

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Year's end, and the grief is with me,
unshed tears at the back of my throat
for those I failed, who didn't make it;
the ones who fell, who stumbled, reeling,
who would not, could not, make a change,
whose lives were lit by other stars
than those that shine so thinly now.

I will place a candle in my window —
not to guide them, still less to heal,
but to show them, wherever they are,
that I have kept faith, that I remember
their crooked smiles, their tipsy laughter,
heads thrown back in wild hilarity;
glasses raised, tall tales untold,
the dogs of disaster still on the leash;
dreams untarnished, dawns undimmed,
my foolish, frail, unforgettable dead.

HISTORY

I close my eyes, and imagine my parents
standing behind me, one at each shoulder;
behind them, and behind them, and behind them
two parents, travelling back in a vee through time.
Two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four —
in twenty generations I have a million ancestors.
I am the tip of an arrow. That's history.

I have a father in me, his frail heart breaking
on the battered anvil of his unlived life,
and a mother whose fear still trembles inside me,
reaching like a scold for the easy mask of anger.
They were good people. They made me who I am.
They left me ashamed of my body and my kind.

I have two grandfathers and two grandmothers,
on the one side dirt poor, on the other middle-class.
My grandfathers stare out of sepia photographs,
stiff in their uniforms like khaki butterflies,
chloroformed and pinned by the coming of war.
One granny died giving birth to my father,
the other endured, and drank herself to death.

I have war in me then, and the greed of Empire,
cruelties born of the ledger and the lash —
the boss's swagger, and the box-wallah's blag,
the foreman's snarl, and the slaver's dull-eyed stare.
I also have a pauper in me, driven from the fields,
grieving the memory of every pond and pasture.

There's a puritan in me who fought his brother,
and a Cavalier who wept as he buried his sons,

a whey-faced villager who pointed the finger,
tied his neighbour to a stake and watched her burn.
The neighbour's in me too, and she's not a witch;
and she did none harm, and she spoke none harm.

There's a monk, and a bishop, and a starveling curate,
and a hermit who went crazy alone in a cave;
each one giving their life to prayer and service,
each one stumbling on the unpaved road to God.
And there's a wet nurse too, and a silent midwife
who buried more children than she ever welcomed.

I've a troubadour inside me, and a crusader
prepared to do murder in the name of the Lord.
Their flags and their pennons flutter forlornly —
there's a bit of me that never got to Jerusalem.
Behind them there's a file of hard-faced warriors
and the sullen churls they ground into the mud.

There's a Celt, and a Pict, and a roaring berserker,
calling on the spirit of the Great White Bear;
and a völva in her trance, and a shaman drumming,
staving off the coming of hunger and pestilence.
These are my ancestors, my blood and my bone.
They made me who I am. I carry them with me.

ROMANTIC

Much thinner than he ought to be,
he begs no more than a smile or a blessing.

Head bent forward, shoulders hunched,
chapped hands deep in his empty pockets.

You could look into his flint-grey eyes
and see the stories of a thousand sons

brought to this city by hope or despair
at one last crop of thistles and stones.

You can hear him in the underpasses,
the delicate agonies of his dulcimer playing,

and all the while you can place him exactly
on the brow of a vast and motherly hill,

in silhouette against the skyline, a dreamer,
held down by nothing but the grasping clay.

THE INHERITANCE

This is the fear
my mother carried
like a cold, wet stone;
her rough hands cracked
with the handling of it,
her love worn thin
by its abrasions.

This is the fear
my father suppressed
like a squalling child;
his strong arms forcing
the pillow down on it,
tenderly, tenderly,
whispering a lullaby.

And this is the fear
I cannot own,
that I have wrapped
in the cloths of anger:
red for a warning
to keep me safe,
white for the grief
and the isolation.

This is the fear
of my generations,
handed down with
the bottle and the flask;
sharp as a cracked whip,
dull as a goad;
driving me, driving me
Sometimes you just want to fly away.