

Four Poems

THE BICYCLE OF LOVE

Caught in the glittering spokes, rashers
of unresisting air slice off with a hiss,
invisible as choirs of battling angels.
Bird-song, too, is shredded thinly,
into scattered crumbs that are barely audible,
as my blurred heels whirl with a life
that is faster than their own. Faster than my socks,
my knees, or even my highest hopes for speed
—or to touch hands, again, sitting on that mossy,
rough-hewn wall, with the be-ribboned girl
of my first day in the school-yard
that has become both the still-point and dizzy
turning of my world.

Over-turning

world, with sky below my whining tires
that fail to get a grip on be-feathered
clouds and black and drizzling birds;
my heels and hopes both rushed at
by a soggy curtain of cow-parsley,
ditch-water and very abrupt dandelions.

Love can genuinely ride bicycles
even at six years' old.
Then blasting off down a hill brings us
closest to the tilted uncertainty of knowing
whatever is heaven. Tree-roots
trail among clouds of everything's being possible.

COPSE AT COOKHAM DEAN

The copse at the edge of the wheatfield
has had the same lovers
shyly in residence for over
five centuries.
Only their names change,
each spring,
stuttering ever closer
to a shout of abandon.

LAMENT ON A FIRE-BOMBING

When incendiary bombs fell on London
in the Second World War, their slanting
hail clattered among suddenly sun-flowered
roofs beneath the wintry moon. My father,
driven by fate – or was it freed by chance
(he was always unbeatable at cards) – was on leave
from the front. He ran up to the dream-cluttered
attic, to face the crackling rat
that pushed steel-hardened whiskers and nose
through the roof, eyes and jaws splaying
fire: “That thy cities be laid waste,”
“And burn, burn, that none can quench it.”
Rusty bucket in hand, he fought it
hard, but was clawed back rapidly,
having to run down one floor
to the bathroom to refill the bucket under an interminably
slow-running, traitorous tap,
which he turned off each time.

My mother, tactful with my father even
in this battle for survival, discretely pushed
the perished, rubber, snot-smelling
plug into the plug-hole, and kept the tap
running, while my father made increasingly
desperate forays upstairs. Dad,
now able to fill the bucket almost faster
than immediately from the flooding tub, forced
the rat back, thumbnail by blackened thumbnail
by singed but carefully crafted airman's
moustache, the tub wobbling – or was it dancing
excitedly? – on its gryphon-taloned feet below.
Though a toddler in a very full nappy,
I learned, that night, that a mother's seeming
deference, though quietly authoritative and untrembling
small hand, can triumph over a fury
that goes forth from any attic. So that the sun
may raise its true sunflower tomorrow,
cock-sparrows not fallen from the eaves
in the last hallelujahs of their charred song.
“For the Lord hath created a new thing
in the Earth: a woman shall encompass a man.”

Quotations from *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*

SAVING MY FATHER'S LIFE

As a boy, with white marks on my brow
from the teacher hurling chalk at a thoroughly
thought-resistant head (he'd been a sharp-shooter
in the Great War), and with urine-smelling
moss on my boots from the school-yard
toilet that was built several wars
and even more foreheads ago,
I'd tell my classmates, in the hope of impressing them:
"The day I was born, I saved my father's
life." He burst into the hospital ward,
an air-raid black-out
curtain fallen all over him,
like a gesticulating and highly excited bear,
to greet my arrival. Meanwhile, his comrade
and best friend, with whom he'd traded flights
to the front in North Africa, to gain
that crucial day for making my acquaintance,
was shot down somewhere over the Mediterranean,
in a wine-dark, blood-dark
cloud of smoke-filled unknowing.
Now, as I try, in much later years,
to measure my life, I realize: the day
I was born, I also sent a man
to his death. Is this the chalk-mark of maturity?