

A Stranger's Table

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Falling Awake

Burnt ochre sands
the colour of my lover's hair
flame with the evening's pulse
a skin-whispered prayer

for I am falling
to where dusk-dark waters enfold
me,
each floating step a liquid heat
drawing me down until I see

only flesh and ocean
and the sea-green pull of his eyes.
Drowning I breathe in salt
which laps my tongue's surprise

until he is gone
when, dream-shimmered, I shake
and cry, drifting with loss
in the tide's lull, falling awake.

Haiku

Two boats on water
nestle in the morning sun;
shoes expecting feet.

Calling

There's a space on the fridge
where phone calls rest.
All week we gather them,
offerings to distant gods
of communication:
small scraps of white paper,
lined, unlined, vibrant
with names of people
who want us, allegedly,
for some important thing or other.

We save them up,
you and I, uncertain
where to catch the words
for whatever answer is required,
this time, to satisfy
these torn disturbers of our peace.

Now and then,
when the paper curls in on itself
enough to tunnel into conscience
or when the fluttering moth of guilt
flies up to snatch at our hands as we pass,
do we blast a way through
the unforgiving net of community,
hurling a social phrase or two
like a tender knife or javelin

down insubstantial wires
which link us, so we're told,
to those beyond our calling.

Merman

All night he dreams in pink,
vast swathes of seashell, sea-smell
coral-rich embedded in grain
haunting the tide of his memories

which sing to him of leaving.
For the splash of surf, the sand's
mellow grit beckon him, a hint
of oyster-hidden pearl

and the wave's salt embrace.
In his sleep he smiles and whispers
strange words learnt from the sea
but never stays to swim with me.

View

Two slow films ease
the evening's length;
I do not watch them.

Figures flicker like lights in dry ice,
they walk on their mapped-out journey
speaking the words someone else has
written.

Ask why and the screen shrinks
to blankness, the purple hum
of broken machinery,

shattered takes, all
the jagged paraphernalia
of unanswered thought.

Sit quite still,
night-wrapped in the unseen view
and all my secret lives.

Wasps

Like the slow trickle of water
or the crumple of paper in the hand
the wasps take up residence under the roof
as they did last summer.

At first we do not hear them;
they are cunning as wolves,
accustomed to slipping ghosted
through the splintered cracks of solid wood and
tile

to build their undulating nest
away from the innocent eyes of our everyday life.

For when the irregular crackle and hiss
of spiky tapping slips into our senses
it could so easily be
the dripping of rain along the gutter
steaming in sunlight
or the steady shifting of a house dying as it
stands
which numbs our every thought
until we come almost to accept the thing we fear
most.

And as in painstaking rhythm
they begin to mark what they count as theirs,
the slow stripe of possession,
stings golden with vengeance
for the many small deaths gone before,
then at last we hear them
as they ease through the folded swathe of

conscience,

crawling just there under the skin
and filling our tormented ears
with hazy dreams of flight.

Things I fold away ...

... include knickers (different creases
for cotton or polyester), briefs, bras
(into nests), nighties, your pyjamas, vests,
socks, jumpers, handkerchiefs (ironed),
ties, towels,
papers we've read, letters (if
pleasant),
invoices, bank statements
(when checked), tax returns,
insurance renewals, the MOT,
your bedside rubbish (frequent), the
recycling,
our social and work schedules
(once combined),
my history, silences,
your disapproval (occasional), rows,
resentment, irritations, frustration,
failure,
pain, anger, grief, bad words,
bad memories (regularly remembered):
life.

Burnt

Cloud and dust-sprung,
spinning in gas, white-hot,
bright-hot,
its scattered remnants woven into matter
understood,
only Pluto being the mystery.

Wild corona burns up the strongest sight

Imagine instead where
in the blink of an eye
hydrogen transmutes to helium
in the inner flame,

travels up through the burning body
and out through space,
dark and cool,
to light us where we shiver,
an eight-minute journey from hell's mouth.

Eleven years of waiting
for dark sunspots to encroach
on your bright equator,
photosphere to penumbra, then cold umbra
swallowing fire.

See where red jet bursts forth
from your too vulnerable skin
to flame its way to glory;

uncontainable energy
carries with it a hint of heaven
spiralling down to earth.

We are held together helpless by the sun.

Reunion

On the road I see you again, your body
framed against white sky
and I realise as if for the first time
how long I have left my heart
unsung.

No reason now for you
to quicken your pace
as you catch the sight of me
but still you do,
one arm raised as if my attention

has not been ravished
a thousand times already
in this one unguarded moment
of silken betrayal.

Now in a hot stray second
out of time
we almost touch, your fingers
brush my jacket sleeve,
leaving a scar more consuming
than if you had stroked flesh

and see our lips
taste promises
our tongues and teeth

cannot fulfil and I know
I will not bear this empty road
again.

The day after ...

... again

the lurch of a foreign morning
and the smell of strange flesh,
sweat and cinnamon
next to me as I taste
heavy on the tongue
wine, smoke, desire
which gilded us to a dawn

we wake in now,
skin stammering
with after-the-loving cold
and that unrelenting need
to fill the unfleshed emptiness
again.

Grieving

The unopened letter folds its paper in
as his scent, cinnamon-strong,
slits the cool gum and flows
over your hand.

Dry grass fades to brown
and the bitter smell of newspapers.

The whisper of his touch shatters
into bright fragments,
glass or memory,
and the crueller thought
of when he walked away,
slipping out of your skin
as a boat slips into the deep

and you open your eyes,
tongue tasting cinnamon,
bringing the flavour of flesh,
wine on the lips, stars in your blood,
roses, melding, night.

The letter unfolded
unpeels your wound to bleed again
and the soft meaning
sinks into white skin

while evening rolls up leaves,
and the bleak unfeeling grass
to leave a lack of stars,
the wind's dry harshness.

Now you tear the pages, watching
as they vanish to nothing;
you have felt too much,
you have lived too long.

Eruption

I am the bitterest heat,
crimson Medusa
snake of the earth,
wild magma rising
punching through translucent crust
with flame and pain
and madness

ring of dark fire
ash and pumice
lapilli and spiky
Pele's hair
etch patterns onto soft flesh,
a crack in the seam
of existence
like the deepest words

fire fountains
rich in darkness
and desire
which scald my tongue
tearing skin
from skin
they rip me open,
leave their own
sweet hardness
unshed on mine,

a dying lava flow
until I am cold and dark
and empty.

Legend

Your eyes are fire now
stars in the night that do not
glow gently
but burn in shades of ochre,
yellow, flame.

Each blazing dart pierces me
as Lear was pierced that rain-drenched
night for all the fools to swim in.
Of which I am – you don't have to say it –
the greatest

Would that I could scream, hurl
myself out onto soaking rock, feel the night
storm's
jagged embrace, as firm
as thunder, as sharp as lightning,
then I would know the full extent
of tragedy.

But here in this more modern space
hanging like hate between us,
your face might burn me up, send me
spinning
off into black space, the heart's expansive
vacuum
or down into earth's comforting warmth
where I will,
with your permission,
and cloistered deep in the knowledge
of all my secret wrongs,

taste the hidden soul
of Euridice
and other splintered wives.

Whore's Honey

Air smoothed her skin's
smoother honey, caught
in the evening glow of sunlight
as she called to the soul
I dared not know,
thief of great men's hearts
and mine.

See how her sex
burnt its song
into dust and sun,
drove out reason
to flesh love's wilder meaning,
for the sweet, seducing power.

So I too am drowned in sand
and carved in water,
Atrium's grave defeat,
while I wait for her to love me,

and all I acknowledge now
of her royal whore's honey
is love and loss
and snakebite.

Anti-celebration

Unhook the stars,
let the sky float down
and squeeze the dark clouds shut,
tear up your promises
in your stormy hand.

Measure the sea
into the mountains' deep hollow,
pluck the wild elms bare
and hush the blackbird's song
before it wakes the dawn.

In your stormy hand
tear up your promises
and squeeze the dark clouds shut,
let the sky float down,
unhook the stars.

Le Voyage Interdit: Greta Buysse

She stands surprised in nakedness,
a whisper of lace, or cotton,
at her hips,
light on flesh echoing a suggestion
of almost movement.

His white-gloved fingers,
counterpoint to her dark hair's sleekness,
grip the top of her arms
while her hands flicker upwards
to her shadowed breasts;
a defence, a response,
who knows which.

Understand how her head
turns to meet his,
her eyes closed, lips
half-open as if about to call
or breathe out the unknown name
of a man she does not,
cannot see:

his face behind her being as it is,
always, only, masked.

Faces

The face I wear today
no longer fits;
its cool blue shades
jar against my red tongue
and I stifle my heart
to show you instead bright cream roses,
the delicacy of lavender,
daffodil, sweet pea,
all the young resonance of the woman
you once thought I was,
even as now and secretly I hunt
a different bloom
in a wild air;
the scarlet firethorn,
tall tulip, nettle, mint,
a fiercer scent, a sharper blood
to tear my face away.

Scarred

Rain scars the wide expanse of
 window,
giving me from my rectangle
of safe tan desk
a view of silver on clarity,
small daggers swift plunging
to wounded soil
like tiny slivers of glass,
the window decomposing as I
 watch,
honed sand collapsing
to air and atoms,
throwing off the pressure of
 man's hand
and the expectations
of what is familiar, workable,
and taking on the unknown,
flinging its whole soul,
brave wet heart out
into the untamed atmosphere,
the unswum shore,
where it fades to dark green,
soft grey-blue
and vanishes, pulled always
by the untellable
wildness of water.

Ice dancer

Images explode, dancing
like daggers on ice
silver, dangerous.

Beneath my feet
the skates
are made of diamonds,

each one a world of longing
in black and white.

When I open my mouth
to breathe,
no sound

except the beating of my heart -
a pounding rhythm
to this diamond dance
as onward my swift feet take me.

If my hand could trace
the beauty of *here*,
where skin and bones and blood –

faster now, and faster - fuse into
a thought not my own
to create a thing
I have never seen:

the danger, the explosion
of words
into ice.

Storm

Summoned by the storm:
turn to face the warm night air;
feel the rain come down.

Gripped by jagged fire
I burn: conspirator with
the wildness of light.

Echo of thunder
pulsating over dark hills;
my heartbeat's rhythm.

A stranger's table

Grained history of wood
and dreaming, smoky glamour
of one man's hands, spicy
seduction of cigars and whisky
as he sits, face in shadow,
the day over but night
not yet begun, mulling
what has happened
and what might
while outside the window
snow is falling
and all the trees are silent.

He holds the moment,
the house being quiet,
and runs his hand
over the table's smooth mahogany,
brass and gilt,
beaten leather top,
cigar catching on the right
where one blood-drop glistens,
replacing mute accusation
with a burn that will last for ever
while, beneath, silent lion feet
stand guard still.

In Memoriam

I thought I heard you calling
and I woke in darkness,
reaching out to a shadow

and the knowledge
of loss. You haunt my dreams,
your eyes keeping

your accusation still.
From the other side of midnight,
understand how much

I might have chanced
to hold you in the sun.
There will be no rest for us now.

So I gaze upwards,
hearing only your laughter
fresh on my tongue like roses,

feeling again the way
you used to touch me, skin
to skin, confession of love.

See how your chosen journey

launches me out once more
on this wide lake of memory.

Vanished

So he's gone then
and all the hours I spent
dreaming of the things
I could not say
are punched
out of air

that no more knows his savour,
the herbal scent of skin
I could never taste –
would that he'd let me.
Just once
was all I asked for.

No more in his granting now
for he's gone
where I cannot reach him
until my own skin melts
under the weight
of years

and I would take the blood
poured from my heart
and smear its pattern on my flesh
until I am nothing
but blood and grief

and darkness.

Wild flowers

The girl's bright skin
shames the sunlight
of this early summer morning
and there is about her
an essence of memory
as she half walks, half dances
amongst the bluebells whose stalks are
bowed,
her fair hair rising in a softness of cloud.

And I am a lifetime away,
longing to touch but fearing to hold,
like a threat of rain, unshed,
or a dark thorn in a young green field
when one step towards her enflames my
guilt;
wild flowers, once picked, quickly wilt.

Judas

One day more,
or three,
and I would have come through,

silver-branded, smoke-blackened,
skin heavy with guilt
and the meaning of earth,

so there would have been
no field, no twisted rope,
no wild remorseful tree,

no sun sparkling morning dew
far below my slow feet's dance
to stillness;

while all around, his star
shone true in blood
even through stone.

I never told him
I loved him, words spoken blue,
though I like to think he knew.

Timing

All the lines drive forward,
yellow, brown, red,
the onslaught of memory
a firework in a dark sky
lighting the wilderness
of tomorrow

and somehow I know
what Macbeth must have felt
and why it's my favourite play,
for all the evil in it, and in spite
of my own private
christianity

because sometimes all we are
is poised on the brink,
a past and future us, between
one action and another

while all the time
there's no way back
to the past

and the future
is too *other*
to see.

Bonfire Night

Treacle-toffee sky
over a Catherine Wheel crowd,
the stars are sparklers tonight;
we could hold them in our hands
and feel the crackle and hiss of centuries
passing through our fingers
to send us dreams
of treason, plot
and gunpowder,
and the small, hot cries of children
as we gaze upwards,
catching a sense of yellow, crimson, white
while our lives shoot by
through a treacle-toffee sky.

Almost a cyclist

I never quite made it,
skin singing the mysterious power of flight,
my two feet above ground;

I could have felt the wind
on my face, the dark saddle
chafing my thighs, legs spinning

boundless figures of eight
into clear space, the smell
of sweat and one small success

as my father finally let go
and I lurched uncertain but free
into the joy-riding future.

All these things could have been mine
if that first and only time I hadn't tumbled
crying to cold earth and cowardice,

my father's quick despair enough
to cast a rider-less decision on,
and later the two of us, guilty

in our untouchable wheels of life,
skulking home in twilight

doomed to bed and endless walking.

Ghost

The air is soft with menace
at the edge of the path where the man waits for
me,
hunched against the autumn evening;
like a tree in a bitter season
no flesh remains.

The yellowed mulch under my feet
shrivels into earth
releasing the scent of apples and death
which clings to my hair, my clothes, my skin

whilst above my head, trees spin nets into cool
sky
and birds, like small darts, quicksilver,
leap from branch to branch, wings beating
to find freedom in the wind's pulse.

The man is fading now.
With each subtle movement, the solemn dance
of earth in slow spin, falling,
fragments of form melt away
into leaf and shadow

until finally he is gone
into shifting air:
an enchantment of fear.

Autumn Wine

Midnight crimson, crushed,
scented of a winter to come,
the blackberries are steeped in purple –

and the summer now a memory
with its sorrow,
and forgotten sense of flight -

for their sweet explosion on my tongue
hints of a deeper wine
which might, one day

burst through flesh,
lift me up beyond myself
and wing me to the dark.

Into Summer

Dark earth burns its seed into waiting air
itself warmed by the sun's new wildness
and releases the scent of green,
untasted since last winter,
captivating, urgent.

From this one bright moment
will come all the riches
that nature longs for:
the glinting rose's crimson fire; the lilting
swing of the hills;

the lapping of water as it dreams in blue
against the rushes;
the fields; the open sky.

All the summer promise
branded on our skin
and singing us to autumn.

Preparing for paint

She sits in golden light
in a moment no-one can steal
and for which she has waited,
through all the day's dark raggedness.
Now she laps the prospect of evening slowly
as a cat laps cream,
soft skin purring with pleasure.
So for a while longer, she shuts her eyes,
a barrier of flesh, almost transparent,
against all her work-time demons;
efficiency, compassion, courage.

Only when she is sure they are gone
does she reach up, smiling,
to the warm wooden mantelpiece,
scented with fern and rosemary,
and touch the curved crimson polish
which pulsates through glass,
calling her name.
Still she is smiling
as the unlost hopes of her secret life
drift gentle through her mind.

Surely the air sings now
as she kicks her feet free
and flexes toes ready for the sweet dreaming brush.
How strong her hand is, how sure
while she paints herself to glory,
pale pink shells flowering to deepest red,
the colour of sex.

Shadow play

I used to run, the sun on my back
casting the dark side of flesh onto waiting
soil
and make believe a friendship;
gift of light, image of every twist and turn,
every mood, shifting sunspecks through
glittering air,
untamed, free,
something like the self I longed to be -
then too young to know it -
unaware each sip of sunshine I drank in
changing days
would take me an atom away from
happiness
to walk the hard bridge to an adult world
where shadows are stronger
and wild dreams longer.

Making Butter

I cream together golden butter
and sprinkles of undulating sugar
which glows with earth-dark dreaming
before pouring in the rich headiness of rum,
making the bright sand brighter.

And without knowing it I am singing,
a song as ancient in my memory
as the recipe itself;
something learnt from my mother
who learnt it in turn from hers,
a woman with the scent of coal dust on her
skin
and heaven in her voice.

Both song and red-flamed butter
I only remember in this winter season,
not used to either delicacy
in the long, arid days of summer
or in autumn's softer heat.

For the past is a harder journey,
one I take less and less often.
But now as I continue to blend and sing,
snatching strange words as if from air,
I find it is all around me,
a hidden garden waiting for rain,
full of rose and thistle.

Written

Poetry twists pale flesh
into Medusa strands of nouns
elongating like creamy snakes
through a word-maddened universe,

skin stretched out of skin,
each atom pulled tight
across air until it releases
the silkiness of verbs

with, edged between and hauntingly,
a wrench of salt-spun adverbs,
participle, conjunction, pause
numbered on the heart's frail parchment.

Watch the poem play me now, rearrange
my heated substance; a strange sea-change.

For Jean

You offer me sweet peas,
love tokens from your garden
and when I tell you of the arrows of my day
still twisting their poison in,
you move behind me
overshadowing my pain
with hands that work magic on weary skin.

Where did you learn such skill?
Not from the time we live in now
because, bewitched, I close my eyes
and watch the anxiety I have learnt to carry
float away into shimmering air
as if it had never been.

Unrushed for this moment only
I could sit in your small kitchen always
lulled by the soothing hum of coffee
and your voice
until, waiting for the night to start,
I am as colourful and petal-scented
as the sweet peas I cling to.

Now in the mirror,
if I should dare to glance there,
we might be one creature

moving together to the beat of unheard
music.

And on my head
the lightest of touches.

Secret Fire

The night scratches my window,
enters velvet fingers through glass –
without my permission –
and drifts into my mind,
touching my thoughts
as I dream my dreams of dragons,
darkness and a fire

which smiles, tantalises,
shows me worlds
I long to enter
but know I cannot bear,
the richness of the stars
being not quite yet
for me

so I wait
for the leaving,
for the heart's moon to wane,
sickle-soft,
and in its place breathe in
the coldness of dawn
shaken only by the advent
of the sun.

Sapphic

Your rainbow eye beckons me,
ease of sunlight through grass,
symphony of green
as the colours arc, a future not yet taken
in the shiver of fingers, your lips' enticement,
peach and primrose, citrus,
blueberry, gold –
so well I know the shades your flesh makes
in my star-wild dreaming –
and I wish I could touch you
while the courage is on me
and I think one day I will,
one day soon I will step out of my skin,
the weight of unimagined expectation,
and slip snake-like, huntress and prey,
into your body's gentle, drifting pasture
to take with me the taste of your breasts
on my tongue, the strange homecoming of
sex
with the salt-sea swell of your rising
rocking me to shore.

Silken

Your silken skin
laps my eye to milkiness
here as I reach out
and draw my longing fingers
down your hair's dark welcome
and the curve of your cheek,
feeling the warmth of your mouth
on the intricate stars of my hand.
The scent of you
is lemon and spices on my tongue.
See how I lean
and trace the rise of your shoulders
with my eager lips
so your shape is carved in breathing;
kissing a journey over arms, breasts, legs
and all the honeyed country between us,
I will wrap you
in the coat of my desire
while around us
the wild night dreams till morning.

Moon landing

All those miles and miles of travel,
stars and blackness for company,
weight of expectation round your neck
like an albatross
but twice as cruel.

The nearer the focus of your thought
looms out of space,
a pinpoint of time here,
July 1969

the more you see a date from which you have
no real returning.

Look there she is,
waterless, airless, lifeless,
cratered with scars and regolith
from meteorites a billion
billion years ago, no wind,
no rain to heal them.

You feel sorry as you gaze
at the same face you always see,
familiar crust and, beneath,
outer core, inner core, mass,
secret heart of a cold tide-turner,
dark sister of shadows
filling your own heart closer
closer, so close
you could touch her
and you will, plunging
within her deepest lunar seas
lava-cold on your skin,
sinking fingers round basalt rock

before you stretch your arms wide, wider than
earth
to bask in the sun's reflection.
See, your fullness rises now;
it's just a step away.

The Cat's Response to Yellow

When the air falls yellow
the violin will sound
and from the far corner of the garden
the slow cat will stretch

first one paw, then
another, and another
and the last, before
springing up,

its yellow and marmalade tail
twitching. The violin dies
and somewhere the notes
drift round the blue hill

where the whiskers of the cat,
quivering in autumn air,
will follow
until gradually

the creature shrinks
and shrinks and again
a little more until
it too vanishes

like the violin
and the noise of the violin
and all that is left is
the echo of yellow air

into silence
and the empty heart
of the day.