

CREATIVE MOTHERHOOD

Small patron of the arts, our son
commissioned songs at bed-time:
'Sing me the fork-lift truck.'
(A tricky one to rhyme and scan!)
'Our holiday to France . . . our dogs,'
replaced official nursery rhymes.
My poems died, no published work,
but on a summer's night I'd hear
the lilting saga of our life
in childish tones from bed-time on,
shaping his universe.

I TAMED NINE TIGERS

For you

I tamed nine tigers.

Mastery meant spearing meat
from buckets into drooling maws,
a pole's length from the flesh I fed them
to the meat I could become.

My spangled rump I turned
quite safely on the fenced-out crowd,
my eyes defying every yellow pair
which dropped in turn, defeated.
Bars on sawdust overshadowed
muscles shifting restlessly,
the camouflaged intent to kill
rippling under skins of sun on grass.

A snarl rebukes the missed beat
of my stare; fixed once more,
outbluffed by my belief
(I am more tiger,
deadlier by far than they)
a sullen tail swings threats,
then stills.

More tiger I
my voice a whip crack,
my pleasures purr and cuff
in play my anger death.

Nine tigers bowing
I present you.

THE GREEN PARTY

Making someone small eat what he'd rather not
requires the sort of tactics that every mother's got
(or soon acquires). Supposing it's the veg
that makes for tea-time tantrums and a wedge
of strawberry-cake has lost its bribe appeal,
for your child to eat his greens the only answer
is to give a choice of meal.

Before you chop the veg up, in cook-to-adult tone,
ask 'Peas or beans? The choice is yours and yours alone.'
To be just like a grown-up with the right to choose between
makes him forget he hates all veg, not certain shades of green.
Choosing is confusing and cons him to believe
that what he gets is what he wanted not
what his mum let him receive.

Just like that cheated child, who eats his 'chosen' veg
I'm bribed, cajoled, bombasted by each politician's pledge.
This greener, better future which they say they offer me,

has horizons built of money on the dead dreams of the free.
Unless I stand for my beliefs myself, election means
that I'm doomed to cast my vote
for processed peas or processed beans.

STORED TREASURE

More gaps than teeth, face open to life,
unscarred, my son crawls on the carpet
in kneeless trousers, Turtles T shirt
and shoes beyond the scuff-coat care of polish.

His galleon sails to battle, manned with
pirates squeaking loud of war and
birthday parties - all their voices, his.

Since the 'Gulf Crisis', hostages and patriots
are mentioned often in the pirates' talk,
their strategies of war more detailed.

Less time is spent on parrot care
but even pirates hold their fire
to share some pop on treasure island,
declare a bedtime truce

WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

We use to 'draw the line' as kids;
a kind of 'chicken' game
between the sexes, one to one.
He'd put his finger-tip upon your nose
and trace a straight line
down your neck,
between your hope of breasts
and down . . . till you said,
'STOP!'
and did the same to him.

I always thought
'They went too far' meant
someone drew the line
courageous low.
We never reached below
the waist-band knicker line,
shamed by pictures in our minds
of what we touched and –
worse still – nearly reached.

Best players took their time;
some things don't change
no matter where you draw the line.

MOTORWAY MAUSOLEUM

That's a fine specimen (means dead).

A badger; never seen one living.

Victorians stuffed their wildlife
for glassy-eyed display in domes.

We passing glance at corpses

re-arranged on roads;

brief anatomy lesson

dividing men from beasts

by blankets only.

Humans go under cover. Dead

SENSORY COMPENSATION

Sighted people's touch can rarely pick out
braille, distinguish six-dot patterns.
Your fingers blur, distracted.

Decoding with your eyes is harder still,
a microscopic view of water-boatmen,
their dance mirage of pond.

And worse, one swimming insect's whole but
letters words are part- and slow collection
a t o m i s e s s e n s e.

A student friend lost sight at seventeen,
learnt braille and used it for a year.
Her sight returned; her hands went blind.

However hard she shut her eyes
she felt as formless texture what had been
a favourite thought in classic text.

Reprieve was short. By diabetic lapse
she went stone-blind again. Why stone?
Glib qualifier of both blind and deaf

derived from feeling less than stone.

Feeling less. Feeling loss,
expecting all the slow re-training (dog and self)

to cope with dangers in a visual world,
she found her fingers' sight returned on need.
Small miracle of compensation.

I would not give my eyes to tune pianos
but for one brightened night to read
the raised points of your skin with blind man's fingers
I might.

POEM ON THE UNDERGROUND

Mind the gap! The tannoy nags us safely
up metal steps to strap-hang on the tube.
Mind the gap between the seats which may be
Perilously close and so intrude
Lewd touch on strangers, setting dangers free.
Don't let your baggage or cramped limbs protrude;
keep movements self-contained, a small grey flea
too insignificant to be considered rude:
Don't let your parcels nudge his foot or knee.
By no means sing, unless with headphones skewed
across your head to signal privacy;
nor unwrap, lick or swallow food.

Read poems on the wall to pass the time –
the inter-station gap's just fourteen lines
(I think I've found a form which suits it fine).

LIBERTY'S DEPARTMENT STORE, LONDON

Between the glass and metal clones of chain stores,
revolving doors down-dated by carved oak,
Tudor black and white façade, five stories lit
with clothing brights and pale December faces.
Shoppers pushing, rushing, brushing past,
their bargains wielded high, broad shouldered
vanguard of the market forces.

A baby screams as angry knees and bags
collide and part at push-chair height.
His mother shushes, keeping a tight hold
on silky stockings (£5 off).

Once, this minstrel's gallery echoed
English song not dollars, marks or yen.
Now Arab robes command a feudal dip
from shop assistants beating a retreat
to rally by their banner at the tills
and serve the women masked in black,
ignoring those like me, 'just looking'.

EPILEPSY: FLEURS DU MAL

Grand mal

Flower bursts of light draw down
to tunneled dark, a falling
sickness. A tes souhaits, à tes souhaits
we all fall down. A tissue
to wipe her mouth and forehead, gently.
So Sleeping Beauty blinked awake,
re-visiting a life she'd left, re-called,
recalling strange breath on her lips.

Perhaps that moment, after fitting,
before the contact breaks between
the real world and some other,
is momentary divinity –
the epileptic oracle.

Petit mal

The nervous system switches off,
takes forty winks of absence behind
the lightest gaze of eyes.
Then rapid blinks restore the power
of thought and hearing. Slightly dazed,
she's puzzled by the trickle
cooling down her leg.

They think she's strange;
sometimes she doesn't listen
and sometimes runs in shame
but won't say where or why.
The dandelions know,
les pissenlits

Nor-mal
The chemistry of body's finely balanced.
In love I overheat and stutter,
sob to choking when in grief.
Too many drinks and vision twists,
horizons heave to falling.
Allergic rashes bloom in clusters
through the spring and in response
to guinea-pigs or perfume.

We're rarely balanced,
rarely in control,
however we adjust our intake.
We're scared of cancer's roots
and analyse wild roses on our skin,
concoct our scientific posies
and need our friends to catch us
when we fall. We bless each other
holding hands; atishoo.