

## **Blessings**

*'It would be infinitely lonely to live in a world without blessing' John O'Donohue*

Bless the fox that tears into your bins  
and scatters your shame in the street. This is not  
the worst that can happen. Bless the red  
at the corner of the sky where there is a rip. You are  
part of it. Bless the blood that wells into the phial  
to be sent for analysis. Bless your stooped father  
when you leave him, like a grieving swan, on his doorstep.  
He needs guarding. Bless the baby you miscarried and the mystery  
of where she is. Bless the hands that picked the apple  
you are eating. Somewhere those hands seek rest.  
Bless the Earth and the voices that sing her anthems  
in your cities. They are the planet's prophets. Bless the man  
you divorced. Bless the man you married after. Both  
have gardens in your heart. Bless the cupboard  
you hide in when memory wears laddered stockings.  
Bless hope when she navigates your mind's black  
canals and places her fingers on the lock-gates. One day you will  
open. Bless the new-born river when it trickles into the light.  
You are that river. Bless the man in the tweed jacket who delicately  
lied to you. He is a house by the ocean whose walls  
are cracking. Bless the stranger in the red coat  
who jostled you in the supermarket. She is the woman  
you were when your mother died. Bless the boy driving  
too loud in his souped-up car on the bypass.

He is your faraway son. Bless the moments  
that surge like waves drowning the shore you love best.  
You are an oyster shell above the high tide mark.  
Bless the woman you still can be, who waits  
in your life's long grass for you to grip  
her hands and dance.

## **Come night**

*(after Derek Mahon)*

And why would I not wish, after a drawerful of days  
disarrayed with worry, to walk into dusk's byways  
leaving the back gate unlatched? Come night  
I'll say, lead me away from the probing kitchen light  
where fear simmers blood-orange like a dying sun  
and all the talk is of treatment not yet begun.

Race me across the cropped grass until my mind  
is infused with black, the future set free, undefined.

Somewhere in the forest a badger leaves the sett  
to forage for her cubs. Inside a child learns the alphabet  
his small hand feeding the page with words.

I stand with my back to the door knowing in spite  
of everything a mother never loses the urge  
to run, for who can tell if everything will be alright?

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*after Vanessa Bell, The Tub, 1917, a painting of Mary Hutchinson, Clive Bell's mistress*

I begin with three.

Circular tub, grey pitcher, Mary  
leant over, her alabaster chemise hung  
like a bride's veil from peachy shoulders.

A wide window reveals charcoal sky,  
allows the night's curiosity to rinse the attic  
in glitter. At the canvas edge a solitary  
curtain flushes. Will this do?

No, begin again. There is too much pink,  
too much harmony. Mary, Mary, you should  
be nude for the sake of decency.

Your navel's black stone

exposed, eyes cast down,  
fingers busy with plaited hair. Let's cover  
the floor with bruised sand, introduce  
a vacant space

between your boyish thighs. The pitcher?  
Take it away. Boiling water can't dissolve  
the odour of this woman's desire.

The bath must

alter. Tip it up, let it open, mutate  
to a single-minded orifice that gapes at the heart  
of the composition. Or is it a ring?  
A hoop of wedded-metal.

Enough. I'll finish with an arched window,  
an urn set on a purple sill, artist's trap for a trio  
of wilted tulips, two-red-one-yellow.  
I end, I always end, with three.

## Primigravida

### *Before*

She was happy. Her body bubbled from its source -  
a river unaffected by dams or diversions.

She had a scar on her temple since childhood -  
it no longer mattered.

She thought of herself as 'possible'.

She ran like a dog let off the leash,  
round the paths of Victoria Park, her legs humming.

She knew she had the right to say no  
even when a prince unpinned her hair in the kitchen.

### *First Trimester*

She was happy, or sad, each morning her belly heaved  
as if trying to rid itself of the foetus.

She had a scar on her temple -  
it belonged to a fairy story she couldn't remember.

She thought of herself as possessed.

She ran along the Thames as if her arms were full of boxes  
husband latched to her side.

She knew her rights had changed but  
she couldn't find the paragraph with the detail.

*Second Trimester*

She was blooming, they said. Her breasts, two  
one-eyed monsters in milky dialogue with her womb.

She had a scar on her temple but no one  
not even her mother, paid it attention.

She thought of herself as an experiment.

She ran awkwardly like an unclipped dog with three legs  
close to the edge of the Regent's Canal.

She knew that rights and what was 'right'  
were two different stories, in a lifetime's collection.

*Third Trimester*

She was bursting. Her naked body a giant plum  
its wrinkled stone demanding an exit.

She had a scar on her temple. She scratched it  
to make it throb like it had before.

She thought of herself as context.

She ran, in her imagination, into the river and out  
the other side without getting wet.

She knew she didn't want a Caesarian but  
on the day of the birth it became - necessary.

*After*

She is empty. Her body wants back the baby  
cut out like Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf's belly.

She has a scar on her temple from where her mother  
hit her when she was seven. A small hand grazes it.

She thinks of herself as riven.

She runs after six weeks, east towards Hackney Marshes,  
her husband left behind with the tempest.

She is learning the knotted language of need. Longing  
pulses at her wrist, hers and her daughter's.



**The morning after a lie was born**

When we set off for Clissold Park, one stainless  
Sunday morning, the lie (I know this now) was just

new-born. You'd birthed him as the full-fat moon  
spurred light into a borrowed bedroom,

then washed his dangling limbs in whisky fumes  
and semen. Swaddled, you brought him

home at midnight. He lay between us till  
the rooster cried, a red-eyed laboratory

rat intent on getting fat on rancid milk.

His mouth froth-stopped. After I'd made you

bacon and egg, you slapped the drooling  
lie into the top pocket of your new-bought

Barbour jacket. Said, you'd had enough  
of questions, when would I start

believing? While the lie took a nap  
we walked beside the pond, threw burnt toast

to the solitary swan, whose whooping

woke the lie. Grown too leggy, already,

for the pouch in which you'd trussed him,

he dropped at your feet. Began wailing.