

Devil's Thunderbolt

At a cliff's foot
I hunt ammonites
in fissile layers
of flaky silt-beds.

But a belemnite
tight as a rifle bullet,
finds me.

I turn it between fingers.
Thick and unwieldy
as the graphite-tipped stub
that rounded my first
laborious letters.

It's an inch-long pen,
but lightning-acute.
No wonder Whitby dialect
calls it a 'devil's thunderbolt' –

it writes miniscules,
eyes mouth muscles,
pennate tentacles,

writhes on the page,
unspools an inky sea,

hides in its own essence,
leaving this shale core.

Each time I think
I've grasped it,
it swims away

into itself.

Poem For 'Eva'

I've got a delicate paintbrush, a dentist's water-pick, and several kilos of high explosive.

Now that I've found you, it's time to awaken you
by blasting you out of your deep-sunk bed.

You are

 crumbling

 as I touch the rust-scented marl

holding your white fragments

 in a curl of the river Aude.

This bone bed was once a riverbed, meander laving your relics, gravels inurning you.

I dig a turtle's scute,

 your humerus,

 your scattered vertebrae

– finally your face –

 out of the Upper Cretaceous.

I wrap your limbs in plaster bandages. The plaster dries, ossifies.

Your arm-bone, long and thick as my leg, white encased in white.

Painfully, carefully, I stick your bones' fibres together,

fix limbs in sockets, root each tooth, lock the links of your spine.

We stand, poised, on the edge of aeons. You watch me patiently from your afterlife.

Trilobite

Curled like a human embryo –
compound eyes blank with mineral dreams.
Its frail armour still braced

to endure the undersea sandstorm.
Scales and ringmail of fragile chitin
could not deflect the grinding pressures
of silt-layers crushed into shale.

You can feel
the sand's weight entombing it alive
as it rests in your warm,
nerved hand.

I Redecorate My House To Resemble *La Cueva de Tito Bustillo*

I need the darkness to breathe with beasts.

First, I let the Rivers Moru, Noceu, San Miguel and crazy Llocu in through the roof. Their muttering soothes my sleep. I sledgehammer the bathroom ceiling, let faithful rains sculpt flowstone waterfalls and gours with step-lipped mouths in the en suite. With my shower dripping, water dissolves the bricks and rebuilds them as stalactites. All light fittings must be ripped out, and the broadband cancelled.

Lastly, I outline a reindeer's armature of antlers in black manganese; sketch a horned aurochs head, carbon-dark; daub violet clay for the bristling mane of a tarpan. I bathe the wall of my makeshift cavern in blood-rust ochre.

They are summoned. I listen at the splintered window for their extinct hooves to come quaking the tarmac of Hamilton Drive.

Ermine Street

Tonight, while men drink Guzzler
in the Old Black Swan
and women with rosé lips
check their phones,

the Ninth marches north
from Lindum to Eboracum
with a flare of bronze trumpets.
Their steel-hooped corselets
glint in the moonlight.

At their head rides Martius Vitalis, *centurio*,
on a tall battle-horse with shaggy fetlocks.
Duccius Rufinus hoists the standard.

As they file along Blossom Street
and cross the Ouse,
a lad in Lendal Cellars chokes on his beer.
At the Porta Praetoria
they stride in formation
beneath the Yorkshire Insurance Building.

Listen. Muffled war-songs
to the tramp of hobnailed sandals
from eighteen feet below the city.

Tired auxiliaries follow Stonegate,
trudge through the cellar
of the Treasurer's House –
a guy fixing the plumbing falls off his ladder.
They slog through the opposite wall
and troop northeast along the Via Decumana.

At the barracks, they strip
tunics and armour,
soothe their limbs in the *caldarium's* steam.
A whiff of warm vapour in the Roman Bath Pub –
the pint Jade's pulling overflows
as she and Felicius Simplex clock each other.
He's stark naked. Their jaws fall.

Tomorrow night,
the legion leaves towered fastness
for the cold hills of the Picti
beyond the Wall.