

PS* Poems

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Choices

Pears are more desirable than apples,
cherries are more desirable than pears,
but apples make better chutney than either
though the child's voice cries for

rich and red and ripe and here and now
with the joy of the slug tail out, mouth in
sweet flesh, rasping out his hollow heaven
then curling in a soft, ecstatic round.

The art of making a decision's not
straightforward. Write the pros and cons in columns
then let loose your honest inner accountant,
and what emerges from your eyes and mind

is a box only holding opportunity,
to be tipped and stretched and questioned,
remembering that all we have is ephemeral;
a patterning of nows in undetermined time.

Hephaestus

Don't mess with me. Few of your children know my name. But this one looked, and in his thoughts

I was weapon-maker, Space Marine, worthy to be miniaturised, immortalised. A Special Character, perhaps 200 points.

He knew what I could do, saw the futuristic cannon in my hand, efficient killer of powerful enemy tanks,

the pack on my back to let me breathe strange atmospheres. My leg braces powered armature, striding across

far future battlefields. He did not care for the artist, bellows in hand, kindling the forge of creativity.

If you will not let us myths loose in your nurseries in one form, we will find another.

(On Eduardo Paolozzi's 'Portrait of the Artist', modelled on 'The artist as Hephaestus', shown at The Lightbox, Woking)

Sic Transit Gloria

Wow. Look at that car.
Mercedes-McLaren SLR.

It succeeded the Merc,
that came after his Jag.

It was the tops.
The icing on
the ultimate cake.

He loved that car.
Worshipped it
with his body.

It was his
exoskeleton.

It had the legs
for speed.

And he ran.
Passing on the right, passing on the right.
Always in the fast lane.

The Hero Machine is him,
and he the Hero Machine

that –

fell to high blood pressure
fell to failing eyesight
fell like space-junk to the
earth of age and illness.

License withdrawn.

Now
his wife
takes the wheel.

His grey wife,
who goes slowly round the bends.
Driving him,
cautiously,
to distraction.

Extension

Open rafters, high windows to catch the skies.
Our extension. My Celtic harp, his rowing machine:
Away from the family, unquestioned, unseen,
This is the room where we extend our lives.
And there's our double bed, which will never recover
The spring it used to have. No more will we.
But we meet in its soft concavity,
And this is the room where we extend our love.

One day we'll hire a big removal van.
Take out the furniture and memories.
After more than twenty years, we'll sell the place
To younger strangers. I'll be a little sad.
We all grow roots. That's how it is. And this
Is the room that I'll most come to miss.

Dali and 'The Architectural Angelus of Millet'

Dali was a show-off and a cheat, but these huge figures
tower smooth-grown and true. Incapable of tears,
she bends in acceptance. Her womb is empty, scoured.
He reaches with trust, or lust, and pity. They reiterate
the patient man and woman in Millet's evening field, where
father and mother stand bowed beside a painted-over grave.
Death is there, but only in their mourning. Dali transmutes love and grief
Into unmoving stone, changelessly comfortable and serene.

Dali was a fantasist and liar. He swam strange tides.
Clocks softly melted to question time itself.
Sibling monsters ate each other in uncivil war.
Here I see strangeness in the towering clouds
above the far-off tide and over-coloured desert;
strangeness and pathos in the unbalanced figure
Resting on a tiny crutch and this dusty red rock.
Brilliant strangeness, strangely comfortable and serene.

Dali was unique. I love this picture.
I love that a small, real man and child walk
below the great shapes, from darkness toward light.
I love that the far-off town shines, small and human,
in a bright and shaded land that could be Spain, or Mars.
I love that partway to the town a figure of line and shadow
anticipates the family made whole. I love that this image
has hung on my wall for forty years, comforting and serene.

Link to 'The Architectural Angelus of Millet' by Dali:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/artspheric/6075340699/>

A 21st Century Woman's Valentine

(Freely translated from Catullus 85, 92, 70, and 5)

i)

Love you, hate you,
love you, hate you –
how does this work?

Dunno.
But it bloody hurts.

ii)

Craig bad-mouths me all the time
but I'm damn sure he wants me.

What do you mean, what do I mean?

What I'm saying is, I bad-mouth him all the time
when I'm damn sure it's him I want.

Same symptoms. Same bug.

iii)

Craig says, now he's got his divorce
There's no-one he wants to marry except me.
Great. But what a man says to you in bed
should be written across the froth
of a Starbucks cappuccino.

iv)

Move in with me, Craig. We're in love, aren't we?
We shouldn't let those silly old women spoil it
with their stupid gossip. It's not worth it.

The sun gets up and goes down day after day.
When the dark comes for us, we're gone, the end.

So kiss me now, kiss me again, kiss me
over and over and over. Give me
tens and hundreds and thousands of kisses
until we lose count, and no-one's going to know
which is the last.

Questions raised by reading Robert Graves

Gannymede

Hebe was young and pretty, and a Goddess,
But Zeus
Didn't want her there all the time.
She was his daughter. So
Bye-bye Hebe. Zeus gave Gannymede the girl's place.
'Gannymede' corrupted to 'catamite'. Forever
lovely and sexy; never dead. Don't
call him happy.

What I want to know, is -

 did he ride the eagle's back as a rodeo cowboy,
or
 was he the rabbit clawed up by the bird?

Tithonus

Tithonus, much like Gannymede,
Was also mortal.
Properly fucked over by rosy-fingered Dawn,
he aged and aged. She kept him caged,
hidden away in her room.
Was he a nuisance there?
(cursed as she was with love for pretty boys)

She wanted him never to die, but forgot
To ask great Zeus for ever-lasting youth.

Did his mind and memory
shrink with him, leaving him only
a grasshopper present?

And when he escaped,
did she feel relief?

The Deal

Let me lend you a hand, the Magician says.

On his palms one line replacing two, life and fate combined. His right and left hands so perfectly alike one turns into the other to the third to the fourth through unreachable dimensions.

Which hand will you choose? My first is filled with
Air

Hot air, or fresh air, you can't know until you take it. You'll give it back in bad air, malaria, sewage works and slurry pits, car-fume miasma of blue-ceilinged summer.

In my second there is
Dust

Borrow the dust and you'll bring back to him skin. And also soil, when a dry wind blows from the naked field. But mostly skin. Your own will do.

In my third hand
Sugar

Hot-burning sweetness, rot your teeth and flood your blood. Pay for it over the years in work and conscience and philanthropy. Eat the buffet, drink the wine, sicken for lack of the pure clean –

Water

Kept in his other hand, though it slips through the fingers. Catch it quick if you really want it. Right on, in the now, but – oh dear, so sad! - splashed into the dust makes the rot that fouls the air. Wasted.

Ballad of a Constituency Organiser

It was better when we were young,
- *except for dental implants, and new knees.*

People knew where they stood,
- *in factories, or riddling potatoes, or down the mines.*

Children were taught to know right from wrong,
- *queers were weird and went to jail,*

And this was a nice neighbourhood,
- *with hard working local families. And Joe. He came from Wales.*

Kids today have everything,
- *SATS, GCSEs, ALs, Ecstasy, eating disorders, student loans.*

But can't be arsed to work,
- *What do you say to Master in Media Studies? Cappuccino with chocolate sprinkles, please.*

Don't talk to me about apathy,
- *my kids are doing all right. We made sure they went to decent schools.*

Only Pensioners bother to vote,
- *that's how our people win.*

The silent dog

We hit the streets on a mid-week May morning,
Dancing up driveways, sashaying round cars.
A leaflet in every letterbox, and listen for dogs.
The ones that don't bark, bite the worst.

'It's time for change'. We take the message out,
From door to empty door. The blues have posters up,
And so have we. Not as many as there used to be.
More green than before, and yet more crazy purple.

We want to feel 'there is a tide in the affairs of men',
A surge we'll ride to fairness and prosperity.
But always lurking is the silent dog whose name
Is 'Vote for change, and get the same again.'

Envoi

We could have had that dog put down
If you'd all voted in the referendum.
But explaining the Alternative Vote, or AV,
Is even harder than forcing it into poetry.

At the Crossroads

What quirk of big-brained survival,
what fortuitous evolutionary benefit,
sent human beings looking for causation?
Then let them find it in burning bushes,
and hear voices speak out of nothing?

What unsafe impulse took them wandering
in the desert, set fire to their thoughts,
turned them into men without doubt, to speak
as algae do, in formulaic blooms; to expand
in toxic colonies of brotherly scum?

Why did belief affect them so badly?
Why the mad Crusades, Jihads, Holy Wars,
sweeping sharp-mouthed, sharp-toothed across men,
even now? When it seemed the infestation of mania
had been controlled, tolerance established?

We ought to let them be, if they had the courtesy
to do the same for others. The Enlightenment cleared,
we thought, our way to men's and women's ground,
where people reasoned calmly with each other,
and words did not invite a punishment.

Faith seethes in the soil of sacred places,
surges from the crossroads of beginning,
from the places where corn was tamed, writing made,
and women once held, unexplained,
the mystery of creation in their own bodies.

The Baby Jesus Gets Religion

There are faces everywhere: in the grain of wood,
In flowers, and mud, and in the cloudy sky.
Until he reifies the world between baby hands.
Things separate out. Cup and toy. Mary and Joseph.
Other children, mirrors of himself. Always
Fascinating, fascinating: other people, other things.

The faces are driven from flowers and clouds.
(No polytheistic culture, this.) How should
A child give meaning to the world of things?
Mother says: 'Be my special boy, and I'll love you.'
Father says: 'Be like me, and I'll look after you.'
Caesar says: 'Obey the law, and my soldiers will not kill you.'

Words, like coins, press their images
On the hardening clay of the child's mind.
Because you are special, you are loved.
Because you conform, you are cared for.
If you obey, you will not die.
And our childhood's measure finds his God.

Missing You

They looked for you with scans, they searched
for stars and galaxies firing in your brain.
They hoped for complex action and reaction;
they found the suck for food, the one-note cry.

A father's love paid money out for hope
to experts overseas. No holidays,
but airports, special transport for the sick,
cheap hotels near expensive foreign clinics.

A mother's love made home a hospital:
she fed you, wiped up sick, changed nappies;
she moved your limbs to fight off atrophy
through four years, six, then onward to ten.

Your parents fed your brother's love into
your nothingness. They said you needed him.
He saw your rooting snuffle, and he thought
it had a meaning, that it was a kiss.

Until at last he reached the age to see
the bright eyes of his dog, that wagged its tail,
and came to him to play, was more alive
than you would ever be.

Talking to you now, I speak as anyone
speaks to someone else. But that's wrong.
A human body breaths, but not 'your' body,
For now I clearly see there is no 'you'.

Unfixable

When did her friends start calling her 'mad'?
The whole and happy ones, who meet after work to talk,
When did they reckon the round-shelled smoothness
of her lip-gloss ways, her high-heeled boots, cracked?

'She's messed up. Broken.' What else to say
when someone suddenly steps off
the big-city bus, ending in a failed place
where no-one in their right mind wants to live?

But was it then, I ask. Or was it earlier?
Back in school when her firework brain fizzed,
found divergent paths through sets of mazes:
plus, minus, equals, therefore. Brilliant. Unasked for.

Or was it long before, when the arch-backed baby
with quivering lips cried beyond comforting
from the pain of being alive?

She says, she never broke,
she is as she is.
Unfixable.

So get over it.
If she can live with it,
you can.

Eleanor

You
Brave baby
Looking steadfast at me
From under your turban of bandages
Recognising me, across the ward, before I see you.

You
Lovely girl
Your brain, the substrate of mind and maybe soul,
Saved by a drill-hole in your skull, a valve, a plastic tube
Tunnelled from head to stomach, and the wonderful, terrifying work of man.

You
Brilliant young woman, young scientist,
And still the brave child who looked outward to the world,
Curious, caring. The hardest thing's to live, they say.
Daughter, you do it well.

Against Authoritarianism

Whistles should have holes
To let the intensity of their
Scream be muted, mutated,
Mutatis mutandis,

Into the soft clay ocarina,
Into the silver flute,
Into the magic of modifying
Time into tune.

Never just one hole.

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