

Mike Barlow

Diplomacy

Word is they're talking. But armies don't talk.
They mutter, they grumble, they seethe.
We've had it to here, stood to in dug-outs and rubble,
the sweat of the day, the bone cold frost of each night,
a platoon of duckers and divers in the other side's sights.

And stood down in the camp, all the briefings and drill,
the press-ups and card games, what does it come to?
It comes to a point when letters from home cut you off,
when hearts and kisses aren't matched by the words on the page,
when your daughter's drawings are maps of intrigue

and your wife someone else's, someone you no longer are,
a skin of a former self shed in a season
of snatched sleep and squints through the green glare
of nightsights, your homesick and half-awake mind half-
tuned to the guy to your right, his black jokes, faraway heart.

Posthumous

(1)
There's my face on the mantelpiece,
a smile in its gilt frame, a medal in its case.
I'm a word spoken softly now:

I might be to blame for something,
or I might be in the kitchen
eavesdropping, ready to burst through

with a corny old joke, mugs of tea
and plates of sausage and chips, ready
to make sense out of nonsense again.

I'm holding my breath all the time.
The longer I stay the more I fear
I'll get in the way.

But her anger, it boxes me in.
And another thing. When our daughter
brushes my knee or our son

walks through me its like being tickled
and not being free to laugh or wriggle
or join in or push them away.

(2)
Once he lay above the duvet
in full kit: webbing, boots, the lot.
I smelt diesel, metal
and something I couldn't put my finger on:
sweat perhaps, not his, anyone's.

He wakes me all hours now,
his warmth nudging me, wanting it.
I roll over on top and the chill

of his absence takes my breath away.

Bridge

A temporary span of girders
crosses grey sluggish water,
a link from one zone to another
a town still eating itself alive
to one already a carcass.
All that's left of the old medieval bridge:
the shattered molars of its piers
jutting from the river. Yesterday
you were advised to leave.
Today you stand midstream
taking photographs of burnt-out flats
and disused sidings. Traffic lights
still regulate the empty streets.
The occasional figure hurries past.
Any moment now one of them will stop,
take you firmly by the elbow, insist
they escort you to the other side.

Fugitive

Each night I sleep in a different house,
a rich man's divan or an old crone's
sacking on a lino floor. Each night
it's prayers to a different god, food
for an alien soul. But each night
it's the same dream. I'm flying
above a city that goes on forever.
I look down on side-streets and alleys,
snickets and shortcuts at figures
running this way and that, glancing back
over shoulders and crouching to hide
at a cough or footsteps or snatches of talk.
And just as I wake, it's always the same,
they're my friends, the friends
I grew up with. For Alice and Louis,
Isaac, Ahmed and Hans, trying to reach
a safe house to dream in, I hold my breath
and pray to a different god each night.

The Brown Room

The voices are not here in the room.
Only my grandmother, reading
and patting her perm and looking up
from time to time to smile a papery smile,
and my grandfather sucking at his pipe
and clearing his throat to spit,
and my mother sewing and not looking up.

The voices come from another world,
not this brown world with its bottlegreen
tassled chenille table cover, but a world

of echoes and crackles, of happenings
not happening here, a world held
in a polished box with a small grimace of light.
Stiff voices, cruel-to-be-kind voices,
voices with music and sometimes laughter,
though nothing sounds funny.

What the words say makes no sense at all.
But it's the voices I'll remember,
reaching into the room where no one speaks
and no one seems to listen. Theirs is a sound
I learn by heart war memories:
making their own strange sense when inally
my father comes home with his terrible reticence.

Mandy Coe

Salt

He tasted me before I boarded the ship,
picked me out from the others,
leaned forward and licked my face with a tongue, strong and pink as a calf's.
I could have left then,

shot into the sky. I could have
gone to live on the other side of the clouds,
but the jetty pressed against my bare feet,
cold stone drawing hot piss low in my belly.

The harbour echoed with shouts,
the drag of chains, the thunder of barrels rolling.
A rat squeezed out of a porthole and dropped.
Men peered at the stinking water; threw stones.

He tasted me
and I smelled meat and wine on his breath.
In that close moment I saw the pores of his skin,
the curve of an earlobe, bushy eyebrows,

tangled as the ship's ropes and masts.
The wetness on my cheek cooled in the breeze.

He held out his tongue, wiped it on his sleeve,
laughing and speaking
to the man with the pen, who looked at me,
wrote down a name.

In Love with a Map

First I looked at it
then whispered its name.
It didn't take long to get naked,
ink staining elbows and thighs.

The paper tore a little along folds
weakened from all those travels.
I remember us spreading it on the car bonnet,
air shimmering with heat

Then, pinned flat with stones
in that field. We lay, watching insects
leap onto its surface: giants!
I could be vulgar, roll it up,
or slide along its edge. But it's not like that.

Just to open it out, press my skin
to the places we went. My nipple
eclipsing that mountain,
my lips on the sea.

Illegal

I crawl through dust
where gullies turn their back on the sea,

a man comes to me

in a fast, straight line as if I am
the answer to a question.

I hold my shadow underneath;
a dark flattened child.
When he touches me
with the side of his boot,
he doesn't ask.

Mosaics, Piazza Armerina **Assassination of Maximilianus Hercules**

For these stones to work
you must stand back, but I am pulling you close.
Indeed, your face might be pressed to the tiles,
your son-in-law's knife in your ribs, seeing nothing
but abstraction, perhaps
the swirl encircling Arione's breast.

You walked her skin a thousand times,
tigers lurching
in drunken lamplight, snaking tesserae
allowing the spotted hare to jump,
waves to shimmer beneath Hercules's ship.

You dropped a cloak in the lemon tree,

a shoe in the Queen of Sheba's lap.
You even laid a girl
among the bulls, then laughed
at the patterns on her back.

The sparkle in Arione's eye
is one white square. Your blood
runs along the grout Hesitating
at every junction, it moves through
the maze one tile at a time.

All Rise

Although you were terrible at maths,
you still have the lightning ability
to measure the speed of the organist
What a friend we have in Jesus,
and multiply this by the number of verses.
This hymn

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
will last for years.

You sway: tiny arcs of grief.
Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
Behind you, that woman,
her voice: sweet. Whereas

yours is thin, trapped in a key
Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
that keeps it a child's.

You could kill the bitch;
vault over pews and rip tissue thin pages
from her book. The organist wouldn't stop
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
but the singing would. Everyone turning
to watch the storm of tumbling paper
In his aims he'll take and shield thee;
thou wilt find a solace there.

Allison McVety

Exercise Books

Kat's eyes are the colour of chemistry
and Frobisher house-points, but when Emily
says modern languages are purple, I see
papal robes and Mr Gregory's Redford tash.
Surely French is in the ruffles of plane trees
and Drake's maps? And how can red be geography,
when it's clearly in the paisley folds of calculus
and further maths; in Scott's immortal dash?
Livingstone and English literature stream
through the atrium, find us laughing at a leaky
pen. Twenty years from Mrs Wadden's speech
impediment and she is still Anthony and Lycidas.
I cry for Joe Keller, for his sons; for the cabby,
for the poor horse, for Stevie on the street.
And not even Mallory's orange zest of history
can pull me from her cirrus daffodils in class.

The Train Driver's View

Mostly, he gets the backsides of houses
flashed at him like drawerless drunken women.
No front room frill or bit of net, but a dressing
down of open yards and washing lines:
the off-white news that filters over fences.
And in winter, as he slows for points, or
InterCitys, under the scrutiny of 60Ws,
he spots a woman at the sink, up to her elbows
in a row she's had the night, the year before.
He thinks you can track the changes here,
in the trip along a passage from front door
geraniums to lean-to late-night fags.
All of life hanging in an outside lavatory,
hooked like squares of hand-cut newsprint,
filled with things you've never had, and fluttering
in the draught of people going places *fast*.

Urmston Brickworks

Not much to show for it now
but blasted brick and, from the hill,
across the flats to Carrington,
the Shell refinery burns off its oil
late into the night, and pylons
make a sampler of the sky,
cross-stitching power with steel.
There are starlings most mornings
toasting themselves on tensile thread
whilst underneath, the brickworks
unpicks itself. Scree is netted,
like aida-cloth, against the slow
crumble, each fall stained red
as though we've pricked the past
and it has opened up and bled for us.

Typewriter

It stored up its letters like tinned sardines,
before Gothic and Comic, when we said
what we meant, let it rattle about,
a racket of how we felt at the time.
This was when words mattered
for the newness of them, not yet
worn in the company of others,
when concatenation and Haliborange
clattered like a child's feet in a mother's heels.
To type was to run through a wet ginnel,
shouts heavy in our mouths, to hear
the slap of our own names in the foot's
repeat. Secrets like cunnilingus
and fellatio came next, pulled
from the dictionary and pressed to the page,
lines slipped into envelopes, stuffed
back into books and hoarded instead
for the feel of them, read years later,
a hammer of sound as big as the silence
in *when*, the power of *no*. How we bared
ourselves on rigid keys, heard our days
replayed in the echo of that emptied-out
rib cage of Q W E R T Y.

Offices

Through the glass blades there's another country,
its language bulky in our mouths, clumsy
and weighted with acronyms. Here, we hold
our laptops open while we walk as if
cradling scriptures, or babies, in the crooks
of our arms. Go north in the lift and there's
a shift in dialect, accents thicken
with money.

And in July this is pierced
only by the tilting slang of Anna,
selling ice creams, pen to pen, cool-bag brim-
ful of Magnums which we eat privately,
like sin. The room outside's stippled with ducks;
and a man astride a lawn mower lays
rolls of Axminster on the off-chance we'll
look up, which we never do. The gospels
speak in tongues; our babies stir, cry for us.

Helen Mort

The Ground Effect

Hunched by the small lock, I watch the swans take leave,
how their wings' pale chevrons skim the gloom
dipping low, then ploughing up through mist.
This trick of flight's no accident, the way earth tilts bodies
upward, the way birds lift half a wingspan
from the water. It's only when they're close to ground
they feel the air grow buoyant.
I think of you again, how well you know
that drag and lift. How you stood on the bridge
at the head of the reservoir, staring at the bottom of the fall
and saw it glimmer green
like the glow of rare base metal. How you startled
at the headlights of a coach and turned your back on it,
stumbled for town and redbrick houses
and woke to a thaw, as though the sunlight
didn't filter but sparked through your curtains.
You said it was some gift of light that brought you home,
the dim beams of the bus, or the first chink
of dawn. Watching swans, I can thank nothing
but the river, that close shift of water
that nudges us to air.

Carnation

They've built a Body Shop
in the old butcher's district —
caul and pig skin giving way
to coconut oil, jojoba,
as if the cloying air
should remind us there's no such thing
as a simple kindness —
like the spring carnations
fetched from earth to roadside
and, while you wait, beheaded
for your buttonhole.

The Collector

There's something human in a broken chair.
You found them cast away and brought them here.
Tonight you are as close, impalpable as air.
Armless, seatless, cleft beyond repair,
sitting out the slow end of another year,
there's something human in a broken chair.
Their bodies miss the weight they had to bear,
the strain of lifting what they once held near.
Tonight you are as close, impalpable as air.
I think of you on the gilded rocking chair,
its empty rigging and its bead veneer.
There's something human in a broken chair.
I've sat with you without meeting your stare,
I've felt your quick breath whisper in my ear.
Tonight, you are as close, impalpable as air.
All you've left unfinished, blemished, rare.
All that's rough and useless, rescued, dear.

There's something human in a broken chair.
Tonight you are as close, impalpable as air.

An Editor's Preface to the Language of Love (Volume 3)

Imagine love's our youngest language.
Two lexicographers in charcoal suits
must spend their winters dotting parchment
to trace soft plosives, map conspiracies of lips and fingers.
How they'd stammer at the accent of a parting handshake
or tremble at the easy grammar
of heads tipped close. How they'd stand, hawk-eyed
and watch two skaters glide, poised to catch the syntax of their dance.
And like the fullest dictionaries, their books fall short.
They pause in the kitchen, stall over ritual tea.
They face each other speechless
and turn out pockets for the glance translated,
find nothing but ancient small change
shabby with a tender long since cast away.

George afraid of fingerprints

thought of
them on patted dogs, the purple leaves
of late geraniums, or gathering ancient
in the pockets of his winter coat.
Their gauze
was on his bookshelves, from the heartwood
to the spine of Henry James. They trailed him
as he clutched the banister at night.
At length, he thought of how they'd linger in the yellow
of his first wife's hair, their savour
on her temples, or her own quick fingertips
and saw
them spread through every hand he'd shook
and every shoe he'd forced, still laced
onto his foot, and every door handle
he'd tried
and given up. The shape of them
when he closed his eyes, like something
jammed at the dresser back,
a vision
of his childhood street, the varnish tin
in the corner shop, its silver lid,
its weight so startling in his fist.
His mother's voice.
The careful turning out and owning up.
Even now, his mark there in the centre,
those brilliant spirals burning on it still.

Lesley Saunders

A Person is Not a Landscape

As always, it's the hills that impress me, their bare mauve cones
and the wisps of high cirrus hanging about like old smoke
though I notice my colleagues prefer to turn the other way
towards the endless renewing of sea and sky, the view over the bay.
I remember we clinked as we trod, trowels and steel rods
imprinting our soft pockets, swifts dinking over our heads,
then the turbine of midges, an occasional white sparkle off the stones
as we rootled in ditches, listening for the tap or scrape of the unknown
yet also, I think, unwilling to imagine the mountain leaping out of its skin,
the trees turning the silver backs of their leaves to the burning wind.
Most of the gold had gone; what else was there under the rubble and ash?
(We'd heard a whole statuette had been gentled up from beneath the crush.)
In time, I confess, it came to obsess me. What kind of space is a person,
what shape is made in the air by her passions, prayers, reasons?
We poured plaster into the wounds of the city, watching while it congealed
until we could see the shapes people made in the tuff like hares in a field:
the shallow platters of their bellies, the calderas of their breasts,
the elegant arcades of their legs, the meditational hoods of their heads,
the lipped ceramics of their ears, the locked cabinets of their chests,
the peripateias of their elbows, the lotuses of their wrists,
the exhortations of their arms pulling each other closer,
the heavenly domes of their eyelids, the last refuges of their toes.
Their bodies — what else could I call them? — became a dead, leaden white,
their clothing and skin bled a stale darkness into the day's stark light
and I began to wonder, what have I done, what could it possibly mean,
if we were stealing their freedom, dreaming we'd set them free?
What was real was the cloudburst of a man's breath like a shout on his tongue
and the fire in the mountain that put itself out in his lungs.

The New Look

'horse-(chariots), painted crimson and with joiner' / work complete, supplied with reins. The rail(?) is of fig-wood, with fittings(?) of horn, and there is (no?) 'heel'(?).' Linear B tablet

There had just been a war and in its wake
came glamour, cinch-waisted, gloved and hatted;
up and down the land the soft scrape
of tailor's pins on tissue, tiny stencils of sound
as women and their apprentice-daughters knelt
to their guesswork: barathea, organza, jacquard, poplin,
reading in the dots and dashes darts, back-half-belts
seven-eighths sleeves, side-vents, double-peplums
while dragons' teeth sprang up in the aftermath.
The trick was turning the chiffon or buffalo
carefully round on the needle or shoulder of earth
goading garments or armour into eye-catching poses,
greek still being a classical affair very vogue
very english, glaphyròs and taffeta to mid-calf,
when suddenly out of a new-fangled past a brogue
blew in like a bare-arsed ruffian *ka-ko to-ra-ke ko-ru*,
his grey clay of man-verbs threatening a landslide
of glottals stuffed in the throats of foot-soldiers
holing out in some tora bora on rations of flies
and dry winds through an age of iron and thunder:
all the war-words that had been trying like utility frocks
run up from parachute-cloth to forget themselves
and what they stood for, all those lives, times, locked
tightly in, writing with no reading, all the key-words in hiding.

There had been a war, or soon would be again,
another lingo to go missing in action or awol,
its shot silks and syllables left out in the sing-song rain
all greek, no cribs, no titles, just these tiny stencils of sound.

Everything

'This man is dying not because of something that has happened to him but because of everything that has happened to him.' Michael Wood, *At the Movies*
'Aun aprendo [I am still learning]' Francisco Goya, aged 83

write the story backwards just as you found or invented him:
how the pain had become a parody of agony
how the white noise of his own voice
had wound itself like a sheet round his mind;
how the thin wafer of strangers' kindness
had grown too hard to swallow, how his own life
had turned into an impossible act to follow;
you could mention how his best friend told the world
about this deaf, clumsy, weak old man he knew
that his notes add he was suffering from spasms of the bladder,
hardening of the bowels, an unpardonable tumour,
that his eyes had started playing fancy tricks on him,
that even before his stroke he walked with sticks;
you could say — who's to argue? — he'd had ten more years
of borrowed hours, squeezing himself a breath at a time
through the narrowest of cracks, only rarely looking back.
But do not neglect to tell us how he went on painting
pushing crayons when a brush wouldn't obey or stay in his hands,
that his patrons were all ill or abroad, that his only son was a lush,
that he knew death best as assassin or hangman, blood on the tracks —
and how then he teased with dabs and puns of carbon-black
on ivory squares, for all the world like a man searching
in his shirt for fleas, furious and alive, furious
but alive, a lunatic in a sack, a grinning buddha swinging through the air;
at last how the flat line of the horizon slewed straight at him
flew him out of everyone's reach and way past anyone's imagining.

Eriochersinensis: Chinese Mitten Crab

This is my last self, hard-backed
and landlocked
refugee from my body's past
its soft-celled children
I glued together out of wet sand
and wide grey skies
grieving as they bobbed goodbye
goodbye.
I became a goddess of the old kind
the ones
whose filthiness is in their skirts
who do not perish
on their wedding nights.
Our bad habits sap
the teetering virtues of cities
parked on riverbanks
— oh here comes the landslip —
the night-soil
the arse-over-tit the scree
of secrets and dowries
crash it goes, crash and I am

your underself always
just out of sight keeping you company
as you sink
as low as you can get. I am not made opal
by the moon
I do not recall what is meant by
chrysanthemum.
Look these are my stillborns my widow-weeds
my cabinet
of curiosities my terracotta army.
My servant-mourners.

Rosie Shepperd

“I love you,
Sheila Mackenzie!”

Apparently, Colin had not mentioned this
prior to the charity touch-down at Sevenoaks cricket ground.
There had been two office parties where, during the last dance,
Colin spoke of his Tuesday evening Samba class.
Tucked tightly in his arms, Sheila told of her burning desire to
reconfigure the LP3-1-7-0, finding similar pride in the solutions that
drew them closer and closer to data assimilation.
On Monday and Friday they met accidentally in Café Nero,
each confiding a weakness for short-full-fat-sweet-and-frothy.
Then, 11th November.
The Annual Kent and Weald Tax Accountants' Ball
Where twelve senior staff members were selected
to receive the key to the fourth floor bathroom,
with a view of Edenbridge Spire.
Complementary soaps. Individual towels.
Colin's head, shining in the lights,
his jacket hanging crisp, following the auditors' sponsored slim,
his perfectly proportioned feet, walking purposefully
to collect his prize from Felicity Juniper, wife of the firm's
founding partner, arbiter of all that is elegant,
harbinger of all that is triumphant
in the Institute of Chartered Accountants
(England and Wales).
And didn't Colin take a second to wave to Sheila's table as she stood clapping
until she thought her seams would burst,
didn't he brush away the in-house photographer who
snapped for Living Ledger
to hold out his soft, plump hand and say,
*Will you come to The Vine on Sunday?
I'm in the 2 o'clock free-fall. I have something to say.*

I know I've gone too far when I think of papardelle with broccoli

It comes on just under a minute later that I miss you; that hollow
feeling when I remember you're not here.
I have to go downstairs; cook flat, yellow ribbons made almost
too long with OO flour and eggs
from Puglia chickens, enjoying themselves and (I hope) walking through
fat fields where the grass is
tough and rich, almost deliberately salted from the Adriatic that seeps
into the land just there.
I bathe the noodles in fontina, melted into crème fraiche and think
how you called it sour cream.
It doesn't matter and would not matter to you that you didn't
like this dish, but even as I warm
your favourite bowl, I smile at my final stab, add purple sprouting
broccoli, diagonally cut.
You might like the colours, the way the steam holds the flavour,
of Alpine milk and the bitter
black pepper that falls in so many pieces like sand or gravel or ash.
I think we're OK for salt and

I'll keep the idea of finely chopped sage, a splash of hock or just nutmeg and/or butter for next time.

“Now`.

What I need, Bernard, is a bit of notice;

I can't just throw this together at the last minute.
I mean,
if you want me to say it with freesias, there's the issue
of weak stems.
Denise says they'll never stretch to BERNARD and are you sure
as the last time she popped her head round you weren't being
terribly clear?

Now. We need to talk about the waterskiing.
My thighs have not been strong since the Maldives.
And do bear in mind
the jubilee fiasco.
If I couldn't stand up after 14 hours one-to-one
at Take-the-Plunge
what chance will I have after a four-course wake (including cheese)
with your ashes under my arm?

Now. Are you head long on Berlioz?
I'm not trying to split hairs in your last hours but I have to tell you,
for most of us, March to the Scaffold is
a tricky one and we'll need a pick-me-up
with Stuart and Audrey
bringing Marion from Stevenage.
Did you flutter just then, Bernard? Did Berlioz hit a nerve?

I don't have a preference and it's your funeral.
I just wish, I wish
we had longer to look at the menus.
I know you feel short-changed by
the finger buffet but I do think it's only worth the trek
if people can meet old friends and make new ones.
And I'm sorry,
but sequential seating has a whiff of Harvest Festival 1987 and
I don't think I could live through the shame.

Bernard? I'm going to hold your hand now.
This is like the old days. Remember the picnics?
You'd forge ahead with your spy-nocs to find the perfect spot,
said you'd not risk detritus spoiling our cold cuts.
Your hands were always fresh and cool,
rather like tinned ham.
Neat and square.
Unlocked with a silver key.

Syzygy

During the 1953 storm that battered Britain's eastern sea-board, strong winds on the surface of the sea were exacerbated by syzygy, or the alignment of the sun, moon and earth.

As Mr and Mrs Jarvis flew past the bathroom window, I realised
I'd never previously seen them hold hands. He is in catering supplies.
She fiddles with crochet (that mostly resembles a cat's-cradle rainbow) and
waits for the crunch of five-thirty and the rumble of the Riley in the drive.

When the storm spun them tight like a bobbin, their mouths sprang open
in a double O and I am almost sure I heard a gasp at right angles to the rain.
It skidded down the roof as Mr Jarvis followed MrsJarvis along the gutter,
their faces drained of colour, her all-weather mac blown out in a parade.
He wore tan driving gloves and put one hand on his wife's left arm.
She held his finger in one of her mittens that started a lime green run.
With some shyness, they peeped inside the second floor of our house.
Mrs Jarvis, who goes out of her way to be friendly, smiled and waved
to our plumber (Brian) as he recalibrated both gauges on the boiler.
Mr Jarvis nodded, looked at his wife, then over her shoulder at the clouds that
lined the unexpected sky and, at a distance, I saw surprise in their eyes.
They laughed at the same time as their arms struggled, then joined in a circle,
their shoulders suddenly sure how to bend towards each other, to be together,
at once aligned, even if this was not really, quite the end.

You all have lied

And now I'm at the stage where
I see you all the time,
even places you would never go,
places where I know better than
imagine you've taken to
swing music, succulents, Lebanese food,
waiting for cabs, or anything.

The man at the corner table of Al Haram
hangs his jacket on a teak chair,
brushes out creases, tugs at the sleeves;
holds a glass of Hochar just as you did, moves it in a circle,
waits for the light to catch the colour, throw it off
in triangles of red, plum, sometimes gold;
smiles at something only he and I know, or that's the way I think of it.