

Ambassadors to Isolation

Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Departmental Honors in English

by
Joelle Jameson

Lycoming College
April 23, 2008

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Poetry by Joelle Jameson

Contents

Parliament Square, 7 AM	3
<i>The Glorious Creatures In It</i>	5
St. George's Day	6
Swinging in Oundle	8
Cornwall	10
Norfolk Lavender	13
Jack	15
Janet	16
Remembrance Day	17
<i>Americans Never Go Anywhere</i>	23
Takeoff	24
Photos of the Moon	25
St. Helen's Bible Study	26
What You Won't	28
Camden Market	30
'Bar at the <i>Folies Bergères</i> ' at the Courtauld Gallery	32
Mrs. Dalloway at Café 88	33
Dorian Gray at Low Life	34
At the Hammersmith Palais	35
Inside the Royal Academy of Music	36
<i>When a Star Threatens to Explode</i>	38
In a Small Pond	39
County Wicklow	40
Tate Modern: <i>Bouquet with Flying Lovers</i>	41
The Christmas Pantomime at Windsor Castle, 1943	42
Fasting	44
Seven Sisters	45
Tate Britain: <i>Ophelia</i>	46
Keats' House	49
April in Regent's Park	50
Remember, Remember	51

Parliament Square, 7 AM

Rainbow flags shadow the green before wind
Wraps them around their poles, hugging their own
Peaceful intentions under Churchill's statue,
His victorious "V" electrified to keep pigeons away.
The birch trees drip dew onto his bowler hat,
Peel, and seem to vibrate like their roots
Touched the tops of trains thundering through
The underground. A hundred yards away, MPs vote
On the Serious Organized Crime and Police Act,
Which would keep peace signs—*Baby Killers*,

Justice For All—half a mile from Parliament. I'm eating
A scone on the green, marketing loneliness
As independence beneath a tree with water
Webbing my hair. My bag's full of books
I won't find time to read and a throwaway camera
Holding negatives of people I'll never speak to again.
But I'll keep them anyway, like a list of forgotten
New Year's resolutions. I can't remember what I wanted
When I caught the bus this morning, or why
I insisted on walking alone without an umbrella, like America

In 1940: an island framed by impossible ideals
As bombs unmade the great stone skeleton of Europe
And swastikas punctured the airwaves, ignoring reason
The way Ed Murrow and his politician friends ignored the bones
Of buildings breaking like dams onto Hallum Street
And fire diving into neighbors' living rooms. Ed would
Shout home, *This is London*: MPs drinking bourbon
With no ice, refusing to adopt a defeatist attitude
By acknowledging charred ruins on the walk
To Parliament. But when Big Ben strikes seven,

It's time to believe *we are all in the same boat now*:
Every briefcase and duffel bag the underground ejects
Onto the wet stone sidewalk, every eye squinting
At the introduction of muted light. Pigeons notice
The scone crumbled at my feet and settle like fog
Around the tree, because the tourists are still
Asleep and these ambassadors to isolation find me
In a generous mood, imagining a cure
For seasickness in a boat
Made of hands clasped together.

I

The Glorious Creatures In It

St. George's Day

We commemorate
The birth of chivalry
With the same vivacity
And luster of Christmas
Because the dragon's dead
God's alive
And the women are safe
In a country green and water-logged
With the honor you poured in.
Fieldsmen form voices through the dirt,
Lepers let exile's curtains fall,
And ladies swoon at being saved
As your horse wanders nobly by
Like an armored sun bolting
From the darkness evil keeps
In the deep hearts of monsters.
But don't say you'd fight
For those who do not think
To lift their heads,
Or defend the honor of a girl
Trembling in a wedding dress,
Or take liberty to places
A red cross could not have wrought,

Where we could speak
With burning tongues and drink
The water of a new life,
When you would gladly kill
The thing with scales inside me
That opens its mouth to yawn
But breathes fire.

Swinging in Oundle

Up, fields of bright gold
 rapeseed blooms, beaming
 in a world dropping

down, earth in bark shards,
 thin willow leaves and shining
 beetles scaling the tarmac.

Three-year-old houses,
 all plaster and beams,
 look vaguely medieval; their walls

reach for neighbors with arms
 of wet pollen and air. She lifts
 squinting eyes, long feet

to the sparse sky, breathing
 a chorus begging
 for complication,

life's shallow curve
 slicing into fate like
 love's curling tongue—

falls back into dust
 and her young body,
 jumps onto long grass, slick

and soft. Even after nine years,
with a woman-shaped body
and a wit that could cut

wildflowers, she jumps
at a leaf falling soft
on her neck, a hand

threatening to bring her down
to earth, up from days burning,
sweetly silent in yellow blooms.

Cornwall

To a 13-year-old girl

I

Tintagel Castle

Like cake dipped in tea, pointed ruins
Succumb to wind, sea spray,
And everything Merlin threw into the brew
From his cave in the rampant turquoise bay.
Rooms, where Uther brought Igraine to make
A future king, hide in weeds. The clinging lycra jeans
Your friend insists are sexy prove an unnatural mistake;
The once-white canvas trainers cannot pretend
To be designer anymore. But rain-flow
Cleans the crumbling cliff top, where breezes
Shape flaking rocks into sand castles and blow
Ignoble prospects to the sea. A bright sky eases
Your flippant desire to plummet past cascading
Gray stone, older than legend, to a fate worse
Than childhood: Arthur unwittingly evading
Honor, born where the curse
Of lost love fuels salty gales,
And the ancient mortar holding dreams together fails.

II

Minack Theatre

You've seen a shrinking world
Stagnate beneath a mildewed roof

In a cities and villages, but tonight
The ocean spotlights Miranda isolated

Without a love-thought to cling to,
Prospero unwinding virtue

From the pretty corners of the earth,
Caliban howling at solitude

Above the waves' applause
Clamoring for the stone stage

Carved into a cliff: the damp
Grass seats, your heart leaping

With the wind, your chapped lips
Whispering promises to God,

I won't forget myself—
Sweet ideas of revenge

Curdle into love, even
After the curtainless stage

Falls dark beneath the sky
Of churning clouds and vigilante stars:

This brave new world
And the glorious creatures in it.

III

Land's End

Short grass littered with sheep
Who have numbers spray-painted on their sides,
And pottery and fossils buried deep
Beneath the *Little Chef's* foundation, cracked and wide,

End on a boardwalk to nowhere, lined
With souvenir shops to remind you of
A thousand years of tea and cake, and that
You stood 3147 miles from New York.

A battalion of three-wheeled cars
Fleeing inspection
And bobbies with high hats
Carrying large sticks for your protection

End on England's small tongue extended
Into the cold Atlantic, tasting the bland trail
Of boiled vegetables and meat turned good
In endless salt beyond the weathered pier.

And subtle humor, all the *quite goods*
Radiating from overly polite tongues
That wag too frequently in school,
And say too often that you are too young,

End in devastating wind
That eats hats and health, and declares
You are grown, here in your red, white
And blue coat in this bloodied, sweetened air.

Norfolk Lavender

Mom says Aunt Kris was always a great writer,
The sister who works the night shift
At a window factory in Iowa. When she saved
Enough to visit, we drove her down south—

It took longer than we thought—to Norfolk
Where flowers grow wild in boxes
And the gift shops are always warm.
March is not lavender's best month,

But Aunt Kris had trouble assembling her camera
For all the looks she felt compelled to take,
Afraid to miss the wind move a wet, bloomless stalk.
She shot the gray-green flora mattress

Bowing to the wind, wiped the lens,
Shot the weathered wood holding mud
Bound by still veins of lavender grass,
Shot a series of the dormant herb garden

Laid out in monastery style, boxes
Consulting a useless sundial. Her own herb garden,
Where she planted her savings, had too much sun,
And died accordingly. In April she returned

To Iowa, and on her nights off she shapes
The photos into flowers and writes
Captions on the best vacation of her life,
Her own green parka in none of the pictures.

Jack: 1880

Crumbs and dirt—all a very small boy
 Could expect to know in the black bottom
Of Whitechapel, but *he* knows every street

Inside out!—weaves like a spider, shoeless,
 No tracks—he learns the best corners
To hide, and watch: soot-colored knees

Crooked like the few bare trees glaring
 At his matted hair and dry lips. But he sneaks
Up steep stone walls and learns how to eat,

Sees silver knives sink into glistening meat
 And red wine plummet deep in the throats
Of men who can ride around the alleys

Of murderers, rats, and children sleeping
 With open eyes. These men know
Their mothers were not whores, never saw them

Duck behind The Ten Bells with strangers
 To hear coins bounce on the cobblestones.

He learns that a top hat lengthens his frame,
 A cape broadens his shoulders
And hides his fidgeting wrist in 1888,

When the meat is real and turning tricks
 Behind the church, when he burns
The blemishes who don't deserve

To go to hell with their hearts or kidneys
Or whole faces. He'll have learned
How to be a respectable cog

In God's hog-killing machine.

Janet

could be her name—

but of course she doesn't have one,
she's just another bum in London
wrapped in a tracksuit uniform
shaking sadly outside souvenir shops
so only a bright white face looks up
from under a crop of waning curls;
just another bum in London
hunched like she needs some heroin
or an appendectomy, asking for change
in the desperate whine of a jilted bride
or neglected child, or battered wife.
On our way out, we can't spare change
that might buy us a few drops of alcohol,
can't put a heavy coin in her cardboard coffee cup
that might end up buying drugs, or fags, or drinks
she really shouldn't have, but it feels good
to know we considered inviting her back
to the dorm for a shower,
and giving her a name instead of just
"that annoying bum"—so inconsiderate
how she's always there,
forcing us to look.

Remembrance Day

I

Oundle School, 1913

A hole three metres high, two wide, gapes
In the centre of town where West and New Streets
Cradle solicitors, stationers,
The post office and the Talbot Hotel.
Oundle School boys, whose grandfathers may have fought
In the Crimean War, wake in Crosby
House, and Sidney, and St. Anthony's,
And trudge across England's green and pleasant land
To lessons in the Cloisters. They stir
The dust and gravel in the empty space
To post a letter home. Only one hundred
Thousand deaths can fill it—a stone spire
That will see sunsets glow and will not sleep.

II

Sarajevo, 28th June 1914

The reward for failure is a sandwich
Munched through a scant moustache in a crowd
Of the wide-eyed blind who welcome strangers
In parades and burn ideals for any new
Warmth, damn, damn, a sandwich! But the car,
Nudged carefully by some black hand, rolls by
Topless, Franz and Sophie safe beneath
Their sky. Two shots: Franz insisted
She wake up as the blood of forty million
Spread over the back seat, then the bullet
In his neck sank in. No one remembers
The assassin's name, the 19-year-old
Yugoslav with the wide nose, sad eyes,
"Too small and too weak" to win anything.

III

The Somme, 1st July 1916

With mud seeping into every mouthful
Of air, and blood keeping time with the rain,
And machine guns chattering a dialogue
Of curses, flooding the shell-holes growing
Like poppies in the field, it must have been hard
For Private Billy McFadzean to hear
The unexcited click of a grenade's pin
As the box that held it slid down the bank.
Somehow, they all heard the impending
Friendly fire, and after three seconds
Of eye-whites, open mouths and dreams
Of heroic deaths dissolved, Billy
Threw himself atop the box, breaking into smoke
So the Ulster unit could charge.

IV

Home, 1920

Time heals, it's true. Say a salty adieu
To the boots and smoke and the gas
You once knew. Hello Rain, hello Jazz,
Hello Fields that once grew so pleasantly
Tall and so green, mud unseen; hello strangers
With sixpence that should go to you, who
Lost a leg in the war. Lost eyes, no good
For work anymore. Lost heat of the gun
In the cold stone floor. Lost all memory
But the cannon's roar. Lost her tender hand
And the ring she wore. Lost trigger finger,
Forgot what it's for. Lost the proud, straight back
He had before. Lost himself on foreign shores.
Won the war.

V

The Somme, September 2000

At the hotel, the boys found wild French porn
And the girls watched the Olympics, until
It was time to explore the underground stores
Of Arras in the dark corners of a church
Dungeon. Then time to bus out to farmers' fields
Ringed with signs: *Attention d'Explosifs*.
Dips of heavy artillery hid beneath
Grass, and the class asked, What place is this?
Where are we now? Lizzie couldn't really speak,
Her sobs sneaking up her throat
Like attrition warriors out of trenches. In Oundle,
Their teachers unloaded eight cases of wine:
"Oh, Gerald, you've gone a bit over the top."

VI

Oundle School, 11th November 2000

Seven hundred students slumped in the cloisters;
It should be warmer. Why can't they take
Two minutes out of *amo, amas, amat*
In a heated classroom? Why should morning break
Fall during the same hour that the guns stopped
On the Western Front? Paper poppies
And sweets wrappers crumble underfoot
Against the uneven stones, and rain waits
In the sky. Sudden silence on the hour
When St. Peter's chimes eleven times;
Lizzie is starting to think about the Somme
When the wind picks up a garbage bin and rolls it
Between the students. They muffle laughter
Till the church keeps peace, and they can keep living.

II

Americans Never Go Anywhere

Takeoff

I dreamt that you proposed to me
and I said yes, rather foolishly,
and dream people scowled, saying
we're too young, praying

God forgive our twisted motivation.
I accepted the eerie sensation
of the ring upon my hand,
slick and shaking at the command

to give my life to you. Then I awoke
on a plane to London, the smoke
of sunset rushing at the window,
the murky ocean swells below

catching light, and swallowing it
whole. The sweet, elaborate
mess of broken waves lies
orange and pink in empty skies

just made to be split. A dust
miracle—sun disaster—there must
be brighter gods hiding
behind the slate jet wing.

Photos of the Moon

I've had the night in slivers of white light
Reflected off my lens and bolting
Into a cushion of navy sky like a rabbit
Catching sight of a fox, shedding beams
And shunning haze only on my glossy prints.
Stacks of photos of the moon turn dark
In acidic rinse, die in corners of my room
And show only a pale pinprick. So I didn't wish for a camera
Last night, when the clocks stopped outside
The Royal Academy of Music and I found the moon
For the first time in London, when it quieted
The high-strung streetlights and sighed
At a novice French horn belting "Bolero" to the dark,
A swimmer in the falling waves.
When I have the city in such glowing pieces
And find heads turning up like the tide toward a sea
Of cement uncovered, stone suddenly washed,
And faces purged of every line, nothing is more
Natural than stillness: a temperate freeze
Of bricks beaming through evening's damp
Armor, iron fences made silver, and red buses braking
For wanderers unaware of time slipping cool
Beneath their feet, tripping radiantly
On forgotten phases and clearing clouds.

St. Helen's Bible Study

It's out of place,
 this student chatter

Bouncing off
 pale bricks, chipped plaster,

And stone Mary
 on the wall

Holding Jesus
 like a doll.

We like to play
 with him

In the same way,
 make his words swim

Laps in the buzz
 of fluorescent lamps

Hidden carefully in
 eaves damp

With age, but
 dry with dust.

I've never had a study
 so intense, I must

Confess; in all
 my years

Of playing church,
the fear

Of misinterpreting
a verse

Was never as alive
or worse

Than now, locked
in plastic chairs

And dim discussion,
immovably aware

Of God—almost!—
in perfect word

Upon the page,
but still unsure

Of what I ought
to say.

You'd think the God-thought
would decay

After parting through
the ancient doors,

But even at the pub,
in the cheery roar

Of rugby fans
and drunk ones,
God's on our breath,
even when we're done
With our oversized
beers,
Watching there,
sighing here.

What You Won't

Love sought is good, but given unsought better.
Twelfth Night, III.i

Let's not go to the trouble of disguises
Or the confusion of a splintered plot;
You've done away with all the surprises
I used to love. You say that you forgot
The way it was when we began, how much
You let me breathe, how you divulged some charm;
Fear reduces me to a wobbling crutch,
And you cannot bear to unhook your arm.
Yet as I strain beneath dead arguments
Beaten with the boughs of drained affection,
I still cannot begin the pained descent
Into an even deeper imperfection.
So hold me, yes, and I will rise above
What you won't say, and only give my love.

Camden Market

Rain in the morning lolls on the tarps
drooping over milk, sweets,
carrots and oil, purses, socks
and plastic jewels, the heaving market

exploring ways to spend
and be spent, to haggle and lose
and be grabbed and be weighed.
On the frantic concrete catwalk

cushioning the sharp heels of budgeted
queens, value is eaten in bulk,
bought in the alley and chewed
like a boy's tie in a foreign conveyor belt.

In the churchyard, specialty pesto
from a real Italian girl, crusty bread
priced to sell from an Irish woman
dying to get home. It's devoured

at sundown with plastic forks and white wine
kept cold by the cracked window
of a single room in Camden town,
where the wind plays in vacant stalls

and he reclines in the alley, skin contracting
beneath a coat that hasn't been unzipped
since it was stolen, gloved hands
clutching bad-news classifieds

for warmth the way a baby
 mouths a bottle, catching
loose threads and crumbs
 thrown down from the market

of sleeves stitched in sweatshops
 with blood on the hem, animals
carved into their own bones, and smells
 too savory to condemn.

'Bar at the *Folies Bergères*' at the Courtauld Gallery

Who cares if there's a mirror! Either way
We have to see you complacent and pale,
Selling, being sold, whatever. Art
Is what you make it, right? No one's talking
To you, surely 'cause you've been crying
In the pantry, or somewhere. Your charcoal's
Smear'd, your face swells like a sponge
Soaked in spilled champagne—no,
It's not from the corset, and yes,
I wish I had your waist! But that
Sack-of-dough face I can do without.
Maybe one of those top hats hit you
And put a baby in those metal ribs, and you won't
Believe it, like you won't believe those flowers
Aren't from a garden and that necklace
Isn't from a lover. Those drinks
Aren't going to pour themselves, so get
Your sweaty palms off the marble bar, honey—
You'll slip. Oh, I know it's hard, it's hard . . .
I know they keep every penny.
But no one's gonna tip
When you make faces like that.

Mrs. Dalloway at Café 88

Perhaps she felt too trapped in 1923
And maneuvered an *Orlando*-esque
Escape into a future where her sex
And class are of no consequence, but that dress
Does not compute. Should have changed, Clarissa,
Should have changed.

Mother England hasn't, except now
Moroccans run the café near Regent's Park.

Her pages, worn soft from library years,
Flap like lace on a dress; she's awkward
Folding stocking-clad legs about her orange peg stool
By a square glass table. Street walkers
In woolly jumpers regard her flowering hat
With the most delightful downward stares.

Yes, Virginia, it has happened—! a world
Where women read whomever they please
On whatever uncomfortable stool will hold them,
Where they can come and go from a room
Of their own—a June-bound world
Where airplanes still spell in the sky
And we wander in gardens, thinking of suicides
And remember our homes, and the men
Who remember our eyes.

You'll have to wait, Clarissa, like a bird
Confused by its wings,
Until you realize that you
Must get the coffee yourself.

Dorian Gray at Low Life

Your first Cosmopolitan? Classic!
Bartender sings a lemon peel, rubs it round the rim, never
Stops to speak, just pushes stress

Out of faces with a motion to smile. Be realistic:
Does that pink puddle last forever?
It dries in five minutes. But you're timeless

In this red basement, the walls and customers painted thick
With cigarette smoke. Mint chocolate martini? How clever
With the mint leaves floating, your moment to obsess

On how the straw sticks to the side. How polite
Your beauty on a Lion's March evening, the shrieking virtue
Of youth pouring through your lips, both ways.

Last night out and you'll win the fight
Against the ugliness of age, a plight so few
Survive. Some Galliano, new friends, ephemeral praise

And you will never be as young as you are tonight,
So don't take any pictures. You know they'll only hurt you
When years grow from these discarded days.

At the Hammersmith Palais

Standing alone—but how quickly lyric can submerge
A slow-beating heart in the sated brine of self-destructive
Bodies rolled in ripped jeans and buttoned shirts to purge
Screams brewed all week long. Friday, a day to forgive

But not forget, wields a sweaty, wiry brush to illustrate
Drunk frustration in sweeps of wine-colored cloth
Wound and draped around ancient eaves to satiate
The crowd's cries for complication. Three hundred open mouths

And one edged by a rusty goatee, balancing a cigarette
Nursed too long, comes close to me and forms an accent:
Might I use your ashtray? His gangly silhouette
Bounces on the curtains, and I suddenly represent

Every star and stripe. *An American at the Palais?*
Some revolutionary spirit wanted me
To close my mouth and somehow portray
The difficulty of an English girl, but instead said carefully

*You may, and yes, because I suppose we're largely unaware
Of how much the other loves this song—and where
Could we go, what could we possibly share
When Americans never go anywhere?*

Inside the Royal Academy of Music

Music students must throw the best parties, I realize
As the slight red-headed man steps up to conduct
An original composition, then Tchaikovsky. Look, the way
He dances up and down in sound, the rise
And fall of his heels and hands, how the notes construct
His tonal dream and echo in a stilted sway
Off high ceilings and gilded windowpanes.

The best parties: everyone would wear black
From the concert—a most stylish funeral—instant
Sophistication, still reverberating with
The Fourth movement cracked
On their hands—a force their fingers can't forget.
Soon they'll learn the Fifth,
Discipline unraveling the myth

Of harmony birthed from inspired bow sweeps,
Making wood vibrate and stomachs flutter,
And boy wonders playing a first movement, then
A second, blindfolded. No—unlit chandeliers keep
Drawn rose curtains closed; darkness shudders
With potential and dust; a breathless pipe organ
Rises over sound waves, the way Tchaikovsky opened

A love letter from Antonia, then tried to kill
Himself three times. And oh, the long legs
On the first violin, folded about his chair
Like a portable music stand. Where will
He take his blond hair and bulky violin case to beg
The end of such a careful composition? Where
Do notes rest, get undone and unaware

Of any time signature? A party! Where tapping toes incite
The only rhythm on their minds, barging through
Like its maker's anguish. They will probably not
Celebrate, only dissipate into the London night,
Nursing calluses and humming to subdue
The measures moving across their eyes—hot
As the night is damp—tender, impossible knot

Of notes and variations on a theme.
A painted hall of folding chairs for
Suicidal masters, defined in a swell
Of bows and raised arms, the steam
Of dreams straining against the tremor
Of the walls—a sound too great to tell
If what's made is heaven, or another pretty hell.

III

When a Star Threatens to Explode

In a Small Pond

Gascoigne Car Park, Oundle School

Students forget the pond in winter,
Dense with brown leaves
Decorating its dark edges, floating
Moss and algae like pillows for
Sleeping single-celled creatures
And flower carcasses in green
Water of surprising depth. Optimism
Dissipates the way summer
Sun leaves skin red and fireflies
Abandon trees for a child's
Sticky hands, to burn and circle
Till they sink into a small pond
So deep, it might as well be an ocean.

But an ocean would not keep
Quiet for a frog's croak, or sink
Into a stagnant state of reticence,
Or rest long enough to generate
A reflection of trees turning red
In the falling sun as summer turns
Itself inside out and birds take off,
Forgetting the small things growing
At a snail's pace—single-celled ideas
And developing bodies in the algae
Murky at the stone bottom, stray sun
Making lanterns of dead leaves
Like fireflies born in winter.

County Wicklow

I forgot how good it felt to pray
Until we staggered off the bus into the rain
And saw the sign: three kilometers to Donard,
Three more to the hostel, and our bags rolled slow
In the soaked gravel. The woman
Did not hesitate to stop her car—full
Of bags and wood shavings—and you thanked her
So much I was embarrassed. She told us
Her family lived around the world—
It's like the bleeding UN at Christmastime—
And you tried to relate, but I wished
You'd just listen, blend her accent with the rain
Like Table Mountain smears into the clouds.
When we reached the brown house
At the mountain's calloused foot,
We drank cocoa by the fire and you held me
Like a bear holds a tree: claws out,
Scared to fall away. I didn't pray
For your grip to loosen, or to somehow
Find the courage to crumble from your arms:
Only for sun. I prayed like I was at summer camp,
Where a song and a fire can heal anything,
Where I found God, where I misplaced him—
But I was never so glad that morning, when the sun
Arched bright and slow, a yellow diamond
In the thick-walled window. Somehow
One forgets the joy in praying for something
As simple as sun, and getting it.

Tate Modern: *Bouquet with Flying Lovers*

Lily trumpets only whisper
hints of her fate—the cough, the fever—
so he won't stop holding her
above golden streets, or leave her

until the cockerel sputters, feverish
against the rising sun, the six roses
at his back red like the blood rushing to leave her
cheeks, as moonlight decomposes

in shards of glass and stone. She rises
as naturally as clouds, the way a river
leaps from the earth and flows
in dreams dipped blue, sending shivers

down his empty arms in rivers
of unimaginable colors. The threat of waking
winks in the window, quivers
like the corners of his upturned lips, shaking

like the hand that holds her back. Waking's
heavy on his brow, where he cannot understand
the weight of moonlight, the brush's nervous shaking,
and the wilted veil—where his hand

makes her a bride forever, stranded
in gallery light, whispering
through death's blue hand
of night holding her.

The Christmas Pantomime at Windsor Castle, 1943

Perky in pink brocade and ribbons, Margaret
Couldn't hold a candle to Lizzie, smoldering seventeen
In short shorts, tapping for an audience who hadn't yet
Remembered that she someday would be queen.
In scavenged lace and curtains, she played Marie Antoinette,
Then a vaudeville comedienne, always a political machine

Set to "dazzle." Four hundred soldiers, including Philip
In the front row, handsome in his heavy uniform,
Watched with high morale her upturned lips,
Her pale limbs catching light, and her face, pink and warm
To touch, that had lost its token "long, cool stare." Her hips
Swayed to "A Red-White-and-Blue Christmas" and transformed

The title "queen" into something Elizabeth never could
In 1558, when the crown dropped onto her head
And settled like a second brain. She surely understood,
As she filled her pock-marked face with lead
Make-up each day, that even her scepter would
Not sway minds mortared in masculinity, so instead

Found strength in loneliness. And Lizzie
Didn't know then that Margaret would surpass
Her in looks and fashion, or that she
Herself would start taking diet pills in 1945, or at last
Discover that Philip's life at sea
Involved more brothels than bravery, or that her class

Would limit the affection she could show
To anyone, except for dogs and horses. The war
Was far away on Christmas Eve, as far as the days
When her name would adorn every trash bin, scores
Of postboxes and telephone poles—far away
And as close as Philip shouting, *encore, encore.*

Fasting

This isn't what I asked for:
the tangible suggestion of bread and wine
and your hand touching mine by the water

springing gray from the Thames.
Ten o'clock, says Big Ben,
and I'm numb when you ask for

just a kiss on the bridge
under strangely clear skies, over
boats touching bows on the water

swirling neatly into night.
Your voice unfolds like an orchid,
but you are not what I asked for

tonight, when I feel almost healthy,
knowing all it takes to grow
costs nothing: a touch of water

and constant hunger to keep
me reaching for more:
an emptiness I asked for
you to share, to taste, to touch.

Seven Sisters

Waltzing in the sky with Artemis,
though not as bright, they sway
soft and loyal, coo and reminisce
about the fledgling Milky Way,

a god's fleeting kiss. They burn
in silver tones for Norway, dancing
over fish-full streams that turn
into a waterfall with seven springs

flirting with the bigger falls across
the fjord, where they flow
and wave, then falter, lost
in the North Sea, and slow

their laughter to a murky sigh
when they reach the Thames.
In northeast London, the sky's
lit with neon, unfaltering when

a star threatens to explode.
Maybe pagans used to dance
around the seven oaks
circled in the park, a green romance

choked by concrete. Nearby
sits the Seven Sisters tube
by the house he moved into last July.
Stacks of travel books accrued

by restlessness and apathy
decorate his room, complement
the uneven bed, miniscule TV,
and the strange exotic scent

of stagnant longing. And she's not
the answer, jumping from the other side
of the ocean, where he forgot
why he cared about the stars. She hides

like a moss beneath a mountain halfway
around the world, where the same sister stars enthrall
a lover who pages through the dull decay
of yesterday, remembers him, and lets herself fall.

Tate Britain: *Ophelia*

It was *The Siesta* I fancied, those green
Curtains draped behind a pale prostitute

With poppies radiating in the foreground.
When an old man with a charming hat

And bulbous nose asked what it was about,
I couldn't tell him; a beautiful nap

After a long night's work? He comes here
Often, he says: *Have you seen the good ones?*

Someone should paint the way he smiled: big, though
His wife is surely dead, there's no one

To make his tea, and he only wants to talk to me
Because I'm alone and he knows

I'll listen. Now he gravitates
Toward *A Spanish Gentleman*, his gray eyelashes

Centimeters from the short trails of paint
Forming shadows on the Spaniard's face,

And I imagine what I'd say
To someone who could bear to be

That close to me. *Have you seen Ophelia?*
I didn't know she was here, but recall

The print hanging over a friend's bathtub,
And think we should meet in person. *She's near*

The Lady of Shalott. I had found the lady,
Her baited breath and thistles crowning

Skin turned to ash from waiting, casting off
At last. And then Ophelia, paler

Than the print, floating only two paintings
Down from *April Love*, so close to bliss,

But drowned. I expect to see him
Next to me, but I am the one

Who drinks her in, alone: the lady

Casting off without a boat.

Keats' House

*I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of
Imagination . . . O for a life of Sensation rather than of Thought!*

John Keats

The heart's affections beat
A summer's night with melancholy,
Bleat like sheep on Hampstead Heath,
Fall like plums from a tree,
Sigh like the folding of a nightingale's wings
And stir like her bedroom curtains as she draws them closed—
And you cannot think, or move—or see—
Only imagine what's behind them
As your eyes drift from your house to hers—
 Floorboards creaking beneath her bare feet,
 Firelight shocked by pale, smooth skin,
 Linens lapping her small chin as she climbs into a bed
 By the window, and blows out the candle,
 Breathing human passion—
 Fair youth beneath the trees.

April in Regent's Park

Little boys unleashed in the daisy field
On the season's first offering of sun grab great
Fistfuls of flowers, chasing each other
With green hands, yelling "Spring! Spring!"
There are girls, too: one's being dragged a bit
By her young mum, until her ivory balloon
Escapes, skipping across the geese's orange beaks,
Up and off daisy heads—then she runs
In bare feet with arms outstretched, lest it jump
Into the leafy pond. Someday she may grow
Into the other girls, hanging off the gazebo
Like the cigarettes hang from their lips,
Swearing too loud, still wearing school uniforms,
Or the young lover doing handstands
With her boyfriend, ending with their bodies
Curled together in the white and yellow
After catching the little girl's balloon.
She grows into middle-aged women, like the one
Smiling beneath a wide-brimmed hat, her long skirt folded
With her legs in the grass, making daisy chains
And wearing them like diamonds.

"Spring!"

"Spring!"

Even ducks and geese sing beneath the willows.

Remember, Remember

It was just the fifth of May when we leaned
Over the river's edge like tourists
Or acquaintances, watching waves convene
In dark circles, trying to resist
The urge to sigh into the dusk, damp and cool,
On our last night there. Parliament was blazing
Quietly, half-shadowed, peeking through pools
Of yellow light. *Wouldn't it be amazing*
If it exploded right now? Guy Fawkes style?
No, but God, what if we knew it would?
That the browning walls would turn hostile
In new shrapnel bodies, and a proper hood
Of smoke and justice would descend onto
The city we had grown to tolerate?
We stayed still, contemplating the debut
Of chaos in a clear sky, eyes sedate
And skin cold at the arrival of desire—
Just waiting for the starry stones to catch fire.