

## Survival (in Subtitles)

Soft-mouthed girl, mollusc of the sea's vault  
the years alter you, how coarse your bones.  
Your spun hair's whipped, torn raiments flap  
like fragments of a curse in a foreign tongue.

Sad preludes swim in your such honest eyes.  
Border towns, the inn stiff with formaldehyde  
siphoned from a glitter sea of death: children  
were floating tariff for an overcrowded junk.

Famines are forgotten, your husband beheaded.  
(Was it for war crimes? Electronic adultery?)  
Cities burn. Crazy bloggers & cross-eyed robots.  
Tell us in your own language what happened.

## Liberty at Box Head

It was high tide and I knew I'd find them,  
spines suturing the sea, dolphins duck-diving  
then surfing the waves in a parallel formation.

How is it we become so snared in our lives?  
Time swallows the insults, the barbs we digest,  
retract and scar. Yet the same scarp enters me

with its eroded beauty, its headland fingering  
the Pacific, noisy today as a cheerful road.  
I cannot match the rapid eye of swallows.

Mannequin finches spy me from their perch  
and know my game. I'm brushed by banksias,  
their waxy leaves sobering my thoughts.

Down by the rocks, the foam's calligraphy  
sparkles in the sun. Spirited waves grant me  
tolerance. I cross the green pools, the cunjevoi

that fishermen waste. I think of those seagulls  
in salmon rich waters. One may lose a leg  
through sheer play – the price of liberty.

# The Accidental Cage

I watched two birds marooned in the barn loft.

How they zig-zagged, butting the teasing glass.

One scooped an air draught from a hopper window

left half-open, his small head twitching randomly.

Another rose like a silver flutter of banknotes in a storm

although the afternoon preceded a storm.

The air was brittle; piccabeen green was the foliage,

the light a stunning plethora.

Butterflies with mechanical lips balanced on weeds.

The windsock was a gesture of excess

and giant cockroaches glistened, waving wands.

Here the mosquitoes had been bred by dentists.

The cabbage palms spread yellow fans sunward,

and the sun's motive was formidable.

But this was not theatre or art. Not in any way contrived.

This was something more prosaic.

Perception is both bliss and indifference. I was drawn to kinematics,

the arbitrary motion of the birds confined,

their ruffled choreography. The empty barn's largesse,

its insulated walls held nothing else organic, but

this kindred pair who shot tormented laps from beam to beam.

I, who had been schooled to think birds could not feel,

did not feel their despair.

Besides I told myself, this was not death. These birds were saved

by impurity, by dust streaks in the glass.

And surely I had seen death enough to know the difference.

Once I'd found it on a salty headland,

in a bird-bone weft – fly-spotted, matted, de-plumed.

This beauty was not death but its living promise.

It was the beauty of panic; its correspondence and design.  
The pointillist shadows of gum leaves,

light falling on the wrinkled sarking, which was foil  
for the birds in their sporadic brush with air.

Crepe myrtle swimming darkly in the prophetic glass,  
the sound-proof sun illuminating the barn.

The birds hovering in a void were winged silhouettes,  
resisting the hours with each arrested flight.

# Pacific Solution

Zahra, I've touched the sharp flesh  
of his photograph, his glasses crooked  
his gaze aimless. I smell him  
in the newspaper ink that stains my sheets.  
We should have been grafted as one, father  
and son, playing ball games, sharing laughter,  
the daily rhythm of our blood dialogue.  
Instead this Stygian dawn.

I pace the room in dead circles,  
stop at the landing: from here

I can see the compound,  
ash soil of the island as it swelters  
beneath a steel sky.  
Armed with wire cutters, shots fired  
as I scurry past the perimeter.  
The same kinetic scuffle of guards,  
their shouting strangely muted.  
Women whose starved looks dissect me.

# Ice

At last we entered the Hongu Nup glacier,  
our boots soaked, there were calluses on my feet.  
But what was most disturbing was the silence.  
Gone, the sweet dialect of the village, monkeys, waterfall.  
Gone, the warble of birds, crickets or wood chopping.  
There was only the wind and the falling ice,  
and as the sound became less human our dialogue lapsed.  
It happened so gradually that we could not say when it died.  
And it was a death, a passing into the spirit world,  
for now the only song we heard was spectral. Yes it was.  
Perhaps it had to do with the monochromatic walls,  
the loss of colour on the surface of the glacier.  
Even our clothes were drab and water stained.  
And what looked like brown fists were not boulders  
but corpses. They stuck out like necrotic stubs  
in the drowning snow, each once embalmed and delicate.

We'd travelled in haste, unprepared for the journey  
to a place without leaf or pulse, a nameless  
spur, although to me it seemed strangely familiar.  
Many times I'd dreamed of stranded livestock,  
avalanche, the bodies of children and soldiers,  
trudging across snow, at night the wind blasting  
us with shards, barely tolerating our tent.

The blizzard acted on our instincts. Snow blown  
we stumbled, a thin rope connecting us.  
Exhausted, we lay beside each other.  
We passed through each other, without touching.

It was so cold that I wanted to cry,  
but everything inside me had frozen,

even my secretions. I had nothing to give you.  
We had nothing to give each other.  
There was nothing intentional, or spiteful  
as we lay resting on the edge of a deepening  
crevasse, haunted by flutings, the dirty scree,  
the moraines, the melting decay of flesh.

And when there was light it was cut from a prism.  
We were cornered by its angles, dazzled and blinded.

Note: The Hongu Nup glacier approaches the Ama Dablam summit in Nepal.