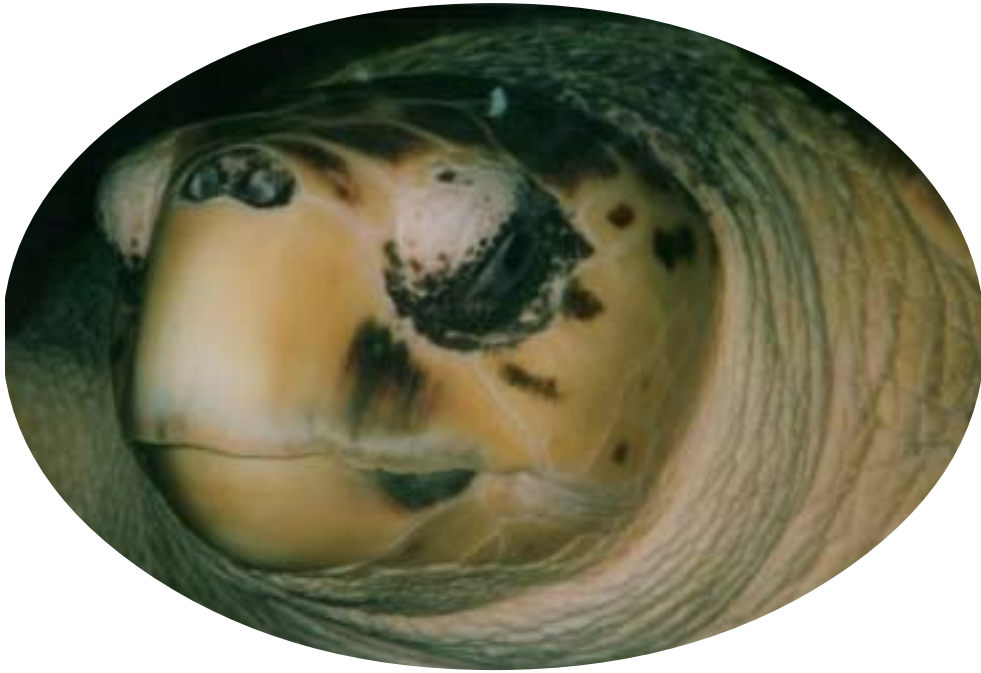


Play Time



Rik Roots

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The following poems represent the best part of a decade's poetic output (excluding 22 Facets of my Father, which is published separately). Many of these works have been workshopped both in a 'live' environment, at Lawrie Smith's *Poetry in the Making* workshops (at The City Lit, London), and online in newsgroups such as rec.arts.poems and alt.arts.poetry.comments, and the Poetry Free-For-All forums at www.everypoet.org. My thanks to everyone who has contributed to improving my poetic skills over the years - it's all your fault!

All of these poems - with many others by the same author - can be found online at www.kalieda.org. Pop in for a visit, when you have a moment to spare.

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Appreciation

In the kingdom of time suspended
I see the dancer arched:
a foot is grounded, a thigh
is tense-taut. The second swings free.
A shaved chest congeals into arms,
into fingers circling a bar
above a stubbled, arrogant head.
A grey-toned face shades from highlights
to perspiration to spot reflection
in grain-hazed eyes.

In the kingdom of time assumed
I could cruise, perhaps meet
this icon, fleshed in colour and cloth.
He would walk with the ease of a cat,
animate friends with words, or maybe
act the Jimmy Dean - cool to desire.
His jeans would pucker across his legs
and his jacket sway easy on the hooks
of sweat-erected shoulders.
He would have a name from me -
sweet fuckable, but I am trapped

in a third, united kingdom, where time
is commodity, and by law my desire
must be tethered, controlled.
Appreciation is tempered:
an appropriate statement, a critical word -
shadow and light. Form and space.
An artisan perusing another's art
before moving on.

Cusp

On the last morning of Summer
I walked, automatic, to Leyton station.
Over the graveyard wall chestnuts rained,
spiked balls smacking onto pavements
rimed by an early, watery frost.
Cleaved, the pods tantalised boys
with glimpses of polished, wood-veined eggs.
Magpie-uniformed, the boys claimed their prizes,
leaving me to follow, kicking husks.

On the first morning of Autumn
I diverted my course to tread the gravelled paths
that meandered beyond St Patrick's church.
Deep mists silenced Leyton's coughing growls,
whitened my sight. Swaying from verge to verge
I searched for a russet jewel of my own.
As I passed, shadows grew branches -
leaves hung drying in the painted air,
browning, then bleaching as I passed on.

Silence was breached with creaks. The mists
began to clot, stirred by an inquisitive breeze
mazed by the trees. A pocket of sight caught me.
Ahead, granite angels stepped from pedestals,
gathered in henges by slab mausoleums.
Weathered mouths whistled conversations, lichen hands
picked moss from carved hair. One saw me: frowned.
I froze as its hand chiselled to the ground, hurled
a smooth grained sphere into the side of my head.

A darkness left. Splashes on my cheek roused me.
I lay between Eileen Murphy and her sister Maude
Both gathered with Jesus in nineteen fifty four.
The mists were gone, flushed by the rain.
I sat up, shaking my head, touching a bruise
above my ear. A distant train rumbled into a tunnel.
By my foot a small conker lay, glowing in the grass.
I picked it up: rubbed its cool leather dry. Uncertain,
I remembered work. Pocketing my prize,
I slipped away.

Commuting

Whitechapel, 8:38. We shuffle-pack onto the train, a mix of suits and office-skirts, backpacks, and I, heaping towards seats. I lose that race, and stand - my adidas joggers catching on a belted mobile phone. Its owner is young, unsure. A cute suit. I turn

to allow the nipples beneath my t-shirt to scrape against his off-the-hook ready-to-wear back. As the train jolts towards its tube our faces swing closer, too close: stubbled cheeks brush, lungs share air - I apologise.

Aldgate East, 8:40. Adverted parade the length of the carriage. I sight an army recruitment poster. Its controlled aggression sits uneasy alongside the carefree cartoon dog offering cheap travel insurance ad.

Mansion House, 8:47. I eddy in the stream as station and train exchange bodies. My hand grabs a support strap above me as I claim space near the door. Young suit press-touches past as he exits left, eyes hidden in a yawn.

Blackfriars, 8:49. I rest my head on my upraised arm. I sniff my skin: salt with heat, clean, tainted by the petrol taste of rush-hour London. Chinning the flapping cloth back to the shoulder I smell the round of the muscle. I lick,

taking long, slow tongue strokes along the length of the arm, spit-flattening the black hairs into rows across my peach-blushed skin. The suits and skirts ignore me from the corners of their eyes. Backpackers stare.

St James's Park, 8:55. Escape. I stretch limbs across the platform, jog stairs. Authenticate my right to commute at the ticket barrier. I emerge to shops, crowds, delivery vans, to Victoria Street. To work.

Art

It was speeded and slowed:

I had left the station, imitating vacancy
as I brazened my way to the street bazaar,
passing the morning muster of vagrants.

There was one, possibly young, laughing.
The mouth was slit taut, lips slabbed by teeth
as uneven as the paving I crossed.
He gambolled his way into the road,
vehicles screaming annoyance,
their dominion challenged.

*Hawkers distract me, smells
of the bazaar tapping an anticipation -*

Right is more interested in other things:
Liechtenstein, is Right's first remark -
then comments on continuing lines, forms
of brush strokes. WHAMM! Dot dot.
Seconds stall past before Left sees
the object of Right's observation
semi-circled by open mouths, hammered
into the warming tarmac. Warhol
is too obvious a conclusion - Right adds.

Left cannot agree. Left's vision casts a different scene.
In the manner of a passionate Van Gogh.
A desperate arrangement of offal
spun across the canvas. Reddened sun-slants
digging, dragging rays across bleached corn.
Rags and boots hinting at distant structures
to a foreground glory - and congealing clouds
promising a shepherd's warning
as I walk on.

Beachhead

*Here lie brittlestars, evicted from deep-channel muds
by a winter storm - now gone - onto the Dymchurch littoral
in drifts of outcast mating waves. Morning breezes
grit-skit across the tide-abandoned sands,
dessicating bootlace legs searching, curling in prayer.
Seagull clouds scream, spear-hunting the sex-spent discs.*

Such star strewn scenes are a memory for me here.
This city's streets are blotched by populations scurrying
from path to path: coloured currents of flow and tide
streaming through my sight. Paddling by the kerb
I wait for an ebb, dive deep within the scene.
As the torrents take me, I ply the storms that brew
in the city heat, ride the rapture foams that smack me
further from home.

*Walking tall, I make belief: a god in a sometimes land.
The sea's detritus stacks the tide mark, cities
of weed and cans woven with life. Between the piles
sandstorms rage, blasting the walls of flotsam halls.
With brown hoods and razor beaks, gulls patrol the expanse,
interrogate strands for easy prey. Pluck lice
from the wracks, crabs from their shells.
Wait to see me fall.*

Summer. I walk with my lover the length of Mare Street.
Heat powers a breeze that picks dirt from the streets
to make dust devils dance their crazed vortex formations
between the bustling, bricked parades of Hackney Town.
Fire catches the rubbish heaps, heaving black belches
into the skies through which lost gulls sail, white in the mire.

As we pass through crowds I catch his hand in mine,
blow him a kiss. Above us gulls circle: shriek insults
and tongue gossip. I smile as he puckers his response.
Our beachhead is built on small gestures and dreams:
today I watch the gulls starve.

Shot

The fox is shot:
I find it hidden in Victoria Street
between the mists of diesel and spring.
I crouch. Touch its pelt. It wakes, licks my fingers.
City smog thickens, killing protest;
shapes walk by, shadows of aliens.

I lift my eyes. See the houndsman.
He lumbers towards me and kicks his prey.
Vermin, he sneers. *Give it me.*
I'll see it's thrown to the dogs.
My arms encircle it. Blood stains my groin.
He lifts his chin, yodels: *Haa Whoah!*

They muster beyond the brick cathedral
veiled in scaffold to save its facade.
The dogs pack in, tongues
slavering their chests, yelps
stripped from snouts fixed in fighting grins
at the smell of easy work.

The fox would panic, but it is shot:
it paws my shirt, tearing the seams.
Fleas flip allegiance; hammer thumps
smacking in my airless chest. *Obscenity,*
the dogs growl. *Rip it. Dirty.*
Not one of us.

I find a voice: *no*, I whisper. *Leave it be.*
Yet my eyes flinch at a bugle halloo
and horsemen ride in from Parliament Square.
They laugh at me. *Get away, lad.*
We have business to attend.
Fox ears flatten: bones shiver in skins.

Bait him, calls a shape from the mist.
Hush, whispers its mate. *Avert your face.*
Move along! Commands a policeman
and ushers bystanders towards Victoria Station
and the carriages waiting to truck them home.
A helmet doffs the horsemen by.

Help comes from pious tones. *Not in front
of the Lord's House*, choristers chant. My cry
of relief is choked in incense fumes. Bishopric frowns
pinpoint the fox. *Hate the sin. Forgive the sinner.*
The horsemen chuckle, raise their whips, slip
hipflasked brandy into the shepherd's plate hands.

The bishop turns back to the brick stack sanctuary.
The hunt advances: the fox that is shot
whines its last breaths, motionless.
I try to stand, escape with the fox clutched in my arms
but cannot move - blood on my legs congeals
like callipers: my eyes fix on sulphur fangs.

Disposal by numbers: first dog, snout foamed,
leaps in my face. Second crushes a fox-haunch,
wrenches it away from my grasp.
As fox is disembowelled I watch the horsemen cheer,
the bystanders jeer, I watch houndsman
and policeman exchange approving looks.

Then they are gone. I am
hidden between mists of diesel and spring
in Victoria Street. With tears silent on my face
I lick damp fox clots from my fingers,
lick the hairs on the back of my hand.
Hear Westminster bells chime, and a rifle bark

distant in Pimlico. Unflexing
my shoulders, I pad
away.

Daisy

Where is Daisy's baby?
Is it in the cardboard box?
Perhaps it is wrapped in Daisy's coat?
No. Here it is.
It was sleeping in Daisy's plastic bag -
The Sainsbury's one: they are big and strong.

Daisy takes baby out and cuddles it.
Baby is cleaned and fed and burped
and dressed up warm in Daisy's scarf,
ready for the day.

Holding baby tight, Daisy wheels the trolley
through Strutton Ground market to Victoria Street.
Daisy talks to baby. Talks of tall buildings
and cars; about busses and people, walking past.
Baby listens, quiet, as a day watches Daisy go by.

When it rains, Daisy makes baby a place to sleep.
Here is a cosy alcove - safe and dry.
Daisy settles, places each bag
all in their proper spots, close to hand.
Then Daisy unscarfs baby, washes its face,
its button nose,

before tucking it up neatly in a new Tesco bag,
with its fluffy ear and pretty orange eye
poking through the handle. Sleepy and warm.
Now Daisy says her goodnight prayer:
God bless Jesus. God bless Mary.
God bless baby, and Daisy too.

And baby sleeps.

After Class

After the first class, we went to the bar. Introduced our personas by the drink in each glass. You scared me. Eyes feared to focus on your face, forced to look when you spoke. Twice you smiled at my jokes. Froze my stomach with the first grin. Melted my legs with the repeat. I remembered to breathe now and then.

To celebrate my birthday I bought chocolates to class, saving your favourite centres from grabbing hands. Our hands caught across a nut cluster: I did not shake when you thanked me. Raised your rum to my health. Yet your smiles are spread evenly between classmates, and my flushes go unnoticed in the dim light of this bar.

Dozens of crumpled sheets pile by my feet. Though we talk each week I cannot communicate my need for your laugh, your glance. Your breath by mine. I have even surfed wires to ask code to generate love lines: *vestigal degeneration dies triumphantly*, sentenced my screen. *Tribal party burns expectantly*. As does my temple, my forehead, my dry throat. My heart.

For class tonight I have trimmed my nails. Shaved. Taken care to crease my casual gear to a cleaner, upmarket degree. Once study is done we shall walk to our bar, where I shall ask you to look at me. Notice the lust-struck wreckage within this cool shell. Discuss my healing in a group of two. You. Good wine. This poem, and I.

Candle

In an island of hard-polished desk
squats the stump of a candle, wax spat
on the green, chipped dish. Once
it was tall, hard: a column of opportunity.
The flame has stroked too often, the bright wick
is aged too soon. The sun is guttering
and my windows are smeared.

There is no clock on my wall
to tick me to grey. I am sat before a mirror
to watch my face fade to patterns
in reflected walls. When the sun surrenders,
I am gone: unmirrored, I cannot be.

Somebody stole the moon, leaving half
a milky mug-stain where once the silver tureen
overflowed. Now that I am not human, I can smile, creasing
what was once a face. I do not know
who stole the moon, but they stole my clock
and my candle too.

Autumn

This year autumn arrives in August:
blows shit-shaded leaves past my head,
under my feet - scrunch-muffled in the rain.
Damp rots the fruit in the market, rusts
trolleys abandoned in the street.

Skin chills. I daydream hibernation.

The colours of autumn are not rich:
they are tweeds misted in drizzle, functions
of an attar-trap rapping my windows, tapping
my gutters. My pity renounces wars, victims,
tips reflexive. Turns to self.

Dreams are forfeit. I cannot fight seasons.

Pity drips like fetid catarh, drops
from nostril to tea mug, gets sipped, swilled
into the maw, swallowed. Drizzle stipples windows
whittling colours from my view: greying bricks
in my walls, thoughts in my head.

A hand writes. Monochromes scream.

Perhaps

The desk sits square on the side of the room.
Touch polished panels meld with the dusk.
Hard drawers grin half-shut
and gabbled papers stray, confused
between cups and pens edging
to cascade on the floor.
Midway, brass handles spit brass reflections
across the bed - unmade -
towards the door, unlocked.

Behind the desk stands the oval mirror,
baroque curves and tainted glass.
In the mirror of the desk, papers are stacked.
Pens line the rim of the cup
in stout regiments, headless stalks.
In the mirror of the room, curtains are hung,
the floor is swept, carpet tufts are spright.
The bed is made, the door is locked
and I am not here.

Menses

January

A new year: my goodwill drains away with the dregs
of a festive hangover. Today I commute by a new route.
My room is lost: I lodge with family. Carpets are dustless,
clothes are laundered, bedsheets are free of stain.

Midday, I go to the bank, obtain a statement. Count the costs
and the benefits, shrug, return to work. Today's tray fills
with yesterday's work. I count the hours and bend my head.
Shuffle papers into folders, folders into drawers.

Colleagues leave after the sunlight fails. I light a cigarette,
blow fumes at the door with the No Smoking sign, sit in the dark
watching the tip smoulder bright when I suck. I consider options,
make a choice, take a lift to the foyer and enter the night.

February

This one's a face. Face stands by the bar.
It's raining outside. It's good to be drunk.
I speak with face. He kisses my lips.
Puts a hand on my groin. My groin sleeps.
Fat man throws us out. My hair's wet.
We howl past Trafalgar. Catch a tube east.
Face plays games. Spot the shirtlifter.
Laughs at the skinhead. Sucks my tongue as we sway.
I vomit in Liverpool Street. Face's grin screams.
We stamp in the juices. Frighten commuters.
Face rubs my hand. Right in his groin.
Feels good. I want to play.
Face wants to sleep.

March

Muscles: a coverlet wraps around this source
of heat, as do my legs. I wake, wipe eye-grime
onto the pillow, feel the form in my grasp.
I finger his stubble, watch orbs dance in their lids.
Touch brings a murmur. Muscles straightens his spine,
his back hairs teasing my cold nipple out.

Reaching down, I draw patterns with a digit
across the muscled thigh that promised so much.
On the ceiling foreign cracks outline alien landscapes.
Night traffic herding west of London muffles through
the broken double glazing. I am lost in the city:
the hangover that finds me won't lead me back home.

Dressing, a warm pain hints at last night's pleasures.
Unheard, I move away from Muscle's life, checking
change in my pocket, choosing to walk.
He told me he dreamed of camouflage skins,
of ropes, of boots, of watersport games:
I dream of tongue touch, a room of my own.

April

Today a lesson is learned. I learn it well.
My teachers are blood tests. Four swabs and a scrape.

Outside I see bluebells arch in their garden.
Fountain sprays swept on the breaths of the wind.

May

There is an empty space, man shaped, that walks by my side.
Once it lived in my guts, but now I can see it
when I look in the mirror, razor touched to my throat.
It moves when I move, sits when I sit. It watches me crap
and leans on my shoulder when I check the newspapers,
looking for lets.

In the evenings, space and I watch a television:
hold each other's hand when the pictures turn dark.
As we drink cocoa, I tell it the shapes of my future room,
describe the shelves of paperbacks, the pots of greenery.
Carpets that don't show the dust. Sometimes we argue
colour schemes, sometimes we don't.

I turn off the family lights and go to bed. I feel a hand
on my stomach as I undress. When the duvet covers me,
before I sleep, I smile to myself and renew the certainty.
Tomorrow, my mouth shapes. Tomorrow my space
will be filled by flesh.

Traveller

London, England

To remove the shirt as Man examines,
to unlace the boots, unclasp the belt,
is a task my head would run from.
But my need holds me in this room, assists
my hands unbutton my jeans, expose my feet
when the socks slip off. Man watches:
assesses from the door. No words are spoken.
No explanations. I know why I came.

Even my need dampens as I stand centred
on rough carpet, hands ahead of a cottoned crotch.
I am looked in the eye. Slowly, thumbs are raised
and that last item drawn down, falling, until
I step away.

*Naked natives are rare on these streets.
Dalston moves to its own dim pulse,
masked by the moans of stop-start cars
daisy-chaining their journeys past rain topped gutters
gargling to my dreams, as I tight-walk kerbs.*

Man moves, reaches to me: takes wrists, hoods eyes
in a velvet bag. Fabric irritates a cheek.
I am led elsewhere, prod across wood,
tripped on steps. My toes count paces from habit.

Es Canar, Ibiza

This space is sharper, the air knobbling my skin.
On a cool silk of ceramic I am showered,
dried with aged wool. Powdered.
Then sat on plastic cold to my back.
Shackled and left.

*From the rosemary hill I can see the shore.
Sunheat is quelled by a breeze that flicks
watermounds from the depths into cliffs.
Resorts are gone from memory:
cicadas chisel new thoughts in my head.*

*From the cliff top I watch a boat round the rocks.
Sailors prepare friends for their work below.*

Soft boot-falls alert me. The dressing dance starts.
A finger traces talc across the hair
of my thigh. Reaches down to massage the instep -
my response is admonished, bound tight in chill hoops.
Slowly, with textured suggestion, each acre of skin
is encased. Soon latex masters the curve of each leg,
tenses against the chest when I breathe.

I blink when the hood is removed: watch the mask
approach. Swallow when a first strap tightens
across the crown of my head. Then a second.
Another snakes around the neck.

*I am the diver, ready to descend. I can see
Mediterranean waves waiting to swell across
the sweep of my suit, kneading
the waters within.*

Bound in shining black, I am shouldered to another place.
Back-lain, my calf is tied into a boot nailed to wood
tight so each vein-beat whips an ankle
angle trussed. The other foot follows.

Man pulls pulleys. The plank is raised.
I swim in air.

Thessaloniki, Macedonia

The play starts. A camera whines.
Man considers each act before applying a pain.
Building patterns, pains paint across the swinging meat,
artistic swirls gloss the sweat bathed skin.
I cannot scream: a gag in the mouth presses the tongue,
but still howls heave down from the lungs to whisper
their way into the mask.

Foot-strung, swing motions are built: testicle halters
controlling the pendulum's arc. Zips are untoothed,
displaying choice zones for applications - clip props
and weights to tune the tension.

*The glitter of the sun touching on water burns my sight.
I have walked far through shaded streets leading to the promenade
where I sit: watching dross ebb across the bay.
From here I can see the white tower squat on the waterfront.
Greenery shawls each side of that hunchback of masonry
buckled from too much history.*

*Aching, I rise: sun-dodge along the pattern paved decks
towards Salonika's pride*

Swing becomes top: I spin. Cramp grabs at my thigh,
tears blasphemies from a pinioned tongue.
The ache-rhythms increase their tempo,
merging and parting until they swarm
from crotch to navel to nipple to neck.

*In the tower, the sun is barred. From the ground door,
I circle my way through historic displays: old tombs
dug from the earth, their paintings protected
from damp airs. Up I climb, ingesting the theories
of Alexander and his sire. Too soon I am near the top,
dizzied, wandering past ikons pasted to plasterboard.
Each hero touched in gold. Each devil
cast in blood.*

*One catches my eye. He hangs reversed from a cross, legs tied
to the strut. His hair falls wild and his forehead glints.
I can feel his tortures, his broken legs. I can feel the ropes
that clasp his wrists. He hangs alone, sways from nails
in his feet and preaches his pain for the glory of God.
His name is beyond me, yet I ache for his love
and I suffer in brotherhood, take his pain
into my heat and carefull - so gently -
I kiss his goldleaf lips*

and all motion stops.

Corralejo, Fuerteventura

*When the cloud base lifts from the land, desolations
surround me. Across the track cold magmas heap
in defiant stances, clinkers making walls and turrets:
outbursts of an old anger. There is no sound but a faint hiss
of waves breaking across the tumbled shore, stashing its cache
of white sand-grits wherever the rocks fault; slowly combing
the cauterised wounds under a sunseeker's smooth bed.*

Skin lightens as implements detach. What was sharp
now glows. Heat travels within to touch each organ:
a scan of pleasure drawn deep in the pit.
Between the legs a coldness arrives. Lubricant leaks
through the tight gate.

*I close my eyes: still the blacks and reds of this alien place
fill my head; frozen threats waiting to crush skulls.
Eyes open, I see the Atlantic sky as blue as varicose veins.
Weeds squat in cracks, leafless stems shake in the heat.*

Body-quakes break when Man touches the hole.
Muscles resist: a pressure builds.

*I tire of the track and branch away,
pitching across furrowed stone towards
stark cones grown from a dead vent.*

Arse kisses rapture. Licks and engulfs.

*The island shivers: rocks crack.
Clutching my stomach,
I scream.*

Dalston, London

We rest chest to chest, our arms tousled across our forms.
In the corner a video recounts recent pleasures.
Smiling, we fondle with lips, enjoying the tastes
of exhaustion.

Outside, evening clouds turn bitter, blanketing skies
with brutal storms. In the house a fire burns,
warming waters to churn past each room: radiators
whine their rusting complaints.

Before the video finishes, I fall asleep on his shoulder.
There are no dreams.

God

My God has skin that tints alongside time:
it darkens from daybreak pink through midmorning
mediterranean olive to ebony noon, then coasts
through afternoon teak to dusk and twilight
and moonlight white.

God's hair plats and scrambles across the brow
and builds a rainbow halo of yellow, orange,
brown and black. The mane frames God's face: tears
cascade down cheeks and drip from the chin
to water the world.

To paint my God, I site my belief
on a rock in the river. In dance God's fingers hoist
the sky to the void: toes tap my earth's root.
The wind lifts the forest's leaves in chorus
and my brush sings.

But details beguile me. I cannot paint God's face.
When I come to the mouth, I see rips across the lips,
scabs sealing the maw shut. I ache to see my God's eyes
but lids are sewn tight: the sockets hollow.
Waxmelt earlobes drum the jaw

in time with my tapdance lungheaves: a gale gust
strips the leaves, the forest bank. My horizon tightens.
Tips me across my rock. My God grows taut, the strain shakes bones
separating my salvation from my sin. Time finds a voice in me:
they say you don't exist

and God shatters. My pillar. My support. My black from white.
My right from wrong. Gone. The forests along the bank sink, shrink
from sight in my river run wild. A newborn sea swamping my life. Yet the sky
fails to fall, and my rock remains. I scream. Sob. Grow still. See:
my ocean has waves that tint alongside time.

History

Here lies the portrait of a woman long lost:
the chin juts a touch too far, the hands
fold neatly on starch-pleats
of the sweeping summer-Sunday skirts.

She is intelligent: a stare crosses glass
to puncture masks. The thin smile
acknowledges my presence. I am read
- un-judged - by a photograph developed
with old alchemies, by human hands
as much now dust
as the skim on the frame.

I think I know you, woman.
I don't know your name, but your blood
clots my healing scabs. Dressed cheeks
shape your face into prosaic folds:
your smile appears now in current scenes.
Familiar history is failed in this age:
I do not need it. I have your eyes.

Consent

1993: Time

It is contrived to a practiced degree:
laces tense across the boot, turn-ups fold
to my muscled shins. With straightened braces
and jacket shoulder slung, I take the world.

Tonight, I drink alone. I lean on walls,
slips of barlight playing smiles on my face.
I sip drinks to basebeat disco rhythms
as potential sex staggers past my space.

Thoughts meander - holidays, a promotion
at work. Perhaps a solid love to hold
week after week. I review the bar's crowd -
licquor improves the sight. When time is called

I number my chances, mark heads to hunt:
strut into my future preening my scalp.

1991: Bruise

This mark has a tale to tell.

It was not the first to be born that night,
neither the last, and it wasn't the biggest
to bloom in that bed.

Its story lies in its beauty.

It entered red, a heated pain racking
the thigh where it sat. Later, cooler,
it blushed darker, back-lit dark blue.

Soaping my thigh, I remember its style.

Oval, not round: its edges bent -
a defiant comma thumbbed on the page,
creating a space in the act.

Flanneling the site, I review its life.

Later, it gathered a rainbow around its form,
aching azures circling maroon. Green tinged
yellows framing the stage.

I tire of the tale. Towel myself dry.

It ended, as all things end, healed. Sometimes
it remembers its home, a merest hint of discolour
marking its fleeting visit. Then we reflect.

Relaxed, less dirty, I leave the room.

1989: Hysteria

I find him in the cave where I had left him
and beg forgiveness. His arms cross his guts
and he rocks on his heels, his thighs muscled taut.
On my knees I edge closer, almost to touch
his slack face white in the gloom. I reason.
Offer disclaimers in words choked on sorrow
but he rocks on his heels, thighs muscled taut
and breathes in and breathes out as required.

I find them on a stall in Camden Market
and beg for answers. The woman takes my money
and spreads them mute across the board. I point
and demand a finish to this pain. The cards
in their symbols dance in their ranks,
claiming tales of love and money while the woman
who spreads them, mute, across the board
fails to hear my need.

I find her in the sky reflecting wisdom and beg
for a word, a reason, but she will not consent.
The moon is dead, the cards lie silent
and the innocent within me
breathes and rocks.

1988: Control

Guru said: *Drink* and bottles were drunk
until the walls were buckled and a bladder grew fat.

Guru said: *Walk* and a path was taken,
a door was opened and a lock was clicked shut.

Guru said: *Desire* and *Need* and a bruise was applied
and clothes were torn across seams.

Guru said: *Drop* and a carcass fell and a kiss
of control was fixed to a mouth.

Guru said: *Relax. Be silent. Consent.*
And it was done.

1994: Storm

The future I choose leads me deeper into Soho,
deep into the heat of the stagnant evening air.
As I walk St Martin's Lane and dodge between tourists
packing their way through Chinatown the skies shatter,
weaving liquid sheets across the town, reflecting my sight.

Head tilted, I stand in the light of a sulphur lamp
and watch the fat gobbets drop, line after line
into my face. Tongue out, I taste their cold story,
feel the rivulets trigger scalp-nerves as they deflect
their passage around my velvet skull.

When the deluge eases, I return to my purpose:
breathe the scrubbed air deep into my chest,
allow the fresh vapours time to cleanse the dark recesses
within me. I stretch, strip, accept the cool stacatto
upon my flesh. Breathing out, I laugh. Then I run.

Typically, I am late. When I finally arrive, we have words
though I smile as you list my faults. I apologise
with alcohol, you accept with a leer. Together we sit
and chat, watch steam heaving from my jeans to dance
with the coiling twine of your cigarette smoke.

When you take my hand in yours,
I look hard at your eyes
and know trust.

Drafting

I suppose a pen and a scrap of envelope
will do, for scribbles that hit mid-amble
along the street, or on a bus. And a keyboard
can take a good pounding of angst, or a tap-peck
for a milder bout of the muse.

But nursery scripts demand to be spelt
on alphabet bricks across the carpet.
Competitive strophes must be gridded
with Scrabble tiles, rhyme sacrificed
for the triple word score.

And the joys of play dough snakes pressed
into sentences across the dinner table
(or the workstation when the boss is away),
verse upon verse coursing across the surface,
punctuated with multicolour dinosaur stops.

Historical epics demand quill and parchment:
the local college offers courses in do-it-yourself
writing kits, supply your own pigeon wings
and kitten skins. Epigrams are built for clay
tablets, baked in the oven alongside the pot roast.

If an image hits as I walk along the shoreline
then a stick and sand will do, big poems
decorated with seaweed and conch shells
to be seen by seagulls until the tides of time
scrub my visions back into the beach.

Or for that one-time invitation only performance
piece, a neighbour's wallpapered lounge and a set
of dayglo crayons: it's art, I cry, as policemen smash
through windows, unbind the audience, muscle
me out of the house.

And then those special times, late at night,
when I creep to the kitchen and settle in
for a feast, and indulge in my secret vice:
chocolate, vodka, and magnetic fridge poetry.
Drafting while the rest of my world snores.

Home

When the wind was warm and the day
longer than the reach between my arms,
I sat on Dymchurch beach and built
a child of sand: a head of turrets
and broken shells, a necklace of seaweeds
hung about its bucket neck.
I gave it senses - pebbles for eyes,
a hermit crab's home for a nose.

For hours I sat, telling the sand boy
all I knew of my world, and listening,
learning the littoral laws of a different world:
tales of the kelp-flies and the wars of the lug.
But the tide turned, wavelets racing
over sandbars, each reaching further before
the beach-hills sponged them dry.

I ran, my footfalls geysering seawater
from razor shell wells beneath my toes.
The breeze turned cool. Clouds shawled the sun.
A larger wave caught me, pushed me
behind the knees. I turned to see a pioneer crest
crash to kiss the sand boy's belly.
I hurled myself through ankle lagoons
and dug mazes of moats ahead of my friend,
trying to lose the tide in channels
that curled like the kelp in a storm.

And it worked! With the sea mazed,
the sand boy stood, a hermit claw
waving hurrah at my deeds -
until the first fat drops fell from the sky.
I stood and watched the sand boy sink home
as the rain beat increased, the necklace splitting
as it swelled. Lightening fingered
Martello towers, making me think
of the sand boy sitting below the sea,
shivering when the storm-winds blew.

When I left, I buried my vest and my shorts,
so the sand boy would be dressed if the storm
crashed it away to the walls of France.
As the storm showered sand grit from my body,
I clambered the curving concrete of the Dymchurch defenses,
threw a stick at the wheeling seagulls,
and charged home.

Postcard

Molyvos must be
the essence of Greece.
We're living in a house
on a cobbled street
with steps, but no cars -
him next door parks
a donkey
in his dry stonewall garage.

We even have a view
of the bay, complete
with picturesque island
and fishermen in old boats
teasing the sea for octopus -
which then hang in tavernas
to dry
on nylon washing lines, tempting wasps.

Priss

A shadow has stalked from the room,
diminishing to the sway-flick outline
of a tip-broken tail as the cat that owns it pads
along a corridor newly sensed. Whiskers alert,
her raucous calls still echo in my ears,
her backskin sharpened claws sheathed,
the damage done with an unplanned rent
in the time-toughened fabric of my love.

I didn't plan to cry: the task of fixing
the mischief made by my demanding, dependent,
eating, crapping demon of purr and fur keeps catching
on flashback memories - tripping over string-tied mice,
cracked ping-pong balls rediscovered in the corners
of rooms. I claim to have developed an allergy
to her moulted hair. Dare others to look beyond
the surface of my reddened, streaming eyes.

Sustainability

I wake, dead. Five foot six
and three quarter inches of rage.
Tunnels take me to the light, to love.
In trust, I am judged, reviewed. I remain
rage. Take the long leap back
to my corpse.

I stare at the stiffening smile.
Choose a future
as the rictus sets my face.

Landfill is the familiar fate.
I would lie man-long in my grave. Rot.
Interlink my limbs, my ribs, with yew roots.
Hear hoar frosts crack across my tomb,
etch my epitaph clean from
its stone page.

Incineration, then. A dignified exit
into the flame, curling
the bones before the marrow cracks.

Neither option offers peace.
Sustainable waste management requires
the eastern means - recycle dead flesh
atop the silent towers, watch vultures
pick at the carcass before bones slide
down roof tiles to shatter
in the pit.

Though vultures are rare, here
in the Isle of Angels. Dogs
are no substitute, and lack wings.

Higher, then. Re-use. Let surgeons
take their steel and slice my cooling flesh
to liberate my offal: kidneys, corneas.
My heart and my lung. I shall live in others,
leaving my cast-iron stomach on a pedestal
at my memorial, its lining scraped
into milk: mourners shall feast
on my junket.

This too I reject. I must be more in death
than in life. I shall minimise waste.
Reduce. Become the pinnacle of sustainability.

I will keep my dead flesh
strung to my frame. I will claim
the eternal flame, sign Faust's forms,
take a Dutch mariner's gamble. Borrow
Baron Samedi's hat. Unlive. Desert the day.
Suckle upon the dark side of the force.
Become unfree.

Vampyr

Dogs have knocked the coffin down
to the ground in search of his bones.
While the lid holds, the last slants
of the ebbing sun catch his face
through dryrot panels, rashing his skin.

Nightfall. He unhooks the security latch
and levers the squealing lid open,
winces, then stretches. Checks the room
for stakes and stakeholders. Stands
and shakes the soil from his cloak.

Sunrash has singed his cheeks, hatcheting
across forgotten laughter ley-lines.
By touch, he applies a white foundation,
thick, panning his visage. A cherry lipgloss
soothes his parchment lips. Fangs are flossed.

Beyond ablutions, he breathes deep and takes
the shape of Wolf. Calling the hounds of hell
to heel, he leaves his tumbledown crypt and pads
through municipal burial fields. Aims for the edge
of town and the cultivated deserts beyond.

Food is scarce in these declining decades.
Beef and long-pork are both contaminated prey.
He settles for short-pork, ripping the pig
before it can scream, tossing torn haunches
to his black pack. He gulps ruby fluid. Unglamorous,

yet safe. Leaving the factory farm, a glance
of moonlight shivers his spine. He checks for cats
before shaking his form into gargoyle faced bat. Takes
wing across wheatfields, arcs across pearl clouds.
Watches farmhands wreck profits with circles in corn.