

David Constantine – five poems

Moon

Under compulsion when the moon turned murderous
Coldly we walked out during the white hours
Who should have kept ourselves indoors for warmth
Asking of one another only mercy.

Sweetheart, I pleaded, under this hag moon
We must say nothing and look upon nothing.
Come in and sleep now or we shall convert
Our universe to ash and ice and stone.

Her hung and bitter face setting against me,
Look everywhere, she said, once and for all
And speak of everything and show me if you can
Some love still living under my truthful moon.

Turning to look I gave our fields to ash,
I creased the brows of hills with lines of stone,
I struck the wincing surface of our lake,
I wrinkled every stream. In silence then

Standing triumphant by the sobbing ice
I cupped my hands in trickling dust for her
Whom fever shook. Moon love, she said,
This being done how will you warm me now?

"Moon" appears in the collection *Watching for Dolphins*, Bloodaxe Books, 1983.

Soldiering On

We need another monument. Everywhere
Has Tommy Atkins with his head bowed down
For all his pals, the alphabetical dead,
And that is sweet and right and every year
We freshen the whited cenotaph with red

But no one seems to have thought of standing her
In all the parishes in bronze or stone
With bags, with heavy bags, with bags of spuds
And flour and tins of peas and clinging kids
Lending the bags their bit of extra weight –

Flat-chested little woman in a hat,
Thin as a rake, tough as old boots, with feet
That ache, ache, ache. I've read
He staggered into battle carrying sixty pounds
Of things for killing with. She looked after the pence,

She made ends meet, she had her ports of call
For things that keep body and soul together
Like sugar, tea, a loaf, spare ribs and lard,
And things the big ship brings that light the ends
Of years, like oranges. On maps of France

I've trailed him down the chalky roads to where
They end and her on the oldest A to Z

Down streets, thin as a wraith, year in, year out
Bidding the youngest put her best foot forward,
Lugging the rations past the war memorial.

Cycladic Idols

In the night there were owls, so close
One on the chimney pot calling back
As though she had found me and were summoning the others.

The flat white face has visited again.
I warm my hands on coffee in a fired clay.
This bitter morning I am willing to listen.

Grow up, she says.
Your grown-up son was right not to sleep with me.
He has a healthy fear. Grow up yourself.

You will never see me in the flesh
Only in the bone.
Your eyes are incorrigible

As though a nipple in each would cool your migraine
Likewise your hands
Small and ugly and with bitten nails

As though one laid on my public bone would warm me through
Will they never learn? Again and again:
Where I belong is never warmer than moonlight

You had no right to fetch me in
I do not belong on your pillow
Your son was right to turn my face to the wall.

Owls are friendlier. I hug myself
For cold and nobody else
And nobody hugs me.

'Mid-afternoon in another narrow bed'

Mid-afternoon in another narrow bed
High up in another thin hotel
Now they are watching swifts crossing the snow
And higher, higher criss-crossing the blue.

Freed of their own they think the swifts' hunger
A love of life, and life all play,
All bodying forth some consummate ability
For the love of it, in freedom. Later when they go down

On the choking streets to seek a sharp red wine,
Succulent bitter olives, soft white bread
And oranges, and when they hear
The caged birds hung on balconies as though to test the air

Each in its shaft of sun
Singing as though to burst the heart and the cage
These two seeking their nourishment when they please
By that trapped singing will feel their hunger raised

Higher than the highest floor of their flung-up hotel,
Higher than the ravenous swifts, higher than the snow
Into the blue itself, the keen
Cold infinite and insatiable blue.

'Mid-afternoon in another narrow bed', 'Cycladic Idols', and 'Soldiering On' appear in The Pelt of Wasps, Bloodaxe Books, 1998

Shabbesgoy

Daylight still, a green sky. At lighting-up time
There was already the thin beginning of a moon, and one star
So that from the streets that smelled of the gasworks and coalfires
And gasps of fighting beer and because of the abattoir
Almost rural he went with clenched fists, wishing hard

Over the river that only transfusions from the factories
Kept going. Or it was winter, fog

In which he left her safe by the street lamp nearest home
Shaped and illumined and vanished immediately
Towards the hospital, its thousand smeared windows.

Him, you. You do not remember, but I say
That on the hill at the big houses waiting for a lamplighter
Or a firemender they never had anyone luckier than you
The boy courting, radiant, burning, for that small service
Out of his trance of vows and wishes accosted courteously

At the gate, passer-by, who lifted his head that wore
The new moon and her star or shone from the drizzled fog
With the aura of apparition. How queer the rules are
High on the slopes above the dead river,
How quick and simple were your offered hands.

'Shabbesgoy' was published in *Poetry Review* in September, 1998.