

Snowdrop

A Story in Verse by
Rik Roots

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I dedicate this book
to all those born and raised
on the Romney Marshes

We know who we are

Snowdrop

For most people, Christmas is a time of joy; for some it has become a time of lonely sorrow.

For Snowdrop, Christmas is about to become a timeless place of fear, horror – and unimaginable loss.

On the hill above the Marshes, someone watches; *some thing waits ...*

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Prologue

The Christmas Town

"Wotcha petal!
You're a fit girl – fancy
some time on my tongue?
We can play
kiss and catch
lick and stab – you know
you want it!"

The girl ignores the gang of boys,
her eyes on tarmac as she treads the streets
that terrace through Hythe; the town has woken
to an afternoon flurry of festive greed:
a shunt of shoppers shoving her to the kerb,
crunching their bodies from boutique to giftshop

to ferret through shelves for the final items
on their cribbed lists – Christmas ticked off.

"Watch where you're going!
Kids these days, don't give a toss
how they butt past –
I could have been run over, push
me in the gutter like that!"

She stops in the road. Her streak-bleached hair
is swept to a bun at the base of her skull
and her face is peach, freckled and thin.
Saucer-sized hoops hunker from ears
to match the rings that wrap her fingers.
Her wide eyes glare, their golden flecks
in umber circles. She skims through the flocks
with a careful stare, keeping a check
for possibilities: a purse left unguarded;
or a shallow pocket. Shillings on the floor.

"What you think
you're up to, huh? Keep your sodding hands
in your own coat –
sodding pikeys all over the place;
check for your purse, Marge!"

A sniff of soup: the scent leads her
to the doors of the Swan, its dingy rooms packed
with sweating shoppers. She shoulders inside
and weaves round crowds towards the bar
to claim a mug. The man who serves her
can reckon her age; he offers the soup
with a lasting look: *you'll leave when it's drained!*
She sips at the broth, breathes on its herbs
and leans on the bar. A bean in the mug
lifts through the mix, moves to the skim
that skins the surface, scratches her lip.

*... a wizened hook, a secret key, a bean;
go forth, find fresh guests for our hidden realm ...*

Watching the crush, she works the bean
to the back of her throat; and blinks; and swallows.

The Cottage on the Marsh

The shadows sharpen when the shawl of clouds
finally slip, framing the coin
of the winter sun on the wave of Lym.
Once a great cliff that walled out the sea,
it tumbles in drifts down to the hem
of flat marshlands.

A matrix of ditches
and sewers drain sinews of light
through deep sluices to sink in the tides
of England's Channel. The churned levels
are bare of crops; coppiced willows
stake their borders.

A scrap of a woman
with a strand of tinsel trapping her hair
walks from the town on winding lanes
to a crumpled cot crouched in a field
away from the road; she whistles carols
to keep herself warm.

In the west, the fireball
sickens and gutters, is swallowed by the hill
where a garland of mist garners the trees.
When she lifts the latch on the laminate door
that guards the cottage, a gust of cabbage
steamed in the sweat of certainties greets her
to swab away the smudge of Hythe.

Gran Says:

"Look at the state of you! You're late again
and dolled up like a dog in heat! I'll bet
some coins to cars you've been in town to shame
your name and mine! Beggin' on streets, a threat
to good and honest folks! Take off that frown
and come and help! There's rabbits needin' culled
and chickens plucked and drawn and Missus Brown
wants lambshanks dressed for Thursday! I'll be pulled
from bed to bog to get it done in time!
Just see the state of you! Now put a pan
of water on the stove and throw some tea
into yourself – you're cold, my girl, a crime
to decent folks, no? You come here to Gran
and kiss me now! Just see the state of me!"

The Dam in her Nest, at Bay

She snouts the tin aside to tumble
a clanking course across the slopes
that mould her home, her mazy nest,
knocking the rime of newborn ice
from leaf and peel; she pulls a lace
of paper free from its frosted pile,
drags it back down to her den within
the layers of waste.

It watches: younger,
this one, the white of wisdom yet
to tip its pelt. It taps the heaps
with barreled whiskers, braces its feet
on discards and leavings, levers its hips
forward towards the warmth of rot.
It's coming home.

She hears the crack
of slipping bone above – a cat
perhaps, or stoat come hunting pups.
She snicks her teeth and snags a taste
of mystery – not dog, nor magpie beak.
Her press of belly bullies her deeper:
pluck out the fur, plaster her snug
with hairs and strips of wholesome compost
before she bursts.

It finds the breach
that leads it back to blood and milk
each pawstep marked and measured in stealths –
a hunting child, a haunting thief
seeking siblings soon to be born,
a season's feast.

She smells its chill,
a daughter, once, a demon now
as dead as the mists that mould its form:
she lifts her lip, levels her ears
to her skull and sets the spars of her claws
deep in the walls of the den, and waits.

The Good Room

An abandoned darkness. She dips a switch
to illuminate clutter: a couch laden

with coarse cottons; a carpet of swirls
dating back decades; dust on the table
cracking veneers; cascades of vases.

"Come here, my sweet. I'm sorry for those words –
I miss her too, and sometimes I forget
that you're not her; you have her look, absurd
as that may seem to you, a silhouette
to catch and shift me back to when she snuck
away – I ache for her! Still, no time to mawk!"

There's memories here; moments of comfort
and laughter caught in the layers of grime.
She refutes their call, casts them away.
Going to the window, she grasps the curtain
to shut out the moon. Her shadow ripples
between the folds of the faded drapes –
a wasp, long dead, winnows to the sill.

"We'll pull some ivy from the fence out back
and braid some berried holly through the stalks
and pin the twigs along the walls, and Bert
the Herder gave me mistletoe – he gabs
romance, that man, but I know what he seeks.
And once we've spruced the room we'll find a fir
for potting, drag it here so you can wrap
that tinsel round it: Christmas done on the cheap!"

The grin on the face of her Gran is crooked
and whole, and good, and the girl can't help
but to smile in return – a tacit ceasefire.

Mulled Wine at Midnight

Outlines of women sit tight by the fire.
A smoke of wine lifts from their china mugs.
A glade of spruce twigs held in arches by wire
outlines the women sat tight by the fire.
A bucketed sapling with tinsel spires
its tip to the ceiling: pins fall to the rugs.
The outlined women sit tight by the fire:
a smoke of wine twists from their china mugs.

Into the Woods

The Yule Log

She watches it wither and waste in the grate;
A peel of bark bristles and powders.

Each kindled flare ferrets through crevices –
one bursts a chrysalis in a cannon of steam.

A chorus of dancers crackle and twirl,
their shapes make scenes: a story of shades.

She follows their play, a pantomime
of hunters and dogs, dangers and hopes.

*... this prize you bring to me – a jewel, a rose;
her presence here shall bless the hidden realm ...*

Jack Flame alights on the log, and bows:
a moss-pad smokes in the midst of his stage.

The Glamour through the Flame

Look at the stag! He leaps at the trees
and hoofs through the ferns, eyes wide in despair;
his pelt is spattered by mud and debris
as the hunters' halloos shiver the air.
Look at the stag: he darts from the flares
of beaters who stalk him, no time to freeze –
the dogs are about him, snouts frothed as they seize
his stress-shook haunch, tumble him, tear
at his throat to spatter hot blood. See
him, eyes wide now, dispaired.

Look at the feast! Great platters of meat
and scuttles of beer brought to sate a fair
of dancers and lovers; a barrage of treats:
a pivot of swan breasts; boar heads in their pairs –
look at the feast: there's ramstones to share,
and manstones, and tongue-in-a-purse – discrete
entrapments performed as a service replete
and dulled and indifferent, each ensnared
participant lost and alone. See
the feast that sates the fair.

Look at the man! He squats by a tree
and stares out the moon, mustering charms.
His lap hosts a knife, its iron blade free
from its yellowhorn sheath; he weaves a barm
of mist from a cauldron, now seething, now calm.
Look at the man as he sits on the tee
of a stripy old hide, his work to decree
the rise of a newly birthed sun – his arm
and his song are the tools of God! See
the Tallyman master his charms.

Jenny Twig Dances

Shadows in the tree with the tinsel strand
and the spice of woods: somebody watches
the women by the fire – one is asleep
and the other mesmerized by mimes in the flame.

When the log explodes she screams: her limbs
hug to her head to hide her face
from charcoal embers, their indolent flush
setting smoulders as they speckle the carpet.

"That was a shock, and no mistake! Are you
okay, old woman? Gran? You're fast asleep,
and snoring soon, no doubt. This night, it creeps
like a cat, no noise; our bedtime's long overdue."

And the other who watches unwinds; a finger
peels from the bark, a palm, a wrist;
a shoulder of splinters splits from the bough;
from a gnarl, the brow; from a knot, the eye.

"Did you hear a noise, behind us, Gran? A rat?
There's something going on – is someone here?
This room's got ghosts, I swear, a pinch of queer,
of not quite right ... oh Jesus wept – what's that?"

She steps from the tree, the tethering ribbons
of rind unharnessed. She inhales, lets air
unfurl the cellulose sacs of her lungs.
She does not smile as she starts her dance.

"You've got to be kidding! This is a joke, unreal!
There's no such thing as ghosts, just fear and dread."

Where callus toes tap on the floor:
a scent of woodlands slumbered in winter.

"Yet you're not real – you're hollowed like a sneeze
of germs – don't touch me! Leave us be! Be still!"

Limber digits dock to the wall:
a creak of breeze caught in the briar.

"Don't hurt my Gran, please don't! Kill me instead!
It's me that's bad, not her; don't take her, please!"

Through mortar, buds burgeon and green:
a shiver of mist shawling the trees –
and Jenny Twig untwists the room
and screams, and sings; stretches and blooms.

Dormant

A web of white water
nets round the buds
of a sycamore, brown
bones in the sky.

Starched ivy leaves
hide the striped husk
of a wasp queen, legs
bracelet the stalk.

Slow snores condense
on parchment bracken,
spine twined fronds
wrapping the hedgehog.

Starlings claw-clung
to the aspen's branch,
their low bickers shiver
the swathing mist.

Bulbs nestle in soil and wait,
a spring of leaves prepared
for the releasing heat
of a newborn sun.

Lost

"I've lost my walls! The room has gone along
with heat and ceilings, leaves and mud where once
I had a floor – I've lost the walls! She danced
with flames – a freak with bark for bones – that's wrong:
I'm seeing things awry; I'm dosed on pills
like sweets at Christmas. Close my eyes and reach
my arms out wide and wait until I touch
the walls with fingertips – oh shit, I'm ill!
My walls have gone: these trees – exist? But how
can this be happening? The air's so cold,
the earth – it's hard like concrete frost, the mist
– it glows? Look up! The moon's still there, still proud
and full. So where's the house? No roof to hold
the night away; my wall's are gone: I'm lost!"

Hunt

Beneath the moil of muddied pelts
a bloody hock beats and strikes out;
tremors stammer the spattered hoof
which stills, and falls. A feral man
strides through the pack, plucking the dogs
away from their kill by kicks and growls
to slide his flint through sinews, let free
blood from the neck – a newsprung brook
bustles downhill. He barks a command
at the bickering hounds, their hackles bristled
as they fight for the right to feast on offal.

He tugs and straps the stag with twine,
drags the carcass from its couch of brambles
to pull it uphill, the pinioned hooves
sketching a line through the litter and sod.
It was a great stag, its grey muzzle
scarred with the thrusts of thrashing antlers
through many ruts. A muddied tongue
slugs over leaves; the last of its spoor
beads the tousled baton of its tail.

A snick of a twig stops all activity ...

In moments men are moving, running.
They loop in lines through larch and aspen
to track the source of the sound in the copse.
Dogs snout through ferns, snuffle and forage
for a scent of intruder: terror; escape!

When a puppy trips and pitches at her feet
she screams – a snarl; a sprint; a leap!

*Danger! Danger! Dogs on the loose!
Teeth on the throat! Tearing and ripping!*

And the girl is caught in the grasp of a man,
pinched in his biceps, a blade at her neck.

The Meadow

The Song of the Sea and the Hill

"I loved you once, my sea, my sea,
your shaping waves, your gouging stones.
You cut my cliffs and mined my bones –
I loved you once, my sea, my sea."

"We played for a time, my hill, my hill,
I took your chinks and built a beach,
a stage for us to meld and reach –
we played for a time, my hill, my hill."

"I loved you once, my sea, my sea.
We prospered well, your storms, my rocks,
the flotsam kelp that smoothed our shocks –
I loved you once, my sea, my sea."

"We played for a time, my hill, my hill,
and birthed a child of soil and salts,
a maze of love to soothe our faults –
we played for a time, my hill, my hill."

"I loved you once, my sea, my sea,
but people came with ditches, walls,
they drained our child and built their halls –
I loved you once, my sea, my sea."

"We played for a while, my hill, my hill,
and soon enough we'll play again:
I'll breach their walls, wipe out their stain –
we'll play once more, my hill, my hill."

"I loved you once, my sea, my sea,
and soon enough we'll love once more:
we'll save our child and heal her sores –
we'll love again, my sea, my sea."

The Fruit of the Wood

They watch the mess of the midnight fair
as they weave their song, reciting the words
of the land and the sea. Linked by fingers,
the brother and sister sing from a boulder
that acts as their stage – a stirrup of granite
embedded in chalk. The boy is the sea,
his hair the weed that winnows the brine;
the girl is the land, the green of her skin
the grassy pastures that patchwork the Downs.

*"... we'll save our child and heal her sores –
we'll love again, my sea, my sea."*

A flurry of clapping concludes their turn.
He kisses her cheek; she kicks his shin
and together they leap from the ledge of the set.
The gathered engulf them: a gossip of shapes
indulging in dance, in drama and more
caught on the meadow clung to the hill.

Hearing the horns of the hunters' return,
the jaden siblings jostle their way
through legs and hips, a hustle, a push;
in spurts they clamber, splicing the crowds
in a roil of rebukes to reach the knoll
where the queen of the feast fashions her court.
They see her face the feral men,
witness the piling of plunder before her –
lifeless prizes plucked from the woods.

The Queen Greets her Wild Hunt

"Come, my ferals! Bring me your gifts and set them
here for all to see: a resplendant bounty –
starlings, squirrels, venison too; enough for
all our compulsions!

"Wily hunters, Woden's own warband, welcome!
Rest among us now, for your work is finished:
cleanse your faces; feast and carouse; indulge in
all your compulsions!

"Loose the dogs to play in our moonstruck meadow.
Hard they've worked this night and deserve their freedom:
howl and snarl and harry the souls who worship
all their compulsions!

"Horsa, Lord, for you I have many pleasures –
fetch him mead and meat and the ease of music!
Come, my lover, sit by my side; discover
all my compulsions!"

A Girl in Strange Company, Afraid

"Too much; too much! This fever strikes too hard
to be a dream: a nightmare rather, come
to test my head; who are you people strung
about this hill? A cult of madness scarred
by life and hope that leads you here to meet
in secret? Like a club of losers left
to dress in costumes, bows and knives, bereft
of families and friends and incomplete –

"and yet she shines like summer caught in hail,
and white, so white her skin and gold her hair
and black her eyes and thin, so thin her face;
she looks at me and I feel – vile, a snail
beneath a glitter model's heel – how dare
I stare at her unbowed? What is this place?"

Time Everlastin'

Silence in the glade: a slant of breeze
lifts through the twigs of the leafless trees.

"It's Time Everlastin' – you know of this place?
It settles across old Lym Hill in its grace
when Christmastide falls on the fulsome oak moon
and dancing becomes our delight and our doom."

He slumps in his cups, a crack of a smile
loose on the leather of his lemon face.

"Come sit beside me and I'll weave you a tale
of night never-over, of endless wassail;
of journeys unfinished, of glammers and glooms –
of folks left abandoned by God to these fumes."

She cannot move. A mock of a scream
falters in her throat, throttling her breath.

"I know of a song that can set out the truth
of why we've been caught in the nets of the youth
who came from the east with a curse on his hands
to build a new kingdom in our blessed lands."

Her knees unhinge and hit the earth:
a stump of flint furrows her cheek.

The Queen's Fair

Voices in the Dark

"As God is my witness, you'll not disagree,
my words took her down like an axe to a tree!
And yet I said nothing to cause such a crime –
perhaps she has come here before her due time?"

"Now hush, old man, and bring her here.
Let's take a look-see at her state:
there's no harm done, just scrapes and cuts
and mud to hide her pretty face
and dressed in cloth as thin as smoke –
She'll catch her death without a shawl!"

"You know we're beyond the soft clutch of the tomb,
stuck here on this hill where no chill can presume
to stop a heart beating or steal the last scrape
of air to the lungs – there's no death to escape."

"You speak the truth, my smuggling friend,
though still the frozen earth can burn
and torture flesh left free of wool
or fur or cotton – why should I
not worry? Look at her: All bones
and skin – no fat to keep her warm."

"You worry too much, Mistress May, I declare!
She's here for a purpose; this much I would swear.
I look as you tell me, and what I can see
is someone who's been here before, you'd agree?"

"She seems familiar, this is true
– the curve of cheek, the golden hair –
as if that woman sent to bleed
upon his knife not long ago
returns restored from sacrifice;
a sign of change to come, perhaps?"

"It's said that the women of Dymchurch can peer
through hearthstones and whetstones and know what the year
will bring to their doorsteps and tables: what fate
awaits this poor child – is it fearsome, or great?"

"Such nonsense ill becomes you, man!
Now hush, she's rousing. Go and find
some food for her, a bowl of broth
and bread, and water too. Be quick!
You're due to entertain the fair
with shanty tales: that much I know!"

Buda Tiger

She sprawls on a paddock of spangle grass
enclosed by a wicker of wind-sculpted trees
that stencil against a grim, pearlescent
spelter of clouds sponging the light
from the chill curve of an enchanted moon.

"Tonight is a time for a story or two,
a song and a dance and a drink – or a few!
There's many a legend that I could relate:
of wreckers and pirates; of lovers and fools
of Owlmen and Excisemen keen to debate
the rights and the wrongs of a tax on our wool;
– but rather I'm minded to sing an old yarn
of Buda, the Tiger at Dawn.

A thicket of shanks and thighs surrounds her:
a collision of people in lines and knots
snatching at hearsays and snagging at leers
as they strut the meadow. A mire fringes
the dolmen slab where the smuggler chants.

"From chaos she pounced like a stripe of despair,
the pet of Lord Shiva Destroyer I swear.
Her paddock was jungle and mountain and plain;
her jaws were the jangle and rattle of hurt –
for when she went hunting none could restrain
the beast from her progress and none could divert
her claws from their throat: upon tides of slick gore
came Buda, great Tiger of War."

She cannot cry, or call for help:
her throat is as dry as the thistle heads
anchored to their stalks by ice and time
and the loss of light; she lets her tongue
poke at her lip, peeling coldsores.

The story is nonsense to her numbed ears:
she remembers a room dismembered by the roots
and buds and saps and sighs and chants
of an impossible woman woven from bark;
she remembers dogs dragging at her flesh.

"'A saviour we need,' cried the people, 'a leader
of courage and skill beyond measure to speed her
demise. For the Lord has deserted our side:
he rides on her back, a destroyer of life
and love and all hope and desire. We hide
and still she uncovers our havens – this strife
must stop! Will not one of us stand up and kill
old Buda, dire Tiger of ills?'"

A long shape blocks the blur of her sight:
He stands so tall, this summit of a man,
with clothes that talk of class and money
and learning hewn from the halls and greens
of a distant city with dreamy spires.

The Tall Gentleman

"If I may say, you have the look of one
who's newly come to our cursed realm.
Is this not what you prayed for? No, it seems
you've found confusions, madness – horrors spun
beyond uncharted hells: it will not stop!"

"I cannot breathe, and yet as seconds pass me by
my chest expands and air moves into me

– and out again – my lungs are devotees
of habit: in and out they go, but why?"

"What do you know of ghosts? Your disbelief
is noted, child, and yet that's what we are!
Some say that death is final, we collapse
oblivious at that last lunge for air,
and once we breathe no more there is no more:
a sleep so deep that none can wake again,
an oubliette of bones and rotting flesh
is all that marks our time upon this world –

"if only it were true: such happiness
is not for us unfortunates to know."

"I'm dead. I must be dead: my breath is ice;
I sit on muddied ice and ice encrusts
each stalk of grass ... are you dead too? I trust
nothing. Not ears or nose or fingers. Eyes?"

"How did I die? I choked upon a bean –
a stupid end for one as great as me!
And yes, I know we breathe: the mists exhaled
are part of where we are, and hunger too."

"They lie to me. They tell me I'm outside
barefoot and dressed for bed and yet I know
I'm dead – or knocked out cold by robbers, thieves –"

"I've not yet told you where we are! Not Hell,
my child, for devils do not dance around
our roast pit fires with tridents in their hands.
And though I know some folk with tails, they are
not forked, and both their feet have heels and toes –"

"– perhaps I'm mad, not dead. I'm still inside
the house, hallucinating nightmares. So ...
what must I do to break apart these reves?"

Below the Meadow

Her shoulders sag as she shambles behind
the besuited man, her step as heavy
as her dazed thoughts – a thicket of words
and clauses chained into a chant for her loss.

He leads her across the cup of the glade
and down towards a denser patch
of gorse and bracken gathered between
a swatch of leafless silhouette trees.

"I once believed that after death we must
return to God: slough off our skins and lift
our souls to bask in love – and all was good,
just like the diver rising up to breach
the waves, to twist apart his copper head
and dump the weights that hold his feet and chest
to breathe the air of Heaven! He is saved!
Was that your plan, my child, to go back home?"

What was once white now withers on the spit,
his bushy antlers broken by the flames –
a spatchcocked king spun on his bar
by weasel-dogs dizzy in their wheel.

A brace of cauldrons as big as a feast,
their bases buried in a bank of embers;
the steams from the pots purl together
like a tablecloth hung from the highest twigs.

"This is our prison, child, for we are trapped
within the mists of this foul hill, where time
has stopped. There is no day, just night and chill,
where trees will stretch their limbs but cannot bud.
No flowers come to bloom in these cold lawns,
and all that ever lights our path is that
repulsive moon! It stalks our star-tacked sky –
its circle never wanes, or dims, or fails."

Some children scream as they charge through ferns
and come to a halt at the hem of the pit.
In the skittering light their skins seem painted
in a camouflage swirl: one smiles at her

... and from somewhere inside her she discovers a ghost
of a grin: a movement of muscles across
the slack of her cheek; a charm of hope
that arrives unannounced, nervous and fresh.

The Eternals Speak:

"We know of you"

"... the chosen one!"

"A moonlight skin
that sheathes her bones"

"... her loamy bones!"

"The golden eyes
which watch the world"

"... and scry for gifts!"

"A hand that spills
the ruby juice"

"... she wakes the sun!"

"The chosen one
has come to play"

"... come play with us!"

"Your blade won't sip
our tasty sap"

"... she can't catch us!"

"She'll fail the test:
we'll stick her head"

"... on Hunter's shaft!"

"Her skull will crack,
her eyes will pop"

"... we'll scry her breath!"

"And then the weeds
will claim her bones"

"... poor pikey girl!"

"We know of you!"

Cold Rage

The stone that strikes the spiteful child
is sharp, a flint that flies from her hand
to cut his crown. From the crease of the wound

a bead of sap swells and congeals
then ruptures its sphere; rivulets gel
across his forehead. His cry is harsh
and sudden: a splinter, a snap of bough
trapped and twisted and torn from its stock.

The wealth of wails weakens her fear.
She turns her back on the baffling tableau:
ignore the man and his mock philosophies;
ignore the boy with his bloodless cuts.
Her steps move her from the spitting meats,
the foggy broths in their ferrous cauldrons.
She limps towards the line of the wood,
to the hug of brackens that hide her from bedlam.

Dayfall

Stars on the Water

The pool is a portrait: it captures the sky.
She reaches to stroke the stars in its depths
and fractures the world with her hand. Waves drive
and pull on the portrait that captured the sky,
a hundred new galaxies formed as they strive
to settle their bulks, to flatten their steps,
to pool a new portrait and capture the sky:
She reaches to stroke the stars in the depths.

The Peggy

A sash of moss musters around
a cobble of rock. Cables of ivy
and briers clamber about the chalk,
hounding the stream to its hidden source.
Hazels and beeches branch overhead
where a harvest of ribbons and ripened shoes
hang, silently siphoning dampness
from the air. She sits and stares at the pool.
She regards nothing while noticing shapes
between the leaves layering the base

of the pond: a brooch; a pin – a bone?
The halfshapes of offerings hidden in the ooze.

The water slumbers in a slump in the hill:
Old Peggy's Pool. Paintstrokes of salmon
cirrus announce the night's farewell,
arousing the Peggy, who rattles its fingers
across the reeds. It captures a grub
with a snap of its tongue. Something touches
its viscous roof; the red of an eye
appears in its welkin. The Peggy startles,
starts dancing a defence: a dart past the rock;
some arcs in the muds; an etch of patterns
that eddy and whirl. As the waters foul
its form disappears ... the Peggy is gone.

The Glamour in the Depths

Look at the mist: it curls around
a steepled church, its fingers pick
at mortars, at stones – its aim to break down,
dismember, detach and dissolve each brick.
Look at the mist as it slowly slicks
the chapel in beadings and moistures unwound
from its essence, its echo heart: it drowns
the lands around in brine so quick
that even to stare is to perish. See
the magical mist, so thick.

Look at the soldiers tattered and scorned,
lost from their time to a hollow frontier.
They prey to a godling capped in thorns
and wrapped in soot and peeled veneers.
Look at the soldiers, so thin and severe:
they scratch at the earth to harvest corms,
and roots, sere beans in pods reborn
as the Tallyman's mists re-cohere
on each unholy third night. See
the soldiers ensnared by their fears.

Look at the woman: she kneels on a bench.
Her mustard hair sweeps down in locks,
her golden eyes stare up to clench
the stars in her mind, unwinding clock.
Look at the woman catch at her smock –
her fingers whiten: her head is wrenched

backwards to arch her neck; a drench
of scarlet fountain spurts in shocks
and dribs and streams and clots. See
the woman collapse from the block.

False Dawn

She runs like the dogs, digging her hands
deep within tussocks as she tugs herself forward.

"I am not mad, and this is not a dream.
The world's not right tonight, no doubt of that,
but I cannot – will not – accept the facts
my eyes report: lies! Lies and schemes
to make me think I've gone insane. Stop, words!"

She runs like the stag, each step a bound
surging her up to the summit line.

"I know these chalks and flints, my soils – they must
hug the Marshlands, my home is there ... so trust
what you know, not what you've seen, or felt, or heard."

She runs like a woman wounded, exhausted,
the limp of her limbs lurching her higher.

"I am not mad, and this is not a dream.
Look! Just a few more steps and then I'll hit
the top; I'll see the Marsh, the sun half-sliced
by the sea and Dungeness and this will seem –"

She runs ... and then she runs no more.
A shaft of light shatters on her face:

"– a nightmare terror, soon forgotten. Grit
your teeth and push, push, push for your life!"

the coral hues of a Christmas dawn
and she falls, fractures, fissions, dissolves

and sinks into the soil – a silhouette, a shadow,
a space, a moment, a memory ... gone.

Resurrection

Life on the Hill

"Wake up! Wake up! We 'as to move
before the dogs do 'unt –
they'll take us down like rats out 'ere
an' rip us limb from joint!"

There's snow on the hill: sprinkles of chill
trapped by the blades of tufted grass
which knobble the chalk. A numbness blankets
the child-woman's limbs: her lungs gulp at
the rising miasma; ribbons of spittle
spool from the side of her salty lips
to frost on the earth. Her eyes are solid –
she cannot see. Her sight refuses
to start its magic, its meagre attempt
to sort some points of purposeless light
into an image, an instance of landscape,
burns a poker of pain through her head.

"Wake up! Wake up! You 'as to move!
We 'as to go to church!
The hunt won't follow us in there
within its stony arch."

Something touches: a tremor of fire
levels a path along her nerves,
plucking her skin, pinscrapes and echoes
of heartbeat pulses prick at her bones
to flex and brace. Her fulsome bladder
cajoles her joints to jerk and crack.
A form is before her – the face of a boy
fresh to the stubble that stipples his chin.

"Wake up! Wake up! We 'as to go
before the light do fail!
The church is just across this ground –
no more than 'alf a mile."

Slowly she rouses, stretches her legs
and works her hip away from the hill.
A thirst from the crypt catches her throat.
On her knees, she spots a splint of ice:
she lowers her head level with the soil
and licks at the frosts that fruit on the leaves.

Between the Flints

An amber chain links
her loops around the roots
of mugwort, each pipe leg
frozen in its shape by ice.

Endless knots of thread worms
dodge the clutch of frost
and sleep; they quilt a blanket
of clays beneath the sharp lawn.

The saucer torus hidden within
an emerald sheen stagnates
like the last of its autumn cups:
no faries shall dance in this ring.

A scrape tight in the hill; fur
wraps the flesh of the hare, his ears
radar alert as he rests mid-twitch
dreaming of madness, and stoat.

The rarest of down flowers
hides its lures in layers
of fat, white leaves. Soon
a new sun will spire its delight.

Haven

The mists recall the clots of a shape.
As the boy leads her to the bones of a church
its stones coalesce, their layers stretching
to ferment the steeple. A statue of the Christ
sprouts and stiffens; some scraps of glass
latch in a weave of lead and frame.

A brace of doors drape in their arch
as the resurrection reaches its peak:
each plank is patched with puckers of moss
and rusted hinges are hammered with nails
to marry them to stone – a stubborn portal
closed on the world. He whistles a signal ...

the postern gate grates and swings back;
a hand beckons: hurry; come in!

The Lord's Corporal

"My God, my God, look at me! Why have You deserted me? Dear God, I shout at the loss of the light, but You choose not to hear; and in the fog of this freezing night I take no rest. My folks strapped their hope to You; they trusted You, and truly You relieved them! They called to You, heaped campfire ash into their mouths and You held them, drilled them to love! They put their trust in You that everything can be just, and were not court-martialled. But as for me

"I am a worm in the embers, no man; a very jest of a soldier, an outcast deserted in this hell in Kent. The folks who fuck in the woods see me, laugh at me in scorn; they pucker their lips in a pantomime of lust, and shake their clocksprung heads, saying: "He trusted in the Lord, that He would deliver him; let Him deliver him, if He will have him!" But You are the general who took my hand and pulled me out of my mother's bleeding womb; You were my first sight when still I dangled from my mother's ropey breasts. I have been press-ganged by You since that first rattling breath. My God

"do not leave me, for trouble beseiges me, and no one runs to help me. The sheep on the hill surround me; fat Romney ewes smother me with their rank fleeces, dung strung from their arses. They gape at me, cud in their mouths, a mummer's play of a prowling, roaring lion's pride. I am poured out like water; my heart in the cavity of my chest is banging like a musket shot. For the devil's dogs are tracking me, and Satan's legions lay down fire around me. They part my uniform among them, and cast lots for my regimental buttons. But

"do not stray, my Lord; You are my succour, quickmarch your power to relieve me! Deliver my soul from the bayonet, my dreams from the teeth of the dogs. Save me from the sheep-lion's mouth; I will scream Your Name to my brothers in the battle trenches; in the midst of the conflagration will I praise You. Oh praise the Lord! For You have not despised nor abhorred the low estate of the infantry; You have not hidden Your face from them; but when they called to You, You heard them. All

"the armies of the world shall turn to Him; and all the folks of the lands that mellow under the bright sunlight shall worship Him. For the kingdom is the Lord's, and He is the Moderator among the nations! All those who go down into the dust shall kneel before Him; the sons of my sons shall serve Him: they shall be bound to His grace for centuries. They shall come, and shall declare His righteousness to generations not yet born, whom the Lord has made!"

At the Foot of the Cross

Wiping the spit from the side of his mouth,
the faith-full soldier stares at a fire
crackling in the apse of the empty hall.

Remnants of a uniform yoke his shoulders,
its pigments masked by a mantle of dirt;
a chevron tatters from a shoddy sleeve.

"It's time to eat; you have to eat.
You cannot sing His praises whilst
you starve. The moon is in the east!"

Some wooden pews pile in the corner,
their simple carvings a source of tinder
for heat and light. A ligament of smoke

caresses a body broken on a cross.
Curls of old paint peel from the Christ
to reveal its grains and varicose knots.

"The moon is in the east. We need
to eat. We have to harvest roots,
collect the seed and rake the soil."

The other soldier stands a shoulder
taller than the first, his tatter as thin
as his limb joints. She jolts at his words:

his sudden appearance unexpected like
a skull in the gloom – yet his grin is real,
a supportive smile that signals trust.

"No time for Jesus, he can wait
a few more hours. We need to work –
The Lord will forgive those who toil!"

A Song for the Harvest

"Old Grandad Time, 'e's bugged off
an' left us in a mess!
The lack of sunshine leaves me cold
an' scared, I must confess.
There's magic 'ere, an' witches too
an' packs of demon dogs,
but none of 'em will get me down –

no, none of 'em will get me down –
none of 'em will get me down
while I goes turnin' sods!

"Old Boney's army's disappeared –
they never turned up 'ere;
an' Blighty's safe from invasion
for which I gives a cheer.
I wishes I could go 'ome now
'cus Corporal's gone all mad,
but I won't let 'im get me down –
no, I won't let 'im get me down –
I won't let 'im get me down
while I goes rakin' mud!

"We've got a magic garden 'ere:
I digs up spuds and roots
an' plucks dry beans from spindle pods
that pops under me boots.
The work is 'ard, it breaks me back:
I 'as to dig with spoons,
but I won't let it get me down –
no, I won't let it get me down –
I won't let it get me down
while I sings me silly tune!

"An' once we gets the crops to church
our Bob will make a stew
an' add some 'erbs an' salt an' stuff
for sharin' round the crew.
It's tasteless grub, more ditchwater,
it barely swells our guts,
but we won't let it get us down –
no, we won't let it get us down –
we won't let it get us down
'cus we's the fighting Buffs!

"An' when we's done old Corporal comes
an' says some Holy Words
an' three night's soon the crops is back
all ripe like donkey turds!
Then on me knees I's back again
a-harvestin' the food,
but I won't let it get me down –
no, I won't let it get me down –
I won't let it get me down
beneath this cruel old moon!

"So come on, wench, and 'elp us out –
the work'll do you good –
an' then you'll share a General's feast
together with our crew.
We'll sing some songs of 'arvestin'
whilst diggin' up the roots:
an' we won't stop until it's done –
no, we won't stop until it's done –
we won't stop until it's done:
not while I's got me boots!"

The Power of Names

Javelins of frost jemmy between
the flints and chalks that form the soil
of the harrowed field. Hammering at clods
with his battered ladle the lad harvests
a treasury of roots – a turnip, a carrot.

"You have a name, my girl? We've not
had time to greet you properly –
the boy here has no manners, see,
and it ain't right to treat a guest
with disrespect. The lowest whore
will have a name (though not her own
most likely, truth be told). So who
are you? Your folks? It's good to know
these details now, before we eat."

The older soldier stands at her elbow;
he picks a twist of peas from their vine.
His eyes are open, an itch of a smile
twitching the lines that track past scabs
and under the sideburns scraped to his jaw.

"They're strange things, names. A name can make
or break a man without a care
to character or service, see?
Some names are good: they carry weight
and open doors, they sniff out chance.
But other names, they bring bad luck –
unclean, unfit for friendship, yes?
Tell us your name, and maybe we
can praise it to God and make it hale!"

She shakes her head and shivers. She has
a name, she knows it, but now she comes

to say it – no sound escapes her mouth.
Instead her hand squeezes a husk:
a grizzled bean bounces to the ground.

Vegetable Stew

"Hear my words, my Lord, the voice of my rally: to You I pray – even though morning has deserted me, still You shall hear my voice! No evil shall live with You, nor will the deserters stand in Your sight. March me, Lord, to righteousness despite my enemies; make Your route straight before my boots. For the folk of the woods hate faithfulness; they worship wickedness; they welcome the tomb; they service each other with their tongues. Decimate them, my Lord! Cast them beyond Hell for their disloyalty; for they have mutinied against You! But let us who serve You rejoice: let us parade for joy, because You, great Lord, will bless the righteous regiments; will bless our colours and shield us!"

The smell of the broth snatches at her throat.
The seeker of names smiles as he takes
a woody trencher, warped, yet cleaner
than others in the pile. He puddles a slew
of swelted roots at the centre of the plate.

"I sought orders from my Lord, and He heard me. When the daylight deserted me, I screamed in madness. I remembered the Lord, complained, and the mists overwhelmed me, shook me to my boots. I lost command of my voice! I tried to remember the old stories, the songs of my heart – had my Lord cast me from sanity forever? Where was my Lord in the chain of command? Why was my Lord's mercy, His grace, denied me? I said to my crew: this is the time for an old soldier to beg for coppers, to sleep in the gutter, his victories gone from history; but I shall ...

She grabs it thoughtlessly, the growls from her belly
the loudest sound she has released since waking.
He smirks askance as he serves another
smaller platter for the soily boy,
and a third for the corporal. A thread of spit
dribbles from her lip as she drops to her haunch;
a steaming root roasts her fingertips
– a telling signal: swallow with care.

"... remember my Lord in all His great works, and how I fought the heathen Bonaparte in His honour, and the King's. For there is no God as great as England's God! He is the Lord who does wonders, who will redeem us, the children of proud Britannia and gruff John Bull! And

then the clouds gathered and blocked the light of that idolatorous moon. The Lord's arrows poured from the clouds, and his thunderous voice echoed from the hills to the Heavens. Lightning brightened and burned the mists: the very chalk shook and the folk of the wood gibbered like monkeys in fear. My Lord came to tend us, His flock, and led us to this, His temple! His glory is revealed and we must praise Him!"

Once she has met the demands of her belly
she slows her pace, practices chewing.
The soldiers ignore her: they sit in a huddle
close to the fire, their faces turned,
beguiled by their leader's litany of faith.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures: He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul: He drills me in the paths of righteousness! Even as I march through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for He is with me; and comforts me! He built me a shelter before my eyes in the presence of my enemies: now I know goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of my Lord forever!"

The Paths of the Dead

Caught in a Hug of Madness

"I do not know you people: soldiers come to life from history books, I think, and yet you found me, fed me. Kindness, or ... a threat perhaps, for something doesn't fit. This slum of a church – I knew this place before it congealed. These stones feel hard and real and safe inside: ruins they were, their roofless pillars wide to catch the sun and rain. What magic healed its broken state – does your belief in God build miracles from mists? Oh no. No! Some prayers to a wood statue glued to a cross cannot explain this mess, it rides roughshod through every thing I know. No crop can grow so quick ... this is a lie, and I'm still lost!"

The Oracle

From the church the soldier chooses a track
that leads them down; they dip between
strands of briar-cane suturing the cliffs.

"Now most who come don't care to think
of this as real: it scares them, see?
So when the magic comes to them
they panic, scream and run away
before their telling's done and then
the telling's damaged, yes? They spin
and break their necks, or otherwise
go stark mad like our corporal did."

No animals call; the coiling mists
dampen all sounds and dapple outlines
in spackle moonshine, smothering shapes.

"It's dangerous, this oracle;
you have to treat it with respect
and take a mind to learn from what
it sets before your eyes and ears.
Now walk ahead and go to where
the mists are thickest, wound around
the fortune post – step bravely, child:
you'll know when you've discovered it."

At last the path levels to a ridge
of ancient cliff, its crumble smoothed
by egg-round hillocks of hard-edged grasses.

"Don't lie to it: the oracle
will know; it gives no mercy – fibs
will help it rip your mind away,
just like our lad lost his! You'll know
the rhymes to chant the magic, see,
it lays them in your head. Except
your name: that comes from you, and must
be true – for names have power, yes!"

The Chant of Summoning

"Each step I take moves me from night to day;
I know that I must learn of night and day.

"This hill imprisons me – my heart has fled;
I see only ice: it churns night and day.

"What greater gift can these cold mists give me?
Knowledge of how to burn this night to day.

"I never found my love, though I touched his shape;
mistrust has been my friend: spurn night for day.

"An old sheep's skull, some ribbons, beads and nails;
this unloved garbage returns night to day?

"My name is Snowdrop, born from love now lost;
I beg of you: adjourn this night, make day!"

Ghost

What cries so loud beyond these mists that hold
me tight? It hints at blood, a birthing wail;
my eyes are lost to life and love, so cold.

A memory of face I see, a mould
that mirrors what I was: full warm, yet frail.
What cries so loud beyond this misty hold?

A child he gave to me, a waif to scold
my face to wretched wrinkles, bastard male:
my eyes are lost to life and love, so cold.

And yet she was my wealth, a love foretold;
our unconditioned joy could never fail ...
what cries so loud beyond this misty hold?

He came again one Christmas time, a fold
of needs – he fought for me, to no avail.
My eyes are lost to life and love, so cold.

A fog can be a jail, and yet enfold
a key for our release: a knife; a gale.
What cries so loud beyond these mists that hold?
My eyes are lost to life and love, so cold.

Grief for the Dead

Her limbs make a nest of supports round her chest;
her face is cemented. Tears grout the cracks

as she rocks to the shuddering cramps that molest
her limbs, shake the nest of supports round her chest
now heaving, rake down the air to her breast
and release in a whistle of snot. She restacks
her limbs, makes a nest of supports round her chest,
her face. Cerement tears grout her cracks.

Cold Jack

A flash in the fog; the flare of an eye
so light in hue it leaches ice,
a pair of points piercing the night ...

Jack is on the hunt for hints of food.
His snout ferrets through frosting grass
for beetles, worms, the wine of a berry
lost in the roots. The rigorous search
succeeds when Jack snags a nut husk:

he claws the seed cleanly from the sod
and chases it across the chalk, stops it
with his berg snout, snatches his teeth
on the chipped prize, chews and swallows.

And the fox sits, flaring his brush
to cover his paws in its plume of fur.
He cocks his head to catch any sound,
noses at the air for echoes of tuck.

An apron of frost infuses the ground;
surrounds the form of the fox in white.

A hic of a moan hinges Jack's ears –
a novel sound: he scans around
hillocks and tufts to detect the source,
pins it within a patch of deep murk.

He stands and shakes, the snow in his pelt
spraying the tussocks. He takes a careful
pawstep closer to the curling smoke
alert for dangers, for dogs and men.

A human, collapsed – the huffs of its creels
are muffled in limbs. He moves closer,
eager to sniff it for snatches of grub ...

it jerks its head up just as he inches
too near to escape! Their stares married,
he yelps a crystal cloud in its face.

The Glamour in the Hoar

Look at the skull: the ribbons that plat
down from the bone; the mane of a horse
now stuck on a pole, now part of an act
to teach the peasants the holy lore.
Look at the skull: its eyes restored
with painted balls; its black teeth stacked
around the jaw like shovels; its hat
a wreath of straw and weeds torn
from the banks of the harvest fields. See
the clack-skulled Hobby Horse.

Look at the head of the Tallyman, sat
on his pelt of tiger stripes; the course
of millennia scratched on his face in tracts
of weals and folds circling his jaw.
Look at the head of the man who forced
the woman in white to kneel, then tracked
his knife across her throat; who cracked
her veins to feed a sun reborn
in the morning of the new year. See
the Tallyman, set on his course.

Look at this face – a man of clay:
he moistens his lips with his muddy tongue
and whistles a tune, a seductive play
of strokes and frictions and tensions unstrung.
Look at this face, the eyes now stung
with pain, with a grief so deep it lays
a net of cracks in his cheeks, it splays
his nostrils. He dreads your touch: the young
will use him, shape him. Kill him. See
the man with a mud-spun tongue.

Black Hound

Having herded a huddle of ghosts
to the hidden shore, the Shuck unwinds.
She pads in circles, smoothing rushes
and matting grasses to make a nest

... and settles down, a slumber of shadows
above the knaps of abandoned flints
– elfshot arrowheads, adze and scraper.
She gnaws at her claws; nibble and preen.

A spur of frost stabs at her memory:
a chill-full fox with a filligree pelt,
his tail a bloom of tinkling icicles
to stake a wraith to the solid earth.

Frets of spittle spiral from her fangs
as she hikes her snout to the star-clad heavens
to snuffle at swirls in the silent night
– her purpose is primeval: protect the dead.

A yelp, a sneeze; a scream. Yammers
hammer across the curve of the hill.
She spots a limb slapping at mist:
the motion sparks her to spring and charge.

She levers her legs, each lunge bringing her
closer to the threat, clattering rocks
and gouts of chalk as she gathers speed,
powering to pounce at the perilous couple.

Ahead is the fox, ephemeral spawn,
its ices cloaking a creature in pain:
a woman snared in a witter of spirits
hurtfully summoned by the seething mists.

And now she sprints, a spine of black
retributions bounding towards
the tattering fogs: she tenses and leaps ...

"Omnis enim locus ac spatium, quod inane vocamus,
per medium, per non medium, concedere debet
aeque ponderibus, motus qua cumque feruntur."

... and her being unbinds – a bludgeon of words
streams through her ears to echo her skull ...

"Nec quisquam locus est, quo corpora cum venerunt,
ponderis amissa vi possint stare in inani;
nec quod inane autem est ulli subsistere debet,
quin, sua quod natura petit, concedere pergat."

... she howls! She keens like a hoard of suns
spun to the ledge of the starless abyss
and ripped of their fires. She renders the cliff

beneath her feet to fragments as she scrabbles
to escape the chains of the chanted lines ...

"Haud igitur possunt tali ratione teneri
res in concilium medii cuppedine victae."

... she cannot fight! Her final bay
echoes against the girth of the moon
as she buckles and shreds,
breaks and dissolves.

Stutfall

Portus Lemanis

The ghosts of mussels garland the stumps
of salty logs that line the strand
of muds and chinks; Lemanis squats
like a tumbled drunk dunking its toes
in the channel waters, waiting to die.

Harbourside shops are shuttered, cloth
and tattered wood welting the structures –
nothing to sell. Nobody's home,
only some history hashed on a wall:
christiani ad leones, christianae ad lenones

A ship is tethered, its *antenna* broken
from the *malus* with *rudens* roping the parts
together in chaos, its *carina* muzzled
by the muds and the mists: no Mediterranean
sun shall ruffle its *rostrum* again.

A shiver catches across her shoulders –
her feet are naked, numb to the pain
of gravels and thorns. Her thoughts have halted:
she knows her eyes are eager to trick her
but this is a slander that smacks her lungs empty.

The Shaking Lad

"I saw you arrive: you ran down the hill
and stopped like a rock – your eyes
went wide and your face rebelled and your hands
took flight to your mouth like flies
to shit! Were you scared to see the sea spill
and flood over fields? I saw
it too, how the sea grew up and the lands
went salt in the mud, all torn."

He speaks in spurts, a stammering voice
from a chest of ribs and chiselled valleys
that shakes in fits. A shawl of wool
hides the hunger, the hollow dips
etching the bones in his elbows, his knees.

"I dreamed that I saw a wall, how it stopped
the sea from the fields, a road
to town on its top. I think there were sheep
and horses and cows, and toads
in ditches that drained the fields; and crops
of cabbages, turnips, beans.
I think that I dreamed of sunshine and heat –
but that was not true, so seems."

He takes her hand in his and smiles,
stretching his neck up, assuming command,
and walks her away from the wooden docks.

"I know that the sailor's home with some food:
some cockles and fish, some greens
he found on the hill just now – will you eat
with us? I can smell he means
to make a good feast, to break his bad mood.
He lives in the keep above
the port, where he keeps us safe, a retreat
from devils and ghosts and stuff."

The Moon on the Marsh

"I know the bones of this place! This tower's stones
were tumbled down the hill and sheep had sheared
the grass to a mat. I watched the ants who reared
their herds of greenfly here; I plucked the thrones
of bumblebees and wound them into crowns –
this place was safe, above the Marsh where I
could breathe the air and watch the seagulls fly
to the sea, free from care. And now it's drowned!

Gran's house is gone, dissolved by waves that chase
the moon's white path to France. No roads, no flush
of light from Dungeness, warning the ships:
beware! The Marsh is a snare, a bastard place.
It binds me down with memories that crush
me flat, and now it's drowned I'm caught in the slip ..."

Stutfall Tower

Within the walls the wind is trapped
by sails that hang from stone: the beams
that once supported them now pitch in the flames
of a fire lit on flagstones. He sits
on a wooden block whispering lyrics
in Latin – the language he lost when his shipmates
disappeared in the fogs. He flavours his broth
with Channel brine and chives from the hill.

The boy who shakes shuffles behind him,
his palsy sweating his skin in the light
of the flames that kiss the clay-spun pot.
She sees his muscles stutter beneath
his skin, each tremor travelling the length
of his beanpole arms to break in waves
on his yellow hands. She hugs her arms
across her chest, clears out her throat.

"You say the sea had swamped the Marsh, as if
it happens every night – how can this be?
Don't answer! Let me figure out the key
that holds this madness whole ... I saw the drift
of fog across the Levels turn to foams,
just as the scattered bricks became a church
while I approached it. Moon-spun swindles search
me out, perhaps, or mist-spawned frauds to hone
my eyes! And yet that dog was real, the fair
was real, the brat by the fire gushed green blood –
that's nonsense! Think! I watched the corporal turn
his sooty cross back to the Christ ... through prayer?
And always the mist, and moonlit skies: they flood
this hill with tall-tale tricks – that I could learn?"

And she smiles, her lips stretching apart
to frame her teeth – a fearsome effort,
long forgotten. She leans and grabs
his hand, its shake, and holds it fast.

On the Nature of Things

"Aulide quo pacto Triviai virginis aram
Iphianassai turparunt sanguine foede
ductores Danaum delecti, prima virorum."

The Captain recites as she sips at her broth:
His eyes are closed, recalling the words
and lines of a poet long ago dead –
to her, at least. She hears the Latin
in colours and shades crowding her skull;
flickering frames of figures and shapes
collected together to grapple cadences
into scenes of a film performed just for her.

"Cui simul infula virgineos circum data comptus
ex utraque pari malarum parte profusast,
et maestum simul ante aras adstare parentem
sensit et hunc propter ferrum celare ministros
aspectuque suo lacrimas effundere civis,
muta metu terram genibus summissa petebat."

A girl dressed in white walks to the temple.
Her hair is braided with beads, her steps
are purposeful, slow; there's priests before her
and behind, chanting a hymn to please
their Aphrodite. The hour has come
for the girl to honour the goddess, to ask
for victory in battle: she unveils, abases
herself on the steps that stack to the altar.

Beyond the girl, the gathering waits:
a goat is hauled by its halter towards
the slaughter space. A silent priest
brings the coppery blade he concealed
in his shawl out; its sharpened edge
looks dull in the rust of the rosy dawn.
Murmuring prayers, he moves the knife
to the veins in the neck of the victim. The goat
still chews its cud as a cord of blood
curls from the cut he carves in the skin.

"Nec miserae prodesse in tali tempore quibat,
quod patrio princeps donarat nomine regem;
nam sublata virum manibus tremibundaque ad aras
deductast, non ut sollemni more sacrorum
perfecto posset claro comitari Hymenaeo,

sed casta inceste nubendi tempore in ipso
hostia concideret mactatu maesta parentis,
exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur."

A mask of shock muddles across
the virgin's face. Her fingers grope
for the slit beneath the nub of her jaw.
Her eyes widen. A whisper of scarlet
dampens her lips. She levers her hips
and sits on the step, stares at the knife
and the man who holds it: 'how can this be?'
her forehead furrows in a final question.

"Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum."

The Gift of the Mist

"He saved me, you know. My brother was dead
already from ague, shook
his way to his grave – the Marsh's own Gift
they call that disease. I took
to bed soon enough with shivers that spread
my bowels with pains. And then
it stopped. I woke up to night, mind adrift,
alone on a hill somewhen."

A wall surrounds the roof's flat edge;
the flagstones rough on her feet. Her gaze
takes in the reach of the surreal tide
covering the Marshes. Her mouth is loose,
yet closed in a line, careful to let
not a single whisper or whimper escape.
Around her the mists mutate, rendering
collections of shapes: a shoe, a lamp,
the face of a woman whitewashed with age.

"He found me and brought me here to this space.
The tower and town – they're all
he knows, or at least accepts to be true.
He's Roman, I think. He calls
the ruins Lemanis, makes it his place,
defends it against all ghosts
and beasts and such fears. The last of his crew,
adrift on our Saxon coast."

She stares at the stars that stud the wheel
of the skies above the sunken lands –

something is happening to her: a thought
takes form in her mind, and forms in the shrouds
around the tower. She reaches and takes
the hilt of a knife in her hand, allows it
to cool and solidify, to craft its blade
to a line of sharpness. The line of her mouth
bends and tenses, bunching the tiredness
in her eyes to the edge of her anvil face.

Watching her learn, the lad backs away,
his foot-treads slow, unsteadily feeling
for the hollow of steps to safety below.

"He taught me that trick as well. But I'm not
too good at the learning. Still,
you probably need it more than I do.
Take care of it, though: your will
will need to be strong; the power can rot
your soul. It can snare your head
in nets that will send you mad and screw
you senseless, defenceless. Dead."

Decisions at Midnight

"What new horror is this? I see the knife
my Gran was using when I saw her last
here in my hand. What magic trick has passed
this blade through fogs to me? Maybe my life
is truly done and I'm in heaven, hell –
wherever. Maybe I'm a coma corpse
in hospital, my Gran beside me ... thoughts
have power here: I know this tower fell
before the Normans came, and yet it stands
as proud as men before the beer can choke
their pride away. Did him downstairs reform
it just by thinking it? I need a plan ...
if I can forge such sharpness, could I stroke
exits from nothing more than hope reborn?"

The Passion Players

Stirrings

A crystal of water
caught in an vice
of stalk and leaf
collapses, drips.

Cold granules
compacting roots
shift at the probe
of new white growth.

Within a paper
scabbard, a point
of leaf stretches
its lignin bones.

In darkness, guests
in their cells waken,
click their chemical
cascades, breathe.

A mess of flesh
deep in the bulb
forms: sepal, petal;
stamen, pistil.

Something Watches

Something watches. The woods are silent,
no strand of fern disturbed by footfall,
no talon of twig tugged out of place
by the passage of flesh, or fur, or cloth –
something watches. A whiff of the Marsh
mingles with the mist, mesmerizes the birds
in the trees to quieten the taps of their quills,
their beaks: something – stirs the leaf mould:
a finger of mud fruits a knuckle,
a wrist, an elbow, an outline of shoulder
sprouting from the soil; silver moonlight
reflects from the clay as it forms a shape,
a scope of a man. Someone watches –

a girl in a glade. She gathers the mist
in her palms and sculpts planes and crumples:
the pleat of a skirt; the spin of a ball;
the heel of a shoe that she hangs on her toe

as she sits on a rock that rose to her call.
He watches her brush bracken from her hair,
noting the dirt that dapples her knees,
the length of her arm. When she leans and reaches
her hand to the ground, he hears the gasp
of the bulb as it spindles, blossoms: a snowdrop
for the plucking – a rare, precious treasure
discovered in the depths of this displaced wood.

The Hoodeners

She sits in the boughs of a birch tree
alert, listening to the litany of profanities
growing louder: a lurching draggle
of men scratching an unsteady path
through the frosted mulch that mats the woods.

Beneath her feet they file in line:
their leader a lad who limps with a stick;
then a man in drag, his dress a mess
of rags and patches – he repeats a tune
of whistles and hisses through whiskers and teeth.

The troupe behind him trample and stamp
their heels the beat. At the back trails
a terror of bone and broken feathers
impaled on a pole – a painted skull
with a metal jaw. A man the size
of a sturdy house is heaping a stream
of abuse on the rider – a boy who lies
on a bed of bramble with bouts of laughter
bubbling smears of snot down his chin.

She smiles at the sight, stifles a giggle.
The boy in his mirth marks her presence –
he shouts and points: *"A pox on the Saints:
A lass up a tree! Let's entertain her!"*

The Betsy

"There comes a time when ice defines
the fields, and ditches freeze
as solid as the stiffened corpse
 swung high to tease the breeze.

The snow will gather in the streets
and cattle in their barns
and folks will gather round the fires
to watch the hooden dance.

"Now I's the Betsy, can't you tell?
My dress is made of silk!
my stocking cotton comes from France,
my gloves is white like milk.
My hair is fair, my heart is strong,
my honour is intact –
and I'll be first to clump the arse
of those who doubt these facts!

"This troupe of vagabonds and thieves
is here to tell a tale
of how the Lord our God Above
became a man so frail
that He could die upon the cross
in anger and in shame
and in His death to bring to us
forgiveness in His Name!

"A thousand years and more ago
around this time of year
a woman dressed in blue became
a mother, blessed from fear
and at that time the farmyard swine
and horses, sheep and kine
raised up a din to keep away
the Devil and his kind.

"And that's what we must do tonight:
a play we must perform
to keep at bay this winter's bite
and keep our bellies warm.
Our laughs will make the Devil's head
explode in blood and bones;
our dance will stop the Devil's legs
from straying near our homes.

"So meet my troop of merry men
who've travelled far and wide
to keep this hillside safe and hale
and true to God's own side.
I'll start with Carter, built of stone –
a solid churchman, him,
who keeps the dancers out of harm

and also very slim.

"Our Carter's staff is like the wrath
of God when riled to fight
and useful too for keeping safe
 our stocks of food each night.
But who would steal such frugal fare
from honest folks like us?
What kind of beast would bust the reins
 of friendship, love and trust?

"Beware the hobby! He's a fiend
a feral animal
with bones for skin and nails for teeth
 and ribbons round his skull
He'll eat your babbies, steal your bread,
demolish house and hearth.
He'll drink your beer and then he'll piss
 right in your old mum's bath!

"Beelzebub's own horse he is;
a fearsome sight to see
and even Carter can't keep him
 away from you and me.
Can no one save us from this beast
now savaging our homes?
Is there no saint to hear our prayers
 and slay this bag of bones?

"But ho! I hear a trumpet blare
from high up on the hill –
a fair haired lad has come to bring
 this evil bane to heel.
He wears a breastplate bright as noon
and carries a great spear,
and even though he tumbles down
 the hill we give a cheer!

"For he is England's own Saint George –
a little short, we know –
but even so he's not afraid
 to battle monstrous foes.
He fights for Christ and Christendom
and our own mortal souls
(however tarnished they may be,
 though mine is solid gold).

"Just watch him take his great big stick
and wave it at the horse
and how he thwacks the Carter's head –
 a practise shot, I'm sure!
They circle now, a courtly dance
of chivalry and shame,
but just before he kills the beast
 we'll break for bread and ale

"For it is said, and truly so,
that godly work is tough
and harder still when hunger knocks
 our bellies like a puff.
So bring us beer, and mead, and bread
and maybe some roast duck.
Then once we've supped we'll see just how
 our saviour rides his luck!"

Shared Bread

The bread in his hand is brown, a hash
of ryes and wheats winnowed in the dark:
a memory of hay harvested by moonlight.
It smells of goodness – a substantial gift
from a different land delivered by a god.

 "Look at the state of you! Did I build you
 just like I built the knife? The shoe? The rocks
 and grass and trees and mad men wearing frocks?
 I doubt that you're as real as mists and dew ..."

He smiles as he sits in the circle, nods
to the hooden troop as he hands the bread
across to the Carter. He keeps his words
to himself, his certainty set in the face
he sets to the gaze of the girl. She smiles.

 "And still you're here – just like the way she spoke
 of you: your hair so dark, your chin so wide,
 your eyes the hue of slates and muds: she lied
 about your death, it seems, sweet man of smoke."

As the bread circles, so the banter soars.
She can see the Betsy belt the rider
as he yanks the mead from the young man's grip.
She doesn't notice. She doesn't care
any more except for the man before her.

"She claimed you worked the travelling fairs, a man
of grease and moments caught in the swirl of rides –
a sixpence man, a candy-floss of smile
and kiss and grunt between the lights – she span
a tale of you, my friend! You pledged her a tide
of love: you left her flotsam, jetsam, a child."

The Glamour of the Prophet

"Look at her! She fights to be free
from the boy-in-disguise, away from the birth
of her monstrous spawn – the children of trees,
the babies of flames and fluids, all worth
a place in his pot, his Hell-on-Earth.
Look at her fight him: she calls to the sea
but her lover is taken already; she's leased
her belly to the Tallyman now, her girth
a cauldron of magic and time. Now see
how her spawn slither from their birth.

"Look at me! I crawled on my knees
into the soils surrounding the Queen
and hid, and grew like a shoot from a pea
as the seasons stopped – a son unseen
in the muds of the Marsh, a being ... between.
Look at me – I live. I breathe!
I can dance in the sun and dive in the sea.
I have furnished the brows of folks with a sheen
of sweat; my pleasure is theirs! Now see
how my conquests surround my Queen.

"Look at you! The woman who flew
from her world to a world of deceptions
in the mists beneath the Hunter's moon –
will you kill him for us? Will you make his defeat
complete? But the Tallyman, he cheats
too: would you dare, little one, to assume
you can finish what gods and queens couldn't do?
You ate the bean in the broth, the seed
of your demise, your contract – we'll see
you bleed to complete our world of deceptions."

The Birth of the Sun

Procession

For all the feet that have angled their way
to his dell, none have damaged the earth:
there are no paths to this place in the mist.

She feels her torpor in the folds of her bones,
in the cups of her eyes; her ache of steps
furnished in thoughts focussed on – nothing.

A muddy godling guides her to doom
and others follow, an odd collection
of the lost and the damned, living and dead.

Witness the Betsy; the boy who shakes;
the lanky man; the maid of Kent
and her smuggler friend; the soldier, his lad.

The Peggy has left its pool tonight,
and here is Jack Flame who flitters and dances
across the joists of Jenny Twig ...

And Snowdrop is sheathed in a sheet of cotton
cinched at the waist by a string of ivy
and crowned with holly – a holy gift

for the Tallyman's knife, a token of life
to bring the heat of a hearthless sun
back to a world now bound in ice.

The Chant of Entrapment

"I sit and wait, I guard this hidden realm;
we keep the world's best in our hidden realm.

"A place beyond corrupted Eden, here;
a home for the dispossessed in my hidden realm.

"A wizened hook, a secret key, a bean;
go forth, find fresh guests for our hidden realm.

"This prize you bring to me – a jewel, a rose;
her presence here has blessed the hidden realm.

"Too many years have passed – so few remain;
the birth of suns divests the hidden realm.

"The sun shall die tonight, and be reborn;
such are the trials and tests for the hidden realm.

"My hands have tallied too many bright hearts;
your last breath: a bequest to my hidden realm."

A Son Speaks:

"Look at the man! He squats by a tree
and stares out the moon, mustering charms.
His lap hosts a knife, its iron blade free
from its yellow-horn sheath; he weaves a barm
of mist from a cauldron, now seething, now calm.
Look at the man as he sits on the tee
of a stripy old hide, his work to decree
the rise of a newly birthed sun – his arm
and his song are the tools of God! See
the Tallyman master his charms.

"Look at the woman: she kneels on a bench.
Her mustard hair sweeps down in locks,
her golden eyes stare up to clench
the stars in her mind, unwinding clock.
Look at the woman catch at her smock –
her fingers whiten: her head is wrenched
backwards to arch her neck; a drench
of scarlet fountain spurts in shocks
and dribs and streams and clots. See
the woman collapse from the block.

"Look at this face – a man of clay:
he moistens his lips with his muddy tongue
and whistles a tune, a seductive play
of strokes and frictions and tensions unstrung.
Look at this face, the eyes now stung
with pain, with a grief so deep it lays
a net of cracks in his cheeks, it splays
his nostrils. He dreads your touch: the young
will use him, shape him. Kill him. See
the man with a mud-spun tongue."

Invocations

"These loving words you speak are true, my son;
the world demands that I renew the sun."

"I hear you talk, old man, I see your form:
are you the Tallyman? What do you count?"

"I saw the world first born; I saw it cry;
I watched the love of us subdue the sun."

"The tears of fear, the cries of those about
to meet your knife – why do you kill at dawn?"

"Without the golden orb, oblivion;
no love can thrive beyond the jewelled sun."

"Perhaps you are an Aztec priest – we learned
of them at school: they killed to tame the sun."

"We drink its harsh-spun light, we steal its heat;
our need for love makes us imbue the sun."

"They tried to rule their gods, they were undone:
they culled the hearts of thousands – still they burned."

"Our globe of flame is cracked – we've worn it out;
a gift of love through blood will soothe our sun."

"You killed my mother. Now you want my life
to feed your madness – will my blood make mist?"

"Renaissance keeps us strong – we must proceed;
the pulse of love shall feed the newborn sun."

"Will dogs and monsters feed upon my meat,
a roast of Snowdrop? Best then take your knife ..."

"There is no pain – my love is sharp and fierce;
my world demands that you renew the sun."

"... and thrust it deep within my neck and twist
it hard – a miss will end with your defeat!"

"A kneeling suppliant is best, my child;
cut deep, my blade: let love set roots in the sun!"

Dawn

The sky is lighter, a scale of clouds
skinning the dome, their scorched edges
announcing the arrival of the ruddy sun
in minutes, seconds ... and Snowdrop kneels
in front of the man. He fumbles for his staff,
struggles to stand; he seems so old
in the weak light of winter's morning,
as old as the hills he inhabits, as old
as the battered pot placed at his feet.

"A copper pot, as green as spring with ropes
of smoke coiled inside its rim – who rests
within its roily depths? Did Mum protest
when shown her final home, did she lose hope?"

Within the cauldron a curl of mist
extends a tendril, tasting, seeking
a place to set root, a pivot to fix
its shapes and sounds ... and Snowdrop watches
it fork and stretch, flail and then latch
to the ancient hems of un-dyed cloth
that loop at the loins of the lore-spun mage.

Slowly, slowly, Snowdrop reaches
a finger towards the fret of mist;
gently she hooks it, holds it weightless
on the tip of her digit: it darkens, pulses
and thickens to mitten her thumb and palm.

"I think this pot is full of life already:
look how it seeks the warmth of flesh, as if
it's lost its way – can it taste the air, sniff
the iron knife? And yet it's so unsteady ..."

Something touches her temple, her scalp.
A tickle of nails tight on her head
urges the lobe of her ear to her shoulder:
stretch out her neck. Snowdrop ... ignores it.
In the swollen spaces of her slowing thoughts
she seeks solutions, a lie of a hope –
a length of steel, solid yet sharp;
she feels a hilt form in her hand.

"... a newborn lamb caught by the height of legs,
or maybe older, a shrivel of life that once
was whole and strong – a giant beast – a god –"

A coldness catches the curve of her neck
– his knife, arrived and ready to notch

her throat: no time! She twists the sword
free of its mists; her muscles protest:
too heavy to lift, too long to stab.

"no saintly prince will ride to save me: dregs
is what I am, the pikey girl, the thief. No lance
to spike this mad insanity, no rod –"

Sharp is the pain of his pressing knife.
She twists the sword through turfs towards
the shaking pot with its shrubby tendrils.

Sere is the heat of the hungry sun,
its bristling shafts breaking the fogs:
too soon. Too soon! She screams, and drives
the weapon forwards, her wail a rage
to thrust its tip through patina and copper
to the cauldron's heart, its heat

... it shatters!

Shatter the dawn; shatter
the dream; shatter
the world to the
shapes of
edges.

Time Everlastin'

On the Cusp of the Marsh

No sound – ripples careen across
the canal's water, a clack of duck-wings
freighting the air, fighting for lift:
an arrow disrupted by a rifle's bark.

No sound – the wires that weave the levels
together susurrate, static electrics
woven from atoms at the world's end,
charging in steps to streets and hearths.

No sound – beyond the unyielding Wall
waves furl and surge, froth and collapse;

the shingle chatter a shadowy chant
to the deep lower of lorries, cars.

No sound can breach her bloodied ears.
A sun has banished the sorcerous mist:
ochre on blue, it bloats the sky.
No sound, no smell; no sight, no touch –
a newborn woman walks from the dawn.

A New World

"This miracle scares me! I thought we were free
for Heaven's embrace when the sun blushed the trees
to gold; such delight took my head to my heels –
I choked on my tears! But this world is unreal:
these wires on poles set to trawl through the air
are God's handiwork? Why would He want to snare
the winds? Or perhaps they are soul-nets, a skein
to rescue folks caught by the Tallyman's bean ..."

"It was not God who rescued us
old friend: we watched her thrust her knife
and slice the mage's pot in two!
A girl, no less, and there was me
who said she'd make a sacrifice
to keep the Tallyman appeased
for many nights – such fools we are!"

"Now don't you be blaming yourself, Mistress May;
just thank the good Lord that we've witnessed this day!"

"Oh don't you fear – I have the scabs
upon my knees as evidence
of how I praised sweet Jesus Christ
as sunlight spread across my face!
Such joy to feel a prick of heat
not born of flame embroider skin
with life! So long I've been a corpse,
a ghost, a wraith, a monster caught
in mists – look up above: no moon!
That girl has resurrected us!"

"To what? And to where? Though my eyes see the world
my mind is confused – like the Marsh has unfurled
and flattened itself into shapes that confound
my memories. Where do I stand on this ground?"

"You're right, old Tom; this place has changed.
what once was green has been despoiled –
the pastures ploughed, the sheep enclosed.
These wires strung on poles – they sing
a mournful ditty: ditches filled
to make great fields, their hedges grubbed
from God's soft earth. And look! This road
is grey and hard, too harsh to let
a donkey trot along it – what
has happened here? Almighty God ...
you hear that roar? A cart on wheels
as round as I am tall – it moves
across that field alone, no horse
to haul its weight: it burns, I'm sure!
You see the twists of smoke – and yet
a man is sat upon it: run!
It turns towards us, hunts us: hide!"

The Tiger Hunts

She walks the sods and the soils of the Marsh,
each saucer paw puddling the dirt
into oval dents. When ditches block
her path she leaps them, pitching her limbs
in a stretch across the stagnant waters –
a surge of blacks and sorrels burst
through the chilled air, chasing the ducks
from sleep in the reeds. She sniffs at the earth,
whiskers spreading the stiffened shafts
of winter wheat in whorls and swirls,
touching, tasting the tangs of this world.

She stills mid-step when she sees the prey:
a lamb-swelled sheep lifts up its head,
cud on the tongue, twitch-ears sculling
for a hint of sound outside the known
creaks and crackles of its cold-hugged home.

Slowly, she shifts – a splint of an inch:
a slide of muscle, a slip of claw
through dock and clover, and crouch, and settle
the tail, and wait. Watch for the tuck
of a head, the scrape of hoof on ice ...

... and dash! Her furs flash as she streaks
across the turf; a tap of her pad

and they tumble down, a tousel of wool
and hoof and scat. The herd stampedes,
their bleat alarms alerting others:

danger! Danger! Dogs on the loose!
Teeth on the throat! Tearing, ripping.
run to the gate; gather and huddle!

But she is no hound. She hauls her catch
back to the ditch, dips through the reeds
and into the water, etching a curl
of ripples from bank to bank as she paddles
her course to the sluice, and the sea beyond.

Gran's Cottage

"This is my home: the bricks and slates are where
I know I left them. Someone's parked a jeep
where compost heaps should slump and steam and steep –
who's washed the gutters, fixed the roof? Who's dared
to steal the shittery? Has Gran gone nuts?
She'd never desert this place! I'm gone two days
is all and now she's had the windows glazed!
What is this fresh madness? The doors are shut
and locked – she never bolts the cottage: who
would want to steal our scraps? It's not enough
that I should have delusions haunt my head
and hunt my flesh; with daylight comes a new
nightmare. I need to think. I need my stuff –
I need to hug my Gran, our rows unsaid."

The Slumbering Marsh

Where soil and mud
mix, a toad –
each breath a month
of suspensions.

The water's own wolf
waits in the reeds,
teeth primed to spike
cold sticklebacks.

A regiment of sabres
hold steady in trenches,

their wintry green
a stubble of profits.

A mallard thrusts
her flinty beak
deep in the slime,
harvesting mulm.

A scythe of wing,
white, culling gusts –
discordant chorus:
angelic gulls.

Mysteries

"My Lord! A heroine in tears – what fuss
is this, my child? These dew-buds on your cheeks
should signal joy, relief, release from night –
I saw you strike the Tallyman's own pot;
I watched as mists were wrenched apart, unwrapped
like muscle teased from bones – confusion reigns
in Purgat'ry and sunlight welcomes us
to Christ's immense, unmeasured grace!
Have you been hurt? An injury perhaps?"

"How long have I been gone from home? I know
there was a night of terror: madness claimed
my heart and guts, my mind – I was ashamed
and angry ... visions came to me although
I fought them hard. I killed a man? No – no!
A nightmare, nothing more! But you were there,
I think – you told me things, you let me share
your food ... how long have I been gone from home?"

"Now there's a question set to stretch the brains
of naturalists and scholars! Who can tell
how time can pass in timeless realms? And yet
it cannot be denied that sequences occurred:
each act begat another act, each moment built
upon the last – a parody of time, maybe?
I felt each breath to be my last and still
I breathed again, cessation never came –
a memory of life, I thought, a scrap
of old routine retained to keep me sane
beyond the binding weight of grave and corpse.

"Another question comes to me, a dog
that whines and digs for bones. This place does look
– familiar; this hill that curls the land
is surely Lym – yes, look! I see the rocks
of Stutfall Tower buried deep in turf.
And there! That steeple – Burmarsh church, I'm sure,
and northwards sits the town of Hythe ... my house ..."

"I broke a window, climbed inside. I found –
a different place; fresh paint, new furnishings
and gadgets – phones so small – a thin TV –
computers, fabrics, shoes that bounce and bound –
so soft to wear. I do not know these things!
It's like the future's come to finish me!"

"You speak in English, yet the lexicon
you choose is foreign – gadgets? Puters? Phones?
Such vexing words – are these angelic tools?
Although your eyes show pain and fear – as if
these miracles have changed while you were gone
from here, and how can things be changed if not
by time itself? Ahh ... now I see the need
for tears and grief – how long have we been trapped
by mists and moons? It seemed an age to me
but thinking back – a month, perhaps, of new
awakenings, each colder than the last –
we must investigate this mystery!
The task will clear away confusion, steer
our feet towards redemption, yes? We'll walk
to Hythe, my friend, and question all we see!"

The Bony Crypt

He Preaches Amid the Vehicles

"I will praise You, my Lord, as these horseless carts
praise You; I will bellow words about Your marvellous works! I will be glad
and rejoice in You: I will sing hymns to Your name, my commander – my
liege. As my enemies turn their backs on Your morning, they fall and
perish in Your presence. For You have relieved my plight and my mind;
judgement ...

The traffic revvs at the ranting tramp
who praises a god forgotten and lost.

"... has come! You have reviled the heathens, You have destroyed the wicked, You have halted their fornicators for ever and good. I say to my enemies: your destructions are surrendered; your everlasting night is destroyed; your memorial moon perishes with your flesh! But my Lord shall endure for ever: He has prepared His throne for judgement – and He shall judge the world in righteousness, He shall minister judgement to the ranks in angelic garments! The Lord will also be ...

As bus-horns bassoon and break-pads shriek
he hurls his words at this hell of metals.

"... a refuge for the non-combatants, a redoubt in times of trouble. And they that know my Lord's name will put their trust in Him: for You, my God, have not forsaken those who march for You. Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Hythe: declare among the people His doings! When He orders us to charge, He remembers us: He does not forget the fervour of His humblest trooper. Have mercy upon ...

Slipstreams shiver his shirt and coat;
still he proclaims the coming of the Lord.

"... me, my Lord; consider the troubles which I suffered, the sneers of those that hated me: it was You that lifted me up from the gates of death, so that I may demonstrate and praise in the streets of Hythe – I will rejoice in Your salvation! The heathen are struck down in the ditches they made: by the mists in which they hid are their own lies taken. The Lord is known ...

Around him, the gusts of a resurrected gale
gather to test their tenuous liberties.

"... by the judgements he executes: the wicked are snared by the sky-rods and wires that pucker this Heaven! The wicked shall be ploughed over like these Levels, and all the nations that forget God shall become sheep-dung! Arise, my Lord; let not idle men prevail: let the heathens be judged in Your sight – put them in fear, my Lord: that the nations may know themselves to be men!"

The Lunchtime Show

In the park a crowd of people cluster
in rings around a rag of performers
whose fleshy stench makes space for their play.

*"budo i hear : a trumperd blare
fram ower : yonder field*

*"a fair hair lad : as come te bring
dis evil babe : te heel"*

Within the grime of their garments, colour:
the green of weld and woad, the red
of madder root, each marked in wool
and cotton woven in the cloth of shoes
and shirts and pants and patched jackets
strapped to the body by strings, and buttons –
each oval true to the artist who carved it.

*"e wears a breasplayd : bryd as noon
and carris : a great spear*

*"and even douk : e dumbles an
de ground we : give a cheer"*

They sweat as they dance despite the frost
that powders the eddies of air they reel in
to the white of a memory of mist, or perhaps
an echo of moonlight etched across skin
and scabs that should have sought the grave
in a different age – a darker place
where the scuff of a foot or the strike of a phrase
was a force to keep the cunning of devils
away from the hearth, the home, the breath.

*"fer e is england : own sen george
a lidyl shar : we kow*

*"bud ewen so e : nat afeard
te badyl : monsrow foes"*

She watches for a minute, a mute witness
in a crowd of laughing, crowing shoppers
drawn to the hoodenars' desperate show.
Their dread is her panic – a potent dismay
of shock and loss, the sharp displacement
from the known to the new enough to render
her lost again in the grip of madness.
Their faces tell her the truth of this horror:
a sidelong glance at the snickering giants
surrounding the space; a squall of noise
hauling a head into the hug of shoulders;
the jaws as slack as the strings on the hobby
now stolen by kids for the kick of a game.

*"e fydes fer chrizzen chrizzendem
an ar own mordyl sowls"*

Time Neverbeen

"I see a girl I know; I recognise
her sneer, her shout, the stamp of her sure pride –
I want to call her name, but there beside
her stands a kid, a boy so close in size
and looks to her, his hair and chin and ear.
And she's so old! A dozen years perhaps
has sliced across her face, her skin collapsed
about a furrowed neck: what's happened here?
I knew her yesterday, but overnight
a history of hopes and fears has slapped
dreams from her eyes. For her tomorrow came
and tolled her strength, slumping her bones; a blight
of time and memories – will I be trapped
like her? A bright mind in its fatal frame?"

Tom Beak Seeks a Boon

He finds her walking westwards, as lost
as the thrusts and gusts of the threatening storm.
He pulls on her coat to catch her attention.

"I cannot deny it; you'll not disagree:
you look as confused as a wherry at sea,
no trust for your compass, its nonsense a moil
of spins and seductions enough to embroil
a heart in a tavern of doxies and pox."

She can feel the crusts of his calloused fingers
as she clasps it between her cold-blanching palms
and steers him through a surf of shoppers.

"Now please understand me; I don't mean to mock:
this morning you gave me the greatest of gifts –
a sunrise so golden it cast me adrift!
I walked with a shadow across these old lands
and stood on that high wall to marvel at sands
recast by each tide into berms and lagoons:
I ran and I danced like a crippled buffoon
and mewled as a kitten when tasting the grits
of salt in the breeze – you've unstoppered my wits ..."

The High Street tacks like the twisted hawse
of anchor cables caught in the ebb.
A slant of sunlight stipples the road
as they arc across the icy cobbles.

"... and still I am lost. Each new step that I take,
each wonder my eyes fall upon makes me quake –
it breaks me, it smacks on my bones like a boar
at rut, for the world that I loved is no more."

They stop at the foot of a staircase alley
that offers escape from the scope of traders;
a murder of tinsels mirrors from his eyes
as their gazes lock through the gauze of centuries.

"I beg you to listen, my Lady. My feats
are ending; the log of my life is replete
with parables fit for a king's history ...
and now I must tackle one last mystery.
I ache for the comfort of coffins, I crave
the bliss of unbreachable sleep in my grave
and you are the one who can help me achieve
my final desire to complete this shore leave."

A Queen Laments

"Look at you: the girl who destroyed the magic
mists and caused the sun to erupt unblooded.
Seasons stall! No spring shall unfold from winter,
singing salvation.

"Hear the bells! They toll for the death of nations.
We who sought the shelter of timeless havens
watched you rip our spells from their tight foundation –
sinful salvation.

"Who will tend my woods now that I am ousted?
Bough and brook will fester, my meadows poisoned ...
bricks and roads shall blossom in place of trees: who
sings for salvation?

"You can fix this, child, for you have the power
deep within your bones and memories: finish
now what you have fashioned for us – we ask for
simple salvation."

Beneath St Leonard's Church

The church clings to the cliff like a limpet
stamped on its rock by the deserting tide;
a lash of gale grapples the branches
of surrounding trees to reenact
a batter of waves on abandoned wharves.

Flexing her waist, she forces a course
to haven – the steps of the stony porch
and a warmth of hymns whispering beyond
the half-opened oaken threshold.

Safe from the storm, she struts her hands
to her shaking knees, shivers and hauls
wafts of incense and waxy smokes
into her lungs laced in their ribs.
The choir pauses as her pulse calms.

"They sing of Christmas, each in their stall, and call
on all good people: witness hope and joy
for God is born in Bethlehem, a boy
whose flesh was sent to heal the world, our fall
from Eden's grace forgiven, if we let
his promises take root deep in our hearts."

When she tightens the sash of her stolen coat
she decides against the sacred echoes
of the vicar's chants, chooses instead
the dark enticements of a door to her right
that leads her earthwards, to the ancestors' lair.

"But all I see are bones and skulls, their arts
no more than layered deaths, a coronet
of jaws, a weave of joints now set amidst
these puckered arches carved by ancient minds
whose skulls sit still on shelves. There must be more
than this ... the song that leaves a throat is fixed
not by the ear, but more a hope that binds
our bones to yearn for greater, safer shores."

A Path to Salvation

As the Sun Settles

In the lea of the broad canal,
its surface chopped to tessellates,
five head-low swans, beak on beak,
ruffed and clumped like a bride.

A burr of fur sits tight in an angle
of bricks, eyes wide and round. Wind
paddles her ears flat to her head;
she mewls for tall, warm interventions.

A fox snouts aside a percussion
of threshed leaves, chances his eyes
on slash bramble thorns, blunts
claws on chalk clods, chases worms.

When the copper sun's last ache sinks
a sapless crack rifles over lawns:
a sycamore bough fails; twigs tangle
like hand-grasps as wood falls.

In the air, an edge of a giant
forms and flails, reforms: tatters
of papers and plastics swirl as shanks
as it strides away from the town.

Canalside Encounters

When she sees the tiger she stops, frozen.
The beast is a shade of shadows curled
across the track, a camouflage of stipples
and two-tone stripes stacked to an eye
wide to refract the world around.

"Old Tom, he said he saw a cat
at play this morning, sheep in jaws.
I told him: 'Nonsense, man!' But here
she lies, as wide as bulls at must
and not a jot of fear in her.
Now I know cats, and if this one's
as full of mutton like he claimed
then it's no threat to you nor me.
You let me walk ahead, my girl;
I have no fear of death by claws."

As the woman bustles her way past her
Snowdrop reaches to stop her shoulder,
caught in a stack of stalling fear.
She misses the coat: the Mistress is quick
on her feet, and eager to end her adventures
in this terse, ungracious, graceless future.

"You come now, kitty: hear my words.
My lady has to pass this way
for she has business to attend –
she has a world to fix, so shift
your paws and curb your growl and let
us by. We have a hill to climb!"

... and the tiger stands! Slowly, it moves,
taking its time to test the stretch
of each of its limbs, and arches its back
and steps to the side, snuffling at ices
that snap beneath the set of its paws.

She keeps her eyes on the canal to her left
that twists and spits in its tight course;
she trusts her ears to anticipate fangs.
A touch of fur tugs at her lungs.
She chides her gaze to glance at her hand:
the tiger's stare is steady, unblinking,
a test of acceptance – a truce, of sorts.

"Sweet Mary, womb to Jesus Christ!
I've never seen the likes before:
this beast has plans to walk with us
it seems, and you to guide it, child.
I see behind us others come;
they fight the winds to claim a place
with you – the hoodeners, poor sods,
that gentleman who talks too posh
and up ahead I see a flame
astride the barks of Jenny Twig ...
lead on, my Lady: bring us home!"

The Glamour of the Son

"Look at the giant, his sloughs of clouds
a gyre of furies surrounding the moon.
Hear how he torments the air, so loud
as he weaves its gusts to build a typhoon.
Look at the Power aroused, his cocoon

burst by your sword; for you've allowed
him time for vengeance, so deeply vowed,
on that sinner's head who spooned and pruned
nature's own pulse for his ease. See
the God of the Storm knot dark runes."

He stands like stone, a sourcerous heel
refusing to bend to the battering force
of the jubilant maelstrom. The march of his words
edge as a whisper over the slopes
of the hill she climbs; they claim her thoughts.

"Look at the ghosts gathered about
the rim of the hill. They seek release
from their blood-set curse, their lips cry out
for you to gift them an end, some peace.
Look at your mother, caught in a crease
of time suspended – hear her shout
for death: she yearns for you to rout
the mage who took her life, to squeeze
breath from a man who loved her. See
the mournful spite that drives the deceased."

A count of nightmares clusters about her:
the demon hound; the hunter's pack
of snapping dogs; the sun-lost dancers
who made a fair of mirthless fun –
and him. The mage who hides from time.

"Look at my father: still he plots
to resurrect the winter sun.
You've smashed his glamours; broke the pot
of Yggdrasil, so long undone.
Look as he wields his staff! It stuns
the ghosts to silence: watch him knot
their will to his ... they writhe and clot,
repressed. For God has commanded: none
shall stand against His Word. See
my sin-cursed father compel his son."

Tallyman

"You come like frost on petals seeking truths;
such knowledge costs: can you discern the truth?"

"Whom time forgets can only count the years
in decades, epochs: I have learned this truth."

"Somebody stole my world; I want it back.
Those years I spent suspended, caught in the Now
of mindless acts, return them! Let me plough
them fresh and straight, re-sow the life I lack."

"I ploughed the world and harrowed the soils and clods
and grew new gods to reaffirm my truth.

"I nurture sunshine, tend the flames of day
to fertilise the earth in burning truths.

"My work is harsh and unforgiving; crops
will wither, lacking love – don't spurn that truth."

"You took my time: I closed my eyes and when
I saw again the world had moved, its skin
a lie of unremembered sags, so thin
and false ... a curse on me, still caught within."

"A curse once seared my soul and bleached my skin;
my sons built realms: they took and turned the truth.

"You lust for reasons, question that which is:
I hoard rejected things, adjourned by truth."

"Some men have claimed that time itself must die,
but not my time: my time must stumble on.
Each breath succeeds the last, not first. Regrets
are mine to hoard; I keep my tidy lies
close to my heart, certain and safe. What's gone
is done, and done. I am my silhouette."

"Destroyers reap what they have sown, and you
have salted history: you've earned your truth!"

The Great Storm

A carnival of anvils clatter the stars;
gouts of whirlwinds gutter the clouds.

"I know you lie, old man. I know the Earth
is round, not flat; it spins on poles and curls
about a flame so vast it makes our pearls
of blood a nothingness beside that hearth."

Frigid bullets belch from the skies;
a chill of hail to chip at her head.

"I know that magic only lives astride
the realms of madness. Matter builds this world,
not fogs and fictions; time can be unfurled
by clocks as much as memories inside."

The atmosphere cracks: an arch of light
levers behind the hackled trees.

"For though I've let you massacre my head
I know that I still breath, and you do not.
All things must end; even the sun shall sputter ..."

Static winnows the weaves of her hair,
puckers her skin with pulsed shivers.

"... in gouts to shake the galaxies. And dead
is dead, dear Granddaddy – the time for rot
has come for us both: let the storm-sparks shatter!"

So bold the flare; so bright the flux:
atoms scatter to absolute sky!

Epilogue

She flies ahead of the heat –
that slow pulse, sun-herded,
which seeps through the flux
formed from spun iron. Each day
she tenses her keel and cuts
the warming breeze. She snacks
on chitin tubes released
from chill earths to dance
and fornicate. North
she doesn't know; only the map
synapsed behind retinas
guides the trim of her tail,
and the urge surging her blood
for twigged constructions.

She vaults a day of salt
water and forgets hot grits
for cork-bole trees, their branches
a budded greeting, a glyph

of rest. She drinks from a stream
fresh in its pelt of midge.

She flies ahead of the heat ...

When the creatures beneath
fountain sere seeds at her
she tumbles and gyres,
a shot of plume – swift and deft;
when the rocks beneath
lever their peaks to the clouds
she tacks the steady winds
to littoral wastes. Others
like her join the trek
and swirl flocked signals
to herald the warm hefts
that track them, the spring
of green renewals a relief
to the muds and sods who live
below the weight of storms
and ice: this ebb of growth is done.

And still she feels the pulse
of need shiver her fatless flesh.
She soars as the white horn
who blackens and bleaches the world
around rises. She glides as the moon
scythes its course through the skymap
and her wings scream for ease.
Salty whitecaps reach up to her
as she follows the pocked lantern
home: a last leap from land
to land amid a beach of stones
caught in the ruddy breach
of the dawned sun. As the Levels
under her claws succumb
to the young day's golden sinews
she spies the time-tumbled cliffs
and the moss-crumbled towers
where she first took breath and comes
once more to break new life
from the pebbles she shall make
within her weave of twig and wool.

She alights on the bough
of a knot of a tree whose bark
ribbons in curls hid by damp leaves.
Safe in her chosen perch she feathers

her head, and sleeps. Sounds seep
and leach from the air; the breeze
stills. In the wood's mulched litter,
a movement: a mouse, perhaps,
or a beetle – or a knuckle, a wrist;
an elbow, a shoulder. A face.

A muddy tongue slugs past dirt lips:
somebody watches.

Notes

To My Dear Readers,

I wrote this poem for both of you; your support over the past few years as I struggled to find inspiration among the rhymes and iambs and alliterations has been truly beyond the call of duty, and I can only apologise for taking so long to complete it.

As you know, I started mapping out my long poem in January 2004, and put pen to paper to draft the first lines in April of that same year. Drafting continued, intermittently, until well past Easter 2012. I do admit to revising my lines when I should have been minting new ones – there were times when my creativity deserted me entirely and I had no choice but to edit and cut and re-edit the existing mess. And yes, there have been some poor drafting decisions along the way; your willingness to help me see my stupidities with clean eyes has been a gift without measure. Thank you!

So in return, I thought it would only be fair for me to offer some brief comments that may (or may not) help each of you make some sense of the final product; for while Snowdrop's story runs clear and true in my imagination, I can understand that a casual reader might struggle with some of my word-choices and scenes.

Firstly, Hythe . You've probably heard of Hythe before; it was voted into 4th place in that book *Crap Towns: The 50 Worst Places To Live In The UK* , back in 2003. Who would have guessed that I was moving up in the world when I relocated to Hackney? Not that I agree with the poll: there's worse places to live in, or visit, in Kent (Dover comes to mind immediately).

Anyway, Hythe is a little town with an over-blown history; for me, growing up on the Marshes, it was a Big Place – and quite foreign, too: England starts at Hythe, and people are strange in England. The name of the town is routinely pronounced 'hives' without the final –s. The 'y' is different to the one found in Dymchurch (dim church) and Lympe (lim).

Note that throughout the poem I've spelled Lympe as 'Lym' – I decided that no good could ever come from inflicting the proper spelling on either of you as you tried to read. And no, I have no idea why people insist on Lympe's wierd spelling – the name comes originally from the Roman word 'lemanis' which has no truck whatsoever with errant Ps.

Lympe Hill, where much of the poem's action takes place, is in fact a continuation of the cliffs running from Folkestone west and south to Rye and Hastings. I think of the Hill as the natural barrier that England erected to keep people like me out – unlike the Royal Military Canal which skirts the Hill and was definitely built by Englishmen to keep Napoleon Bonaparte at bay.

Stutfall castle, on the slopes of the Hill overlooking the Marshes, is all that remains of the Roman port of Lemanis. It is the only part of the Tallyman's domain that has a physical existence.

The Romney Marshes are also known as the Romney Levels. Romney Marsh (singular) is the easternmost portion of the Marshes, abutting Hythe and in the shadow of Stutfall. Gran's cottage can be found somewhere in the midst of Romney Marsh, though don't bother trying to find it: you'll only get lost.

I ought to mention the great debt that this poem owes to Rudyard Kipling, and in particular his book Puck of Pook's Hill . The phrase Time Everlastin' is entirely his, and my Man of Clay owes much to his Puck. The Puck could well have been talking about Mistress May when he was describing the women of the Marshes in his "Dymchurch Flit" story. In my poem, of course, the Fairy Queen doesn't escape to France.

My plagiarism of Lucretius's De Rerum Natura is far more obvious. Unfortunately, I never studied Latin at school and so I can only hope that the passages quoted by my Roman Captain have some vague relevance to the visions the words offer Snowdrop.

Prologue

When I was a lad, calling somebody 'pikey' was a fistable offence.

I got the idea of using a bean as the gateway to Time Everlastin' partly from Terry Pratchett, in particular his book Hogfather .

Into the Woods

There's some detailed mythology surrounding Jack O'Lantern on the Levels: locals would refer to strange lights seen at night as either the spirits of dead children, or as Jack's Lantern, 'Jack' being the sprite come to collect the souls of naughty children. I remember having heated arguments as a toddler about whether Jack was a real person or a will o'the wisp ; in fact the lights were most often the sign of the local Owlers at work. Unfortunately in modern times, the name Jack O'Lantern has become synonymous with Hallowe'en and pumpkins – which has nothing to do with my sprite, hence why I call him 'Jack Flame'.

Unlike Jack, there's no local mythology that I know of concerning Jenny Twig. Which I think is a pity.

Similarly, there's not much in the way of a tradition concerning the Wild Hunt on the Levels. But the myth is too good to be excluded from the poem ... though my hunters have no horses (except for the Hunt's leader, as is made clear by the Queen in the next section).

The Meadow

Traditionally, the Romney Marshes are considered to be The Gift of the Sea. A number of writers have commented on how different the Levels are to other places – Camden , for instance, and Barham .

I stole the Green Children from Suffolk. I have no shame.

Horsa is the brother of Hengist (both names are Saxon words for 'horse'), the traditional founders of the ancient Kingdom of Kent .

The Oak Moon is (I believe) the traditional English name for the last full moon before the New Year. I could be wrong about this.

I'll admit to there being a hint of the Brigadoons about the restricted appearances of Time Everlastin' in the real world. The conceit that I've used in the poem is that Time Everlastin' only appears for the three days around the last full moon of the year, and only then when that full moon falls between the winter solstice and Christmas Eve. I'll leave you two to do the calculations.

The Queen's Fair

Smuggling on the Marshes has become a romantic notion of late – check out Kipling's "A Smuggler's Song" or Thorndike's Dr Syn . The reality was often rather different .

I imagined my tiger as being the beast on which Lord Shiva would sometimes ride, particularly during his more wrathful moments. Whatever the tiger's real name might be, I chose to call her 'Buda'.

'Reves' is not a local word. I apologise for that.

Dayfall

While the Romney Marshes had little need of holy wells (on account of much of it being below sea level), there are plenty of such places in Kent. I don't know of any where people tie pieces of clothing to nearby trees, though I have seen such trees in Turkey; the image was too good to leave out. Sacrificing broken jewellery in such springs is well-attested, and a very ancient custom.

My Peggy is a rather benign version of Jenny Greenteeth . As I've already mentioned, the job of keeping young children away from the ditches, dikes and sewers that twine across the Marshes (especially at night) was covered by our local Jack O'Lantern.

Resurrection

So I've misquoted some Psalms. So sue me! Or, rather, sue my Corporal, who is not quite sane; he retrofits his quotes to meet his immediate needs.

The Royal Military Canal was a secondary line of defence built at the height of the Napoleonic wars, when fear of invasion was at its most fevered. Typically, by the time the canal was finished the threat was gone.

The Buffs were one of the oldest infantry regiments in England, and were long associated with East Kent. They were amalgamated out of existence a few years back.

The Paths of the Dead

I may have come across the idea of frost being animated in the form of a white-pelted fox through my extensive web-surfing; if this is indeed the case, then I apologise for not linking to the source.

I stole the Shuck from Suffolk though, much like the Green Children, I've twisted its myth to fit my own purposes. The closest Black Dog to the Marshes appears to be the Grattack, from West Sussex, but I couldn't persuade that beast to make an appearance in the poem.

Stutfall

The line 'christiani ad leones, christianae ad lenones' translates along the lines of: "Christian men to the lions, Christian women to the whoreshops" – or at least that's what the internets claim.

The ague was the local name for malaria, a common disease found in marshy areas across southern England well into the 18th century. On the Romney Marshes one in three children would die of the ague before the age of five.

The Passion Players

Hoodening was a form of mummers local to East Kent. Naturally, I've taken liberties with the tradition: for instance I imagine my hoodeners came to Time Everlastin' sometime in the 15th century.

The Birth of the Sun

Much like the bean, my inspiration for the need to sacrifice someone or something to ensure the sun's renewal comes from Mr Pratchett's book.

As I wrote the poem, I developed a clear idea about the Tallyman's true identity, and the provenance of his magical cauldron. Please forgive me for not sharing this information with you both; it makes more sense to me if readers are allowed to make up their own interpretations about him.

Time Everlastin'

The Romney Marshes underwent a great change following the second world war, as pasture for sheep was plowed over to grow more profitable arable crops such as wheat, potatoes and rapeseed. A good representation of this change can be seen in the film *The Loves of Joanna Godden*, based on the book *Joanna Godden* by Sheila Kaye-Smith.

The Bony Crypt

No doubt you will both be interested to learn that the crypt really exists, and can be found in the processional beneath St Leonard's Church in Hythe. There are only two such ossuaries in England which is, I think, another pity.

A Path to Salvation

Naturally the climax had to involve a storm. Storms have been central to the history of the Romney Marshes, for instance the Great Storm of 1287 which comprehensively redrew the map and changed the course of history. I know these storms aren't technically hurricanes, but the one I lived through in 1987 certainly felt like a hurricane; the damage was awesome.