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A Tapestry of Absent Sitters

SAMPLE



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The Dance of Death (Totentanz) circa 1485, Marienkirche, Berlin

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I

Agitprop

Praise with Faint Damnation

for Kevin Saving

Don't damn with faint praise or admiration –
Drub our green words till they bruise at the smart.
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

Feel free to deflate with defamation –
Pick at the scraps of the amateur heart,
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration.

Anything but vague, blanched affirmation –
Rattle our talents with your crafty art,
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

We're not after plaudits or salvation,
Blast against the grain that splits us apart –
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration.

Trample us to our naïf foundation,
We'll grasp the straws at the pitch of your dart;
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

No time for hyperbole's temptation:
We'd sooner upset Fashion's applecart –
Don't damn with faint praise or admiration;
Raze us to grain, praise with faint damnation.

The Clattering Classes

Discarded on the curling pavement slabs
crouched the beetly dark grey UNDERWOOD,
shining levers stirruped in,
compacted as a swatted fly;
long-hammered keys, fingertip-blunted,
an eroded causeway of QWERTYU.

I claimed the decrepit old typewriter,
cradled it in my arms, careful
not to let it fall and shatter
as if it were my own dust-cocooned soul,
a little broken but still dormant;
reflexive; reactive against the bland
craven anvil of a hammering scene
crimped in brinkmanship, besotted by
sameness, an understated take
on what has to be said, by not saying it.

Suggestion needs a kick-start now and then
or it whimpers out to nothing. Roaring voices,
hardly audible for stacking attacks
on life-quarried lines; belletrist backlash
against fired minds' spined generations;
an anti-crusade for the sake of staking
vain claims on the creaming page,
battered self-tributes, owing nothing
to a Blasting past. The Thatcherwrite hack.

They have it all wrapped up now;
creativity need no more question.
*We know this, we know this – but never show
we know, too obvious. Show don't tell.*
Deconstructing the poets, stripping their spell.

Elocution Lessons

They sussed I scrubbed up from humble origins
by how my second-hand clothes wore me out
of pocket, kept up stay-press pretensions
of 'well-heeled'; my clipped articulation –
practically accentless – betraying embarrassment
at state-school culling: too conscious of aitches
to pass for one above my fricative station.

Those old-tie school boys deloused my foibles
as psychiatrists their patients' phobias,
with lackadaisical lazy-lashed flicks –
You lack that certain air... didn't rattle me,
salted as I was with socialist distaste
for privilege-peppered classes. Though I
resented those tongues ironing out my creases.

Naturally snatches of taut consonants
and cavalier vowels rubbed off on my palette
but not that lofty atmosphere
orbiting moon-cool composure;
gravity-defying, gravitas-supplying,
tripping high to satellites of expectation.

Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Hardy

Never have ideas above your station,
it'll only end poorly;
Remember that cloister-struck stonemason,
darkling Jude Fawley.

A greengage when he spied those skerries
of sandstone, and they spires
Sparking his eyes as blackest blackberries
unreachable on the greenbriers.

Those spires he saw were Devil's horns
leading him astray
From knowing's roses to knowledge's thorns
that strip the heart away.

Time fleeced Jude's future – his wool eyes
unravelling from their books:
Lambs snagged on barbs by hushaby
box-cords tied to hooks.

He died in thrall of his tall vamps
to peals of Trinity –
But tolling cow-bells, tumbrel champs
chimed his varsity.

In their flowing gowns those dons n' deans
they rascal jackdaws be:
Cawing in ruins cut out of dreams
of low-born boys as 'e.

The ink that stains their lily white
dainties b'ain't the dirt
That fills your fingernails a'night
n' soils your patched-up shirt.

The only verse you'll plough verbatim
 is the stump-jumped furrow there –
That plank for kneading bitumen:
 the only mortar-board you'll wear.

Those tasselled hats graduands throw
 to their Christminster sky:
Good as a cloud of cackling crows
 to the scarecrow's half-cocked eye.

At Ambleside

Hartley Coleridge to Branwell Brontë

Dear *Branwell*

That day at Ambleside my friend
where we both laid our failures,
unassailable ambitions,
like feathers onto water
to drift invisibly forever,
was as well for me a small warm summer
in the Titan stride of winter –
we have shared, I feel, an interlude
of kindred respite, a meeting and
intermingling of minds,
a mirroring of moments,
a marriage of reflections.
Know thyself, the philosophers say,
and by knowing you for only hours
I find for the first time I am nearer
to knowing that life-shy inner-me
that least of all I ever see –
as for my aspect, I suspect
that was, in all its curiousness
(I mean my prematurely white
old man's mane, autumnal gait
and jittery disposition), some-
thing of a disappointing sight.
It's also one that contradicts,
as if by inverse caricature,
my juvenile green heart:
yes you may laugh at this, but I
still believe I cannot die –
an infantile immortal sense
I know the want of pains your soul
for what choice have you but to know
your time is limited, shall stop,
with graves crowding your window?
But I can tell you life is more

unbearable without an end
in sight; it's like an endless day
un-punctuated by the dark
that multiplies abundantly.
And so that's why my hair grows white
while I'm still fairly young:
because it's not had any nights,
nor has been spared of sun.
Well, my fellow Halfling friend,
my red-maned kin-diminutive,
it seems we both are as thin-skinned
as crinkled apples felled by wind –
I'll ask for last that you forgive
the letter I will never send.

Hartley

p.s. – your 'marbled skies',
I truly loved your 'marbled skies'.

The Ghosts of Haworth

'Let's see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it'. – Heathcliff, Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë

i.

*Storming thoughts
no stones unturned
mice-feet pace
the ringing table
tossing minute-
scripted stories
to Lilliputians
in the country of Wainscot –
rustle of hems
shingle of hemp
hissing the parsonage floor –
Banshees of Haworth
casting small shadows
green to pen spells
dashing a quarry
in sheets' sweat and writhing.*

ii.

Anne: We once had a brother called Branwell, I'm sure.

Emily: Our variable brother Branwell.

Charlotte: Variable even down to his hands,
each gifted its own prehensile will:

Anne: ...to draw with the right, and write with the left

Emily: ...the scratch of the pencil, the crack of the quill

Charlotte: ...our ambidextrous brother...

Emily: ...a double-tasking marmoset...

Anne: ...a triple-headed prodigy...

Charlotte: In his place now seethes a ramshackle ghost
trapped between limbo and this cold shattered place.

Anne: We warned him not to fall between four stalls.

Emily: But he showed not the same fleet-feet as when
he'd scamp over the gravestones.

Charlotte: His sweat's all a-chill beading the rims
of his wire eyes
Anne: – Hush! He might catch our whispers upstairs
and think them Banshees' wassailing hushaby's...
Charlotte: He doesn't know whether he haunts
Emily: ...or is haunted...
Anne: ...as the wind knows not whether
Emily: ...it blows or is blown.
Charlotte: The word *infernal* is branded on his brow,
its letters patterned from the pox.
Anne: He who is no longer who he was born.
Emily: Thrown back to thunder from where he was torn.
Anne: Poor, poor Branwell.
All: Infernal... Eternal...
Anne: ...tangled in bracken like a stag snagged by darkness
Emily: ...on the winnowing moor...
[*Nine 'o' clock rap on the door:*]
Patrick: Good night my children – don't stay up too late...

iii.

Taciturn Patrick
paternal jackdaw
breaks the silence of his beak
with habitual caw
muffled behind his neckerchief,
its inching swaddling of his chin
the tidal mark his miniature daughters
use to tell the shored-up years
moaning through the dolls' house rafters...

Haloed in candle-glow
up the wooden hill
the myopic Parson follows the shadow
of a giant crow.

The ragged stairs creak,
the banisters groan –
boughs of a dark wood.

Don't stay up too late –
incantation to grate
at the insatiable chirruping
of paper creations.

iv.

Too late for the family's Chatterton
cliffed upstairs, impatient for
failure – the artist's thrall –
knowing his shadow will cast no further
than the lamp-dabbed wall,
no trace of his gifts to out-trace him;
paints himself out from among his kin;
a ghost in the cracks on the canvas.

Charlotte: Trampled by scattering talent

Emily: ...too wilful, too fiery, too green

Anne: ...nerves too rickety, under-ripe,
to take the strain of waiting –

Charlotte: scampering over the blunted causeway
of Parsonage headstones

Anne: ...his stepping stones

Emily: ...fire-feet knowing off by heart

All: ...each dip and rise and mumbling gap

Emily: ...between the leaning graves...

Satanic chapel-goer, fox-haired
disciple of Byron, de Quincy,
opium-puffed, burnt out to cinders
in the hot squall of neadling sweat
clumping his curls to knotted thorns –
soon he'll gulp his bellyful
from Lethe's dark bowl;
a full tot of broth from the Ferryman's hands
bleached bone-white as his marble brow
parching soup for insuperable soul.

[*cliffed:* a Cornish expression for 'cast aside' or 'thrown away']

v.

In no time his sisters will follow.

First Emily; her paling dress-rehearsal
at Branwell's chapping funeral
swift as a swallow, stubborn as a thrush,
granite-willed till the end, staggering downstairs
the day she slips with the sprig of heather
from her limp hand on the tattered chaise lounge,
Keeper by her side (the dog she loved
so much she beat him) – crutching her lungs
till the moment she'd known would always come
effortless as the harebells' thrum.

Anne, only a season on, abroad
at Scarborough's sighing sands.

Lastly, Charlotte, spared time enough
to tasted immortality on her tongue...

...the Parson outlasted his progeny,
ringed as a tree, a furniture part,
a hollow-sounding heirloom, now
snowy-plumed as an old barn owl
mummified in his neckerchief...
Goodnight my children – won't stay up too late...

vi.

*The raised grave of the Parsonage
stares out the bitter wuthering,
the crooked headstones of the crags,
the darkening brow of tumbled moor.*

*Four stunted furs battered and bowed
by bashing winds, bark Atlases,
ballast the sky with tensing boughs –
as in seclusion's servitude
their minds, besieged, withstood the storms
and wore them on embattled brows.*