

## Sticklebacks

If only something else had been so real  
we might have left them in the Fitty Burn,  
the males electric blue  
and crimson, females  
silver in the flank  
and wall-eyed,  
when they slithered through our fingers;

but summers were always for hunting, a garland of bees  
trapped in a Kilner jar, the hum of it  
gorgeous to the hand, all life and rage  
made abstract; redpolls  
lured into a homemade  
box-trap for my cousin's backyard  
aviary, their throats and crowns

the rose-red of the Zephirine Drouhin  
in our grandmother's pit-town garden  
at Crosshill.

When fair days came, we stood  
like herons, knee deep in the silt  
and slither of the rockpools, dip-nets  
poised to gather in the shining wisps

of wrasse and weever, distant, nameless lives  
that paled to nothing  
in the noonday sun,  
just as the lunties died in their chicken-wire frames  
and the sticklebacks dimmed in their jars till we grew dismayed  
and would surely have given them back  
if we'd only known how,

come to a stop in an acre  
of willow herb, dusk on the way  
and the colours of everything, grassweed and Himalayan  
balsam, butterflies  
and lily beetles failing in the grey  
that came to find us, calling us by name,  
anchor and limit, singling us out for the dark.

## First footnote on zoomorphism\*

It seems we have said too little about  
the heart, *per se*,

how it sits in its chambered nub  
of grease and echo,

listening for movement in the farthest  
reed beds - any feathered thing will do,

love being interspecific, here,  
more often than we imagine.

If anything, I'd liken us to certain  
warblers, less appealing in the wild

than how we'd look  
in coloured lithographs,

yet now and then, I'm on the point of hearing  
bitterns, at the far edge of the lake,

that cry across the marshes like the doom  
you only get in books, where people die

so readily for love, each heart becomes  
a species in itself, the sound it makes

distinctive, one more descant in the dark,  
before it disappears into the marshes.

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\* 1. Attribution of animal form or nature to a deity or superhuman being. 2. Imitation or representation of animal forms in decorative art or symbolism. (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*)

## Travelling South, Scotland, August 2012

*Necessity is not the mother of invention; play is.*

Ian D. Suttie

It gets late early out here  
in the lacklustre places,  
wind in the trees and the foodstalls'  
ricepaper lamplight, fading and blurred with rain,  
the wire fence studded with fleece  
and indelible traces  
of polythene wrapping; marrowfat clogging the drains  
on the road that runs out to the coast  
then disappears.  
A last bleed of gold in the west, like a Shan Shui painting,  
then darkness.

The animals are gone  
that hunted here:  
wolves coming down from the hills, that  
immaculate hunger,  
rumours of bear and cat, quick  
martens and raptors.  
The rain is darker now,  
though not so black,  
oil-iridescent, streaked with the smell of lard  
- *it gets late early out here*; though *late*, out here,  
has a different meaning:

stars in the road  
and the absence of something more  
than birchwoods or song,  
pallet fires, tyre-tracks,  
grubbed fields clouded with grease  
and palm oil, hints  
of molasses and lanolin, tarpaper,  
iron filings.  
A narrow band of weather on the road,  
then houses; though we scarcely think of them  
as that.

I remember a meadow at dusk  
in another rain  
(and this is nostalgia now); I remember  
I stood in a wind like gossamer and watched  
three roe fawns and a doe  
come quietly, one by one, through the silvering grasses,  
wary, but curious, giving me just enough space  
to feel safe,  
their watchfulness reminding me of something

lost, a creaturely  
awareness I could only glimpse

in passing.

That meadow is gone, and dusk  
isn't dusk any more  
- or not out here -  
just miles of tract and lay-by on the way  
to junkyards and dead allotments,  
guard dogs on tether,  
biomass, factory outlets,  
the half-light of ersatz dairies petering out  
on rotting fields  
of rape and mustardseed.

We've been going at this for years:  
a steady delete  
of anything that tells us what we are,  
a long  
distaste for the blood warmth and bloom  
of the creaturely: local  
fauna and words for colour, all the shapes  
of ritual and lust  
surrendered where they fell, beneath a fog  
of smut and grime and counting-house  
as church, the old gods

buried undead beneath the rural sprawl  
that bears their names, or wandering the hills  
of Lammermuir and Whitelee, waiting out  
the rule of Mammon, till the land returns  
- with or without us -  
chainlink going down  
to bindweed, drunken  
thistles in a sway  
of wind and goldfinch on the dead estates, fat  
clusters of moss  
and gentian, broken

tarmac with new shoots  
of coltsfoot breaking through  
like velvet, till the darkness of the leaf  
unfurls into a light we could have known  
but failed to see  
by choosing not to find  
the kingdom-at-hand:  
this order;  
this dialectic;  
this mother of invention,  
ceaseless play.