

Damage

The rags burn, a small pile on the dirty slope of
beach
Ignored behind the buildings. Waves
Jerk them, sizzling.
Floating sinking, floating sinking
Out.

I

Bless the wind of no direction, that charms the
flesh
From the blackened bone, that teases the leaf
From the ravaged tree, that demands the
Child from the mother's lap, that parts the two
then
Parts the one then parts the parts as if it were
Dissatisfied.
Or on spat pavements, sticky gutters, fouled
streets
Find your god. Who watches where the rust snakes
Climb the green-stained stones to fasten and suck.
Cracked.
Yellow.
The hand that . . .
Or the girl perhaps, walking like an interruption
To the morning's chill mundanity, passing the
beggar
Selling matches on the road to the station

And remembering . . . a sourness from the vine,
swallowed
In the dark. The rat,
Twitching on the boards,
Frothing red round its lips.
. . . The snow melts beneath her feet.
‘This is an old house, but—’
This is an old house, and being shown round
Try not to see the boards dead feet have scraped,
Or the crumbling enamel under stained windows
Pinioned under the sun, peering at the stagnant
sand,
Wallowing in the sight of the sea,
Steeped, in the child’s tears, burning. There were.
‘There were even bullet holes in the wall. From the
war.’
And the hand that.
Bless death, that crime, which is its own
punishment,
And on the battlefield let there be war,
For as the pearl is the daughter of the oyster’s
torment,
As the mink must die to save its skin
And as the infant enters, disengaging, through a
maw of pain,
So must death be . . . cajoled, to play a proper
part.
Before he leaves, he cuts the stray dark lock,
Then lays down the scissors, lifts the map, and
with the
Keys, and having checked everything, leaves.
– He remembers night, sleep, the bed, their shared
comas,

A certain source of fondness in the night.
(She saw, no, expected, a dawn from every light.
Such was her fault)
And the hand that cupped the breast, strikes the
child.

II

In the basement, the fire burns, a contained
combustion,
Fury in iron, clothed in rust, self-consuming mixer.
Sweet fire sour fire, flames not tongues nor hands
nor face
But flames alone.
They accepted what she gave, insinuating within
the bundle
Of sheets an undemanding rage,
Expiating
A white, committed sin.
While the walls did not echo to the things she did
not say.
Mme Mercure is on the train now, worming its
way
By predetermined ways, flowing from snow to
slush, land cold
Under a low sun. She reads a magazine.
She has a plastic cup of coffee, and,
Annoyed by a recalcitrant lash,
Plucks out the blonde offender
With tweezers.
Once she saw his thumb turn down, then turning
up, pressed
Forward, and against the window, crushed a fly.

The man that . . .

So are the dead heaped in piles of one,
Spattered like the bull's blood spattered, falling
Under the broken sun, broken as the chicken's
neck, jerked

Powerless as the child under the tank;
Just a hunk of meat with a brain, with time to
choose

To laugh once

Or cry once

But not both.

– See us seduced by fire and water,
And sweet *Enola's* kiss.

The bird flies, glittering blue in an azure sky.
The bird flies, for ever, over the drowned planet.
The bird flies, blue feathers over endless cobalt
waves.

And gives no clue on which blue sign
There rests the hint, the accusation
Of the fire that burns,
At the core.

Ferris at the level crossing, stopped in the middle
Of a long journey, watching pale streaks of faces
Flame briefly in the gloom of the passing train,
Puts on gloves.

It is growing colder, slush on roads,
And he has learned too-cold metal burns just as
well.

He recalls that she demanded 'Why am I?'

And would not take her echo as an answer.
. . . He feels . . . like an old pop star,

Tossing and turning in the darkness of a cheap
hotel,
Kept awake by his past hit, played too loudly in
the room above.

A man who did not believe in death.

The ground floor, where he drew the curtains,
Vertical sea staring on to horizontal,
Where, face deepened by the light, he bent to snuff
the old lamps.

And the old brass bed they bought together;
There were marks on the wall. From hauling it
upstairs.

The kitchen has a *vast* ancient coal range. Kept on
For show.

Once, when a pan with oil in it went up in flames,
She had to stop him; he wanted to put water on
it.

Life or death, scissors and forceps,
Gleaming in the front-street light,
A double operation . . . or conciseness in a scrape.
(She marked it in her English diary.

'Tue' said the day, abbreviated.)

Death. Rhetorical answer to the preceding
question,

Relying only on itself, depending only on itself.

Or perhaps not so,

Perhaps the stone knows better,

And all that dies was born to live.

Here lies, says the stone, a man who did not
believe in death.

III

Esther Mercure, gathering up her things as the
train slows,
Gazes for a moment at a small piece of skin,
coming
Away from the flesh at the side of her thumb-nail,
And feels her body, fraying at the edges.
'There was no child. There was never any child.'
– She stands before the house, remembering
glittering symbols.

The dead man cries: Dancing, dancing, see us
dancing
Sing a song and set us dancing
Turn your head and leave us kissing
What the birds of prey refused
Sell the Sarajevo ticket darling
Catch a bullet, what's the use? ('follow me, follow
me')

And if you have to ask . . .
Ah, the bedroom; scene of, cause of, stage.
Where she cried alone, used cans of spray
Burning walls and windows, furniture and
floor
Black with dripping paint.
And heaved the bed out crashing down the stairs,
While the room behind her echoed
To the sounds of ancient screams,
Like wax burning, dripping, burning.

Finale. Whose climax the end of life; death's own,
Or life's? *Petit mal, petite mort*, shall we repeat,
'Ah but my dear,
There are at least four ways to explain
everything?
Or stick to the unchallengeable, such as
'Cars die young' and 'no change out of a missile'?
Such individualism; not so much a philosophy,
More of an excuse.
And if you have to ask, if you have to *ask*.

See. Andrew Ferris, striding angrily from the bell
Unanswering. A wasted journey,
Lying bleeding on the stones
There was no child. There was never any child.
And on the way to the station car park
Snatches at the blind man's tray,
Then flings the matches back, lit.

. . . Attic, head of the house, dry tank and stored
memory
Long scraped clean
Where from the skylight, cracked and yellow,
Watch while first she pushed and heaved the bed
that year,
Out into the snow-crushed garden,
And fumbled raw-eyed numb-fingered with the
metal cap,
Spattered petrol in a glittering arc
Then threw on the can
And on the match
And stood as if stunned, watching the snow melt
at her feet,

3.

PROGRESS hardly broke its stride
To deal the city such a blow,
Like a joker off the bottom,
That it flickered and it died
Like a candle caught before the dawn
And rising again as the world spins
Presents itself once more
With all the rest. Like
 Fairground
 Ducks

(December 1973)

Zakalwe's Song

Watching from the room
As the troops go by.
– You ought to be able to tell, I think,
Whether they are going or coming back
By just leaving the gaps in the ranks.
– You are a fool, I said
And turned to leave,
Or maybe only mix a drink
For that deft throat to swallow
Like all my finest lies.
I faced into the shadows of things,
You leant against the window,
Gazing at nothing.
– When are we going to leave?
We could get stuck here,
Caught
If we try to stay too long.
(Turning)
Why don't we *leave*?
I said nothing,
Stroked a cracked glass,
Found knowledge in the silence;
The bomb lives only as it is falling.

(December 1973)

Sisyphus

Sisyphus eventually wore the hill away
Or ground the stone down to a pebble and
Threw the damn thing up.
Which might be a comforting comparison
With a little eternity too, but
As it is
I can only call you bitch and whore
Thus forcing shut the wound
(Tiny orgasm of pain?)
And through my jaundiced eyes
Contract another disease,
Seduce a further ill,
In hope of curing the first.
– And the eagle gets fed up with liver
– And flies off for different fare

(December 1973)

7.

A blind goat,
Tied to a stake
Driven into the desert
Stretches out its slight
Circumference
And determines
Mountains do not exist.

Einstein's fibre with the
Rest, one day, will
Snap
But pride, or a sense
Of accomplishment
Will be an irrelevance.
From age,
Wear,
Or indifference
The rope may part,
But not from the goat
Having the sense to turn back
And bite it.

(April 1973)

Skull

There is a skull beneath the skin all right,
But beneath the bone
A brain.
And though the hard
Outlives the soft
In the reckonings of decay
That hardness too in dust's betrayed
While that other can, and can choose to
Leave Changes
– And one of those isn't discarding the grain and
Milling the chaff

(May 1973)

9.

Hellfire, brimstone, torture, doom
An etcetera of presumed
Catastrophe.
A sloughed-on mantle of
Indulgent guilt.

 Meanwhile, a certain lack
Of activity in prayers offered
For the souls of slums, a dearth
Of psychoanalysis for those enjoying
Malnutrition, drought, bilharzia
And so on

 (Not to mention real torture)

An old, worn, tawdry set of sins to be called
Original
And not so different
From our touted, screened distractions;
The sapping trivia of our franchised fantasies:
Scum cheap, remorselessly monetised . . .

 Hellfire, brimstone, torture, doom
– An engaging little masochism
But ultimately

 A frivolity.

(May 1973)

Ozery's Song

We are nothing,
Who crawl upon the surface,
Unseen from these heights,
Diffused by distance
Baffled by, frustrated by
Our little, little scale.

(These the girl's thoughts,
Suspended from the limitless,
Carried through the braking air
Rushing yet still yet . . .)

Ants would be hyperbole,
We have less sense of mass.
The people look like, we look like, are
Nothing.

Only in the darkness are we, conglomerated, seen;
Lights forever outnumber, infinitely outnumbered.

(These the girl's thoughts,
Denigrating all,
From a vantage high
Procured by, technology)

SSSSHHHH, goes the jet.

(May 1973)

Hesitation

*'We are still strangers as we sleep,
You and I
And all our intimacies
Those hours ago
Make it only more so.'*

– It is an old cry, I suppose
Knowing
We have shared bodies
Wondering
Have we shared minds,
And right now I feel more close
To those of my own sex
Who too have lain and wondered so
Than I do,
Lady,
To you.
And I feel I am no longer me
But *a* man, with
A girl
(Dichotomy; should I call me boy
Or you woman?)
And wonder, perhaps uneasily,
Had you woken first,
What later thoughts
My sleep
Might have raised in you.

You sleep on, oblivious.
– Probably the wiser course.

Another age might have caused some pious
Guilt in one of us at least,
Yet prisoners of one time though we may be
I feel this closer, now, to all other ages,
And all this sexuality.
Our nearly love,
Only
A time machine

. . . Yet it remains, remains yet,
And still I wonder
Do we share thoughts?
Have we shared thoughts?
And if we do,
And if we have,
Was the only one,
This?

(July 1973)