

Joining the women

The invitation comes at last
to bring his young and second wife
to lunch with his old friends.

He soothes her fears with water
under the bridge, good people,
and homegrown vegetables.

But persuades her only
with recycled endearments
and assiduous lovemaking.

The women's arms are folded.
They smile at her with closed lips
and are busy with the children.

The men have firm handshakes.
They laugh and open bottles
and slap each other's backs.

They want to show him the sheep
– an old breed, very rare.
Of course, she says. I'll stay and help.

She can hear the women laughing,
finds them gathered in the kitchen,
rosy from wine and the Aga's heat.

They have peeled and sliced vegetables,
anointed lamb with oil and herbs
and now pierce it in appraisal.

I like it pink, one says,
pink and tender,
blood on the point of her knife.

Unsuccessful Dates #1

I go swimming with the glazier;
Me, I'm a craftsman, he says,
you wouldn't believe the skill
it takes to cut glass.

He is an indifferent swimmer,
but I praise his strokes,
afraid the chip on his shoulder
could open his skin,
draw blood, attract sharks,
although there are none
unfortunately, nor pirates,
but cowboys are everywhere.
Not him, he has been trained,
he is in the association.

I feel for the cowboys, forced
by economic necessity
to abandon the wide prairie
for the tight fitting of windows
and exterior doors.

We are on the beach now,
and he's disappointed I will believe
that glass is made from sand.

I know he wants me to ask him
about diamonds, so I don't.

He tells me he is going
to start up on his own,
and will finish that way, I expect.

The woods are full of princes

All older sons, once handsome and rich, ex-favourites,
too ashamed to go home after their failed quests.

They all have a story, it's the same story; lost out
to youngest brothers or poor but honest farm-boys.

They hang out at The Gingerbread House, it's a bar now.
Gretel took over, she reckoned the witch owed her.

Her sauerkraut is legendary, although she doesn't
serve wurst in deference to the three little pigs.

The two youngest pigs drink a lot, play dominoes
with the wolf, who's getting on. They all get along now.

There's no huffing or puffing allowed, though sometimes
the princes start with the *shoulda, woulda, coulda*.

Mostly they just tell their stories, eat their sauerkraut
or noodle soup, drink slow beers and fast schnapps,

sometimes they play five-a-side against the wolves
or the fairies, who are tougher than anyone thinks.

It's not the life they expected but it is a life. At night
they sleep like Beauty under faded ermine cloaks.

My mother told me

about a girl who hit her mother. I don't know
how many times, it may have been just the once
but that was enough to curse her forever.

I can't remember if I actually hit my mother
or just really wanted to, I think the intention
was enough to get me into trouble.

My mother hit me but that was ok,
I deserved it and it was for my own good
but it was always bad to hit your mother.

This girl died. I don't think they killed her
bad things happened to bad people often
in the olden days, maybe it was measles.

Loads of children died then, there was more of them,
they probably weren't even that sad about it.
They had a funeral anyway and buried her

and the next day her hand stuck up out of the grave
so everyone knew she was a mother-hitter,
though I'm not sure why it mattered at that stage.

There must have been some sort of resolution
but I can't remember the ending, at a guess
I'd say they just beat the hand into submission.

Like honey I am sticking

I have spread across the marble worktop,
oozed into the crevices between the tiles,
run down the walls, dripped and soaked
into the soft furnishings, I have cohered here.

Mild abrasive won't remove me or soft soap.
Louise Gluck wrote—*How privileged you are
to be passionately clinging to what you love,*
but it's not passionate to stay, it is orderly.

The air is scented, the floorboards shine,
here is a laden table, solid chairs,
a bed of blank linen, an open door,
admitting and denying.