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HUNGER

There are students everywhere:
strutting magpies,
they chatter in black gowns
and white bow ties –
crowds of them loudly matriculating.

I wait
and watch,
lean against a wall beneath the Bridge of Sighs,
wearing
a tight black dress
and stupid heels that trip me up
on the ancient stones.

I wonder if I laughed as much
when I was them
or smiled so widely,
can't remember where I went that day,
what I did, with whom, or why.

Smoking a cigarette, I stab the wall
with a stiletto
and wait for you
to come cycling up the lane, barrelling forwards,
the rebuke of your bell
the chiming tinnitus of evening.

I ought not to be here, wasting time,
should be inside one of those book-lined rooms,
safe in the refuge of paper and hard work.

I have been attending to other things.

In the last week I have noticed
the colour of turning leaves,
vivid shocks of sun slicing across crenellated skies,
and I have noticed the smell of the season,
damp and rich,
so dark it's almost black,
and the rub of soil in my shoes, between my toes.

I have been thinking about how things rot
and decompose,
wishing I understood the chemistry of it,
the biology and physics
of degeneration

so that I might apply this understanding to
loss
of my own.

Because if ideas can breathe
then surely they can lose the will to live.



'You shouldn't smoke,'
the man beside me says,
his spectacles skew-whiff,
breath hot with port,
ripe with cheese and opinion.

I've forgotten his name
and he won't know mine,
but he's someone I should be trying to impress,
gatekeeper,
keyholder,
big swinging intellect.

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I should try at least to oil his hinges
with the grease of my servility.

I understand deference and
the imperative
to not embarrass you, or myself,
but tonight my head refuses to nod
and my smile is a dead thing.

I shrug and take out my lighter and a cigarette.
'Well, at least I'm still young enough to give up,'
I say, swinging my legs free from under the table.

Ignoring swivelling eyes and
looks exchanged –
like a congress of ominous old birds
they stare –

I walk away.

The candlelight shudders
and the faculty turn back
to peck at their cheese
and the state of the world,
of which I am an apposite example,
certain of their a priori assumptions
about my behaviour:

young,
too much lipstick
and skin,
silly, emotional,
doesn't know what she thinks.

I don't excuse myself,
just stride away, out
and into the quad,
take off my gown
and breathe.

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You follow me,

‘What was that?’

I light the fag.

‘What?’

‘Do you have to be rude
to everyone you meet?’

I shrug.

‘Do you really have to
patronize me?’

Once I would have been so grateful
for this privilege:
my place at the table of success
where brains are spread like butter, or –
for you – undergraduate legs.

‘Why the hell did you want to come?’

‘I didn’t,’ I lie.

‘So, actually, Tom,
I’m going home.’

I could ask you to leave too,
but I won’t.

It doesn’t mean I don’t want you to offer,
that I’m not waiting for you to bother with me.

This morning, running my hand
over your head, holding your jaw
to angle your face,
feeling for the brute force of your thoughts,
I wanted to
ask what you felt about us.

We kissed

and the mirror watched, making a marvel of you:
Rodin's beautiful thinking man incarnate,
my half-dressed body against your naked back,
an inkling of summer still on your skin,
as the bedroom and everywhere filled with our
reflection.

You shake your head, a decisive *no*,
and look at me with the glance
you reserve for people who make your
stomach and eyes roll:

women waiting for buses
in short skirts, chewing gum,
with a racket of children who run under your bicycle
wheels;
the thud of their footballs against ancient walls.

Or undergraduate work
that insults your brain –
the girl who left your college last year,
she was weak, you said
(in how many ways?),
and clearly never deserved her place.

I'd thought she was sweet,
nervous and sincere,
when she stood in the quad last autumn
hovering on the edge of a shadowy lawn.
A night like this
when soft lights twinkled
the grimace of gargoyles into a fairy tale.

It was supposed to be fun.
Your annual welcome to a new cohort of freshers,
an open-armed night profuse with champagne,
but I saw myself in the way she drank too fast

and in the way she jumped when you laughed,
looking over her shoulder,
straightening her clothes,

just in case she was the joke.



‘Whatever, suit yourself,’ I say,
‘but don’t wake me up –
I’m going straight to bed.’



You’re home,
bloated with wine,
your bulk loud in the shadows,
and I have been sitting up
writing messages into the air
with the tips of my fingers and toes –
my body a nib
sharp and dark with the ink of waiting.

We collide in the kitchen,
jaws snapping
Who? When? Why?
What’s been happening?

Evenings end up this way –
you push past,
rough, fast,
and leave me standing
mouth open
and
alone.

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THIRST

It rains all night.

Battered by the percussive thunder of your snores
and the storm outside,

I watch the sky

vomiting

fists

of

ice.

The garden is running with leaves,
the street awash with trash,
wild night unleashing wild things –
words
and meaning
untethered from ruled lines.

Standing in the kitchen, back door open wide,
surrounded by the clothes I haven't ironed,
yesterday's pots I haven't washed,
I let the rain come –
step into the puddles on the path.

Drenched, I open my mouth,
drink rain

and wait for

what?

In the dark earth,
in the patch of ground
by the road,
by the tree,
I put my hands in the dirt and
shine my torch on tiny flowers,
cyclamen,

I planted yesterday,
folding my tongue around the word

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until it became an incantation,
a spell for a storm
I knew was coming.

Why did I bother?
Perhaps it was just to spite myself,
to give me something else
to swear about,
another way
to force myself to begin again.

Maybe I just wanted to observe
suffering
and understand better
how indifference operates.

In the dark,
hair wet across my face,
I cradle limp, shredded leaves,
dirty my hands with soil
obliterate petals and
hold out my palms – filthy and cold.

DAWNING

‘God, look at this day –
have you seen the state of it?’
You pull up the blinds and stare outside,
stretch
and stop me,
hold me,
and as we watch the rain
I take your heat
and the thick **Copyrighted Material**
and am fluid beside you.

But your words
wonder if I have meddled with the sky
and am responsible
for the mood you have woken with,
the dark surge of
your stinking hangover
as bitter as the coffee you pour for yourself
when we go downstairs,
waking up slowly to each other,
remembering all the reasons
not to smile.

You grumble:
why was I so rude last night?

I hold the butter knife
tight in my fist and imagine
sticking it
somewhere

between
your ribs,
or into an eye.

But it is blunt
the edges rounded and the handle old,
ivory weakened from hot water and ill use:
your mother's cutlery,
which I have spoiled,
you said,
and should have cared for better.

I bit my tongue
didn't respond with the acid
I longed to throw,
didn't say **Copyrighted Material**
that by the time
I moved in
it was already tarnished.

You retreat

out of the kitchen
into your study.

Because you are
An Intellectual

I mustn't disturb you
and the rattle of the door as it is shut
announces that
I must leave you with your pen
and papers and
books
and very important
thoughts.

I imagine you staring at the screen,
chewing at your fingers,
ripping them raw as you work,
and hear you begin to type
then scribble,
furious.
Huge shoulders tense and mouth tight,
you drill into the work
like a man fixing the road
boring trenches for pipes
laying down essential systems
maybe wires, or telephone lines

but failing to communicate anything
at all.

It's as if someone has
cast a spell on this house
where nothing takes root, nothing grows -
we are surrounded by things that don't work.

Did you think that life would always be easy for you?

I think I thought
you'd help me be
the person I dreamed
I am.



You don't share your fear
of the blank page.
It is a threat you do not wish to publicize
but it is written all over you:
in an image so carefully curated
to mark out your difference from the kind of men
who shamble across the city,
egg yolk on their lapels, smelling
distinctly out of date.

You accentuate your face,
its sculpted planes,
in the way you shave your head and wear your clothes

and I wonder how many hours you spent
seeking this version of yourself –
Greek god turned gangster –
in trashy magazines, or Europe's marble halls?

You enjoy the surprise on
people's faces when you open your mouth
and gift them with the privilege of your tongue.

I used to long to stroke your neck,
your head,
feel the buzz against my cheek,
and when I did I rubbed my lips
against your skin
and told you you'd be good on telly,

made you laugh
when I said you'd make the perfect rogue.

But now I'm privy to
a catalogue of complaints about
the state of
everything,
and your habit of not noticing me
unless I goad you into spite or rage.

It seems it's only me who's noticed
your decline –
did anyone else see
your nerves rattling last night?

Perhaps I misread,
perhaps I only describe myself.

But I'm sure I saw you forget the grace.
Benedictus
benedicat,
you stood there – mouth codfish wide –
watching me.

Why would you care how
I behaved?
Not unless you were trying to sustain
some image of yourself that I was fraying.

I do not invade your privacy
or ask you to share anything at all,
although I know the fear well enough,
the turbulence of self-doubt,
how it feels to feel
like you've run
out
of words.

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BEGINNINGS

At the start –

five years ago –

when it happened
in your office

that intoxicating
thrust of knowledge,

you didn't guard your piles of paper then –
your work
pushed aside,
my arse on your desk
as the afternoon sun and your mouth
and teeth and hands
set my skin on fire.

It was all about fucking:
the pleasure principle
so much more interesting
than footnotes,
you said,
laughing at yourself
as you straightened the mess and then
turned back to me,
put your teeth to my shoulder,
raising blood.

I walked away, dazed,
mouth a strawberry blister,
face grated rough as a stubble field.

Our fantasies **Copyrighted Material**
met and matched,
I thought.

Now I wonder if my body were paper
I'd catch your eye.

Perhaps you'd take a pen
and fill me with words,
then strike through my flesh –
scoring out the lines that no longer make

sense

until you find an undiscovered lyric
on the curve of my neck
the back of my knees
under my chin

and write me new
with another beginning.

PARSIMONY

A determined chill creeps up through the floorboards
and in through the gaps
in the doorframes,
the windows,
but we don't heat the house.

I stare at the unmade bed,
wrestle of sheets
and crumple of pillow –
memory of an angry sleep.

I could put it straight,
instead I dress myself in layers,
remember thermals and thick socks.

Don't be pathetic, you'd say
if I were to suggest turning on a radiator,
building a fire.

You do not feel the cold
but my hands are freezing,
red and chapped,
gardening, washing-up,
the angry rash that has tortured me all my life.
I sit on the bed,
laptop before me.

I will write this morning.

But when I try,
manuscripts like murder holes
scream retribution as
I press keys only to
unleash a trail of crowing consonants
that clatter and chatter, angry plosives biting back,
growling dogs guarding the space where
nothing is.

I should smash the reflection that
hides in those margins,
that mocks me, and smirks:
useless girl.

There are spaces where
there should be words.

I google your name
and sit, watching you appear on my screen,
smiling
as you don't in real life –
generous, scholarly, kind.
Lists of your books,
publications,
events.
You schmooze at me from
a page that lists your accomplishments:

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Newsnight appearances,

Radio 4.

I play a recording of a documentary,
watch you stroll through a gallery
with a young artist, then on to a beach.

You are attentive as she speaks,
so charming, so convincing.

I believe every word you say.

That was always my mistake.

I snap the laptop closed,
discard it on the bed and ignore its
lips pursed in silvery disapproval.

Downstairs you cough,
then I hear you, noisy on the phone,
and try to listen in –
who is it you're talking to now, and what about?
Echoes of you thrum through the ceiling.

I pull on more clothes, mummify myself.
You're just tight,
I decide,
would rather see me freeze
than waste any more time or money on us.

It's everywhere,
the evidence of atrophy:
the pile of junk you choose to drive
and this house,
the bedroom ceiling bruised with mould
and your slippers
splitting at the heel.

I preferred you
in proper shoes.

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In fact,
I think I'd prefer it if you smelled of oil,
tarmac,
grease.
Anything would be better than the stink
of your
superiority.

I go downstairs,
leave you to it,
to whoever is making you laugh,
leave you to
that voice you use
when you're talking to anyone but me
or your mother
or your ex –

a woman you married, briefly,
then left.

I don't say goodbye,
grab my purse, a bag,
and slam the front door.

PUSSY

I used to like your words,
used to lap at them
like a cat at a saucer of milk.
I used to stroke you and tell you
how clever you are,
make you purr
as you shut your eyes and stretched,
languid and receptive
in the heat of my admiration.

It's been a while since
I leaned over your shoulder and murmured,
Let me see,
brushed your cheek with my own,
relished the stubble scratch,
knotted my fingers into your shirt
and enjoyed the heat between us:
your breath
on my neck.

The day is cold inside my clothes,
the sound of bells swings in the sky,
and I walk
in the rain,
over a bridge,
wind-driven towards town.

Cars smash puddles up and over pavements.
I breathe in exhaust fumes,
and that sleepless night
shadows me.
I rub my neck
and think about all the places I ache,
the places where you don't touch me.

SIX YEARS AGO

Empty quad,
low-hanging clouds
threatened to split
and spit
down rain.

I didn't realize the **Copyrighted Material** books had changed

The choice:
to sit on a bench and wait,
or walk through the mist
by the river,
lose myself there in the depths of the trees,
go back to a dark room,
narrow-windowed, up too many stairs,
and sit on the bed
cross-legged,
to stare in silence at the walls or
slide under my duvet and hide
from things I didn't understand.

I could read,
or write an essay that was due,
check my phone,
pretend not to count the seconds until it was time
for the drinks and the lunch
and the chat.

I sat at the table later,
mute
without the skill, the dexterity of tongue
to know how to speak to a professor –
ancient, white-haired –
whose specialism in politics and philosophy
rendered her
dignified and astute.
She examined us as we ate roast lamb,
chewing over ideas
and soft meat.

The girl beside me said
something clever about Schengen
and I didn't even know what that meant –
not in terms of facts and statistics at any rate.
I preferred poetry and stories,
could talk about borderlands

and distances, liminal spaces,
in-between places –
but I wasn't sure that was the point,
wasn't sure it was relevant
or how to start, to smooth a new conversational path
without confirming how different I was.

Estranged from
them
and from
myself,
I sat tasting nothing,
sipping water,
scratching.

Pale blue eyes
pierced my ignorance
when the professor asked me what I thought –
apparently she didn't realize
that my mind didn't work
like hers.

But then, when they looked at me –
the others –
with pity
but no surprise:
already I had been characterized
by my lack of sophistication
(I was ugly-vowelled
and too loud;
I needed to learn to pipe down),
I knew they thought
I didn't know how to talk their talk.

I decided not to care so much
and somehow something came out of my mouth
that sounded clever enough.