

TWO POEMS



Alison Brackenbury

STAYING OUT

“Did you see a badger?” We never see the badgers,
Except the young one, rolling down the bank—
But that’s another story, and it blurs
Into this. The dregs of daylight sank,
The sky above the wood quivered, like drink,
In that odd afterglow in which small rain
Loomed, drop by drop, to light, through which it came;

With our eyes still untuned, it was a cry,
Keen as the curlew, who was never here.
Its long screech raked our heads, then landed, high
In the great ash, the badgers’ tree. How near
We stood, we strained. Its call alone was clear,
A half moon in the rainy night, of anger,
A sharp white knife which cut down every stranger.

I did not see it, but I felt it go.
My head swooped back, as wings caressed the air.
I saw the great span by the wood’s grey glow,
The dipped head, silent now. It was still there
A second on, a line of cloud, a hair
In the sky’s eye—So people used to know
Their owls. And did we see a badger? No.

INTERREGNUM

Dead but not buried, as we buy dark suits
They tug at our sleeves, they rustle in notes.

They talk through the silence we thought would be ours
Between the harsh breaths and the funeral's noise.

Theirs should be kind lies, the vicar's soft voice;
Their first wives forgotten, packed up with old shoes.

They, too, were worn out. They begged us for sleep.
But death has revived them. They whistle and wake.

Time, we think grimly, must catch them and blur—
As crying drowns clear sight—their stillness to air.

Here is my black jacket. Here are my warm shoes.
I fought you, alive, but I lost. Still I lose.

You won, for the last time. Do as you please.
They fall. They lift free of us, sudden as trees.