

The Abbat

Abbat (æ·bət), *n.* [- OE. *abbod* – eccl.L. *abbas*.] **1.** He who or that which abates; beats down, destroys. **2.** Spiritual overseer of the slaughter of animals; see ABATTOIR

A small man in white, he drinks the early silence
and the clean smell of absence, as a prayer.

Later, he stirrups her, one foot first in chains,
gravity easing her sway through the strange angles

of this afterwards, the darkness falling to the swaying
censer of her head. Under her hide, long-dead

flies land again upon the ghost of skin; tiny charges fleck
her hulk. Under his hand her warmth is flesh again,

he's flushed and twitched away the noisy fear
with which she cracked his bright, clean day.

He's grown accustomed to the snapping fat and skin;
unseamed then pulled away, a conjurer's tablecloth:

what's left's a tremor and a glistening anticlimax.
He has already felt the quiet crunch of skull,

the capture-bolt, the cradling crush, the too small
sound, the recoil of a life into his shoulder. Each

time he hears again the childhood jangle of the altar
bell, ticks off the time from crush to carcass

to the count of beads: three decades and one *Glory Be*
will see the job get done. He stands alone at close of day,

quietness restored. Before he switches off the light,
he yawns a mute O of expectant tongue and tastes the fug

of flesh and blood, swung sweetly through the solemn
air. Lights out. He tells himself it's really bread and wine.

Swallowed

The first was a chip of stone like a shrew's front tooth
in the bowl of his hand. Tongue-tip, chink past teeth,
disappeared. He licked

at small flint pieces, tasting coolly of sweat: more flesh than earth.

Next was a round brown pebble, an unboiled,
unsweet sweet lodged in the arch of his mouth.

Swallow.

He coughed, felt it shift – a stately jewel slid down his gullet. He raced
another, gulped twice, listened for the clink.

The day clocked on, busied with the empty things of days.
Woke to the humming night: the heating pipes; her breathing and the
hallway light.

Raised two fingers as in blessing,
brailled his body for their trace, counting through the schoolroom words:
oesophagus and pharynx, lumbar, spleen.

They seemed lonely turning through his tissue folds.
He stumbled to a plant-pot, glass in hand, prescribed a regimen of grit. Lay
back, smiling as the bile rose up his throat.

Slept right through.

He stooped three times between the bus and work, then nodded
through the sliding doors with pockets like a Colditz escapee. *Will you
excuse me?*

he enquired through the day, found secret spots.
Soon, he'd dispensed with water, swallowed fists of stones quite straight.

He waddles, pockets weighted like a bridge-jump suicide. Hears, inside,
the ring of rubble when he stands: a walking cairn
marking a path he neither sees nor understands.

His heart grows geologically slow. Become tectonic, the clock
unravels through his loosened days. *Upon this rock.*

The earth inherits him.

Air comes and goes. *There is no absence at the core of me.* His
mouth

cracks open and, with each rough meal, he grows.

The Isles of Dogs

A river flowed from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided to make four streams... The third river is named the Tigris, and this flows to the east of Ashur. The fourth river is the Euphrates. Yahweh took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it.
Book of Genesis

A small brown bag, three unsmoked Camels,
a pocketful of change and moments to spend,
a man arrives at a scattered South Bank bookstall.
An unpromising haul: a creased Penguin, whose loose
pages take flight from chapter twelve, something quarter bound
in French, a satchel-scented Latin primer and another relic:

The Golden Book Picture Atlas, volume four.
Some pages still bathed in the sunset tones of a pink gin,
on others, borders stiffly rise in iron. He flits from holy lands,
past that holiday in Goa, to Granddad's Suez tales.
Then the scattered headline names of this young century,
freshly slid from the cracked shell of Mesopotamia.

Jewelled Baghdad is snaked through by the swift Tigris
in a shape so like our own. A young city,
rising in the west, spreading to a slack-looped noose,
like the Isle of Dogs, as if the Thames had flowed off course:
our cities a double exposure;
Pangaeian fragments; lost continents, that waited

for our seismic age to lock horns and rut;
some bloody paper chain of names and stories
turned back upon themselves. A quiet kiss
finds his craned neck, tells him time is up.
The bag takes the book and a hand takes a hand,
two figures wander downstream, to the distracted bend –

past three girls thrilling with terror up the shingle,
frothing in a boat's small wake; past a halted, roofless
double-decker; past a diffident, helmeted man who looks
through last week at loss; past a roadblock; past a quiet shoe
drifting to shore; past a solitary, deep pocketed smoker.
Two waterways, strung like irregular heartbeats

across the tight chests of two cities, roar in the coming dusk.

Of or pertaining to a raven

My throat's a fist that grips a coarse sandpaper song.
I quoth, forever, *Nevermore!* Am something like a writing desk.
DC Comic vixen in the mix with Lou Reed concept album
(gone preposterously wrong). Pebble-eyed, face grotesque;

black-haired beauties go by my name nonetheless. After rain,
Noah sent me out to take the air, but I took fright mid-flight,
and off I flew. To the Cynic Rabbi, pondering, I brought grain,
he crushed it, on shabbat. *Consider*, he said, between bites,

how they do not reap or sow. (Leviticus 11: to eat me is a sin).
To keep old England safe my blackface caws off all invaders
from the Tower's high white walls - I'm nationalism on the wing.
They called me Hugin, Munin perched on Odin's shoulders,

I was John Peel's real name. I perched on Cnut's soggy throne
and watched the waves wash flightless feet. One cry
from me, the gulls all scattered into sky. In Bhutan,
I'm God Mahakala and long before he rode on fire and sky

I fed Elijah meat and bread. I'm trickster and creator god of Haida.
300lbs of heavy tattooed wrestler. Battle standards bore my face
in Hastings when, to make an arrow's point, history was made,
Harold Hadrada fell. In Kamchatka, they know my place:

Divine Kutkh. Wings that splay with claws that flay; my hook
of beak will tear your flesh. Carrion king: eat eyes out of your head.
I watch your meagre slice of time with blinking, sideways look –
make history with a flap of wing. Outlast all. I peck and time runs red.

Stone House Asylum, 1932

*He trod, in a way we who were sane could not emulate, the lanes and fields
he knew and loved so well, his guide being his finger tracing the way on the
map... he had Edward as his companion in this strange perambulation and
he was utterly happy* Helen Thomas

Private Gurney, no. 3895, at ease.
Unnoticing, unnoticed by the grinning choir who shriek
and shit, idle through the hours, slack-limbed with slacker minds,

that crack and melt the days. His spare frame,
framed at the window, almost inhabits
the great wit near to madness. Until this bawdy band

strikes up: no romance here. Yet still, some days rise clear
as the bright air above the sweet silt at Framilode
until, like crows at dawn in the scant yard,

terrors arrive upon the hour, whistling down the unseen wires,
with fresh news from the front as clouds roll in.
His green eyes scan the grey imagined skyline for the sniper

who knocked Lieutenant Thomas to the mud.
Round eyes, eager as foxes beneath bold brows
tap out a morse code in memoriam.

The widow comes, strong, sight failing,
heart and arms wide-full despite the years.
Quietly, she unfolds Edward's packages of summer days

creased along the yellow spines of an old map.
She spreads their youth upon the iron bed
as if, beneath the ordinance of loss, all three can walk together:

cross the byways of their grief, unbrick the walls,
trade back a life, a mind, a love,
and journey to remembered streams.

Geese sound above their heads, veiling the skies
from unheard mortar fire. Bearded barley grows
from the cracked floors of the cell and catches the wind

in a rush of mirth. From Abbleimont and Arras to
Brimcombe, Maisemere, Leaden Banks, beneath fingertips,
inches become acres as the years unwind;

they bound up hillsides, tripping
and whooping down river banks,
under lark song, in the evening's thin bright triumph.

The East Coast Line

Rapeseed's yellow freckling rises
like a bruise on the fields.

Terraces blush –
their cosy rows concede to grey fists
of border towns.

Under the bristling shadows, in the evening
of the undrawn map we run

late. In each pocket, the flinty syllables of a Highland name grown
soggy-strange in an English mouth.

Going home?

Going home?

Going home?

asks the trail of the tracks.

I am shaving in a cubicle
like a coffin, peering
remorselessly close.

We cross the silent border
without cause to tremble
over clumsy points:

no movement flecks the mirror
from unopened skin.
No heat to trace a line across the glass.