

Act

Every day it's up and out of the marriage-bed
and its unfinished dreams, to leap straight on
the horse's waiting back. I touch my finger
to a spot midway between its blinkers,
and already my thighs are flexing, feet jabbing,
onward into the ring, where an old man
and three girls are seated for the breakfast turn.

At this hour, my breath's a grey flower
behind the horse's cloud. Straight
into first paces: grip; circle; bend backwards;
urge; and check. Breathe deep
as in a morning pranayama on damp sawdust,
toast, just-ironed cotton, strawberry lip-balm
and the piss in the pot left out for emptying.

We pick up rhythm quickly. Each twist
and stretch unchills the blood; flushes
the muscles and the brain of night-time's resins.
The canvas brightens and the tent begins to fill
with child-minders, neighbours, exchange students,
asylum-seekers, and union reps:
all in costume, working, or resting between acts.

Like sauna-steam, their body-heat
zings to my head and I'm off, I'm at it,
throwing stances, showing them a trick or two,
tilting my chin as I do the splits
or a sturdy one-legger on the horse's sweating back,
one arm curved delicately in upon itself
for me to admire its well-worked sinews.

Failed Asylum Seeker: Attempted Re-entry

for Matvei

The cell door was opened, and he looked up.

There you are, he said.

The line around his throat was fresh; otherwise, he looked well.

The Idiot by Dostoevesky was lying on the bed.

He grinned.

Andrei's joke. He'd told me to try Ireland this time,

and I didn't know Belfast was the UK.

The customs guy who found him in the toilet and cut him down said he was the first man he'd ever had to kiss.

Yes, he was working through my *Practical English Usage*;

he found double negatives and third conditionals difficult.

We sat down at the table to play chess.

I asked about the exercises for his back.

He shook his head.

No room to swing a cat in here. I looked that up.

Did you know 'cat' is an old Scottish word for thief?

No, I said. *You live and learn.*

He smiled and said he liked that one. Then moved his pawn.

Lear's Only Daughter

You come visiting, Dad, with one small suitcase,
and without your riotous knights.

All ghosts now, your drinking-pals,
summoned up for stories in the grim bar

where you eke out your days.
Dead, you say, from too much abstention.

You see me, don't you, as your good girl
who sat your shift and mine beside her hospice bed;

who held your cold hand the night
when burglars carried off two coffee mugs,

a radio and your anniversary cassette.
But my voice was never gentle, soft and low,

and you won't wear your deaf-aid, will you,
to hear my stern complaints about the way

her hard-earned pension is disappearing
on Australian white. I need you

to liven up and get back
to the fine fettle of a rage,

throw my maths homework at me,
and call me thick.

This is no time to start telling me
you love me. I can see

where it's all leading.
Dad, this fifth act's no place for us.

White

White's what you want:

a house, a lake holding the pale sky
steady for your midnight swim,
your feet ghosting through a garden
so long and dark that you forget it's yours.

It's too late.

It's your commedia dell arte smile
as you sip reception wine and tell the artist
how you love but can't afford
her 5' by 4': the White on White.

White must go on:

not as in the radiance of eternity,
but as towels kept separate for guests,
voile curtains blurring the yard's bricks
and the dustbin to ethereal.

It's the high ground:

watching snow drift across the rocks
and huddling with friends in last year's jackets,
playing Five Stones with your principles
until your fingertips turn white.

White is what you're not supposed
to write: the scar on his long thigh,
gored by a fence at the age of five,
where you sometimes lay your head
and show him, slowly, you are grateful.