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## **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)*

## **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.

## **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.

## 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'

## A 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

## **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 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.*