure truth. We learn to fear the decaying body
and often become lost simply in the looking.

Nighthawks by Edward Hopper

Four people framed in a symmetry of being.
They do not talk. They are not interacting

with each other. Darkness idly draped across a street.
Story captured yet, palpably, incomplete.

We search through daubs of yellow and tan.
Unexpectedly, colours drawn from predetermined plan.

So step back behind the image, smeared
chalk and charcoal of preliminary sketches. How the picture prepared,

constructed, entirely apart from the bone and blood
of a sitting. Not from drab, ordinary life. How should

we feel? What should we see?
Is this conflated drama in any form, reality?

Substance solid enough to grasp and hold? A stray thought
bound to pigment, then brought

struggling into birth? Perhaps it must always be this way.
How we can only ever overlay

scenes with our own fractures and preconceptions.
How a canvas must become an artist's own reflection.

Ghosts

We try the door which will not let us in
and strive to force the lock a final time.
A search for pace and style as we begin
to shape the fledgling thought and orphan line.

The visions that we glimpse outpace our grasp.
We stoop to find lost tracks, re-draft again.
Use words too insubstantial for the task
which seldom live beyond the page they stain.

What is the price to pay to fix their form,
those shards of life we barter for a deal?
The looking glass from which the scene is drawn
is far too blurred to capture what is real.

The summit seems so close and yet we know
mere sweat alone can never scale that cliff.
We stumble in the scree and waste below,
our willingness to fail both curse and gift.

Lost

The book
is no longer here.
Life on hold.
First flush of fear

sweeps balance aside.
A stranger on a train
may know too much of me.
Pages ingrained

with blunt ink betray
– naked verse
not meant
for another's eye. I curse

my careless nature.
Walls fall silently.
Somewhere, a knife trails across
a soft underbelly.

Long Poems

The Cutting Room

The building itself looked nothing special.
Certainly, no hint of what lay inside.
As all old medical schools do, it had
a faded grandeur. The Victorians
artists in red brick and sculptured sandstone.
The room sited on an upper level.
A twisting mahogany framed staircase
led to the door. At last we stood outside.
A nervous laughter. The shuffling of feet.
Who knew what to expect? *Doctor in the
House* ran through my thoughts in an endless loop.
The door opened. Would someone faint? Please God
don't let it be me. We filtered inside.
I think someone did faint. Or leave. Returned
later smiling sheepishly, first test failed.

The bodies were laid on metal tables.
Silver, heavy, each top dipped down to a
central sulcus running its length. A hole
at the end drained excess fluid away.
Carefully arranged, they spread across the
room in neat parallel lines. Four to a
dissection, there were over a hundred
students in the class. A sea of corpses.
Then we began. Our blades cut the chest wall.
Each stroke shallow, precise. In time we would
not be so careful or show such respect
but now it was different. Serious.
Death: how it felt, looked, and even tasted.
And through this strange rite we too had become
different. Special in ways only we
could know. Jokes soon followed. Mock bravado.
When you look at something so awful you
must laugh. That too would always stay with us.

Cadavers: odd beasts. Not human at all.
A disturbed refection - hollow vessel.
Doppelganger shaped from a modeller's clay
which was somehow incomplete, unfinished.
Motionless, drained of fluids, they rested.
Faces expressionless, mouth dropped open,
you could pull tissue up between a thumb
and forefinger. See it hold. Then watch the
mound diffuse back to the body below.
A smell of formaldehyde clung to them.
Clung to us. Seeped into our clothes and skin.
After a while we didn't notice it
though years later, I would share a lift with
students returning from dissection and
be appalled at the stench. We must have stunk.

Loose leaf books outlined the scope of the work.
Our bibles. The covers laminated
so you could wipe them clean, though the pages
inside, being paper, would stain and mark.
Leg, Arm, Foot, Thorax. They listed the tasks
to be finished before a final test.
Pretty soon we were old lags. Knew the score.
Whispered mnemonics as mantra. We heard
a rumour that someone took a hand home
to work on it. An urban myth? Who knows?
Forever worried about fingernails.
So difficult to clean. Stopped biting them.
What was normal, routine, somehow shifted.
Once we arrived to find our head (*our head*)
removed. Sawn off for someone else to use.
Within the year we would do similar
ourselves. Amazing how ordinary
the extraordinary can become.
Perhaps you can get used to anything.

When the school moved, I helped. A summer job.
They'd asked for volunteers, but few replied.
We worked alongside the porters taking
specimens to the new site. Some carried.
A strange procession walking with parcels
covered in dark cloth - underneath, organs
swimming like surreal fish in a glass case.
The porters were good sports: spilled their secrets.
Told of bodies kept in purpose-built tanks;
the relentless progress of embalming;
how at a designated date they had
to collect all the pieces together
for burial. Had to find all the bits.
All of them. Everyone. How did they know?
The bodies left to medical science.
Were we medical science? Really? How
grand! I wondered if they knew the scope of
that selfless bequest: what happened after.
I still humbled by the scale of their gift.

Twenty years on in a forgotten case
of books, I knew at once what lay inside.
The smell unmistakable, unsettling,
A ghost returned: *The Thorax*. I began
to read it. Did we really do that? Why?
Dead anatomy. What use would it be?
To learn a few surface landmarks, even
some small skill with a knife - but the detail?
Those endless hours hunting tiny vessels.
Branches, divisions, carefully displayed.
To what end – etch it in us forever?
No. It had never been about that. Not
about gain at all - but loss. We had been
dissected there. Blooded in that harsh room.
Magic and reverence replaced by mere
gristle - machinery to be mended.

The wonder in us stripped out as surely
as we had stripped out each nerve and vessel.
Conditioned and desensitised. And I,
only realising two decades later.
Still with the stink of the book lingering
I started to wash my hands. Couldn't get
rid of the smell just as I couldn't then.

I see films of extremists. Terrorists.
View pictures of their crimes. The innocent
lives lost, the injuries, the traumatised.
Yet despite this, I find my thoughts drawn to
the guilty. How did they move so far from
where they started? The normal - average?
How did I? Was it the same sleight of hand,
just a different destination, scale?
No longer unsullied myself, can taste
the delicate opium of their path.
Its slope and solace. That heady journey
a shorter distance than we might admit.
*Then we began. Our blades cut the chest wall.
Each stroke shallow, precise. In time we would
not be so careful or show such respect.*

Perhaps there are cutting rooms everywhere.
Some more subtle or extreme than others.
All plausible, rational, bathed in the
warm glow of tradition - even duty
but taking away that part of us we
owe to everyone and everything else.
What if you could lose your humanity
standing in full view, lights blazing, with the
very best of intentions. Your one crime
being not to ask *Why?* Imagine that.

Dissection

I Anatomy

Catch fish in the human tank,
hook bleached skin,
touch the lifeless thing,
prod and poke and laugh.

Some shape likeness
from wax and string,
Not us. We hang them up
and drain them dry.

II But I never found it there

I presented the branches of the vagus,
displayed the anomalous palmaris longus,
but he said I must do one more thing.
Find this man's soul.

I carefully placed a knife above his sixth rib.
Opened the thoracic cavity,
grasped sodden lungs, ripped a rubber heart
from its cage, but it was not there.

Removed eyes, ears, tongue,
sawed the baseball cap right off.
Plucked the pink ball from its nest.
Nowhere to be seen.

Peeled crust from carcass
as bark stripped from a tree.
Cut withered, pitted, tangled limbs;
shaped, trimmed, pruned to no avail.

Someone said he knew.
He had seen it and it had whispered to him.
Someone in the next room spoke
of those with none to find.

I ignored them.
A lot of competition to find a soul.
It is I who would hold it aloft saying,
Here it is. I've got it!

But I never found it there
so it does not exist,
or it is too well hidden for my knife to find,
or it is too insignificant to be of consequence,

unlike palmaris longus
or the branches of the vagus.

III It must be nice to be dissected

It must be nice to be dissected:
explained in myelin sheath and muscle fibre;
osteoclast and renal parenchyma.

Tissue neatly presented for examination.
Ah yes, I see that's why he did that!

I could rest in glass bottles
packaged with labels.
Passers-by could be tested.
What is wrong here? and
Do you think it caused him problems?

Skeleton
hung in the corner
a pale white necklace.

Sliced and pinned
captured on glass slides
where microscopes could record each cell
which deviated from the norm.

I could be a learning experience.

IV Animation

It is the empty cask,
husk of human seed.
A flesh full stop; a pale reminder.
Animate him now!
See, you cannot.
Stiff limbs resist your pull;
deaf ears resist your pleas.
Chop him up for firewood.
Forget this spit and sawdust,
cold, grey plasticine man.

V Animism

How far shall we go?
Soul is such a fleeting thing, that spark
attached to voluntary movement,
the animating principle.
Do we attribute life, sensation,
seed corn of the desolate self
tied by the finest, spun thread
in descent from harmony to bone
to the beating, calling heart alone?
Is it profligate or profound?
Perfused as perfume, actuating spirit
written on a skin of sky and wind,
cacophony of life
beneath our feet?

VI Creation

See how my garden grows: exhumed from
inanimate grain I consecrate and beautify;
dig earth; move spent Hawthorne and
barren bush; sow, feed, plough and water.

See how my garden grows: I consume,
eat soft fruit from labour; grow bark;
scatter plants; spin a living thread; transmute,
transform forgotten words, neglected fields.

See how my garden grows: as fresh
saplings, my roots grasp between
body and bread - blood and wine. I am
a geographer mapping a land.

I catch a breeze and make it flesh.

VII Perhaps it is art not science

I have tried to pin you down.
Sketch parameters,
define boundaries, edges.

Spread your parchment wings upon this board
to tease thought,
nature,

from this marriage of convenience,
sorority of mass and self.
Past a desolate gravity of doubt

with its stench of sulphur
and leaden feet,
tied to walls we have built ourselves,

epistles of sin and suffering.
But my tracks decay in circles
as you smile.

I have never found your elegance
or erotic inspiration.
Sand drifting through an open fist

you are gone,
tide and away,
no remnant of the flame remains.

Alternatives to Reason

I The void

Darkness burst through
a broken bulb.
As a child I could see no holy place
in its lightning tongue
devouring walls, carpets, stairs.

Innocence was no protection.
I hid, pierced by blades
sharpened on the whetstone of my pulse
until the air buzzed again with safety
covering that fracture with a mantra

We'll leave the landing light on
We'll leave the landing light on.

II Supplication

I struggle with prayer. That barren gulf
between question and answer,

trying to wring water from a dry towel.
As a fly, pace about the web,

throw stones, smash windows
all to no effect.

Yet a prayer fits easily inside a travelling bag.
Covers a car or child,

even spans a continent.
I am a new man too.

I scrape moon and star into my battalion.
Enlist the foot soldiers of karma and Tao.

But I have never played with graveyards, skulls,
creation's dark names.

Those who might shake your hand
only to steal fingers.

III Common prayer

I will be punished for speaking up.
I will be punished for keeping quiet.
I wait for people to find my mistakes.
I wait for it all to go badly wrong.
I fear I am not good enough.
I fear everyone will know.
I know the ring is closing.
I know someday I will kill myself.
I should have done it long ago but I am too lazy.
I should have done it long ago but it is too late.

Goodnight. Amen.

IV Statistics

Cancer reads our base language.
It takes many deaths to feed its stone belly.

Quick, muscular, overtakes the fastest constitution.
Bestows gifts of weeping as flowers

draped across ordinary, undeserving limbs.
Understands survival in a changing, hostile world.

Here take a card. No, keep it. Remember to call.
To speak its name to have first finger

on the dial. Risk a voice replying
before last digit rung. *Hello?*

V Obsession

A minor ordeal. You should not worry.
Post a letter, drive from here to there.
Rituals begin,

linger as the stink of garlic.
Reason says nothing - silence which costs dearly.
Nothing is happening over and over

until emptied rests, drinks, sleeps.
To stop is to invite retribution;
to continue, have the creature as guest.

Humour in the choice, bitter as its breath.

VI Extinction

Unpicks the knots we speak:
She's looking better, or He's put on weight.
We interpret silence as indifference

when all the while
thumbs close our eyes,
kisses tarnish our silver tongue.

Ask Achilles how it all went wrong.
Bad luck, he cries limping
as a billion bumpy graves whisper, *Me too.*

VII Reprise

Always the darkness.
That state of ignorance in whose cup
we pour our sovereignty, offering all
for hope of sanctuary.

But our tyrant still calls for more.
We fashion demons
from the void
and moths to flame, stagger.

Reduce ourselves.
Make the target ever smaller.

Aspects of Mortality

I

I awoke in terror: a first appearance.
The nightmare spoke of no longer being.
Obliteration of self: sheet wiped clean.
Abject fear of dispersal to nothing.

Mother applied a soothing balm,
how this a passing, imagined apparition.
With that halted my childish rant.
World repaired by misplaced fiction.

II

Antibiotics and oxygen two days in.
Behind gown and mask saw
laboured, restricted breathing.
A vulnerability not revealed before.

Line on a dock
traced his deteriorating state.
Plunge deeper into shock,
chemical debts which accumulate.

Ventilator, monitors, dialysis brought
as we ignored the truth we knew.
Held in a web of machine support,
bags of saline pumping through.

They removed the spent technology,
venous lines and banks of tubing,
brushed his hair, washed face and body
before our final viewing.

III

Séance: what conceit to ply those questions,
no narrowing of any divide.
Who could wrest epiphany or illumination
when every scrap denied?

Then, not described the half of it,
countless fists battering doors that will not open.
No password or key to fit.
Step crossed - unknowable in that motion.

IV

Platitudes
speak only of the living.
Under cloak of ground
we are beyond caring

what sops they tell.
We sleep alone
secrets gone,
nothing to atone

or disturb
our tranquillity.
Motives rest
converted to failure or victory

by those who lag behind.
We do not care,
all lies
end there.

V

To re-animate that limp, moribund coating,
an impossible thing. I know that prison, cavity,
from outside-in. Flesh hook and pulley operating
by bone lever and tendon string. In healthy,

breathing state, pulpit for self within.
It is a jacket, worn, to be discarded!
What interest could it be? A snake's skin
slumped, when all inside departed.

VI

In the end, will make no preparation.
Shocked by events will plead my case.
As if exempt from its crude attentions,
always unexpected yet so commonplace.

Three Stories with No Good Conclusion

Stopped at the nurse's station. A cup of tea
on offer. The old wards were so much better.
Desk placed bang in the middle, centrally.
You could watch all the beds. Didn't matter

where the action was, chances are you saw
things as they just kicked off. Great design.
I watched a young girl roll about the floor
playing with her visitors. She looked fine.

Laughing. A rare sight in the hospital.
It caught the eye. Mum and relatives
sitting by her bed. Perhaps a couple
of siblings too. A poster for happy families.

A nurse saw me looking. *A crying*
shame she said, gesturing in the girl's direction.
I asked what she meant. Everything
going well, surely? The girl's condition

deteriorating? No. It was the family.
When the girl first brought in, minor
signs of neglect but most worryingly
the lack of any real affection. Mother

and father barely acknowledged her.
Here, a different version. Pointing
covertly towards the cheerful picture,
It's because they know we are watching.

She said the parents had quickly
realised our concerns not solely clinical.
Nothing to hang a legal hat on, marks to see,
or enough that as a professional

you might want to step in. More
an absence of what you might expect.
Following that, appearances changed. I saw
none of this. Delightful child. In retrospect

a little too clingy, but really nothing much.
When the nursing staff had gone
I stood out of view. Began to watch.
A light went off. Girl vying for attention

but ignored or casually brushed aside.
Left alone to play until, again, staff seen
at the desk or walking by which would coincide
with a return to the previous happy scene.

The most heart-breaking aspect? During
those periods the girl would realise and go on
to make the most of them. Smiling, talking,
running around. Basking in the appreciation.

She had deduced what was happening.
Impressive in a sad way. Intelligent
for her age. Later the same evening
I returned to find the nurse intent

on getting the full story. Abashed
at my ignorance. Was there any detail
I had overlooked? *Detail?* She laughed,
pausing for effect. *It's because she is female.*

An answer I didn't expect to hear.
Not even on my radar before.
An unwelcome lesson. Even so, clear
any child had a right to expect more

than that. The bare minimum.
An age on, talking with an Irish friend
about the reasons he had come
from a post in Ireland to spend

his training here. The usual culprits.
Property, girlfriends, lack of opportunity.
Suddenly headed completely off script.
Started talking about the cruelty

he had endured there in his youth.
Words flooding the room. I, finger
in dyke trying to stem the flow. In truth,
embarrassed by his raw emotion and anger.

I hadn't realised he was an orphan.
The institution he had spent his teen years
run by a religious denomination.
Outlined how he and many of his peers

blighted by the time they had boarded there.
Not the obvious excesses of other
such places. Say, physical or sexual abuse, where
decades later a state prosecutor

might collect evidence for a prosecution.
More refined, indirect. An abrogation of duty
towards the children. From their position
of authority, the staff had systematically

undermined them. Discontented, unhappy
people, but passing that internal rage on.
Their charge's days a desperate journey,
a master class in subtle oppression,

coldness, lack of humanity. Veneer
which kept his wounds hidden, paper thin.
And I, startled recipient of the story, no idea
of the scars he had been carrying.

We did visits after morning surgery.
The call had a familiar name.
I took it. Something about a baby
with a cough. When I arrived and came

through the hall, immediately knew the score.
The whole place smelled. Carpet sticky
underfoot so when you walked, the floor
would pull at your soles. Quite audibly.

I had seen it all before. The sort of place
you don't accept tea. Or linger too long.
Baby with snuffles. In the space
behind the cot, where his sister had gone,

(incidentally, a happy bundle of energy)
I saw dog crap in the corner. It looked old.
There was some in the hall. The proximity
to the child annoyed me. Not pleased and I told

the mother so. She hadn't time for cleaning.
We moved on. Had a health visitor and social worker
and received all the grants and support going.
Basic hygiene never a priority for her.

Otherwise, a caring mother. Doted on her three
children. Loved them, and they loved her too.
Focus of her world. As always, the worry -
when they grew older, what they, in turn, would do.

Rise above this or recycle more of the same?
Heart looks to the former; head the latter.
Here, at least, not about a lack of love, but again,
far from optimal. How much does that matter?

Three exemplars. What started as a chance recollection
and grew. Don't look here for platitudes. I have none.
So many villains. Cultural attitudes, beliefs, institutions,
dogma, individual behaviour. The list goes on.

*The visions that we glimpse outpace our grasp.
We stoop to find lost tracks, re-draft again.
Use words too insubstantial for the task
which seldom live beyond the page they stain.*

from 'Ghosts'

