DAVID FULTON

Generation

I – BROTHER SON

(i) Thoroughgoing Futuristic Eschatology

(Swanage)

Bleak light from window slot,
scant glint from wet eyes,
old hurt eyes that seem to ask,
though the mouth cannot,
'Will I be under earth
before you return?'
Strangely shrunken trunk
slumped between sermon and tract
(a wall of words),
so much smaller
than when scraping ceiling
above my trembling head.
O, how you roared… like Legion,
hurling all backsliding to the pit,
that Sabbath I refused the bread and wine.
What does an Elder's eldest son,
reared for preaching, do,
but break bread? An empty seat
in the family row—inconceivable!
Whatever would the watchful Brethren say?

Now I block the light above you—
stiff-necked, unregenerate,
the still prodigal son—
long brown hair above sparse grey,
sky-blue veins above bruised red,
dust falling between us,
clock scratching the silence.
I chafe to leave,

fearing your final words will rear
another range between us
just when I'd begun to think
we breathed the same air.

'I know you've chosen
not to offer the Lord your life,
but think of end things
before it's too late:
His Kingdom is always near
and you can never tell
the day of your recall….'

I am indeed becoming late,
coach-late, so make to go,
knowing this farewell will not be the last,
for how can a father not be always there,
permanent as magnetic North?
A minor heart attack, yes,
but surely over that and not terminally ill.

Is it the old presbyterian gloom
returning as the body weakens?
As well Prizren as London
for chances to meet—
and, after all, I'll just be gone a year.
But, though eyes are wet,
Thoughts already start to stray elsewhere—
back to life, the life of reliable flesh,
firm lip on the rim of practice, pleasure,
not forward to that afterlife
of ghostly milk and honey
your toothless gums are now
not sipping, alas.

Smug, stupid, blind, crass!

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(ii) So Long

He was with us less each year: the belly's
skin balloon let down on doctor's orders—
no blowouts now; a back bending to the earth
he'd soon—too soon—be sealed inside
and shoulders turning in on themselves
as if this last good fight had been lost
before begun; but still the spirit resisted
the slow pull of a collapsing body;
it stood for the person we'd known so long,
a gradual stranger, yet not strange.

Then, quite suddenly, he was with us less each month:
cars and sermons given up, and breathless hobbles
round the block, and bumpy lifts to Spartan gospel halls.
In time that morning expedition beyond the bedroom door
ceased; the handle no longer turned
for an ever-frailer form to realise itself
eerily between the jambs; but his strong spirit
could still force a way out of a shrinking life;
from bedside chairs, close to confinement, yet free,
we still made contact with the father we'd known so long.

In the end he wasn't there at all: displaced to hospital bed
and tied to it with tubes, then stunned by daily needle blows,
dozing or waking, lidless with terror, his shrunken body
torn by heart shudders, his mouth pain-tugged
to an inverted V, the small voice piping with strangeness
and second childhood, and he, like a child,
needing to grasp our adult hands through each throe
and pleading sideways ease when pangs became too sharp.
But this time the spirit could not leap the pain,
he was no longer the one we'd known so long:

A father too far off; an old man, not our old man;
his good brain teased by clocks and maps,
muttering nonsense, then—lucid—fearing madness,
that ulcerated mouth repeating private mantras
or calling, 'Water! Water!' for, yes, he was burning,
the body dry, so dry, then incontinent.
And as mind and flesh fell toward the darkness
he cried for the light and all the vanished graces,
and we cried too, though we could do nothing
but tell healthy lies and walk with guilty breath away.

God's Holy Word fell from his grasp, then words
for groaning he died, and we looked down,
speechless, helpless, on the torn mouth, the face twisted,
its ashen skin drum-tight on the nose, but loose
round neck and cheek; on eye-sockets, trenched
and strangely stained; and, far below, the backs of hands—
those purple mats of broken veins.
Then we, heads bowed in the chemical air,
fell to wondering: is this what a life,
so long denied, so saintly modest, saves itself for?

(iii) Patrimony

(in memory of a Brethren lay preacher
buried in Swanage Municipal Cemetery—'without a city wall')

No more living words
over the broken bread
and wine,
no more evening exhortations.
Far from Sabbath zeal,
the saints
chorusing praise
for a risen Lord,
he lies silent
under silent earth.
And I stand above,
disbelieving, dumb,
scanning the marble text
to catch a sense
that might, one day,
speak to me.
Father, may I
in this profane art
find other words
to witness, thrive,
and congregate
in forms of grace?

II – BORDER RELATIONS

(i) My Old China, My Old Duch

(Chang-Chun to London)

Out of the thousand million
I found you;
among the devilish few,
the thin snuffle
of Big Noses,
you noticed me.
We met
as arranged.
Mindful of language
and age,
what could we do
but circle each other,
wary as the few
spring dogs
through my compound window,
still uneaten?
You were not tall,
as your character claimed,
but clearly bright,
while I

tried to be
cloudy-clever,
hiding behind
irony, friends,
afraid to feel.
Through three shared years
we learnt
to believe our eyes—
trust, I hope,
that will never break—
so were joined,
cycling through summer heat
to register
as doors were closing,
I entering
earth's largest family,
you flying with me
away from all that
to land on this little island
of tricky Angles.
Welcome, Min,
but, please,
mind your step.

(ii) Moon Lake
(Chan-Bai-Shan)

(1)
No,
not that long ago
surely!
Can it really be
twenty years
since we scaled
the lava track
up into the clouds,
stone step
on stone step,
then scree
on scree,
slide and sink,
slide and sink,
till mountscape
turned mindscape
and we almost fell
to questioning
our recent poise?

(2)

You were dressed
after Chang-Chun's
fashionless fashion
(lemon plastic jacket,
scarcely thick enough
for the thin, cool air,
above black, slack-legged slacks),
and I
in Liberation Army green
from canvas cap
to canvas pumps,
pitching for
a Great March camp,
the mock-martial,
the heroically unheroic.

(3)
Leaning into yet another
steep climb
and studying
our slow feet,
we found ourselves
suddenly astonished
as unsuspected summit
opened
to the rim
of a vast volcanic lake,
moon crater
placed on top of the world,
yet in unearthly strangeness
so much out.

(4)
At an invisible line
across grey water
'Red China' gave way
to a redder Korea,
whose camouflaged gunboats
made sure
no foolhardy soul
tried to flee
Father Kim's
loving concrete arms,
gesturing massively
from the far shore.

(5)
We stood on the edge,
panting, laughing,
one lapsed

Cultural Revolutionary
hand-in-hand
with a red Capitalist Roader,
and as we peered
into grey skies
that drained the sweetness
from the day,
without warning
the sour clouds broke,
and all the sunset's
blocked dazzle
took the lake,
turning dull surface
to league on league
of honeyed light,
that richly glowing,
luscious light,
those twenty moonfed
years ago.

(iii) No, Not The Sixties
(Rome)

(1)
Strictly
out of sight—
that light show
in the dark room
on Bianca's
big brown bed!
Such flickering
friction
our skin
must have pulsed
black-white,
black-white,
in ever
shorter frequencies,
faster and faster—
strobe crazy—
till colour rose
from below
in rainbow arches.

(2)
Nothing heavy!
Two bodies
sheet-dancing,
as they should,

to the insistent rhythms
of the night—
bright, excited chatter,
laughter, horns—
that floated up
from the Roman street,
inciting as Moon-skin,
to underscore
our delighted cries.

(3)
After such
son et lumière
did our soft machines
hum
like processed words,
glow like lasers?
Lazarus from the dead
could not have felt
more satisfied
with flesh!
So,
comfortably clothed
in skin,
we faced each other
nakedly,
beamed like the Italian sun
that puts the best hidden
into the shade,
chuckled
like piazza fountains,
but at no joke—
except our lives
come to these chance
white sheets.
Then you sang
lightly
of a world
without Butterflies
or blues,
and from just above
the tilting
tiled roof
a full spring moon—
silver on red—
shone down
through open shutters.
And two
not-so-young lovers—
one grey head,

one refusing to grey—
were caught there
in pure clair de lunacy,
blissfully mad
as March hares,
lovingly loopy
under the she-wolf's
brazen tits,
our late Lupercalia
all but over,
darkness—for the moment—
forgotten.
Far out! Really far out!
That brief, crazy world
of sound and light.

III – THERE YOU ARE

(i) Coup

Poor Min,
you thought your body was your own,
but she showed you you were wrong,
seizing control before you knew she was there,
slyly deflecting the moon's tug
till she could deliver you again to blood,
the blood of tearing free. Bestial to begin with
(tadpole, frog, porpoise, pig), by aping you
she grew human at last,
crouched female knot of flesh,
pushing fingers, toes
defiantly through warm solutions,
heart-bulb pulsing danger in the dark.
Soon you found your life, your body,
pear-shaped to her demands,
craving food, more food, strange food
till she forced you force it up again,
telling you how starved of sex you were
till you binged on new positions, then, replete,
thought you heard her foetal whisper
you were gross, your belly bloated,
breasts swinging like evening udders,
nipples blackened, flapped,
corollas spread like spilt oil.
She used your stomach as her map,
plotting a dotted downward line
as though to tell surgeons, 'Quick,
cut here and let me out!' Growing,

she made you groan before your time
to have you think how hard labour is,
sending swollen legs, sore joints
and stomach cramps. Later, she got her kicks,
punting your oval belly into touch,
rucking your nights, your days
till, bored, she got her head down at last
and forced a painful way through gaps and knees—
a messy try!—to milk her celebrations.

(ii) Safe Delivery
(*Crow* variations)

Such desert cries,
flooded eyes,
little life,
the skull malleable,
limbs unfired.

Such Oxfam sucks,
cliff-edge clutch,
little life,
the breath so sprinted,
heart so stalked.

Then first smile,
delectable affinities.

O don't stop
breathing,
beating,
being,
little life.

(iii) Sound Wonder

We speak
        with smiles—
what more
        can we say?—
that silent lexis
        of lips we love,
written on the skin,
        then signed
and countersigned
        in cheeky marks of joy.

And there are sounds

you feel
I should know:
giggles, gurgles, grunts,
hushed confidences,
shrieks,
and those long descants,
skylarking songs
sans words
I struggle to repeat,
cracked bass
to baby treble—
scat
or scatty?

You say nothing
wisely,
full of simple vocables,
sound wonder,
so sure I follow
that I try.
You point to, sigh
at glowing worlds
I can no longer see:
the switch that
Christmases the cellar,
while four flapping pigeons
vanish the lawn
and cupboards open-sesame
to jewelled jars.

You waddle through
a country of surprise:
mountainous dressers,
pine glades
of chair and table leg
and thick rug meadows.
Doors give way
to other worlds
and you glance back
to see
familiar landmarks
turning strange.
‘Oh,’ you cry. ‘Oh!’
and ‘Ow!’
as what should
not be there
brings you down
giving everything to tears,
then forgetting
when next moment’s

blazing wonder
        dries the eyes.

Yes, stumble through
        each good day
till I almost think
        it's so.

I'll lumber after
        to sit at your soft feet,
while you profess
        your deepest babble.
Teach me where to look
        and how to go
until I think
        I should rethink
everything
        I think I know.

IV – RUNNING FOR LIFE: VALENTINE'S PARK

(*In memoriam* Denise Levertov, daughter of Ilford, who communed with spirits in the park.)

(i)

Mad? Maybe.
                Masochistic? Perhaps.
But just set
                your heavy head,
tight leaden sinews,
                on a jogging rack
and let your body
                stretch
into the dawn.
                Soon oxygen will lighten,
loosen
                your whole frame,
then how easily
                you'll slip the straps of pain,
relaxing to a joy
                that rises, rises
till it leaves you
                training air—high!

(ii)

The morning run—
                every day:
Saturday, Sunday,
                weekday,

sick day, strain day,
birthday, bank holiday,
even Christmas Day
when gates stay chained,
but railing-gaps
gape
for a quick squeeze
to fenced liberty.)

(iii)

Summer: ten past six.
Winter: ten-to-seven.
Running from Ilford's
bourgeois ease
(unlikely),
unmortgaged house
(semi-detached),
loving wife
(fully attached,
I hope),
and child at fifty
(bizarre);
surprising fox and cub,
fire eyes swivelling
from tipped bins,
ripped refuse bags,
sturdy legs hurling a red blur
at green cover;
running up Cranbrook Road
past solitary bus-stop waiters
in rain, in snow,
darkness and first light
to skirt the Square,
Ilford's brief 'village,'
houses standing back
in smug satisfaction;
approaching park gates
under concrete urns
that lean to ask
a classic question,
'Why are you
dying to run
when all you are doing
is running to die?'
Pushing creaking iron
apart
to kick the cinder path
past Valentine's House,
our East India shyster's

listed chateau
(first entrant to Love
or Trade's demesne?),
so many bijou boughs,
homeless leaves,
so much enclosed earth,
common grass.

(iv)

No, not locked,
surely!
Park-keepers
still asleep
or will that mythical dog,
figured at the gate—
'patrolled area:
beware!'—
finally find flesh
to uncurl lips
and launch its snarled incisors
at my wrists?
No! No panting slobber,
no ominous pads
make horror music
in the shadows.
Relax:
the grounds are yours,
the air is icy blue-black,
the moon a sliver,
and one shooting star—
Boeing? UFO?—
moves silently
across the sky—
to Stansted
or deep space?

(v)

Race down
your narrow tarmac
into the lamp's
yellow glow,
shooting beyond
your breath barrier
as you re-enter the dark;
or tread
through midsummer treacle,
wind rollers
and the rain's
bead curtains

in thigh defiance
of a world's weather;
then whenever air's
intangible
force singlet, shorts, shoes—
everything!—
through what can
no longer resist.

(vi)

Why not jog over the bridge,
breaking that pack of geese
as you accelerate
round the lake's rising curve,
then duck through rhododendrons
to a smaller bridge,
opening on acres
of downhill grass?
Yes, chase the fleeing horizon
till you lose
or freewheel into a sun,
Martian red
over ankle mist,
but take the keepers' hut
for turn
and lean hard into the home run.
The incline will leave
you panting
like a dog
at dogs
that emerge
from half light
(raw slaves,
held by collar and chain),
barking back at their barks,
blissed out—Barking mad.

(vii)

Spurt up the street
those last one hundred yards
through car tunnels,
glass-sealed from glory,
the pigeons' dry departing clap,
your only applause;
breast the invisible tape,
putting leg breaks on
like indoor sprinters
at the wall.
Then gulp triumphant air,

head endorphin-high,
flesh free from pain,
tired, yet so richly calm.
Well, are you now
fit for life,
ready, willing
to run down another day?

V – BEING THERE
(Swanage)

(i)
Calm summer dawn,
dense mist
over ebbed sea—
such thick emptiness!
Yet how can this
vague shifting lack
so firmly deny
all prospect of Needle
or facing shore,
of a world
beyond this bay
where we stand—
Old Harry
nowhere to be seen
and Alf's
scarcely utopian isle
unplaced in sea?
Even the jetty's
half lost
in moist absence!
Swanage
entirely reduced to itself!
Absurd?
Not quite for—look!—
this vaporous void's
becoming something,
a luminous zone
of mother-of-pearl,
as dull wet air
embodies the rising sun;
and—listen!—
rare silence is spreading
through the visible:
waves so reluctant to fall
to any kind of splash,
the sea could be

blue sky
with gulls bobbing in air,
their strangulated cries
finally mute.
So why don't we,
though cynical, false,
for once
commit ourselves to wonder,
walk down that jetty
past contingent dogs
towards a glory
glowing there,
a saturated radiance,
silence of ambiguous distance?

(ii) New World Ordure

(Looking down on Swanage Beach, 1 January 2000)

Sea turd brown,
sky no cleaner
and the wind's dirty tricks,
flushing a shore road
with shingle, salt-slush, sand,
then hurling gulls
like sewer stink
halfway across town,
while driven rain
hand-dries wall hedges
with electric wriggles.
Morning sludgy as any night,
odd smudged figures
leaning into soiled elements,
wishing they were clean away,
and stray dogs
squatting, lifting legs
to a new-brand millennium—
scat-, not eschatology.

A world
boggy beyond belief?
A globalised jakes?

You nod
and stare down on Swanage.

Pretty shitty prospect!