

Poems

Em Strang

Felt Sense

Tongue hanging out,
incisors like flick-knives,
she was way up the track
to the stirk field
where you lost her.

Slow arrival
of rain, felt sense
tapping your head
as you straddled
the barbed-wire fence.

But it was too late.
Gut in her eye
stench of blood
at the heart of her
and all the spilling
from the roe deer,
steaming organs
in the half-light.

Licking her wounds
the dog left her
bright, half dead,
so you had to
boot the life out
in the brash
of the field.

View Outside of the North Gate of the Citadel by Christen Købke

Always the river. You can tell
it's early by the shadows -
half the size of the men
but twice as certain. It's 1834
but the gateposts are almost Bauhaus.

Six figures: two men and three boys.
They've lived here all their lives
with their breeks and braces. Experience
leans on the railings, yearning
for the colour blue. The bridge,
in full sun, confounds the river.

On the far bank, trees waft like feather-fans.
Nobody speaks. For a long time
there is only gazing. The trees are aware
that one man is dreaming,
the one with the trousers
as white as a swan.

At the end, by the draw-bridge,
the absurd puff of the woman's dress,
kingfisher blue.

Whatever is in the water
is both broken
and altogether whole.
On the right-hand side, in shadow,
oars.

After The Flood

The journey begins
with black water and snow,
feet sunk in fields
we've seen open before,
now winter lake-land
that laps at trees.

They say we were warriors once,
lycanthropes with rabbit-skin boots
and vulpine hair,
blood in our limbs
like nothing's a given.
But none of us know what that means.

We stop at the old ford,
bodies clamped by the burn
that's bigger than it ever imagined,
fed by rain and snow
and the tilt of the hill
in high wind.
We talk about crossing.

They say we had blood-breath and deer-eyes,
thoughts like hollowed-out canoes
ready to transport
and protect
and float
or to wait at the river bank
expecting anything.

As we swim for high ground
the river roars
and our heads burst with it,
the near promise of the other side.

Blackbird

If the human race fails to survive all this, it will be because it can't get interested in its own annihilation – Ted Hughes in a letter to Terry Gifford, 1993

I will find the blackbird
hiding in the ivy. Its orange beak
will give it away, its orange-rimmed eye
like the bromide ring around the moon.
I will see its machinery – the plumed wings,
the precision-tool beak -
and I will crush it between my palms,
feel the nice urgent pumping,
the scratchy lizard legs.
It will not be enough
so I will find a stone,
any old stone. I will wedge the bird
by its shivering wings and smash it
in one fell swoop,
its egg-sized cranium,
the stream-lined bony font of its breast.
There will be no heart,
no lungs full of upper air,
only the smashing spurt of blood
and ribs like pins – the bird's own cage.