

## POEM FOR NINA

*an axe age, a sword age (things shall be split)*  
*a wind age, a wolf age (before the world sinks)*     The Poetic Edda

*Time takes too much time!* you sang as we took  
to the wind, pulling our hair from our mouths

and breathing out air still spindrift.  
In the two remaining greys of last light

the storm came in on the king tide's back;  
by morning the jetty would be broken to bits.

That night we stood at the jetty's clinging root-end  
and ran. The waves broke over both sides

to make us an harbour of threat and glisten;  
we jumped the loosed planks that clacked

in retarded joy *sea! sea!* as we reached the sprig-end.  
You clutched your crotch in happy fear

and lost your hat. The railings were all gone:  
we were standing on a platter, offered up.

## WAKING (FOR KAFKA)

It is a mandible language, ours; one of release  
or grasp; a byzantine binary of yes, no (yes);  
the shellac click of stag beetles all het up.  
Dear Franz you should love whom you want to  
and hard—forget about the world's wanton  
fathering and mothering . . . both will bear on  
past your little momentous death.  
Our parents always outlive us in a sense;  
at our end we call for them from the darkest night  
of our first own bedroom—  
even if they do not come  
there will be Breakfast. Waking is the bare minimum  
or miracle. There's no telling what you'll be,  
or how you'll be loved. Release, now grasp.

## AFTER THE ETERNAL PROTEST

He takes a long live minute of ticking senses  
to know it was a rubber bullet homed at his forehead,  
sitting among the hats and sandals remaining  
like bronzes; live-time memorials to a cause  
that presumes its loss to give its hope a wildness.  
He bleeds down his best shirt, worn in case of death,  
now ruined with survival; his concussion sparkling  
like a wet shook net; his blood unnoted,  
misused on asphalt . . . still he wants it back  
as kin do their fallen. The frontline runs past him,  
strange and normal again in their single skins  
and desire for dinner. Someone slows to pull him up  
and is off, leaving him in a standing spangled sway,  
suddenly ill with the idea of sacrifice and okay.

## O MILLIE

*for my mother*

Every pat and kenning we dedicated lovingly  
to her bottom front teeth; they stuck out  
in the face of function; cartoonish, feel-good.  
O Millie!—All earth's creatures should (at least)  
be master of their own resting countenance.  
In the end it was a tumour, upending the tooth-roots:  
her bottom jaw was mostly, humanely, removed.

*A purely cosmetic job!* you said brightly to friends.  
On her first post-op beach walk she froze  
where you unleashed her; you cooed and cajoled  
while she shook the wind from her mouth,  
her tongue prone, the world a cold obtruder.

Though she soon took off, a new axis of happiness:  
tail to the sun; and a spittle-ribbon, fishing light.

## GIRLS

The perfected ingénue turns straight into woman;  
the feather-moult, the piecework undone to do again.  
Is the Child killable enough to start from scratch—  
the adolescent, a blithe Fury with bored shears?

I ask for the sake of June. Her magnified eyes  
inspired us to the hard petrified names of animals;  
both the totem and its sacrifice. She talked to no one  
but herself. I was left at June's house one day,

told to play quietly or else June might have a turn.  
She proffered her tortoise; I patted the air above  
its death-mask shell. We took it to sleep in the grass  
as we swung on the swings; pink, earnest pendulums.

June took a flying dismount, her glasses shuck-light,  
the shell-crack a horror, the cracked shell a heraldry—

## MENIS

He arrives early morning on his mother's lawn,  
each trembling leaf of grass a potential of his. A hero  
with a feats backlog: he walks through the glass door  
like it's a waterfall; two knives, blades for handles,  
slicing his subgod palms as he smashes the all-seeing  
screens, defies the tricky stars emitted from the microwave,  
tips over the big blue fish-tank swarming with flash-eyes  
of Zeus. In Athene's flak-jackets the cops approach  
this infinitely armed Achilles throwing canned goods.

There's an impossible, bearable weight to the world,  
pressing down the soil of thought into a diamond self;  
each phrenic facet *adamant*, unmistakable, as he teems  
out the door onto the street. The gunshot is quieted  
by a garbage truck. On his body his mother falls.

## SHIPBREAKING

At oldest moon the tanker is aimed at shore  
and scuttled like a much smaller thing;  
its prow cocked in the unnatural questioning  
of a carcass head; its waterlines, doing marked done.  
Empty oil-barrels thrown to sea, herded to shore,  
then the loosest fittings, then steeliest ego-structure:  
all parts can be turned to mutiny in the end.  
In the hull's darkness a man, as taken as Jonah,  
falls off a girder and ends forty feet below,  
straddling a crossbeam that splits his pelvis in two.

Cross-sections shape-shift in the conflicting light  
—a bone cathedral, a bombed housing block—  
as the boss explains the job to the new boy.  
*Take a piece. Break it in half. And in half again.*

## DOUGLAS MAWSON NEARING BASE-CAMP

There may well be an *Ur-Ilias*; here, but lost to us  
as water in snow; it may well be the authority on  
a man's proneness to die, in the name of survival  
dressed up as a god, yet what—Mawson has thrown away  
the soles of his feet. Long loose, he'd kept them  
for their slight quality of Shoe, until they wouldn't sit right  
under swaddling, until the pure fluid, between them  
and the still-living ends of him, flooded out.  
He waters the ice with the manna in his boots  
and walks on. His last man Mertz died mortified,  
finding his frostbitten finger in his own endless mouth.  
*Who needs enemies with a self like this?* Mawson mourned  
with an extra bowl of dog-head stock, a chocolate half-inch.  
He walks on, leaving tufts of beard, a weekly tooth:  
long the history of the honour-weary foot.



## PROGRESS REPORT

Weak by the minute, strong by the year:  
no exact way to judge our worthiness  
as subjects—objects—*subjects!*—in love; mere  
bad weather can reduce us, as our impermanence  
can rouse us to endure.

We tried co-hibernation,  
consuming only time. Emerging topple-boned,  
our big smash-mouth love was like a bear's swipe,  
surprisingly precise. How did we refrain from  
eating each other, loosed from the black's clench,  
the one self-scent? . . . Next model: co-moderation.  
We'll ration the bread we are to each other,  
to outlast every war pent up in human nature.

No matter how we persist,  
love's a lever. We lower when we want to lift.

## LOVE'S POEM

*for M & N & O*

My once lover saw an old door, then saw a table in it;  
he changed its plane forever like death does for us;  
gave it strong legs to never move on and crowned it  
with a cut-glass bowl of just-in-season fruit.  
Years later, my friend saw this table, then saw  
a garden bench in it; she studied long and leisurely,  
planning her feat of hard wood origami; she sawed,  
hammered and made it with nothing added or spared.  
Love's a like proteanism; the open promise of all  
things to be its evidence, with a mere new morning's look.  
This new morning on our garden bench, we give  
room to the bird-shit begun in the fig-tree above,  
we give thanks to our births well-timed and placed;  
we'll give, good-grained hearts, till we're taken away.

## LORCA

He stood a moment against the wall  
then walked towards the executioner  
reached for the mouth of the rifle  
and tried to take it from him,  
gently, as if a breadknife from  
a lover gesticulating.

He stood back against the wall  
then walked off again  
apologetically, as if from a broken-  
heart's call to fight at bar-closing.  
But they grabbed him  
and knelt him  
and bent him over  
his prayer now *a river of lions*

DEAR LITTLE BASTARD ANTOSHEVU,

*(from Natalia Golden to Anton Chekhov)*

You're having, I know, a merry free-for-all  
in Moscow. I'm glad.  
I cannot belong to you any more, now  
I've found for myself  
a boy-tiger more suitable. I advise  
you not to marry:  
you're still too young and write such rubbish to me.  
As for the main thing  
that interests me more than anything else:  
your health—you don't talk  
about that. You have two certain diseases,  
my Antoshevu,  
amorousness of the blood and the spitting  
thereof—the first may  
not prove lethal, but of the second, I ask  
please give me some words  
if I give you the stamps. Perhaps you haven't  
yet forgotten your  
Little Skeleton. . . . But if you have, she can  
imagine farewell

## DARWIN'S TAXIDERMIST

*A Negro lived in Edinburgh and gained  
his livelihood by stuffing birds,  
which he did excellently,  
and taught me*

when a thing is killed the mouth  
should be opened, cleaned as if your own,  
filled with cotton  
and any wounds the same.

Without an audience or food a mouth  
is just a wound he said while labelling jars

*POISON DRIED MOSS*

*GLASS EYES SWEET HAY.*

Lie the animal on its back, quiet legs  
pushed aside, take the scalpel in the right  
and with the left separate the hair  
like a loving groom.

Work in a straight line to better God  
he laughed. Be firm:  
why should the skin loosen its hold at all easily?  
Turn back the skin on either side

and a wild red land is revealed.  
Take much care in setting the eyelid;  
the expression—of belief, nonbelief—  
depends altogether on this.

## UNTITLED

I.

The beginning is  
the furthest

wildest  
dominion of the end.

My tears have been  
all as food.

Why are you so heavy my soul  
and rattle inside like a ballbearing?

Deep calls to deep in the dry under sea.  
The storm's mass and spittle are gone over me.

Why can't you sit right  
my soul.

Even without faith  
there's always a best-case scenario.

2.

I have cried day and night  
on the threshold of your ear.

I am like those with a death to die.  
I lie on my side, my kneebones

millstones ground together.  
Your terrors I have suffered from my youth up,

in each bedroom's nightly skull-box,  
in each blink's dark eye,

in each quick hot cupful  
the heart tips out,

each sonnet a shrunk head  
strung round the neck.

The fear comes about me daily,  
a tide without a moon, on every side.

3.

I asked the stone who's glad enough,  
why do I go so heavily,

why the bone-drag?  
After the small kindness of light

must I sing through the night-season?  
I have been a partaker.

Adulteree. Enabler.  
Guard-dog-choker.

I watch now the birds  
so I do not have to watch myself.

When the bird I pray upon  
takes flight

I take a breath—just the one:  
we must punish the life that goes on!



4.

Hear me. Do not hide your face  
that hides your awful head.

All my visions are half-ones.  
The antlers of a hidden stag;

the scat of a just-gone fox  
full of hair and bones and lying there like voodoo dolls. . . .

But to have one clear shot  
at love.

My enemies test out my teeth  
on my tongue and they taunt me

so where's your Loverman now?  
Where is He?

There are things I've never seen  
that are mine. And mine to give.

5.

The cliff is a wave of rock  
that waits. Settled on top

is an albatross nestling, facing  
the way its mother left at first light.

It will not move but to blink, *adagio*,  
till she comes on the front of dusk.

You set me likewise on this rock  
and ordered me to stay.

My heart a vessel  
misemployed above the watermark,

the sea's black pelt gleaming  
in the light underneath.

Steady is the pulse of the promisee's heart:  
one beat mutinous; patient the other.