

P O E T R Y

NIALl McGRATH

GENETIC ENGINEERING

The spade whoks through damp earth,
Brown powder spills as I root
For gold nuggets: tubers clutched
Together like a nest of eggs secreted
By some sharp-eyed reptile that'll dart
Forth snapping. Not that a parent knows the worth
Of its offspring: some are weak, most ordinary,
Finding a prodigy, there's the rarity.

Jack warned it can take a decade to breed
A viable variety, a lifetime to produce
A proota like this, with near-perfect characteristics;
But I didn't follow the man's strain when he said,
Good berries may not trip the spud fantastic
But bad seed never made anything of any use.

ON AN ONION

On the surface you were flaky, would shed dry skin
When touched, rust-like matter betrayed where hands had been.
I tried to reach your core, began peeling; layer
After layer, first smooth, green veined, before paler
Strata gave way to translucence. And as I peeled,
And mysterious realities were revealed,
My eyes smarted, tears welled as I blinked back the pain
Of rupturing the essence of a spring onion.

Your aphrodisiac qualities worked on me:
Boiling, the tart aroma tickled my fancy;
Spread before me, I feasted on your tender flesh,
Lost in the ecstasy of succulence, the clash
Of flavours – your circumscribed firmness and freshness
Opposed to the milder korma's licit caress.



ROAD KILL

A pad down the bank from the hedge
Leads my gaze to where this carcass lies;
Only the fox's bones remain,
Once verge grass grew through rotted flesh;
To be crushed into muck by a tractor's tyre
As the councilman mowed April growth.

Already a bloody splodge
On tarmac, the hedgehog's
Bristles glint in spring's
Clarity; uninteresting.

You'd imagine the pigeon would fly out of the way;
If I'd known, I'd have honked the horn, not just driven on;
It waddled, its back turned, oblivious to danger;
When the grille struck its head—an eruption of feathers.

I WANT TO BE A TREE

*(It's too hard being human, I want to be a tree!
from Day by Mary Herbert)*

'It's too hard being human,
I want to be a tree!
Pronounces the hippy woman
With the long, wavy hair,
Dancing on the spot
As if chanting for rain
To nourish her roots.

The oak groans in the cold wind,
Branches bare, as frost
Tortures every fold of bark
Like the excruciating wrenches
Of a rack. Sensing every strain
In this unreal world, wishing it were
The green man of myth, praying
For reincarnation in some more
Pleasant form, able to tug
Those roots from the damp earth



Like legs, able to escape misery,
be freed from desire.

The callow youth, green as they come,
Carries his treasure tucked inside
His anorak, so that he passes
Unnoticed, at one with the street;
Back home, ogles at photos
Of the beautiful, gets high
On paper fantasies,
Unreal relationships;
He does not realise it,
But he is becoming a tree.

KATHRYN KIRKPATRICK

A FRIEND VISITS THE SITES OF VANISHED CIVILIZATIONS

She tells me the Anasazi ascended,
dropped the husks of their bodily selves
and returned to pure energy,
that essence we all are anyway.

I speculate climate change,
food gone scarce, but she'll have
none of it.

They were shape-shifters
already, sometimes running on their four legs,
sometimes unfolding their wings.
Why *not* become the breath
rather than the animal breathing?

And it makes as much sense
as anything else
here at the surreal beginning
of the twenty-first century.
Aren't we all in the grips
of something more or less unbelievable?
Sonambulant citizens in a failing craft,
we watch the waters rise,
each day more species extinguished.
As if we weren't going with them.



In the face of it
who among us would not wish to leave
altogether, not through the squalor
of disease or cracked bones,
but sudden and clean,
an indigenous rapture,
all of us transformed
beyond plunder?

Here's what the Hopi say:
a serpent with plumes
brought a great flood, water
scouring red rock, uprooting
cottonwood and willows,
rising above the sandstone walls
of the city.

 The leaders,
grown arrogant and greedy,
had stopped talking to the spirits
of the land, and the people,
the people let them.

MYSTERIOUS FRIENDSHIP

Silences between women
are overgrown flowerbeds.

Even the daylilies, left unattended,
yield to the bermuda grass.

Mid-August and I'm weary of weeding
though I *do* weed, grudgingly,

careful not to wake up
the small spokes of pain

that wheel toward my back
if I'm careless.

What's less than it might be
because left untended?



Coral bells choke in the crab grass.
Heathers pout beneath pokeweed.

What I tried to say
you preferred unsaid,

so here's the ragweed
between us, the beggarticks

and bitter cress, the cleavers and nettle.
In this wilderness nightshade's as likely

as queen anne's lace, brambles
and cockleburs as multiflora rose,

though once I found a wild orchid
in the burdock and goutweed

at the edge of the woods.
When I gave it air and light,

exposed the ethereal stalk,
the single striped tongue

it shrank back, all my care
unwelcome, willing to thrive

only when hidden,
surrounded by weeds.

WELL BEFORE DANGER

Surprised by your summer funeral
we drift in
 in our improvised mourning

called inland from Edisto, Myrtle Beach,
fishing rods laid down at Manteo

we come in our sandals
and discount-house blacks
bought beside the highway.



We don't wear these clothes
as if we believed in them.

Instead, we are all of us wishing
the bullet back in the gun,
the gun in its unopened drawer,
even back on the store shelf.

Easy enough to get rid of the weapon,
but what's left is your lover's anger,
so deadly we're here
beside a closed casket.
We're stuck at the end of a story
his own temple entered
like yours

and we don't know how to walk
that narrative back—
we don't know
where to find you
well before danger, beloved,

both bullets back in the gun
that has never been forged.

JAMES DOYLE

EVA PERON'S BODY

Stolen, lost, misplaced, trans-shipped
knuckle bone by clavicle by skull
to places of worship, where the worms'
monopoly is broken, and everyone
gets a relic, small as a breath,
laminated and ready to wear
for devotion, decoration, history,
or any other synonym respectability
wishes to tie up the loose ends.

Time for a meditation on the flesh
by the priests of Argentina. They stand

in long winding lines up and down
the pampas so anything the wind
brings for illustration can stick
to them like substance and parable.
“This is my body,” says Eva stumbling
from grave to grave, arms outstretched
before her in a game of Blind Man’s Bluff.

She can still turn the heads of the crowd
and her General, The Husband. Argentina
wrinkles its brow for a proper memorial.
The highest steeple in Buenos Aires
trails in the dust, a path that circles
and circles the coliseum’s tiny basement
cells by the thousands, lit by electric
sparks from the interrogators, and burnt
flesh filling the nostrils flare by flare.

DEAD CROW

He found it early one morning in his field.
Its wings were outspread, their tips
touching the opposite sides of the furrow,
as if it had been flying down
the newly-planted canyons all night
and decided this was the place
it wanted to stay, this intersection
of feeding-ground and burial-ground,
this final trigger deep in its nervous
system, that labyrinth of tangled wires.

The farmer took it for a good sign,
his crop’s resistance to scavengers.
He impaled it on a tall pole
which swayed at the field’s center.
The crow’s body swung back and forth
like a pendant. The farmer told me
it would keep off the other birds
better than a scarecrow. I tried
to think of it as a totem against itself.

But there was nothing significant
in it. Its wings, tight against its sides



now, were neither swaddling clothes
nor a robe of dark purple. They were stiff
and dirty and blurry with ants. Its eyes
neither surveyed the kingdom of the new
crop nor looked inward towards its royal
sleeping chamber. Their only interest
was in shrinking and hardening. But that
was not my only interest. According
to the farmer, last year's bird hung there
for quite a while, slowly detaching itself
piece by piece, each fragment disintegrating
on the wind, or flecked casually aside,
into the furrow. My own nervous system
honed itself down to a single cell.

GOVERNOR JOHN WINTHROP

Governor John Winthrop has a boil
on his nose. Salem,
Massachusetts, pretends not to notice.

It is fall, and the witches are shedding
themselves like leaves.
A just world is coming to rest.

It is 1638 and the colony's first lady
kisses the first man
on the nose to show it doesn't matter

in her just pursuit of the colony's first baby,
but John Winthrop,
being wise, doesn't believe in everything

he feels, unless it has first been posted
by ducking stools
and uncoagulated blood. The Winthrops'

servants are tested every Friday afternoon
for incubi, black
masses, haggard crevices in odd places.

The estate has Corinthian columns, surely
a pagan giveaway,
but crosses in the nick of time have been



lathered on the marble, sky to earth and back
again. The orchards
are spoiling with offspring of the serpent,

mealy worms ticking away the seasons
until another garden
spirals into the dust. Massachusetts

is ready to take the necessary measures
to keep from tottering.
Great notions turn the stones of the tomb,

rise like monuments, the sheltering death
that cools the steadfast
into heroes. The courts of the land nod

vigorously. There can never be too many
traps for the devil
when wheat fields are turning on their sides.

It is 1638 and Governor John Winthrop
has a boil on his nose.
The suspicions of witchcraft are growing.

ANNE CORAY

L

We must pay homage to a letter
that heightens calm yet assures the frail
even the strong may tremble. No easy art
for this almost-vowel
to muscle up and draw
from the deepest well of breath.
So full a bucket extends the pull
of tongue and hand;

smooth rope we trust
to hold, smooth rope that winds
on the wooden crank,
arnica-yellow in midday sun
fluent as water arriving now,
with its faint taste of moss and leaf
to the parted lips.



INCOMMUNICADO IN NOVEMBER

Drizzle on the steel roof,
click of the woodstove, pop of wood,
my dog shifting positions on his bed,
an occasional lick of paw.

My husband's gone—
boated down in a stiff east wind
to clear the neighbor's airstrip.
We've had three days of snow, now
it's a slush like mortar.

Alone, I have only to learn
how to love this weather,
its ostinato, its brash indifference
to my state of mind. *Won't change*
is the theme, *why hurry, where going...*

I'm dumb, it's Friday, my dog
growls at the falling shocks of snow.
The VHF radio is quiet. Where are
the old women who still speak Dena'ina?
I wish they'd come on.

Yagheli du. *How are you?*
Aa. *Good.* Yagheli du?
Shgheli. *I'm good too.*
O rain, long drawn, some days
you're a poor replacement for the human voice.