

Belfast Book Festival Mairtín Crawford Awards 2017 Poetry Winner Rosamund Taylor

The Names We Called You Meant Nothing to Me

We shouted witch

but inside I said meadow-sweet, hollyhock, clover. We said we'd peel off your skin but I dreamt of you taking me: the sky let you go and you landed between the laurel trees at the graveyard gate. You covered my mouth. Your hand light and dry as a moth.

In bed I imagined the smell of your cloak: lanolin and cobwebs; or the smell of the skin at your throat, sweet resin, sweat and wood smoke. I was so tender.

At harvest, the village set a fire and we chanted crone, hag, Satan's whore. I imagined dancing with you: our shadows, the flames and soft ash, the heat catching our faces, our throats. We were red and gold and impervious.

We didn't burn the oak tree though its roots circled our bonfire. It smelt green; it grew lichen. In the morning I found you there hung from a noose. The branch sighed. Your feet without their shoes. Your toes blue and small.

I was afraid, and then I remembered our names for you. *Witch*, I shouted.



Autism Spectrum Disorder, at Age 20

1.

The taste of the sewing-machine: a honey hum at the back of my throat. The vacuum cleaner shatters like glass in my mouth.

Blood doesn't flow easily, blood sets into an iron pattern, stains the drain and the square under the sink.

2.

On the light-switch by the door, the harvest-man is dead, his jumble of legs and wings translates into a shadow like French lace. My friend the harvest-man, a barrier between world and door, between my egg-shell and the tarmac glittering with cars.

3.

I am a gorilla, and they cage me with the flamingos, macaws. Such colour! I sit by myself, I put leaves over my eyes.

4.

Ferns coloured rust by this January wind. I make myself small in the mulch between tree trunk and concrete walls. Woodlice walk over my ankles.

In the supermarket, tomatoes pulse with light: I'm so hungry.

5.

I am getting better at not making a fuss. I put my hands in my mouth, the screams press against them like a Jack-in-the-Box drumming his head against the wooden lid.



The Light Comes in the Name of the Voice

(- Jeanne d'Arc, as quoted by Anne Carson in Variations on the Right to Remain Silent)

And in the end, only this moment. First the ash-pile, white, fine wood-ash, grimy ice, a grey noon. The pigs. Frost lacing the leaves. The girl with itchy thighs, cold nose. Then this moment. The voice. The light.

The light.

It did not flow like a muted shaft of sunlight in water; it wasn't like snow, snow at dawn, the white flecks on a fox's tail as it bounds in snow-ferns. Nor like the flash of a stoat at dusk overcoming a rabbit bigger than itself (though, like the stoat, it held everything in its jaws). It was not even like moonlight, like being thirteen, warm in a moonlit room, moon so full and bright it lies in long white beams, white shadows on the skin, skin melting into shadows as though there is no longer any space between self and moon. The light

was only like itself just as she was only Jeanne. Her breath a shape in the frost. Then this moment, only now, only ever the light and the voice. Wordless and complete.

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She was questioned. At her trial they said where does your voice come from do you hear it like you hear my voice when do you hear it do you hear it now. Does it echo. She could not answer, there were no answers, as there had been no songs, no angels, no shadows. Only light,

the girl transformed by light. After the trial it seemed to her the light had always been full of the smell of herself burning: her bursting lungs, her fried skin. The questions already licked her arms; behind the voice, her white ashes –

and somewhere she still knelt by the pigsty, hands tense as if searching for a sword.



Passage Grave

I'm in the dry centre of the passage grave looking at interlocking circles carved by stone-age hands when the guide tells us life expectancy was twenty-five.

I'm dead, then. The guide adjusts the electric light, creates a gold glow and asks us to imagine sunshine, December sunshine striking silent stone.

I imagine I'm Neolithic and pregnant, standing here, knowing I may die soon from wounds or childbirth. I'm taller than the other women. When we celebrate I

chew berries and paint my face purple with their juice. The women say I'm a wicked goddess. We laugh together in the dark; a woman kisses my stretched abdomen where the baby's head

distorts the skin. She kisses my foot, too, all its firm callouses. We laugh together in the dark among dry stones and I'm

standing in Newgrange and I imagine I'm already dead like all those who didn't—who stepped into the sea and went under, who never disgorged the pills. I have a year left, I have fifty, I watch

the electric light glow gold, imagine stone-age sunshine striking stone, and a December goddess laughing in the dark.



Twelve Dancing Princesses

Come back, come back right now, obey – they hear but begin to dance. Sleek as a knot of otters

they tumble in dew-sweet air until their slippers wear right through. Smooth soles

on smooth marble, they come apart from themselves like whales breaching and crashing back

against the sea. Light, dancing light. A comet on a long orbit around our star. Come back – they hear

as they dance, imagining a husband's weight, cool hands on warm waists. Stomachs starred with stretch marks, a baby

under the skin. But they forget. No way back, only further out, more stars, more space.



Detour (Leaving Edinburgh)

It took some time to admit we were lost. That a train could be lost. I always held my breath high in my chest until we crossed the Forth Bridge, when the firth swelled grey under us – the stretch, the too-wide stretch of waves and rock, the wet clouds bisected by red struts – and then I sighed, a rough gasp, every time, even in crowds, even on a 6am commute. But that day we never crossed, never edged cold beaches in Fife and, much later, the voice small and slivered, the announcement came: we were in Stirling. Life unsettled, we simmered on polyester seats.

> Then I saw the river. River and willow tree, grey shape of an old rowing boat, the beat of oars. The water was slow-moving that Sunday in September, the light thin. I was nineteen; I was in love. And I let go: I'd been holding that breath until I saw the river, the willow leaves falling onto the river.



When I Was Twelve

I did not conceive but still the child appears. Sometimes she's a turnip child, made from ruddy roots

and onions. Her face, white as the inside of a chestnut-shell, is only an impression of ears and nose, but perfect.

Sometimes a coal-cellar child, she comes sparkling with dust, her eyebrows gold, her tongue made of fossil ferns,

her cries the sounds of embers spitting on a hearth. A mushroom child, when I squeeze her, she spills spores

like a puff-ball, and she smells like a late-autumn orchard. She's the baby cursed by the witch in a fairytale

but she reminds me I never quickened, never grew heavy and limp with nausea, never split open like a nut. A toy child,

made from satin and cotton grown soft with time: now when she screams I don't curse her, I hold her to my breast.



Suddenly The Unicorns

The unicorns give us space to be ourselves. We were cut in pieces and put in metal boxes and we forgot our thumbs,

our eyes, our lungs, we forgot what it was like to breathe. Then the unicorns, a sudden darting black, sharp points in miles of sand

or a black eye at the centre of a dust storm. And the first time I touched you. Your skin pulsed like the sinuous heat of a unicorn

as she plunges through glaring streets. You were afraid and you opened to me, bruised limbs spilling from boxes, wet lungs gasping for safety,

and I remembered Sappho, I first held the black book in nine-year-old hands, read standing on one leg, her short lines lost in the bleak white landscape

of the page, but when I found her words they were wide open – the smell of sage, the smell of seaweed, the smell of a woman's dusty foot. The unicorn,

vivid, another universe crossing the page to give me space, this space to find you and watch your limbs knit themselves back together. Together

we're wild again, exposed as in a desert or on a bright street, sharp points in monotony and I kneel at your feet to lick the breath out of you, and back in.