

## Praying Mantis

Found in Andalucía's autumn night  
on the road between red blossoms to the sea,  
and caught by my thrown shirt, insect Nefertiti,  
Egyptian queen, dazed from looping flight  
about the streetlamps. I carried her unhurt  
back to show your sons.  
Fresh leaf-green, hypnotic-graceful; female,  
we supposed.

We watched how she'd begin  
to clean herself fastidiously — then pause,  
to turn a triangular, high-cheekboned face  
to look with eerie grace at me or you  
across the room. Those spined front arms!  
Gently-working jaws.

Then she'd come to, and clean herself again,  
upslanting, over all our heads,  
up on her curtain rail, as you harangued  
your sons over unwashed dishes, unmade beds;  
silent as we all stormed about and banged,  
and ignorant of children, women, men.

## Adolescent Bodybuilders

*Hercules II!* I clipped the little ad  
and sent for it. Twelve quid. Then once a week  
each posted part proclaimed: *A dynamite physique*  
*in just three months!*

*It's naethin but a fad*  
my father mocked.

I understand why, here,  
surrounded by your weight-bulged adolescents  
posturing and preening like cock pheasants.  
Muscles! Mirrors! Gasps! And the top cock's fear.

Five nights a week, bedroomed, I'd heave and strain.

*What better than your woman being thrilled*  
*by your large biceps and your superb build?*  
Hercules enquired.

Nothing, I knew,  
examining my stick-frame for each gain.

Twenty years it took to get the woman too.

## A Winter Morning

*At age 14, Ayrshire*

Puddle ice cracked like lightbulb glass.  
Frost had furred the last of the hips and haws.  
My breath plumed out like a dragon's  
In the cheering cold that morning the class  
Was off for the day as the heating had failed —  
Off for the week, with luck.

It was a gift, an escape from the wise laws  
That governed things, a glimpse  
Of possibility, like the thought  
Of seeing a waxwing in an Irvine garden,  
Or discovering a girl who liked you,  
Or waking to find tremendous snow.  
Not the escape itself, but its fine surprise.





Who licks my beard with the rasp of her tongue if I  
    catch her in a grooming frenzy,  
Who leaps to my chest and places a single and  
    talonless pad on my lips  
If I whistle, who, if I open the door here at night as  
    she sits in the chair  
And walk down the path with the door left open,  
    follows —  
I see, looking back, her small head turned  
Round the door edge, peering;  
'Where are you going without me?' her look implies;  
She cannot resist the magnetic night.

Mornings, when she squeezes somehow through the  
    left-ajar window, over the sink in the kitchen,  
And her ears spring up as they clear the pane-rim,  
Her forepaws hooked on the window's edge, her  
    hind legs clawing for purchase on the pane outside,  
Just at the point when she's stuck half out, half-in,  
I kiss her on the nose when she is most helpless,  
And laugh, yet realise too, with the strange wild  
    gleam in her eye as she comes in,  
How that must seem to a bird in a tree hole,  
As if the kitchen here were a giant tree-hole, and  
    she coming in with me as her prey...

She arrives in my forest of books from the wood's  
    university;  
I lift her, sniffing wet mud on her paws from the  
    miles of night-fields;  
Counties of leafage upflourish in my mind when I  
    sniff her fur,  
Which, lustrously white on her paws, with a pale-  
    gold tinge,  
Is exactly like that on the old seed heads  
    of the Spear Thistle  
In forgotten corners of September fields.

Now the neighbours smile as they pass, at my  
    accepting time.

She follows me out when I go to the tap on this hill  
    for water,  
At a certain speed in her walk her tail stands up  
    with a little crook at the tip,  
Or she'll be in spirited mood, bouncing about on  
    her flexible spine; a strange thing,  
She alone  
(As we all are alone in the end), sistered by shadow,  
Leaping in gaiety in the light of the catless moon.

*Cunninghamhead Estate*



A young man and a pencil and Eddie  
Are epic.

V

I do not know which to prefer:  
The hammered  
Craft of Eddie's sonnets  
Or the gaiety of his experiments,  
The long tradition  
Or just after.

VI

Hailstones blatted the window  
With strawberry-sized glass.  
The shadow of Eddie  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The mood  
Was unlike that  
In his poem of long ago.

VII

O wee men of Easterhouse,  
Why do you imagine knives and scrotums?  
Do you not see how Eddie  
Is blasting off  
To Saturn and Jupiter?

VIII

I know blind old men like Christ,  
And what the sperm and egg might say;  
And I know, too,  
That Eddie is involved  
In what I know.

IX

When Eddie soared out of sight  
It marked a crick  
In the necks of some contemporaries.

X

At the sound of Eddie  
Reading his 'Loch Ness Monster Song',  
Even the scholars of gravity  
Would levitate slightly.

XI

He rode over Lanarkshire  
On a glass Suzuki 1000.  
Once, he experienced trepidation,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his motorbike  
For Eddie's Concorde.

**XII**

The sun is shining.  
Eddie must be writing.

**XIII**

It was night-time all day long.  
It was dreich  
And it was going to dreichen.  
Eddie made light  
With his pencil point.

## The Holder-out

He sat in the palace of spectacular squalor,  
A king, at least, of that small domain:  
In the breeze-blocked hovel, misery's scholar  
Drank mug after mug to toast his reign.

His cheeks were a disused-postbox red.  
Light could ease no letters through his eyes.  
Whatever he'd held out for lay as dead  
As the mouse the cat brought in and the littered flies.

It set for crown on him, poor king,  
Tall gulfs of air through the grimy window,  
And old crofts opened to an absolute thing:  
Its rains rain and its long winds blow.

*Orkney*

## The News of Swans

Bad tempered, hot, I cleared the rise  
With two wet miles on foot ahead;  
Wind-buffeted, and soaked by skies,  
“The meek will inherit the Earth!” I said.  
Though maybe that was true enough,  
It wasn't in a tone of truth I said it:  
The rains too wet and winds too rough  
For such old tales to be given credit.

Then, on my dark sight, a vision gleamed —  
Seventeen swans on the flooded pool! —  
At least in the dreich that's what they seemed  
With their aura of being beyond our rule,  
Their aura of being beyond our lies.  
Nor at my passing did they scare,  
But flapped their wings and made small cries.  
They could not be soaked by the soaking air.

I almost threw my umbrella away —  
My portable heaven — but not quite,  
So happy I grew in the lashing day  
At seeing that marriage of bird and light.  
The following morning of course they were gone  
To some further place, like a startling news:  
The floodpool was empty where they had shone —  
And more ragged and worn my clothes and shoes.

*The Overtoun Road*