

# 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,

Trying,  
To laugh.

And the child says,                      If you have to ask,  
You can never be told.

There was no child.  
There was never any child.

Ah, that old napalmic '*whoosh*', Greek fire,  
Protestors burning in  
The square, trees of smoke rooted in flame  
High above the desert . . .

She warms her hands, between wiping her tears.

. . . When the flames were almost out  
And brass frame blackened,  
She took the last few rags,  
And flung them on the beach.

(November 1973)



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)