

## A Part Song

i

You principle of song, what are you *for* now  
Perking up under any spasmodic light  
To trot out your shadowed warblings?  
Mince, slight pillar. And sleek down  
Your furriness. Slim as a whippy wire  
Shall be your hope, and ultraflexible.  
Flap thinly, sheet of beaten tin  
That won't affectionately plump up  
More cushioned and receptive lays.  
But little song, don't so instruct yourself  
For none are hanging around to hear you.  
They have gone bustling or stumbling well away.

ii

*What is the first duty of a mother to a child?  
At least to keep the wretched thing alive – Band  
Of fierce cicadas, stop this shrilling.  
My daughter lightly leaves our house.  
The thought rears up: fix in your mind this  
Maybe final glimpse of her. Yes, lightning could.  
I make this note of dread, I register it.  
Neither my note nor my critique of it  
Will save us one iota. I know it. And.*

iii

Maybe a retouched photograph or memory,  
This beaming one with his striped snake-belt  
And eczema scabs, but either way it's framed,  
Glassed in, breathed hard on, and curated.  
It's odd how boys live so much in their knees.  
Then both of us had nothing. You lacked guile  
And were transparent, easy, which felt natural.

iv

Each child gets cannibalised by its years.  
It was a man who died, and in him died  
The large-eyed boy, then the teen peacock  
In the unremarked placid self-devouring  
That makes up being alive. But all at once  
Those natural overlaps got cut, then shuffled  
Tight in a block, their layers patted square.

v

It's late. And it always will be late.  
Your small monument's atop its hillock  
Set with pennants that slap, slap, over the soil.  
Here's a denatured thing, whose one eye rummages  
Into the mound, her other eye swivelled straight up:  
*A short while only, then I come*, she carols – but is only  
A fat-lot-of-good mother with a pointless alibi: 'I didn't  
Know.' Yet might there still be some part for me  
To play upon this lovely earth? Say. Or  
Say *No*, earth at my inner ear.

vi

A wardrobe gapes, a mourner tries  
Her several styles of howling-guise:  
You'd rather not, yet you must go  
Briskly around on beaming show.  
A soft black gown with pearl corsage  
Won't assuage your smashed ménage.  
It suits you as you are so pale.  
Still, do not get that saffron veil.  
Your dead don't want you lying flat.  
There'll soon be time enough for that.

vii

Oh my dead son you daft bugger  
This is one glum mum. Come home I tell you  
And end this tasteless melodrama – quit  
Playing dead at all, by now it's well beyond  
A joke, but your humour never got cruel  
Like this. Give over, you indifferent lad,  
Take pity on your two bruised sisters. For  
Didn't we love you. As we do. But by now  
We're bored with our unproductive love,  
And infinitely more bored by your staying dead  
Which can hardly interest you much, either.

viii

Here I sit poleaxed, stunned by your vanishing  
As you practise your charm in the underworld  
Airily flirting with Persephone. Not so *hard*  
*To imagine* what her mother *had gone through*  
To be ferreting around those dark sweet halls.

ix

They'd sworn to stay for ever but they went  
Or else I went – then concentrated hard

On the puzzle of what it ever truly *meant*  
For someone to be here then, just like that,  
To not. Training in mild loss was useless  
Given the final thing. And me lamentably  
Slow to 'take it in' – far better toss it out,  
How should I take in such a bad idea. No,  
I'll stick it out instead for presence. If my  
Exquisite hope can wrench you right back  
Here, resigned boy, do let it as I'm waiting.

x

I can't get sold on reincarnating you  
As those bloody 'gentle showers of rain'  
Or in 'fields of ripening grain' – oooh  
Anodyne – nor yet on shadowing you  
In the hope of eventually pinpointing  
You bemused among the *flocking souls*  
*Clustered like bats, as all thronged gibbering*  
*Dusk-veiled* – nor in modern creepiness.  
Lighthearted presence, be bodied forth  
Straightforwardly. Lounge again under  
The sturdy sun you'd loved to bake in.  
Even ten seconds' worth of a sighting  
Of you would help me get through  
This better. With a camera running.

xi

Ardent bee, still you go blundering  
With downy saddlebags stuffed tight  
All over the fuchsia's drop earrings.  
I'll cry 'Oh bee!' to you, instead –  
Since my own dead, apostrophised,  
Keep mute as this clear garnet glaze  
You're bumping into. Blind diligence,  
Bee, or idiocy – this banging on and on  
Against such shiny crimson unresponse.

xii

Outgoing soul, I try to catch  
You calling over the distances  
Though your voice is echoey,  
Maybe tuned out by the noise  
Rolling through me – or is it  
You orchestrating that now,  
Who'd laugh at the thought

Of me being sung in by you  
And being kindly dictated to.  
It's not like hearing you live was.  
It is what you're saying in me  
Of what is left, gaily affirming.

xiii

Flat on a cliff I inch toward its edge  
Then scrutinise the chopped-up sea  
Where gannets' ivory helmet skulls  
Crash down in tiny plumes of white  
To vivify the languid afternoon –  
Pressed round my fingertips are spikes  
And papery calyx frills of fading thrift  
*That men call sea pinks* – so I can take  
A studied joy in natural separateness.  
And I shan't fabricate some nodding:  
'She's off again somewhere, a good sign.  
By now, she must have got over it.'

xiv

Dun blur of this evening's lurch to  
Eventual navy night. Yet another  
Night, day, night, over and over.  
I so want to join you.

xv

The flaws in suicide are clear  
Apart from causing bother  
To those alive who hold us dear  
We could miss one another  
We might be trapped eternally  
Oblivious to each other  
One crying *Where are you, my child*  
The other calling *Mother* .

xvi

Dead, keep me company  
That sears like titanium  
Compacted in the pale  
Blaze of living on alone.

xvii

Suspended in unsparing light  
The sloping gull arrests its curl  
The glassy sea is hardened waves  
Its waters lean through shining air

Yet never crash but hold their arc  
Hung rigidly in glaucous ropes  
Muscled and gleaming. All that  
Should flow is sealed, is poised  
In implacable stillness. Joined in  
Non-time and halted in free fall.

xviii

It's all a resurrection song.  
Would it ever be got right  
The dead could rush home  
Keen to press their chinos.

xix

She do the bereaved in different voices  
For the point of this address is to prod  
And shepherd you back within range  
Of my strained ears; extort your reply  
By finding any device to hack through  
The thickening shades to you, you now  
Strangely unresponsive son, who were  
Such reliably kind and easy company,  
Won't you be summoned up once more  
By my prancing and writhing in a dozen  
Mawkish modes of reedy piping to you  
– Still no? Then let me rest, my dear.

xx

*My sisters and my mother,  
Weep dark tears for me  
I drift as lightest ashes  
Under a southern sea  
O let me be, my mother  
In no unquiet grave  
My bone-dust is faint coral  
Under the fretful wave*



### **Death makes dead metaphor revive**

Death makes dead metaphor revive,  
Turn stiffly bright and strong.  
Time that is felt as 'stopped' will freeze  
Its to-fro, fro-to song  
I parrot under feldspar rock  
Sunk into chambered ice.  
Language, the spirit of the dead,  
May mouth each utterance twice.  
Spirit as echo clowns around  
In punning repartee  
Since each word overhears itself  
Laid bare, clairaudiently.  
An orphic engine revs but floods  
Choked on its ardent weight.  
Disjointed anthems dip and bob  
Down time's defrosted spate.  
Over its pools of greeny melt  
The rearing ice will tilt.  
To make *rhyme* chime again with *time*  
I sound a curious lilt.

### **'A gramophone on the subject'**

#### *1 The postwar exhumation squad's verses*

Exhumation squads dug to unearth them  
In bits that got dropped in cloth bags  
While one man stood by with his notebook  
Recording all readable tags.  
It was not the most popular service  
Retracing those old trench charts  
Then shaking off well-rotted khaki  
From almost unknowable parts.  
One father pitched up to bribe us  
To hand him a charred scrap of shirt.  
He'd worked out it was his son there.  
We told him the thing was just dirt.  
Blood mud had thickened to rich mud  
Which settled as grassed-over clay.  
Matching pieces with names wasn't easy  
Despite what 'their' new headstones say.