

CLIFF FORSHAW

Four Poems

Wings

“Of shapes transformed to bodies strange, I purpose to entreate...”

(Beginning of Arthur Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

“Dr Joe Rosen of the Dartmouth Medical Centre and ex-scientific advisor to NASA believes that within five years he will be able to graft wings onto a human body. An American circus-artist called Enigma has already had horns made of coral implanted in his skull. Each year he has progressively larger implants to stretch the skin.”

(Johann Hari, *Guardian* 11 March 2002. The first four stanzas are based closely on Dr. Rosen’s own words or his ideas as reported in Johann Hari’s *Guardian* article.)

We use this rack to stretch torso fat,
rejig rib bones to create a wing.
Soon they will resemble angels,
have full sensation in their new boned flaps
of hanging flesh.

Bodies change and, of course, the brain
is infinitely mouldable.
If I were, say, to give you wings,
you would, quite literally, develop a winged brain.
You find that strange?

I welcome this conference,
but, my fellow doctors, I feel I must ask:
Why do we value only the average?
Why are we, as plastic surgeons,
dedicated merely to restoring
our current notions of the conventional?

—As opposed to letting people explore,
if they want, the possibilities?
Only our Judaeo-Christian conservatism
holds us back. We must become more.

*Our basic unit's bone.
We overcome, or else we die.
With these new wings, of course,
you will not, still, be able to fly.*

Country Matters

Long faces nosing over stable doors,
a line of trophy heads and watchful eyes;
shifting haunches, the hum of piss and straw;
horse-whiff, ancient must, oiled saddle leather.

Old sweat-twisted *tack*. I've heard the word, it fits
What's trestle-slung or perched on pegs; leather
tongues those *yah-yah* girls fiddle through clasps;
country matters; stirrups, girths notched up tight.

The bustle of big fillies—all teeth and arse
and whip. Shrug off my worn old biker leathers,

flicked crop juddering against my plastic boots,
and in borrowed jodhpurs, not quite Mr. Darcy

but, good thighs and bollocks, I can strut
through breeding, flesh—appreciate a damn good seat.

Spurs

The bit's shine frothed and crusted green: this big
shy face, a secret whispered in her ear.
So many hands of new and nervous mare
—eighteen, nineteen? I wouldn't know, but *huge*.

Saddle up, then lead her out. And at the box,
check girth for slippage, the stirrups' notch.
Swing leg over, mount. Take up the slack.

Thumb frayed reins. She's slow, grumping back
to straw, the water pail... I kick,
she snorts, clops into a disgruntled trot.

Thwack her useless bump and grind, but the crop
Can't fire her. Slide out the stirrups.
The stable-hand distracts her with a carrot,
fits shiny traps to my bootheels. Spurs.

Pumpkin

1

All last week, the same old joke
cracked that face up. He swung for us,
the burning Bogey, this pumpkin bloke.

Hacked out chops, no arty fuss,
these little triangles for nostrils, eyes.
weren't meant to last or gather dust.

Set light, the kids strung him up high,
lynched him briefly from a rafter.
Little priests, they swung him like a censer;

the smell of burning wax wafting
up as air hissed through his sawn-off crown,
turned gallows grin to hollow laughter.

All Hallows, we cut him down.
Three nights, he glowered in the dark,
then guttered, more malcontent than clown.

Now, suddenly that gourd's gobsmacked.
The bite that was incised in light's
a gurning mouthful of gummy black.

The hackneyed grin hacksawed in white,
the one that made light of death's
now toothless, gormless by Bonfire Night.

2

The candle inside's dead, unlit,
but a visual pun still takes the pith
and disses us with living soot.

At first, I'd thought the kids
had blacked it in, felt-tipped.
Tipped up, inside's a weird skid-lid,

foam-cushioned right up to the lip,
black padding where the casing's holed.
But then the night sky seeps

through an opened fontanelle,
and you're staring through a brain-pan
chinked with stars, a trepanned skull:

the nightlight waxed into a tinny moon;
or a metal plate countersunk in bone,
but inside out and upside down.

3

All perspective's suspect. In Holbein,
the anamorphic does the trick,
a tangent turns formlessness to omen.

The Ambassadors' world is fixed,
measured, ordered by degrees:
categorical, hierarchic.

Against these clear geometries,
the foreground's strangely deformed, defaced
—soft and shapeless as a new disease?

or thin and hard, reflective as a blade?
What's smuggled in's your skull, of course:
(left-field) revealed obliquely in an aside.

4

... And in *Acherontia atropos*
you can read your future, make a book.
A flutter on this Death's Head Moth

shows you how the odds are stacked:
an old movie of an ageless face
flickered through short-winged days.

This moth cannot know what's on its back.
The sun has never seen its shadow.
Yours is everywhere you look.

5

Staring through this dark halo,
this tonsured hole in the head, to see
a Möbius pumpkin, full of hollow,

some Zen monk's *memento mori*,
or merely the fungus that has rimed
these lidless eyes, this lipless smile

with kohl. There's still a *mise-en-abîme*
of further skins beneath the skull.

This close, the spores begin to seem

like droplets of commas, dots, ink.
Now powdered anagrams dismember
rictus, smirk, reek and stink.

6

Outside the season's ash and embers.
Elsewhere, fruity gourds—watermelons
are sliced into lippy smiles. November.

On the Day of the Dead, in sun,
I got a sugary skinhead grin,
a skull with *my* name candied on.

These aren't my kids. In another life,
words end with "ohs" and "ahs:" Mexican
names sugared on by a dark-skinned wife.

What's dead sometimes was never born,
or a belly's swollen by another man.
Short days, dark nights, mud, ice, rain

—this wasn't part of any plan.
These aren't my kids, but without them,
how would I recognize this woman?

Tomorrow, somehow I know, the skin
will blister into tears—tiny, red.
Passing the piano to the bin,

this ex-hardcase, pithy kinsman, blokish pumpkin
will give, then break—I feel it already—
mush up to my knuckles, as my thumb sinks in.