

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 Zephyrine 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.

* 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.