

*That* wasn't me, of course; I knew as much;  
and yet I knew the creature I had seen  
and, when I turned again and saw him  
gazing back at me, *ad infinitum*,

I knew him better: baby-faced  
pariah; little  
criminal, with nothing to confess  
but narrow innocence

and bad intentions.

The backrooms of the heart are Babylon  
incarnate, miles of verdigris and tallow and the cries  
of hunting birds, unhooded for a kill

that never comes.

I saw that, when I saw this otherself  
suspended in its caul of tortured glass,  
and while I tried pretending not to see, my mind

a held breath in a house I'd got by heart  
from being good according to a law  
I couldn't comprehend, I saw  
– and I believed my mother saw –

if only for a moment, what I was  
beyond the child she loved, the male  
homunculus she'd hoped I'd never find  
to make me like my father, lost

and hungry, and another mouth to feed  
that never quit its ravaging.

A moment passed;  
I was convinced she'd seen,

but when I turned to look, her face was all  
reflection, printed roses and a blur  
of Eden from that distance in the glass,  
where anything can blossom, Judas tree and tree

of knowledge, serpents gnawing at the roots, the life  
perpetual, that's never ours alone,  
including us, till everything  
is choir.

## II SELF PORTRAIT

The one thing you want to portray  
is the one thing it lacks.

Awareness, perhaps, the sense of an outside world:  
a holly tree, starlings, the neighbour who plays piano,

or somebody out on the staircase, pausing to listen  
for longer than you had expected.

You do this again and again, as if your life  
depended on nothing,

light filtered up from the alley, the homeward sound  
of shoppers and that constant sense you have

of some place less than half a mile from here,  
a favourite bar, a pool hall, someone's bed,

the place you could be right now, with snow coming down  
through neon, or that baize light on your hands

that makes you think of summers long ago,  
the 'water's edge', the 'faint breeze in the pines',

those girls you really loved, before this patient  
look-alike paid forfeit to the dark.

### III MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE

*en el espejo pinta  
un paisaje más dulce que el paisaje,  
un adiós más eterno que el del día*

Juan Ramón Jiménez

After she hung that mirror in the hall  
the world was changed forever.  
It wasn't just reveal; there was a far  
white distance at the corner of the glass,  
a thousand miles of tundra, just beyond  
the climbing roses twined around her door.

Whenever we went to visit, I was the one  
who ventured out over the snow, in a hawering wind,  
to name the flora there, my only point  
of reference a childhood I had lost  
on purpose, and such Bible litanies  
as anyone remembers;

nothing but stunted willows, clumps of birch,  
a scatter of Arctic  
poppies, miniature  
as any signal is, Druidic greens  
and greys I'd only learn to recognise  
by being lost.

If only the body offered such  
taxonomies: a name for every shade  
of fever, or those dark interiors  
where snow has passed beyond  
the picturesque, those first flakes in the dusk  
become a months-long standstill, shapes and sounds

that made me think  
of furnace, every scent  
a symptom, sweet  
urea in the creases of my palms,  
cloves at the back of my throat  
like a cherished tumour.

After she died, I watched my favourite uncle  
lower the glass from the wall and set it down  
so all it could reflect was polished wood  
and lino, though the soul it had beguiled  
kept walking into blizzard, dumb to grief,  
and nothing he could track to bring him home.

IV POWER CUT WITH CHEVAL MIRROR  
(HOMAGE TO THOMAS HARDY)

*for my sons*

You woke up in the dark and came  
to find me,

a sickle moon shedding its light  
in the narrow hall,

that give in the floorboards  
*footworn and hollowed*

*and thin*

– but you weren't afraid so much  
as confused: the doorwells

occupied, all of a sudden,  
by something new,

the feel of the house unfamiliar, its fabric  
wedded to the land

around us, seeing eyes where we  
were blind.

Yet isn't there a hint of *Thou* to find  
in how the light reveals us all as wisps

of distance in the mirror, when the candle  
wavers for a moment and we're lost

in depth of field, a newfound history  
of presence in the dark, its self-unseeing

barely the ghost you feared  
or hoped for; just

the long familiar things  
made strange, as if you'd turned to find

your bearings  
– home  
as love and narrative –

while, just this once,  
the known world looked away.

## V THE WAKE

In a house with too many mirrors,  
it's hard to dream;  
and this is why, after she died,  
her children walked the house from room to room,  
with sheets and scarves to blind each looking glass  
that might have kept her from the afterlife.

No one explained; and yet I understood  
how readily the soul might linger on –  
a far song in the hollow of the roof,  
a thumbprint on a cup, an old cologne.

A mercy, then, to send them out alone,  
forgetting what they were, no name, no face:  
whatever happens in the life to come,  
you'd hardly want to drag the self along.

My uncles left that house of mirrors wrapped  
for weeks, a secret flowering on the glass  
beneath the veils of blanket-wool and linen;  
and, afterwards, I couldn't bear to look,  
afraid that I might catch her hurrying back  
to what she'd always known, an eager ghost,  
smiling at nothing, coming home untransformed.