

**THE
WATER
BEARER**

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FREMANTLE PRESS

CONTENTS

Carousel.....	7
Transit.....	8
Berries in September	9
Near-earth Objects	10
Three Michaelmas Poems	11
The Bells.....	14
School Walk in German Winter	16
Smartraveller.....	17
Winter: Liebestod	18
Winch-bird	19
Laubwald.....	20
Österberg.....	21
Tilt-and-turn.....	22
Next to Godliness.....	23
Now Lie in It	26
Sehnsucht.....	28
<i>Rainer Maria Rilke</i> Love Song	29
Disordered (Response to Rilke)	30
Irish Light.....	32
For My Late and Former Teacher	33
Edge.....	34
Shed.....	35
Evaporative Water Cooler	39
View from Below.....	40
Sensitive	42
Abscission	43
Life in Water.....	44
For My Father	51
Seventh Swim	54

Staunch	56
Sometimes	57
Transience	59
Self-supply	60
Interruptus	67
Pheromonal	68
Admission	69
Shake-down.....	71
Ceiling.....	73
Siege	75
Second Siege.....	76
Cusp.....	78
The Kindling	79
Prospect.....	80
The Grass-cutter	81
The Double Appointment.....	83
The Water-bearer	85
Poem for Shrove Tuesday	88
Poem for Ash Wednesday.....	90
Crossing Myself.....	91

For John and Tim

CAROUSEL

Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voilà,

De ta jeunesse?

– Verlaine

Because in a foreign city even at eight
 he needs the familiar nearby, to hitch
 the gaze like the reins of that lacquered
 horse to a fixed spot, in order to let loose,
 someone to witness his flight or he can't
 fully feel it, body forward but head turned
 to the side, my side, he keeps me pinned here
 on a bench at the roundabout's centre,
 where I give back affirmation, looking out
 from my still point, dead as a cyclone's eye.

I'm as much part of the furniture as each faceted
 mirror, each Parisian pom-pom and oom-pa-pa,
 mutely crucial like the unseen inner wheel
 of the hurdy-gurdy, the curlicued chairs
 and pastel tableaux where small folk-tale scenes
 suffer grotesque encroachment but nevertheless
 stay put, defying centrifugal force, I am what was
 and he is what will be, launching eternally
 into a churning future — over our heads it says
La Belle Epoque La Belle Epoque La Belle Epoque.

TRANSIT

Not even lifting a finger but with that swing
from walking, unconscious, palm open,
I catch it without volition, it catches me,
this white, minute feather, brush too aloof
to be called soft — but it did stop — weightless
as snowflake and just as blankly obvious,
the loss, the newness. Loose from a nest,
a fledgling, though there seemed
neither tree nor bird anywhere near me
to furnish it so listlessly, indifferently,
and I could not say what became of it
when it finished with me, glanced off,
as if it too might melt or dissipate, as if
without root in flesh or destination.

BERRIES IN SEPTEMBER

Some have been out
since we got here a month ago,
first cause for a motherly warning:
gorgeous, but you can't eat them.
He likes to walk by them, reminded
of Keats, one way of marking
this unfamiliar place, route to a new
school and home again, the poem
will cover a multitude of signs.
Yet now we see them everywhere
as if each street once reticent
were bursting to tell, were avid,
getting the berries up while
the going's good, sung like a red
and orange dispersal of swansong
or counterpoint, second cause, storm
before the calm; colour and opulence
insisting, they say: a bitter winter.

NEAR-EARTH OBJECTS

Built in is the possibility of it all going instantly.
Merely having a name seems minutest luxury, folly.

I'm still the open-mouthed child my brother could terrorise
by telling me the sun would end – will end, indeed

but so far along that the word *far's* engulfed in
non-meaning the way the world would be. Will be.

And Tim, nearly nine now, who once lived for the sheer
idea of the mighty crab and horsehead nebulae –

something approaching God to him – hearing obliquely,
from a schoolmate, who's got slightly the wrong end

of partly the wrong stick, that a STAR today will crash into earth
turning us off like a switch before we're even aware of it

garbling, I guess, the story of NASA's cast-off six-tonne satellite
expected in twenty-six bits which could each pack

a substantial punch but at odds of twenty-one trillion to one,
can meet this great ontological mess only with *I hate space*,

I hate space.

THREE MICHAELMAS POEMS

in soft September, at slow, sad Michaelmas

— D.H. Lawrence

1. Equinox

Everything just on the edge, leaves
with the faintest flush of intimation
as if ashamed to admit defeat
though they should be used to it
and the sun soon reasserting itself to thwart
even satellite communication
before retreat, and the school's request
we donate some non-perishable item
to simulate, they say, an early form
of welfare provision, Christian and pagan.
A harvest — not a hunter's — moon.
No light to go out and ravage by,
no licence for appetite — instead
reminder of social obligation born
of abundance, a notion of balance.
Yet last night sharp shots kept
ringing out their lethal angelus
till we could only wish to picture
fireworks somewhere, a celebration.
Of an ending, a beginning.
I called the college porter
who said she couldn't hear them,
heard nothing. Next morning, a friend said:
military practice. Lucky the child's dread
slept through it — only because exhausted.

He's been learning the war in class and is
 prone to translation, to taking things on.
 Summer's as good as dead. I'm reading Lawrence,
 the last, dark, steep decline of 'Bavarian Gentians'.

2. Effects

A kind of gleanings: the harvest is done
 and you have moved on. Seasonal, nomadic.
 I pick up the pieces, imagine them as
 residual interface — this workspace,
 virtual, collapsible as tent of Peri-Banou
 — 'innate capacity for expanse' — a mortal
 coil you'll not quite shuffle off despite
 reincarnation 'like anyone starting a new life
 in a country as foreign as this', you leave
 (are always leaving) specific essentials,
 cast-offs I might class as spartan, monastic:
 means of coffee-making, reading, camping
 or sleeping, shell-fragments I shall
 move into, hermit crab, stick to the trail,
 make part stand for whole, synecdochic
 not static, museum-like, but pressed
 into desperate service, like those objects
 they give dogs, for sniffing out missing persons.

3. Underworld

Yesterday, in the dark basement of the University
Library, an exhibition — Books and Babies:
Communicating Reproduction.

Waiting to get my card,
magic of access — I faced down a gravid uterus engraved
in cross-section, 1774: the caption noted violence,
prurience, pride of display, as you might say, male
mastery. An image based on extensive dissection, even
the thighs of the purported woman in question cut
to the bone, to show we can.

On a screen
nearby, a looping documentary — *The Joy
of Sex Education* — with the sound turned down
on what appeared to be a hapless sixties chick
cradling telltale swelling, gazing on white-clad, green
eye-shadowed bride, aglow on the church steps.
Or maybe the two were one: they looked the same.

I'm reading Dreiser, a second time — his *Tragedy*,
and in that doubled girl I saw Roberta, the one likeable
doomed character, her lover-and-murderer sent to the chair
by the same state that denies her a termination.

Yesterday, in the world outside books, another execution.
I came up steps blinking into bright near-autumn.

THE BELLS

*... the silence, wanly prinkt
with forms of lingering notes*

— Christopher Brennan

*In Germany, there appear to have been few
instances of overt resistance to the [Nazi]
confiscation of church bells.*

—Kirrily Freeman

I tilt the window
and they pour in here
cascading, swallowing
till I can't separate
sacred from secular —
how could it matter?
More than a marker
of time or collection
sanctus or death-knell
barely an interval
they take possession
with body and tongue.
Once they were named as
metallic resources.
Churches flew swastikas.
You can see photos
of the bell-graveyards
thousands awaiting
recasting for *service*
from all over Europe.
Now in Tübingen

they ring out in order:
some are survivors,
missed requisition
by virtue of heritage —
others too recent
to carry that weight.