

Whiteout

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Whiteout: a meteorological-psychological phenomenon, often experienced by skiers, where diffused light conspires with snowfall to effect a disorientating blurring of coordinates. Familiar horizons evaporate; ground and sky collapse into an alien canvas.

Our project embraces that state of vital folding, evaporation, collision. Authorship is located at a vanishing point; the poems in this volume exist in the gap between two names, in a space between single authorship, shared authorship and anonymity. Locating themselves on the interface of disciplines, these poems are *alloys*, collapsing the languages and images of science, religion, love, and art. But they aim for a creative blurring as the prelude to a radical recomposition and refocusing of vision. Indeed, this volume fiercely *fights* whiteout, as the poem “22 Tormentil” puts it, aiming for a stinging clarity against the page’s snowfall. Temperature-wise, they are cool; their tang, metallic.

We began with a clear sense of what we didn’t want these poems to be. They were to reject sentiment in favour of a detached, furious stillness. They were not to indulge an unfolding narrative of crisis; their voice was to be personal-impersonal. The reader was meant to feel suspicious of any easy emotional response. And yet these were not to be clinical, sterile “studies” after the event; on the contrary, they arrest moments of high drama, home in on the unexpected detail, cast themselves as both still lives and moving images.

Many of these poems are conundrums, compressed vignettes and tableaux; and yet we hoped they would open out, like zip-files. Combining an emphasis on the local and particular – both geographical and emotional – with political undertones, the poems in this collection seek to address the reader in a voice that is both tricky and human, self-aware and self-effacing, playful and deadly serious.

The opening poem is entitled ‘Edgework’, and the concept of edgework is one that is exploited fully throughout *Whiteout*, and beyond, into our more recent collections. *Whiteout* offers a poetics of the edge: line-endings are deployed as a border-space where strange things happen. We were attracted to these micro-sites as punning terrain, in which a word might glint in different directions during that free fall from line to line. In deciding on lineation, therefore, we actively looked for those white spaces of polyvalence. The other effect aimed at is that of the vertiginous line break, where the hyphen marks the hinge, fissure or pivot to reveal the inner lives, histories and ambitions of words.

A group of poems in the collection respond to visual images, often in a revisionary spirit, thus making the poem a performative space, where familiar dramas are restaged, where hidden or suppressed energies are brought to light. Our project was to decentre, to find new centres.

Many of these poems demonstrate a technique of immersion, whereby poems are dipped in the vocabularies of a particular discipline or discourse. The effect aimed at is defamiliarization, to pull something into strange light through sheer force of technical language; however, it also works the other way, as these poems seek both to domesticate that 'bespoke' lexis and to preserve its otherness, so as to achieve an effect akin to the uncanny.

Four Poems with Commentaries

'Death of a Starling'

The performance of death haunts poems in *Whiteout* – even (perhaps most especially) those poems that go for a lighter, more jocular and ironic purchase on their subject. 'Death of a Starling' is, as so many of my own poems in this volume are, a 'record' of an actual event or experience: a sparrowhawk's hundred-mile-an-hour stoop into the strawberry tree in my garden where it had spied a starling. In tune with the 'edgework' of the volume, the linebreaks set up expectations only to thwart them (the 'sparrow' of the opening line suddenly transformed into its raptor nemesis, 'sparrowhawk'. And the voice is both involved and distanced, the lyric persona one who is ornithologist, art lover and would-be mechanic.

Death of a Starling

The sparrow-
hawk – lean Stuka, payload
of instinct – came in on
a botched line
through the strawberry tree,

sent its starling bouncing
absurdly under
the parked car, the cac-

ophony of its fall
being how birds scream.

There, there,
 its wire
leg was a mad
seismograph, scrawling
its little death on the air
under the fatty axle,

kaput primaries
fanning out against
the moving stipples.

'Hands'

So many poems in *Whiteout* worry away at an object, trying to decode it and make it speak. This is the perennial challenge of ekphrastic poetry, of course, Keats's trouble with the urn. I came across a rhyme etched in slate on the gatepost of a Pembrokeshire farm on the final night of a summer holiday. It was a conundrum out of which a questing, questioning poem emerged, quieter and more personal than many of my other contributions to the volume, and written, despite the penchant for punning that's still in evidence, in a voice that's allowed to lapse – if that's the word – into the personal.

Hands

*William Lewis
Healing hand power
Greater than Dewi Sant
And British Empire.*

(Inscription on a slate plaque near the gate of Rhos-y-Cribed farmhouse, St David's Peninsula, Pembrokeshire)

Such hubris, William Lewis, or humour;
either way, the nerve of it, here
in the saint's back yard. Your words?
You nicely rhyme awry, disturbing empire's
claim to power. But on this last evening
of the holiday, in this peninsula's coasting
light, it's hard to trust your art
and conjure you from braggart slate.

And, Mr Lewis, conjure may
of course be quite the word. I see
some late-Victorian phony, trading
on the wizardry of place, some old bone to pick
with Power. Or real rural magus, bone-
setter, mender of animals and men, easer
of women's hurts, tapered hands
as in that sketch by Dürer. But William,

I'm outside your house and you
may very well be in, pacifying
a soldier from the base at Brawdy, healing
that lady from the bank who looked
unloved and spent. The slate gives all and nothing
quite away, surprised me with a song
that is a laying on of hands.

'Leda and the Swan'

Several *Whiteout* poems are engaged in close conversations with other works – both within and beyond the volume. If our approach was geared towards clearing imaginative space, we had no wish simply to reject 'the tradition'. 'Leda and the Swan' responds in the first instance to a painting by German artist, Karl Weschke – in whose canvas the process of reclaiming a Leda who emphatically refuses the status of victim has already begun. It's also engaged with two other poems on Ovid's myth. The first, 'Pen Drawing of Leda', was written at the end of the nineteenth century by Aunt and Niece collaborators known collectively as 'Michael Field' – *their* joint project stands in intriguing relation to our own. The second is W. B. Yeats's famous poem, which *itself* may be involved in a reading of Field's lines. (Yeats championed Michael Field, and included their work in his 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*).

Leda and the Swan

(Painting by Karl Weschke, 1986)

Nothing's taken
from this Leda: torso-
colossus breaking the water,
neck bent on business,
shoulders wound
to sling celestial power –
arse an affront
to the curious.
 And the swan,
quite out of his depth,
caught by the unutterable jut.

'Vorrest'

The eight sections of 'Vorrest' printed here became Part 1 of a longer poem in a post-*Whiteout* collection, *The Fossil-Box* (2007). 'Vorrest' reflects on my upbringing in the Forest of Dean, and the poem shuttles between three time-frames: boyhood; journeys back to the forest's strange ground as a teenager at around the time when my grandparents died; and more recent, imaginative returns to the 'gravity of trees'. The poem explores the forest's uncanny – 'uncanny' in Freud's sense of being familiar and utterly alien at the same time. This familiar otherness, felt in the title itself – 'Vorrest', not 'Forest' – is evoked by dipping the poem into a very particular word-stock that was once part-and-parcel of Forest life, something the Forest bequeaths. Readers may not now recognize elements of this lexis; however, the use of unfamiliar terms is part of a deliberate attempt to recreate my own sense of various alienations – geographical, emotional, linguistic.

Vorrest

1.

I have returned to the forest's legerdemain –
its green conjury – for new paths through
the gravity of trees, new treadways
over the spoils of its worked sections;

to browse the clints and grikes and thin soils
that suckled, forged character and foible,
cemented synapse and junction. I have returned
to dig down, layer and label; break apart.

What slips through conifer stands
across the derelict bed of track? Deer or hare,
scoped by goshawks flapgliding over scoriae
and clinker? Or other, older company?

2.

The drive to this place is a journey
in old time – massless and unphysical
through the disused mineral loop at Moseley Green,
with its ghosts of woebegone wagons;

and water-logged routes beside the Lyd
in Norchard's gales; along the Dean road
that runs to Ariconium, where masters smelted
arms for legions; past Staunton's stones –

the Toad, Broad, and dislodged Buck
of Buckstone Hill, and wooded scarps
where moss feathers oolitic walls. Time dilates,
extending like moons the half-life of my adventure.

3.

They planted squatter cottages and low farm buildings around meanders and tributaries of the Wye, hidden in frames of orchards, beech and alder cloaking the valley slopes,

shelterbelts for settled margins. I hunker, too, among matured coppice, worked wood elevated into high supports of trees? What slow-burning, charcoal

fealty do I owe these vales and folds, these lapped ways, their shales and sandstones? What deep time has leached into the bands and joints of rocks?

4.

There was no name for the hewn scowles we dared not enter – bare rents of rock thatched with ferric yew drawn to the iron in unfathomed lime below. Seven-year boys, we bounded over felled tops

and lops of commissioned trees, kicking daddocky windfall above the haematite pits of New Dunn and Old Sling, those slow, elbowing ways, into unfenced leg space,

canopied airways widening in the essential forest, where boreal larches nurse lea oaks into cordwood, through piney crests and over rings of lamina shale – no verderer to check our unchartered, off-piste ways.

5.

Each way along the roads between the forest's thick fingers registers the pull of remote syntax. Names like *Speech House* – incalculably dreadful signs of as far from home

as it was possible to go, unfeasible miles from the slag and broken cottages lining paths along the Straits, where thin fields of bracken suck through anaemic root at mineral soils.

6.

It's shrinking, margins closing in on deciduous
broadleaf, already fringed with needle
and cone. The canopy caught my fancy.
Once, no more than fifty feet behind parents

photographing unpollarded limbs, terror dug in
deep and I cried for the feathered light.
Later, the sudden right hand through the fern
seemed differently placed with each orbit of the trees

as we drove the old Austin to the new house.
Grancher raised it with Moses, his father, the mason.
It stuck out with ashlar, faced with frogs. The cider press
made me feel good: sharp apples on fusty hessian,

the sodden barrels, the quiet tacit time with the miner.
I didn't work at his forest burr, compressing
the stretched vowels automatically. Over the road
from the bays, vegetable rainforest. Runners

loped up poles; broadbeans squat, defiant; cabbage
heads peering above their trenches. Tucked away,
a wooden lid in the ground. I prised at an edge
with my boot, watched the appalled heave of worms

at work in the sucking vat – an endless seam of shit,
this deep working. We spoke once, the miner and I,
about the underworld, colour television blaring in the bayed
front room. I asked how it was, and the long ton

delivered by the Board seemed small recompense.
I watched him haul radiant chunks from his windowless
shed – scuttle the glossy stones with a practised whoosh
of the worn shovel – lean one hand on the wall

as if to hear the coal again – feel the gangers' voices – working
the gale – The Horse, Little Horse, Low Fault – this friable
domestic seam. Nineteen-eighty-three, when the forest
slipped shape – unkempt, flaking at the gable end.

7.

Aunty Gwen was new to me. I was pronounced
my dad's son. There was talk of Uncle Albert,
Grancher's brother – blew up in the war –
whose eyes and nose I got. Their forest brogue,

its slow substance a living thing, a cove of sound.
Other words fell flat before the corpulent dip-
thongs. The village hymns I could almost believe –
slow and ancient like ringwidths

of the forest's floating chronology. Abide with me
and the old hundred of St Briavel for the free
miner. My dad sang, and I trebled. The priest's
hands blessed as we rose from our borrowed pews –

sloped out speechless under the church's fluent
roof. No stone, just a flat pedestal with a lid –
unadorned except for name and dates –
a raw plug in the earth. I drifted, detached

from the semicircle of mourners, relative
to their grief – and heard and felt chlorophyll surge
through the veins of trees older even
than the old butty with his thees and thous.

8.

New sheep – not born under oaks but brought in
after the cull – don't get the forest's green code;
stroll across the resinous white, lose themselves quite
in the long ox-bowling ways. The old battle-lines –

commoners and incomers, labour and leisure.
Not sure now where I stand. I've avoided it for years,
kept it in reserve, its customs abrading like road markings,
retrospective beads all but worn away.

Redshifting from the forest, delayed by my own
momentum, I'm still – or am another time – a boychap,
seeing forms and faces in the trees. I cast my eye up
to the hanging question marks that could be bats.