**Fulbright Scholars**

Where was it, in the Strand? A display

Of news items, in photographs.

For some reason I noticed it.

A picture of that year's intake

Of Fulbright Scholars. Just arriving -

Or arrived. Or some of them.

Were you among them? I studied it,

Not too minutely, wondering

Which of them I might meet.

I remember that thought. Not

Your face. No doubt I scanned particularly

The girls. Maybe I noticed you.

Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.

Noted your long hair, loose waves -

Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.

It would appear blond. And your grin.

Your exaggerated American

Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.

Then I forgot. Yet I remember

The picture: the Fulbright Scholars.

With their luggage? It seems unlikely.

Could they have come as a team? I was walking

Sore-footed, under hot sun, hot pavements.

Was it then I bough a peach? That's as I remember.

From a stall near Charing Cross Station.

It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted.

I could hardly believe how delicious.

At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh

By my ignorance of the simplest things.

**The Shot**

Your worship needed a god.

Where it lacked one, it found one.

Ordinary jocks became gods –

Deified by your infatuation

That seemed to have been designed at birth for a god.

It was a god-seeker. A god-finder.

Your Daddy had been aiming you at God

When his death touched the trigger.

In that flash

You saw your whole life. You richocheted

The length of your Alpha career

With the fury

Of a high-velocity bullet

That cannot shed one foot-pound

Of kinetic energy. The elect

More or less died on impact –

They were too mortal to take it. They were mind-stuff,

Provisional, speculative, mere auras.

Sound-barrier events along your flightpath.

But inside your sob-sodden Kleenex

And your Saturday night panics,

Under your hair done this way and that way,

Behind what looked like rebounds

And the cascade of cries diminuendo,

You were undeflected.

You were gold-jacketed, solid silver,

Nickel-tipped. Trajectory perfect

As through ether. Even the cheek-scar,

Where you seemed to have side-swiped concrete,

Served as a rifling groove

To keep you true.

Till your real target

Hid behind me. Your Daddy,

The god with the smoking gun. For a long time

Vague as mist, I did not even know

I had been hit,

Or that you had gone clean through me –

To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god.

In my position, the right witchdoctor

Might have caught you in flight with his bare hands,

Tossed you, cooling, one hand to the other,

Godless, happy, quieted.

I managed

A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown.

**The Minotaur**

The mahogany table-top you smashed

Had been the broad plank top

Of my mother's heirloom sideboard-

Mapped with the scars of my whole life.

That came under the hammer.

That high stool you swung that day

Demented by my being

Twenty minutes late for baby-minding.

'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,

Smash it into kindling.

That's the stuff you're keeping out of your poems!'

And later, considered and calmer,

'Get that shoulder under your stanzas

And we'll be away.' Deep in the cave of your ear

The goblin snapped his fingers.

So what had I given him?

The bloody end of the skein

That unravelled your marriage,

Left your children echoing

Like tunnels in a labyrinth.

Left your mother a dead-end,

Brought you to the horned, bellowing

Grave of your risen father

And your own corpse in it.

**Sam**

It was all of a piece to you

That was your horse, the white calm stallion, Sam,

Decided he'd had enough

And started home at a gallop. I can live

Your incredulity, your certainty

That this was it. You lost your stirrups. He galloped

Straight down the white line of the Barton Road.

You lost your reins, you lost your seat -

It was grab his neck and adore him

Or free-fall. You slewed under his neck,

An upside-down jockey with nothing

Between you and the cataract of macadam,

That horribly hard, swift river,

But the propeller terrors of his front legs

And the claangour of the iron shoes, so far beneath you.

Luck was already there. Did you have a helmet?

How did you cling on? Baby monkey

Using your arms and legs for clinging steel.

What saved you? Maybe your poems

Saved themselves, slung under that plunging neck,

Hammocked in your body over the switchback road.

You saw only blur. And a cyclist's shock-mask,

Fallen, dragging his bicycle over him, protective.

I can feel your bounced and dangling anguish,

Hugging what was left of your steerage.

How did you hang on? You couldn't have done it.

Something in you not you did it for itself.

You clung on, probably near unconscious.

Till he walked into his stable. That gallop

Was practice, but not enough, and quite useless.

When I jumped a fence you strangled me

One giddy moment, then fell off,

Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me

And tripped me and lay dead. Over in a flash.

**Your Paris**

Your Paris, I thought, was American.

I wanted to humour you.

When you stepped, in a shatter of exclamations,

Out of the Hotel des Deux Continents

Through frame after frame,

Street after street, of Impressionist paintings,

Under the chestnut shades of Hemingway ,

Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein.

I kept my Paris from you. My Paris

Was only just not German . The capital

Of the Occupation and old nightmare.

I read each bullet scar in the Quai stonework

With an eerie familiar feeling,

And stared at the stricken, sunny exposure of pavement

Beneath it. I had rehearsed

Carefully, over and over, just those moments –

Most of my life, it seemed. While you

Called me Aristide Bruant and wanted

To draw les toits , and your ecstasies ricocheted

Off the walls patched and scabbed with posters –

I heard the contrabasso counterpoint

In my dog-nosed pondering analysis

Of café chairs where the SS mannequins

Had performed their tableaux vivants

So recently the coffee was still bitter

As acorns, and the waiters’ eyes

Clogged with dregs of betrayal, reprisal, hatred.

I was not much ravished by the view of the roofs.

My Paris was a post-war utility survivor,

The stink of fear still hanging in the wardrobes,

Collaborateurs barely out of their twenties,

Every other face closed by the Camps

Or the Maquis . I was a ghostwatcher.

My perspectives were veiled by what rose

Like methane from the reopened

Mass grave of Verdun. For you all that

Was the anecdotal aesthetic touch

On Picasso’s portrait

Of Apollinaire , with its proleptic

Marker for the bullet. And wherever

Your eye lit, your immaculate palette,

The thesaurus of your cries,

Touched in its tints and textures. Your lingo

Always like an emergency burn-off

To protect you from spontaneous combustion

Protected you

And your Paris. It was diesel aflame

To the dog in me. It scorched up

Every scent and sensor. And it sealed

The underground, your hide-out,

That chamber, where you still hung waiting

For your torturer

To remember his amusement. Those walls,

Raggy with posters, were your own flayed skin –

Stretched on your stone god.

What walked beside me was a flayed,

One walking wound that the air

Coming against kept in a fever, wincing

To agonies. Your practiced lips

Translated the spasms to what you excused

As your gushy burblings – which I decoded

Into a language, utterly new to me

With conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings –

You gave me no hint how, at every corner,

My fingers linked in yours, you expected

The final fate-to-face revelation

To grab your whole body. Your Paris

Was a desk in a pension

Where your letters

Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth

Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.

Was a dream where you could not

Wake or find the exit or

The minotaur to put a blessed end

To the torment. What searching miles

Did you drag your pain

That were for me plain paving, albeit

Pecked by the odd, stray, historic bullet.

The mere dog in me, happy to protect you

From your agitation and your stone hours,

Like a guide dog, loyal to correct your stumblings,

Yawned and dozed and watched you calm yourself

With your anaesthetic – your drawing, as by touch,

Roofs, a traffic bollard, a bottle, me.

**RED**

Red was your colour.

If not red, then white. But red

Was what you wrapped around you.

Blood-red. Was it blood?

Was it red-ochre, for warming the dead?

Haematite to make immortal

The precious heirloom bones, the family bones.

When you had your way finally

Our room was red. A judgement chamber.

Shut casket for gems. The carpet of blood

Patterned with darkenings, congealments.

The curtains -- ruby corduroy blood,

Sheer blood-falls from ceiling to floor.

The cushions the same. The same

Raw carmine along the window-seat.

A throbbing cell. Aztec altar -- temple.

Only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness.

And outside the window

Poppies thin and wrinkle-frail

As the skin on blood,

Salvias, that your father named you after,

Like blood lobbing from the gash,

And roses, the heart's last gouts,

Catastrophic, arterial, doomed.

Your velvet long full skirt, a swathe of blood,

A lavish burgandy.

Your lips a dipped, deep crimson.

You revelled in red.

I felt it raw -- like crisp gauze edges

Of a stiffening wound. I could touch

The open vein in it, the crusted gleam.

Everything you painted you painted white

Then splashed it with roses, defeated it,

Leaned over it, dripping roses,

Weeping roses, and more roses,

Then sometimes, among them, a little blue

bird.

Blue was better for you. Blue was wings.

Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco

Folded your pregnancy

In crucible caresses.

Blue was your kindly spirit -- not a ghoul

But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.

In the pit of red

You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.

But the jewel you lost was blue.