

On the Spot

A cold clutch, a whole nestful, all but hidden
In last year's autumn leaf-mould, and I knew
By the mattness and the stillness of them, rotten,
Making death sweat of a morning dew
That didn't so much shine the shells as damp them.
I was down on my hands and knees there in the wet
Grass under the hedge, adoring it,
Early riser busy reaching in
And used to finding warm eggs. But instead
This sudden polar stud
And stigma and dawn stone-circle chill
In my mortified right hand, proof positive
Of what conspired on the spot to addle
Matter in its planetary stand-off.

The Tollund Man in Springtime

Into your virtual city I'll have passed
Unregistered by scans, screens, hidden eyes,
Lapping time in myself, an absorbed face
Coming and going, neither god nor ghost,
Not at odds or at one, but simply lost
To you and yours, out under seeding grass
And trickles of kesh water, sphagnum moss,
Dead bracken on the spreadfield, red as rust.
I reawoke to revel in the spirit
They strengthened when they chose to put me down
For their own good. And to a sixth-sensed threat:
Panicked snipe offshooting into twilight,
Then going awry, larks quietened in the sun,
Clear alteration in the bog-pooled rain.

—

“The soul exceeds its circumstances”. Yes.
History not to be granted the last word
Or the first claim... In the end I gathered
From the display-case peat my staying powers,
Told my webbed wrists to be like silver birches,
My old uncallused hands to be young sward,
The spade-cut skin to heal, and got restored
By telling myself this. Late as it was,
The early bird still sang, the meadow hay
Still buttercupped and daisied, sky was new.
I smelled the air, exhaust fumes, silage reek,
Heard from my heather bed the thickened traffic
Swarm at a roundabout five fields away
And transatlantic flights stacked in the blue.

Through every check and scan I carried with me
A bunch of Tollund rushes—roots and all—
Bagged in their own bog-damp. In an old stairwell
Broom cupboard where I had hoped they'd stay
Damp until transplanted, they went musty.
Every green-skinned stalk turned friable,
The drowned-mouse fibres dried up and the whole
Limp, soggy cluster lost its bouquet
Of weed leaf and turf mould. Dust in my palm
And in my nostrils dust, should I shake it off
Or mix it in with spit in pollen's name
And my own? As a man would, cutting turf,
I straightened, spat on my hands, felt benefit
And spirited myself into the street.

Höfn

The three-tongued glacier has begun to melt.
What will we do, they ask, when boulder-milt
Comes wallowing across the delta flats

And the miles-deep shag ice makes its move?
I saw it, ridged and rock-set, from above,
Undead grey-gristed earth-pelt, æon-scruff,

And feared its coldness that still seemed enough
To iceblock the plane window dimmed with breath,
Deepfreeze the seep of adamantine tilth

And every warm, mouth-watering word of mouth.

The Harrow Pin

He would say, "If you don't behave
There'll be nothing in your Christmas stocking for you
But an old kale stalk". And we would believe him.

But if kale meant admonition, a harrow-pin
Was correction's veriest unit.
Head-banged spike, forged fang, a true dead ringer

Out of a harder time, it was a stake
He'd drive through aspiration and pretence
For our instruction.

Let there once be any talk of decoration,
A shelf for knick-knacks, a picture-hook or -rail,
And the retort was instant: "Drive a harrow-pin".

Brute-forced, rusted, haphazardly set pins
From harrows wrecked by horse-power over stones
Lodged in the stable wall and on them hung

Horses' collars lined with sweat-veined ticking,
Old cobwebbed reins and hames and eye-patched winkers,
The tackle of the mighty, simple dead.

Out there, in musts of bedding cut with piss
He put all to the test. Inside, in the house,
Ungulled, irreconcilable

And horse-sensed as the travelled Gulliver,
What virtue he approved (and would assay)
Was in hammered iron.