

Dinner, Ningbo

Eating nightly in this tired port is becoming
less than we were promised. I thumb my tongue
around fungus and the spectral leavings of geese.
She sips tepid water from a gold-ringed mug.

Earlier we'd watched the sharp towers and black stone,
sodden with heat, spoke of sharing a buzzing behind the eyes
at night—we both take things we oughtn't. There are books
in her briefcase she knows nothing about, not even the titles,
but I remember stories long after the names have gone. A smart
lady in a black coat, with a small dog, a Dachshund or a Pekinese.
I could make a paper dog to float across the water, if I had the art.
A mania for that solo traveller, his clear expanse, makes me champ
till I draw cloud ear fibres from my teeth. We put down roots.

Badbeef

I chose the surname; I chose to be called
Mrs Badbeef. Do you love it? The little, sly women
of the heath and mouseholes all clapped, very solemn,
when they heard—it is good to be part of something,
It is a tonic. The smallest and the thinnest told me, over schnapps
that if not now, then when? And if not me, then who? She had
bare arms and a fine, silky moustache; I was embarrassed to serve her
the schnapps, of truly indifferent quality, for who knows
how discerning these women are? I lost the import of our conversation,
but said tamely that it would be a pleasure to serve—which I meant.
I saw us as two young girls, fishing for coins in the city fountains
For every coin you find, she said, the hospice serves one apple less,
and we plunged furious fists through the chemical shallows
Mrs Badbeef? I came, glowing, to myself, drawing the schnapps slowly
through my teeth, as though straining a syrup. I said frankly,
I'm afraid this is very poor stuff, then, are you sure you want
the likes of me for this? The smallest and the thinnest said, Oh,
none better. Duty. She placed the flat of her hand, which was like the face
of an embryonic calf, flush against the table; Duty. I saw
that in subsequent days, the hand would fall with greater velocity,
that the thin-stemmed, misty glasses would tremble, then snap,
that the gelatinous tone in which she now queried 'Mrs Badbeef?'
would become sinew, derisive statement of fact: *Badbeef!*
I saw this and still was powerless to retreat, I smelt the chlorine in my palm,
like glamour. I will, I said weakly to the smallest and thinnest.
I resolved to buy fine meat and drink.

Pastoral

1.

I was born after four brothers, precisely when
I am yet to learn. They rear us in the cleft
between two mountains, in the brown
of indifferent countryside, where we shuck lake trout,
arching our arms with the knife as though aiming a bow.
Our insides are vaulted with tiny bones, stained
with watermint which grows like clouds, I suck
the tips of my brothers' fingers like a young lamb,
I put seed husks and stones
in my pocket. *And just watch*, says Mother sourly,
how they do not grow. Father is as tall as our lake
is deep, our lake a black ovoid, a flat gong against which
he sounds himself, green and clear. I will never be as tall,
I think; I eat too little fish, I lack a young man's ambition.

2.

My brother's children grew like corn I couldn't keep track, I
caught one between my knees, Martha, I said, Martha, will you tell me -
This is Sean. Sean, the mother said in a high voice she put a cup
in my hand I felt that if I stared long enough
at the meniscus I
would see sky in its interior, would see
the green heart of the air. Where, then
is Martha? I challenged my sister, my brother's wife, some

poor species of a sister. Ah, I thought, she doesn't meet my eye,
something is amiss I nodded once I
was confabulating with my cup
in the absence of trustworthy conversation I
swear, Martha, I swore to the porcelain disc in my palm,
I will get to the bottom of this.

3.

Something jumps in the lake, the lake
has a bloodbeat and if you know this, you are
a rarefied person. By the shore
a girl hosts arachnid chatter; the pain
of bees moans in her belly, a dolorous fly
courts the mulch of her face. Amid this slack
mirth the lake pulses,
it ticks with its thousand grains of matter.

4.

The youngest was *oh so young* when she left.
I keep a green flame burning, small and sore
to show how her leaving hurts us. I am getting
smaller everyday here and I say, *she is
growing as I shrink*. She sits at a chrome counter,
orders hot chicken with napkins, ketchup,
a flock of salt - if that's how you make your dinner,
you can't help but grow strong. She has taken

the milky heart of the bird meant for me,
she is stringing the white heart to pieces,
and I am not bitter.

Martha and I sit by the lake, wringing our hands.

We share a temperament very calm, very knowing.

Sardines

And though there's nothing particularly wrong with me,
I don't think love is the answer. I loose a clod of sardines
into the bowl and watch each silver streak pant for the rim.

Loose coins coat the bottom of my bag – Lord, always
unearthing, always patting down. I didn't crave too fine a silt
but the tiny vertebrae dissolve so slowly

and after all, I am fastidious, pasting mulch
with the flat of a spoon. I dismiss impossible bones
as the scales shrink to grey, like panic subsiding.

Sunday, very early morning

These last days in the compound are slow and pleasant.
Ants boogaloo to distant explosions,
I sip liqueur from a thin-stemmed glass.
Things are blooming hectically inside of me
Inside of, I like these Americanisms,
their childish twang. I put a thumb
to the broad, orange shoulder of Abschnitt
My beloved, my faithful one. His mouth
a hoop of black mesh, his body bashful putty
under the stripes and epaulettes. I have learnt
to live with the heat, have learnt the habit
of success. I bristle; I don't bleat, I sweat, I don't sleep
through the night, though Abschnitt—
he dozes, now and then. We have been such
friends, these thirteen years His head wobbles
on its slim cord; his laughter flickers in my gut.
The jagging daylight suggests retreat,
while the tree drops her fruit with a grunt, while Abschnitt fizzes,
privately.

Beyond our watchtower—

What am I saying?

The earth, he prickles.