

The Astronaut

I

As a Child

I spent my youth in practice,
kicking thin tin cans, or stringing

a line. My crackles were rationed:
they floated in sky-white milk

like lonely pod modules. I passed
behind the village pavilion,

pretending to be a golf-ball,
and tuning my wireless just to the

left of Hilversum. Golf-karts
crooned and zagged over crew-cut lawns,

and the meteors flew by my face
as I lay upwards in bunkers,

counting down the spasms of dusk.
Now my head is full of space.

II

Weeps

I look at the slow birth of Earth
through a portcullis of tears. My eyes

are raw: the reflections of starlight
dance on my visor. It is so hard,

harder even than thought to watch
a planet spin on faraway axes,

lost in night's spiral. I am waving
farewell. My heart is a fable,

an insoluble tale of grief.
It is written, in a thin tincture

of ink, or blood, and I write it,
marooned on a moon's soft blotch.

III

Dreams

Macramé of cable. My right eye
pulsing like a passing star.

The contraption I'm flying has wings,
but no controls at all. A blind

gulf in the window, and a U-turn
without a U, or a turn.

God's in the cockpit, repeating
Copy Copy in a coded voice

which reaches through thick ether
with something like gravity. Planets

pull at my pipes, there is rust
on the galley porthole, as I

teeter, looking for parachutes.
That's one small step ladder.

Gig

On bleed guitar, it's Johnny. He needs
no introduction (but he gets one. The audience
is crammed with amateur compères, each of whom
hopes for a booking
at the local library. They queue to roust
each other from their seats) and so:
On bleed guitar, it's Johnny. He plays
some shambled chords, assaults
A minor, and the gig –

But no. The drummer patrols his kit
like a traffic warden looking
for a lost ticket. He ups sticks, and slanders
a hi-hat. Johnny, in slash velvet, hits back, leaning
his lungs. He wraps his knuckles round the mike. Begins

a lyric. It fuses
everything he's ever learned, from being a cub
to drubbing his sister, from breaking the highway code
to
wolf hooley from the local woods
(where he rehearses, all teeth and tank-top,
in his private lair). The bassist
mumbles his thumbs, is several bars
ahead. He has been on medication. It might have been
meditation, in fact, but that's drugs for you. You

pop one, and your shadows
follow you round the stage. Johnny persists.
He plays for several hours, prowling and preening,
while the listeners peel off
and head for their bunk beds.

They lie there, brine, while lupine Johnny
thrashes the half-drawn dawn.

Missing Persons

They turn up, frayed at the edges,
yellowing, with lost images locked in their eyeballs,
and sanded shoes. If they have names
(and most of them don't) then these are
fictions hitched to their collars.

They are opened like wallets.
Out fall photos of mothers with milk-vetch eyes,
and ginger fingerprints, letters
written in Russian, wild hair
sealed in Sellotape, tired tickets
to nineteenth century shows. Stubs.

Someone runs a bath, and sponges
their wilting arms. A caucus of experts
tries them on adjectives, suffers them
to turn to
a lens, and, blinking, to give
what whittled looks they have left
to the music of platitude.

Later, they are left on benches, to grow
as old as they like. They stare at the blossom,
and the blossom dies. They are like empty parcels,
divested of string. Quartermasters
no longer call. One night, when no-one is looking,
they steal away, and become, somewhere, selves.

The Sound of Rain on a Window

It's a sudden banter,
the arrival of several riddles at once,
nineteen people standing
in the road below, aiming
handfuls of pitted pebbles to see
if you're in.

They guess you're sleeping,
missed the bus, wrote
the rendezvous on the wrong calendar.

You wake
just as the sunlight hurries
back through the glass, asking
apologies, and painting
streaks where the rain
rattled your nerve. You stand

in the street, blinking,
throwing lonely stones
at your own window,
wondering whether you're in.

Moon

I

As a Child

The moon is a splinter of finger,
seen through a tear.

It is trapped in the night sky,
welded to dark.

It touches the cusp of nothing
and blinks, slowly,

while the whitened tide
covers the shingle's

tambourines, and blunders
up a green beach.

You found this moon weeping
one morning,

and carried it home.

This is your moon. This is

its cradle. This moon
has a beautiful future.

The Stories of Your Lives

Life One

This was some story.
You threw your weight
at a guitarist who strangled his chords,
and who went off
with a dancer who doubled the huff.

Bored, you made
fruit pies, and lived off the crusts
of your customers.

One Sunday, you were orphaned,
and fell from a pedestal
into a fountain, and drowned.

Life Two

This was a tell-tale.
You grew up in an attic, with toy-chests,
and a rockabilly horse.

Your mother was really your mother,
but you thought
she was your maiden aunt.

At seventeen, you eloped with a viola
to see the world.
You found Norfolk,

and lived in a flat with a man
who worshipped the sea,
who ate pilchards from the tin.

One night you died laughing
after an argument over his bloaters.
You couldn't make it up.

Life Three

This was just matter-of-fact.
You lived in a tree-
house, with curtains and carpets,
and a feral cat.

You fell in love with a body-builder
(he used a kit)
and polished his muscles.

One day the cat got his tongue.
Depressed, you moved trees.
It was through grief that you met
the life-saver
who couldn't swim to
save his life. He
died in your arm-bands.

Since then you have drawn water
in a sketch-book.
No-one knows to what end.

Life Four

They still talk about this one.
You were raised in a trance,
until, without ado,
you kissed a superstitious vicar
in a chancel.

But he was already married
(by himself) to a wife
with fifteen infants and a smack habit.

Some say
you were wasted away.