

James NORCLIFFE
POEMS

the attack on Baghdad

in the evening a rising wind
knocked the black peaches
from the laden branches

one by one they dropped
and some fell into the roses
where thorns tore at their flesh

and some fell onto the bank
and rolled down towards the river
gathering dust and bruises

the dark sand was stained
black with peach blood
and when wasps arrived
and were excited

the air crackled with their lust

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the song of the belly button man

after the painting Belly Button Man by Pam Helm

unseen on the foreshore
by a jelly-rolling ocean
where apple-bellied seals
sleep on watermelon rocks

and where flighty spotted shags
crouch like parking meter wardens
in a sedentary sun
leaking yolks of yellow clocks

I'm the belly button man
and my lotus-husky voice
mutters blue-bottle nothings
from a fennel scented hill

until the lilac-coloured evening
you will only know that whisper
like a trilobitic lovesong
from some prehistoric swill

but in the bladderwracking darkness
through the static of the breakers
you will sense my phosphorescence
you will hear my voice of flint

I'm the belly-button man

and my fingers will infest your
with a barracuda fastness
you think at first is lint

my smile is full of pincers
my eyes are full of pinpricks
and my navel is the pain-song
of a flounder in a pan

I'll com up on your crabwise
when the moon is swimming naked
in the jelly of the ocean
I'm the belly-button man

my navel is the pricksong
my navel is the purse-seine
my navel is the black hole
that will surely suck you in

then you will be my flatfish
in a belly-pan of darkness
in the liver-oily vastness
of a midnight pelican

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schadenfreude

I don't like the way
the cat is looking at me

her narrowing eyes
her flexing claws

too often I have enjoyed
her delight in a moth

her dance against the window
now I see dead birds

their little rubber legs
jiggling their dead bodies

their white eyelids
accusing the moon

the cat stretches
like a question mark

the slits of her eyes
glance obliquely

looking at me
as if I had feathers

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Villon in Millerton

a plank bed in the gully
and a woman there with

a buckled mouth my hand
plunged deep in her pigfern

turpentine and tea-tree
the sour-smoke smell
of damp coal in the scuttle
and flat beer on the bench

once I stood so tall on
a stolen Triumph
my hair streamed behind
like a thousand freedoms

now I stand two miles
above the flatlanders
screaming so loudly
no one can hear me

earthbound beneath
a high ocean of air
I am a poisoned stream
full of slippery words
sliding underneath a broken
bridge's collapsed members

her body is heavy and overgrown
her laughter is desperate
already my sons have gone
there is nothing for me here

2

I am tired of the chipped formica
and its clouds of blood
I am tired of stainless steel
and its bleary reflections

I am sick of the feltex floors
which stick to my feet

the broken glass and crushed cans
the rain the water the strangled drains

my mind is a mixed miasma of
smoke gathered on the ceiling
cut through by angle iron and
the jangling chords of a rusty guitar

and I am tired of screechy voices
of brotherhood and sisterhood
I just want to curl like a frond
of bracken into the silence of love

3

Item: I leave to the helicopters
one thundering yellow fart
to chunder up Calliope Street
and daub the hall with camouflage

Item: I leave to the cops
astigmatism arthritis
gout galloping-deafness
and olfactory deprivation

Item: I leave to the future
that flaky blistered rusted
tangled tumbledown
crock of shit that is the past

4

they have lobotomised
the mountain and with steel
fingers they fossick and fiddle
in the black stuff beneath

out in the Tasman the Koreans
have built a city of lights -

imagine their parties: disco
squid and cheap whiskey

but what parties I had:
Lion Brown and Millerton Green
the good old songs of The Band
on a sixty amp lute

beating up enough brave decibels
to wake up the city of darkness
the empty passageways
the cloisters the dripping walls

5

I think of the things
the fingers remember:
the telephone numbers
the diminished sevenths
the one-handed roll-your-owns
and the nicotine tang of women
the stink of fennel and artemisia
of wormwood women and gall

6

between what is left
and what is to come
I squat for a second
to catch my breath

I have always been
a gasping stranger here
a whistling frog puffed up
and croaking to its echo

just a mad ripple on
that pool of black water

I foolishly let
become my world

a weatherboard
a borrowed clapboard
banged on the side
of a clapped-out house

Oh God

before I become pluperfect
just pinchbar me
the hell out of here
but leave my nails
bent naked spiky
and dangerous
and never drive
them home again

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a field guide to the wild flowers of the moon

this spiky inflorescence
on the answer-phone
troubles the heart

the students are asked
which is the more stressful?
the bad news you anticipate

or the bad news that comes
when you least expect it?

and rats as usual
provide the answer

they droop like
stringy chrysanthemums
the colour of rust

their ulcers bloom brightly
like twitching anemones

they stumble through
falling petals of cancer

and those who have least
knowledge stumble first

towards the wall
towards the door
towards the window

through which
a sharp white
sickle moon
floats in a black sky

in its pale light
letters are lilac
enough to read

the future is round
and dark enough to see

First published in *MANY MOUNTAINS MOVING* (USA) 2005

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vice versa party

dressed as Groucho in a pin-striped
suit with a slouched fedora dipped
acidly over one eye

horn-rimmed glasses a mournful stare
and a black bootbrush moustache smeared
above her lip, smudged like a sigh

my mother darkly taking stock
my father in a floral frock
grins beside her, legs astride,

a pastiche of Margaret Dumont
stripped of all hauteur, an affront
to grace, to feminine pride

he holds a beer, she a cigar;
she's bound her chest, he's in a bra,
but bare-legged for the hair

later they'll dance
she'll take the lead,
but he'll stumble backwards on heels
and she'll have to hold him there

the foxtrot, the Boston Two Step
the Valetta Gay Gordons – cheap
laughs at his armpits, bum roll,

mince
the floor is chalked, slippery
she'll hold him there, her mockery,
her sugar, her honey, her doll

SOUTHERLY (Australia) 2001.
Collected in *ALONG BLUESKIN ROAD*
[2005]

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sleep sleep

he'd said he was a stranger
then frowned but nodded at the
incomprehensible directions

is that why there is slippage
now and the treachery of ice
on a pass through the mountains?

the motor is humming
but the car is lost lost
in drifts of white noise

there is a suggestion of voices
close close and far away
and the clank of chains
tractors and shackles

beyond these there is the creak
and crack of splitting stone
the danger of falling debris
the steep steep grade

you trust your father
you trust his eyes
in the rear-vision mirror
but you distrust the handbrake

you feel him slipping
backwards backwards
through bakelite and benzene

through the luminous dials
the quivering needles
the grip of whitewall tyres

his hands frozen
at ten to three
on the steering wheel

CINCINNATTI REVIEW [Fall Issue] 2005.
Collected in *ALONG BLUESKIN ROAD* [2005]
