

Extracts from *Fools and Mirrors*, Norman Buller

Table Talk

Molière wrote that food, not speech,
keeps us alive. Hear Brecht declare
'Grub first — then ethics'. Thus both teach
the primacy of table fare.

Eliot's Lil had cooked a gammon
to 'get the beauty of it hot'.
For higher things she'd put that ham on;
it saved her marriage, like as not.

Food is the body's fuel; our hearts
and minds require a different meat.
We can't have science, religion, arts,
philosophy — unless we eat.

But do so wisely. Moderate
your appetite. Let sense prevail.
Don't overfill your glass and plate —
then love Sir Toby's cakes and ale.

Sickert's Girl

I work the streets in Camden Town;
it keeps the keen
wolf from the door by letting him in
— if you see what I mean.

This unusual punter, he looked me over
— I'm used to that —
and we went to his place in Mornington Crescent,
a right dingy flat

for one who seemed like a gent. Let's get
it over, I thought
to myself. It was gloomy and dark even
by day. I caught

sight of a kind of frame with an empty
picture propped up
on it. There were these brushes everywhere,
some in a cup

soaking. Oh Gawd! 'Alright', I said
firmly, 'where?'
He pointed to an iron bed in a corner.
'Over there.'

Well, to cut it short, I started to take off
my skirt and blouse.
I've a good figure, though I say it myself,
and they usually rouse

up at that and get on with it. But not him!
My body possessed
him alright, only by a different fire.
After, as I dressed,

I thought how different it had been
to when I get laid.
He wanted me just as an image in paint.
Still - I got paid!

My Sister
1922-2009

She was her daddy's girl; when his light failed
hers guttered too. Our mother had to try
to cope through widowed shadowland impaled
upon the Means Test like a skewered fly.

She'd spin play's gold from straw, for me create
a palace from a bedroom magically,
enchant some game where we were rich and great,
the reverse mirror of our poverty.

It all comes home, the sadness and the grief,
the withered promise and the wasted chance,
the joy that spiralled like an autumn leaf
beyond her grasp without a backward glance.

The fire consumes it all: sick bone, failed breath,
the crumbling limbs, the settlement of death.

Miniatures of Loss

Memory, turn the key,
letting the haunting past
return: his father's face
an alabaster mask
framed in its coffin lace
and he a five-year child
bewildered, unaware,
numb in the grasp of death.

Long thirties' summers, tents
and makeshift cricket games
in tangled meadows near
the house; stickleback days,
the pond in Farmer Lowe's
field, all newts and minnows;
cotton-wool clouds puffing
forever across the sky.

Cigarette cards, a vase,
some faded photographs;
such miniatures of loss,
drawn from the bric-à-brac
of time, litter the mind,
drift in a phantom world,
a vanished, unreal country
where only ghosts return.

Anna Akhmatova
1889-1966

I

I drew my first breath
to the distant cry of cranes
and the steady throb of death

whose grinning skull and bones
danced on the other side
of the river. Turning the stones

of life uncovers vermin;
that was surely part
of my task. But within

that frame a portrait had
to be painted — Love — the heart's
prime duty. Being sad

is what lasts long in life.
Ask God for nothing.
Endure the twist of the knife.

II

A nightingale sang in a nun's
garden in the ruined city.
There I carved my son's

face in verse with pain's
honed chisel. I was
a whore-nun shaking the chains

of a Russia writhing under
bloodstained boots, a bird
tearing itself asunder

on broken glass, its feathers
bloodsoaked. I feel it must
be someone else who suffers

these agonies, not I;
surely I couldn't bear it!
How many times must I die?

III

The city seemed merely an annexe
to its prisons. If a plaque
should be made for me, fix

it where I stood for countless
hours in sun or frost
enduring all the heedless

weather before gates
which never opened for me.
What I have written states

well enough what I've known;
I shall never explain or alter
a syllable. I have thrown

the door wide open. My name
burns through ice. I have earned
that gift of bitter fame.