

Chekhov's Gun

Eight years old, and after much pestering,
my parents bought me a Swiss Army Knife,
finely weighted, with silver embleming
and more tools than I would need in my life.

Naturally, I set about slicing
gashes in an innocent bag, plastic
and branded with thistles. Not noticing
my exposed digits, the blade made drastic

arcs through white folds, which whispered on the heel
of the steel, then slowly filled with red ink,
when the bright curve opened up weeping flesh,

soft as breath. At first, I could barely feel
the loss of life seeping from tender skin
where I still wear a scar, still cheating death.

Anxiety

On the way back from hospital, we stop
off for lunch at that café on Sketrick.

The sun is full, the breeze sweet as pear drops,
the sky open, and my lungs free from clicks,

radio static and Morse code spelling
out my impending doom. We order drinks,
then watch through sparkling glass as a wellspring
of sunbeams plays catch-kiss on hills turned pink,

finger-painting tilled fields, hedges and stone
bridge bedecked in seaweed by the recent
storm. In a haze, I chase food round my plate,

ignoring a raincloud, at first alone,
then swelled by more, moving with sole intent
across the lough, like dark thoughts, filled with hate.

Olympia Splendid 66

They found the room at the top of crooked stairs,
sealed and forgotten, hidden behind a partition

of cross stitch and screen prints. A *pop*, then a *hiss*,
when they worked the obstruction free, and the loft

pooled with buttery light. They were not greeted
by cobwebs, pipistrelles and lungfuls of fusty dust

but by a phalanx of gleaming typewriters, ready
to receive eager fingers, pockmarked by engagement

rings and cigarette burns, each platen waiting
to be fed a crisp sheet of blank paper, each ribbon

impatient to tongue words onto the page, each
shelf empty... apart from one: a vintage device,

midnight black with ebony keys, nursing a solitary
folio, yellowed slightly at the corners, bearing

the same touch-typed phrase, over and over and over:
I ask nothing of you... only that you love me.

Cigarette Girl

It was never supposed to turn out this way:
a facsimile of discarded scraps;
a palimpsest, a half-remembered cliché.

She was bright, sparky, pretty enough to be sprayed
on the side of warplanes, so how did she wind up
wearing a pillbox hat and holding a tray

of light-up yo-yos, roses, chewing gum
and Home Run cigarettes, faking a smile
for handsy gangsters boasting about running rum

through the Canadian pipeline? Their well-thumbed
come-ons made her gag as she walked the aisles
of The Ruby Moon Club, legs sharp as shotguns,

a dab of Coco Chanel behind each knee.
Once, she flew away, like Dorothy or Dahlia,
from the backwards town they named that disease

after, all smiles, fizzing with hopes and dreams,
and later reappeared, floating like Ophelia
up the Hudson River, sparkling in the sunbeams.

The Projectionist's Hands

Slow but insistent as rain, the projectionist
makes his way to the magic booth, past the disused

piano, the pretty young girl selling candy,
and the owner's daughter sweeping up confetti.

He pads over carpets deep and red as the Nile
in that biblical one by Cecil B. DeMille,

and slips slim hands into cotton gloves, whisper thin,
to stop his skin from sticking to delicate film.

He unlocks the box sealed with asbestos and wax
to hold in fire should the nitrate reels ever catch

alight and burn up like napalm. Print is brittle
and must be handled with care: the slightest spittle

or dust makes it flare like sulfur mustard. He racks
twin projectors, gently lifts out the strip, and tracks

it on the spool. Light floods the auditorium.
Shadows dance and swoon inside the proscenium.

The audience gasps. Little do they know or care
how stock shoots across white hot carbon rods. He hears

it whirr, waits for cue dots, black circles marked with ink;
gauges the sweet spot with fingers dusted with zinc.

Perspective

Falling over the edge of sleep, and the mind chooses to spit out
a randomly selected image from the mental rolodex:
a horse, white as chalk, poking his muzzle through
a wrought iron gate to snaffle grass from the other side.

I cannot say why this picture comes back to haunt me
so frequently. Maybe it is the breeze ruffling
the horse's mane, white as porcelain, or the twitching
of the horse's ears, white as a cotton ghost,
so white that it appears more absent than present.

Or maybe it just the memory of a dream horse,
framed in ivory white between two stone pillars,
watched by a small boy from the back seat of his father's car.

Pareidolia

Funny how the mind, when still and idle,
drifts on a current of its own design,
returning to the familiar island
you never quite left but instead consigned

to somewhere between Patagonia
and Timbuktu. When you were much younger,
and hoodwinked by love and myopia,
you sought her face in ink blots and summer

clouds, or the way a seabird might angle
its wing. Though her eyes appeared clear and kind,
they were merely droplets shining on leaves,

or the breeze brushing through sharp brambles.
A candle in the dark, the flame twined
around the wick too tight to be uncleaved.

Altiplano, 1958

You must have felt so far from home that day,
stranded somewhere on the Peruvian plateau,
regarding a posse of useless men
arguing over how to change a tyre.

Sick with pregnancy and hypoxic air,
you were glad of the zephyr fluttering
your floral dress. The afternoon light had turned
silken but the air was dry, and the lozenge

of a language you did not understand
tasted bitter in your mouth, like dark chocolate
or the sweat collecting on your top lip.
The alien landscape, flat and barren

as the surface of the moon, stretched along
an uncertain road, drawing a zigzag line
between the rainforest and Great Ormond Street
until the wire tightened, grew taut, and snapped.

Camera Obscura

Supine, arms outstretched in a dream pool
 of womb warm apple grass and sunlight,
far from city roads and road rage windigos,
 I tilted my trembling head from left to right,
squinting at leaves that shrank, swelled and glimmered
 in and out of focus. Stalks, layers, fronds
and veins were filled with fluttering flames
 from God rays descending: blazing
but not consuming in the tractor beam
 piercing through a pinhole of branches
and clouds; a māngata on a twilight ocean
 that gifted a stolen glimpse of Heaven.

Phare

The farmer's field, viewed from the single-glazed
window of my childhood bedroom, was swathed

in downy darkness that fluttered, gently,
like stage curtains above drills of densely

packed soil. In fifteen second intervals,
an expanding circle of hibernal

light broke through a tear in the black fabric,
filling the dome with whispering cambric,

then drained out the same distant interstice.
Again and again, the dark acquiesced

to the winking beam from a tapered tower
cut from Anglesey marble and ashlar,

and mounted with balcony and beacon.
The dark is strong but light never weakens.