

# Nones

Lancaster Avenue's resident spinster  
still weathered winter  
in Victorian splendour, her hermitage a sprawl  
of walls and shingled spires within her snowy woods.

From my window, looking out  
towards her estate, I watched a barn owl  
soft and silent, sail out  
on the evening light, its shadow passing  
faint across the flurry fields.

From my writing desk  
I could see the distant silhouette  
of the bare trees against pewter sky.

My careful poems set-out, scratched through,  
my fingers stained from dip-pen ink,  
a cat's-cradle of sonnets  
suspended the world, that world...  
in the winter of sixty-seven.

The room was always cold, the quiet grief of the house  
that December my father died.

A bib of ice across the panes  
never hid the view entirely: once seen, I knew  
what held, what threaded silences together.

I thought more of Ruskin than the Beats; my sister  
the previous spring  
secretly married; Mother's bedroom door was closed.

Thinking back, it was the stillness I remember –  
at that time of year, at that hour  
of the afternoon, the dark coming early, the owl's flight  
finishing with a kill.

# Yellow

From all I knew  
towards everything I know...  
the town, the pool joints  
by the Court House, and behind it  
in the uncertain shade  
of hack-branch pine, jailbirds on ice  
for knife fights or a drunken grudge.

Water Street, still cobbled, jarred feed sacks  
from the pickup trucks, a fan of fine grain  
clumping in gulleys  
with ravels of Hessian and jaw-tobacco spit.

In camouflage of overalls and boots  
I slipped unnoticed  
through the crowd of farmers  
and their heavy wives, dolt boys in tow  
or, where the gene-pool startled to a depth and cleared, daughters  
of a brief and incandescent beauty.

Near the rail office, its furniture  
and routines unchanged since Lincoln, I watched  
the mile-long trains trail north  
into Ohio, east to Carolina; I knew my Whitman  
as a rookery the rook, suspected  
setting-out was half the journey,  
and in my pocket journal pencilled  
the shape of stone-melt heat in August – the look  
the South takes  
when it no longer cares who sees.

Mother's friend, Mrs Carlisle, had a radio show,  
*Kitty's Talk of the Town*, snugged  
between *Best Country Tunes* and *Farming Today*, and asked me  
would I read a poem 'or maybe two...'

Come the day, I was late, just made the cue  
with a wither-look from 'Kitty',  
though she and Mother never knew  
I lost the time on Water Street,  
polishing my style:  
near the feed store, her kin  
loading up, Sweet Sixteen staring hard, hard  
to make me see  
the way she smoothed first one hand  
past her dip of waist, then with the other wiped  
a sweat bead slow along her throat,  
deep into the damp, loose yellow of her dress.

## Last Days of Ishmael

Above the harbour, a hill house,  
its coat of cracked paint  
binding wet-rot in a frame – outside the window,  
a square of sky scrubbed blue – in a room  
minded of winter he reads a little, on the table  
a book of sea tales, shipwreck, the old routines.

Again, memory, considering nature  
where it rose, and the time begun  
to come to that business,  
it was not, it is not, just one time, useful honestly.  
It asks, it increases, recognising itself,  
pulling oceans with it, above other lives  
less deserving of memory.

At the open door, leaves the colour  
of November leap as the wind wills, a jig  
of jammy rinds along the porch planks.  
Below, the town's deserted quays – the ships  
gone now, and fewer too those others  
boiled down for lamplight

...that day, a grime in the mouths  
of pagan stokers, the scald-pot seas  
red as a cut heart, that day... a shadow  
spooling fathoms, surfacing through iron spears,  
its white flukes trimmed to sounding cold  
for Ahab: his last breath... salt, salt, swallowed  
deep enough to make a ghost.