

from *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013)

Three Treasures

Jamaica in the attic in a dark blue trunk,
sea-salt in the hinges. What must it look like
all that wide blue sea?

England downstairs in a rocking chair.
Nanna rocking with her playing cards,
cigs and toffee, tepid tea.

Jamaica frying chicken in the kitchen,
pig-snout in the stew-pot,
breakfast pan of saltfish, akee

China in the won-ton skin,
gold songbird on the brittle porcelain,
pink pagoda silk settee

Jamaica in the statues, lignum vitae heads
of dreadlocks; Anansi, rebel spider
in the storybooks, the poetry

England eating peaches on the patio,
hop-scotching, Mum in wellies, secateurs
around the rosebush and the raspberries

England painting midnight with a sparkler,
cousins throwing Guy Fawkes on the bonfire,
orange ash confetti

England for the English in graffiti
on the roundabouts and bus-shelters,
Please Sir on TV

Jamaica on the phone at 3am,
my father's back-home voice through fuzz
and crack: *My friend, long time no see*

China in the Cantonese he knew
but wouldn't speak, in letters stuffed
in shoe-boxes, ink-stick calligraphy

China in his slender bones,
in coral birds of stitched bamboo,
China in an origami butterfly, that flew

Sausages

They hang from the washing line
between the tea towels and bleached sheets.
He has pegged them in neat clusters,
dark fingers of blood and gristle
with twisted ends and oily skins.
They flame against the trees.

She smells them from the backdoor -
ginger, clove and fennel. The house is quiet.
He is hiding from her. Her mother told her
not to marry a foreigner. *You always wanted
to be different* she hissed. *Now this. He's black
and old enough to be your father.*

The sausages are Chinese dragon red,
the red of a chilli or a shamed face.
They gather fire, drying on her line.
This is Ilford, Essex, 1965.
The neighbours eat mince and cabbage
and talk about her.

She asked him not to do it
but they taste like home to him
and he is like good food to her.
Tonight they will eat sausages together
and she will lick the oil and spice
from his hands.

from *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014)

Ormonde

Rewind, rewind the Windrush! Raise the anchor
and sail her back, three weeks across the water,
then let the travellers disembark, return them
to their silent beds at dawn, before the mayhem
of the docks at Kingston Town and Port of Spain –
they'll wake to see their islands' sun again.

Wind back the hours, the days and months, a year –
and out of fog, Ormonde sails like a rumour,
or a tale about how what's too soon forgotten
will rise again – light up, awaken engines,
swing her bow through half a century,
return a hundred drifters, lost-at-sea.

Among the crowd, here's Gilbert Lowe, a tailor,
strolling starboard with his wife and daughter,
or staring out to sea alone most nights,
here's Paul the Carpenter, the yellow moonlight
and his battered playing cards for company,
or curled like woodlice in the clammy canopy

of darkness under deck, those stowaways
who'll leap for Liverpool on landing day
and sprint a half a mile of stormy water
black with mud, to climb the slimy timber
below Albert Dock, where policemen wait
to haul them off before the magistrate,

and all the passengers step from the ship
and through a coverlet of mist, then slip
like whispers into tenements and backstreets
as Ormonde's deep horn bellows her retreat -
and from this little piece of history
she slowly creaks her way back out to sea

What I Know

*This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.*

from 'The Waking' by Theodore Roethke

At night, you find me at the oil-lamp, dice in hand.
I say to myself, if I throw a pair of fives
I'll give up this life – the hot slow days
of hurricanes, sweet reek of banana rot,
black fruit on the vine. I want another hand
of chances. I grip the dice and blow
a gust of luck into my fist. I'm dreaming
of England, yes, work, yes, women, riches.
I shake these bone cubes hard, let go.
This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

The radio fizzes news across the tenement yard –
dazed soldiers sailing home, a weekend cavalcade,
monsoon time coming. I pass dead horses
in the field, dead mules. Men sag like slack suits
in the square. Talk of leaving starts like rain,
slow and spare, a rattle in a can. My tears
aren't for the ship, new places, strange people,
but the loss of my *always* faces - I mean,
my people, who I know, my places. My sister says
you carry them with you, don't fear.
What falls away is always, and is near.

Ormonde rocks steady across the ocean.
You ever look out to sea, and on every side
is sky and water, too much too blue?
Thoughts lap at me like waves against the bow,
not where am I, but why and who?
At night, we use our hours up, ten fellows
flocked to someone's sticky room. I roll the dice
or deal for chemmy, brag, pontoon.
We go til dawn, a huddle at the lamp turned low.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Some fellow swore there were diamonds
on these streets. Look hard enough in rain
you'll see them. I squint my eyes but what I see
is sunshine on the dock, my sister's white gloves
waving me goodbye. There's no diamonds here,
or if there are, they're under this skin of snow.
Seems the whole world's gone white. I roll my dice
in basements below the English pavements.
I guess I'm learning what I need to know.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Shipbreaking

These folks were not the victims of migration...these folks mean to survive – Stuart Hall

I watch old films of ship yards on the Clyde:
cranes ripping ships apart, their metal hides
peeled back by men in goggles wielding fire.
The shock of innards – girders, joists and wires,
a rusted funnel toppling in slow motion.
Those open flanks rain down the cabin's foreign
detritus of flags and posters, turquoise charts
of distant oceans, photographs of sweethearts –

They tore the *Ormonde* up in '52
for scrap. I google what I can. If you
were here, you'd ask me why I care so much.
I'd say it's what we do these days Dad, clutch
at history. I find old prints – three orphans
on a deck chair squinting at the sun; a crewman
with his arm around a girl, both smiling, windswept;
a stark compartment where you might have slept

and I recall that old trunk in our attic -
cracked leather, rusted clasps – *my box of tricks*
you said, you said you'd lost the only key.
Your home, the ship you sailed, those miles of sea
were locked inside. Now my mind re-cranks
a fizzing cine-film: the young man on a gangplank –
his trilby tilted, pocket hankie, stride
rehearsed – it says *I'm here*. Then sitting dockside
with his trunk among the rippling crowd, he lights
a cigarette, inhales the English night.

from *Old Friends* (Hercules Editions, 2022)

1

A white tablecloth, a spinning table, a heap
of hot spare ribs. Wine glasses hung from stems
above the bar, bells I wanted to tap
my chopsticks on. Old Friends, Good Friends, New Friends?
My brother remembers dad slapping the owner's back.
They knew each other through poker, or some deal they'd done.
You know the way dad sort of knew everyone?

I see that restaurant as if through steam.
Ghost-waiters in bow ties swim around the edges,
dispersible as the images in dreams.
Tired wallpaper: coloured birds on perches?
Someone's birthday? I can't remember who's.
Only my bowl of won ton soup is clear,
pulled into focus through my mind's binoculars.



Limehouse. Run-down lodging houses. Sea-farers from Malaysia, Cape Verde, China. The Thames laps the docks, hauls in the tea clippers - the smell of oranges and ginger crams the air. The photographs are monochrome – the restaurants, shops and laundries lining Ming Street, two Chinese men inspecting chickens in a crate

but I see colour. Anna Mae Wong crossing the empty road by Sam Sam Sing and Co, I paint in red, gold, green. I colour in the pile of pears beyond the shop front window, the way that Thullier, in her Paris studio had two hundred women on an assembly line to colour films, like Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon*.



All these years, I thought that won ton skins
 were round. My father made them once or twice –
 pale and floury moons he rolled out thin
 to fill with pork and shrimp, a pinch of five-spice.
 He strung pork belly in the oven, fried rice
 with egg and snow-peas, showered everything
 in soy sauce. But google tells me won ton skins

are square, that *won ton* loosely means *cloud-swallow*.
 I make them now, and launch them in a dish
 of salty broth. I make my mouth an ‘O’
 to suck the hair-string noodles in, and fish
 for cloud-balls on my dragon spoon. The splosh
 of soup on blue-vine china brings back my father,
 and lets me hear the lapping of the river,

hauling in its cargo. Porcelain and tea,
 the rolls of Chinese wallpaper, bananas,
 rum, molasses, resin, ivory,
 Persian rugs and spice and ostrich feathers
 filled the old brick warehouses, and liquor
 stood in barrels underground – a maze
 of tunnels, deep below the waterways.

Richard Scott and go walking, explorers
for a day. The sculpted Chinese dragon
looming above Westferry DLR.

A rusted street sign – *Ming Street* – older than
its post-war wall. The Asiatic Seamans
Rest, the warehouses turned galleries.

In a coffee shop, a man, Chinese,

obviously a tourist, smiles at me.

What are we looking for? A hundred years
ago, you'd pay T. Cook & Son three-pennies
for a tour to colour in your fears

and fancies – *Ladies, Gentleman, just here,
beyond this door, a real life opium den!*

And down this street, a murder! – and when you'd done,

be driven safely back to Piccadilly.

At home, I find two photos – Pennyfields
in the shadow of Canary Wharf: 1960s
council hutches. Another shot reveals
old Pennyfields, little houses peeled
and sagged against each other like drunk sailors.
Two suited Chinese men regard the camera.

We took a selfie at the river, cheek
to cheek. I posted it on Insta, but later,
click *delete*. We stood too close. Another week
of lockdown - face masks, two statutory meters.
Joanna phones to say she's heard a rumour –
Covid cooked up in a lab – the plan
of bad Chinese – like Fu's black poppy poison.



Because My Heart

is an empty port today – sea-rot, grey weather -
what I'm feeling isn't festish or fear
but how those people might have loved each other.
Not the scandal, but the simple cheer
of love, a coat against the rain, the purr
of it. Not the way the critics simplify:
'*Chinese men made good husbands.*' Who am I

to know better? Surely lovers can be lovers
because they're *other* to each other. The way
I think, that once, my parents loved together?
A lifetime ago, in Fairgrounds, San Jose
I loved a man who stummed guitar all day
and worked all night, and spoke a cinematic
Spanish, *eres mi vida*, bullet-quick.

The late-day sun cascading through his room,
he held my hair back as I sucked a straw
above a burning lump of opium -
smoke brightening my heart. Those Limehouse sailors,
alone, outsiders wanting lighter weather,
had every reason to colour London's grey –
to search for love, and fall in it, and stay.



from *Rock, Bird, Butterfly* (Hercules Editions, 2022)

Dazzling Blue

And soon I'm telling everyone I meet
about Chinese wallpaper, the lotuses
and butterflies, peacocks, parakeets,
how there are one hundred and forty known cases
in bedrooms from Perthshire to Powis
and more to be found. I'm raving about curators
and wallpaper restorers, how China

did everything better than us – pottery,
gunpowder, printing and yes, wallpaper
but when I say 'us' I don't mean you and me.
Now check out these rainbow-tailed warblers,
I laugh, scrolling through my phone, consider
this dazzling blue! I'm babbling about tea-clippers,
Guangzhou, the Silk Road, the Empire

and some people glaze over while I'm talking
and some say wow and nod vigorously
because I am saying wow and nodding
vigorously, and when I tell Arji
I'm writing wallpaper poems, or am meant to be
but don't know what to write, he empathises
deeply, relating my experience to his

as poet-in-residence at Wedgewood Pottery –
Wedgewood! he sighs, like what did I know
about Wedgewood? So I share a long story
about the ornate wallpaper still on show
at Coutts private bank on the Strand – how
it was saved from a sinking clipper
on the Java Sea, as Malayan raiders

with machetes sailed closer and closer –
that's how much that wallpaper cost,
£26 for one sheet of paper!
and Arj says man, this is like your specialist
subject if you were on *Mastermind*,
and I think he's right, but I know
a lot about Joni Mitchell too

Chinese Wall Hangings

After he died, I took them from his wall,
each with its pair of songbirds: pink silk plumes
and silver beaks. I hung them on my wall.
In Brixton, if anyone asked, I called them heirlooms
from my father's father's village, from rooms
where workers in the mountain half-light sewed
pink songbirds to bamboo – though I knew

he'd bought them in Soho, from New Loon Moon
or Lucky Foods. That's what China was:
two chipped soup bowls, a fire-dragon spoon,
the rack of belly pork he'd string across
our oven spitting fat, a Chinese dress
from Top Shop, and songbirds, factory copycats,
all arranged like a shrine in my tiny flat.

Later, I took the lignum vitae sculpture
from Jamaica – a Rastafarian girl
with smooth swan neck, two twists of plaited hair.
I sat her in the centre of my windowsill
and saw her as my grandmother, from the hills
of Hearts Ease, though we'd bought her at Dunns River
from a higgler banging on the windows of our car.

