First time, about Easter

There was a donkey inside a wire fence where the road begins its first climb to the Rimutakas.

We passed it on Friday late afternoon for years, passed it again coming back on Sundays, or thought so in winter, when the dark was already down. It was more grey than not, though children reasonably argued the toss, but its muzzle this frosty white, without question. You could not of course hear from inside the car, but once we saw its neck extended, its teeth displayed, without doubt it was braying, and looked hurt: our driver said No, it was nothing like it, yet thought of the horse with the spiked tongue in Guernica, the blue-grey horse, or paler even, imagine the glare of a search-light picking it out in a show called ‘War Arriving’. Then one day it is gone, the donkey on the first incline towards the Rimutaka hill. A dozen reasons.

I forgot, says another driver, a long time later, to ever mention, did I, the one time it snowed that far down the hill, the donkey
standing in the white paddock brought tears to my eyes? Its head hung forward as though too heavy for its body. As though, finally and forever, that bit too much.

A donkey in a snowed-in paddock, under trees black as its hooves. On the Rimutaka road. One Friday.

Three’s a crowd

We’ve looked together – what, three, four, times? – at Manet’s barmaid. Insolent? Not quite. Nor melancholy either, with her canny eye for fetching decent tips from handsome cads. ‘You’d have done it with like composure,’ I tell the woman I’d rather see there, pouring thimbled absinthe, than Cleopatra talking barge-talk, gold-hulled as you like. ‘I rather fancy strolling in and simply ordering.’ A touch of boredom, an obliging nod. We both, as it happens, are wearing black. We look at the painting I love as much as any. ‘This is as good as it gets,’ isn’t that also what she thinks, that marvellous unflinching gaze? She may well be thinking of children, some impending grief. Or joy, don’t leave that out, joy’s in there too. I want to touch her hand. Taste the glimpse of her throat. Hit the phrase to set her smiling. ‘Imagine being at that bar,’ the woman I stand with tells me, ‘Such loneliness surrounds her. All those mirrors reflecting, both the world, and not.’ And her curious judgement: ‘Wish I’d known Manet.’
Love, assuming nothing

When she decided, ‘All right then, that’s what you want,’ left her jandals at the screen door, hooked her bra on the doorknob as she walked into the bunk-room, the rest of whatever she’d been wearing out there still on the verandah, he quoted a poem that said, ‘Every gift I ever imagined comes to me, love, on these naked feet,’ so that ‘smooth bastard,’ she responded, but being as good as her word, the dawn’s there in no time. Then asked, ‘That French poet, right?’ and he said, ‘It was.’

‘Then don’t,’ she told him. ‘Next time you come at that caper, the show’s called off. Say it like is or I’ll stone you.’ He’d seldom thrilled at anything so direct. He shoved the *Collected Valery* beneath the mattress. Believe it not, it lasted: as did ‘every gift’.
Come again?

I’ve watched again a movie I saw when I was seven.
The same trees thrashed, the same moon
glinted too brightly, the wrong people kissed,
a fat nurse with a nice voice turned out to be German.

I sat in an Auckland theatre, I think the St James.
I chewed a hole in a white silk scarf in special
wartime terror. There were wry British jokes that went
over my head. I think I remembered the bit

about the postman, but forgot two doctors thumping
each other because a nurse couldn’t quite decide.
The hole in the gnawed scarf is the taste frightening
my mouth. When the trees pelt because that

is what studios knew scared everyone awfully,
especially ladies starting to run back home in the dark,
and the moon glitters so everything is knife-edge,
I am there in the dark as well, I am still not sure

who is really bad when everyone seems nice.
I watch the eyes slide above surgical masks.
I remember the balloon that goes limp when someone’s dead.
All this time the detective’s been looking after my scarf.
Any heart would give a leap

on meeting, as I do, a woman whose calling is to discourse
in the cleverest way on Theoretical Approaches
to Biographical Texts – a Chair being the diamond in her sights,
who regards the common reader pretty much as a terrier
assesses rodents from the perspective of how necks
are best snapped:

then to hear she jumps from aircraft
at 10,000 feet, that her hobby is precisely that,
to step from a rushing door into pure speculation,
to drop for the thrill of both utter and dangerous
freedoms:

that she grips for the hands of other
jumpers, forms one of those famous descending circles
photographers die for, a human plunging Stonehenge
you might think as gravity occurs:

    to hear

that, to meet her, to walk with this woman
who hates it that a sliver of discourse might drift away,
a tessera make off without standing to account,
yet has – I hear too from a colleague – a special
emergency chute she has hand-embroidered
with conventional prayer, a ‘Lord be with Me’
reminder should the ground sprawl sudden
and quicker than expected, oh unravelling text . . .

This is a puzzle I’m ill at ease with. This is ‘a self
constructed from diverse fields of semantic force.’
There, I quote her, granting gouged respect.
Nothing truer, mind

Remember the Frenchman who said philosophy
- or one philosopher, at least – had cut
poetry’s throat? The man casually beneath
the blue tree holding the white book
doesn’t mind that the Frenchman said so.
He as casually liked it that he did.
He liked it, the featured poet’s
throat a child might gruesomely draw
so it seemed a red ship sailing
from ear to ear, or a skipping-robe
dipped in paint and cleverly caught
at the very grinningest part of its
swing in the shouting playground.
Yes, he liked it, the reading man
with the white book in the yellow field.
Unless the Frenchman had told us
you’d fancy philosophy had so little
to offer poetry, philosophers solemnly
stropping razors for pure fun.
After that, to begin with

The wind has talked through most of what we have said together, the wind has cleared its throat as though doing us a favour. We wait the streaming of leaves to pile the corners of the veranda, before we say 'The wind we never would have believed could last so long, has scarcely begun.'

Then proving us wrong, there is stillness the shape of crystal slipped over the hollow of the wind, a new fear, a different fear, making us stand and look to trees carved from something darker than darkness, and we say, 'At least a few stars have made it,' surprising us, the stars, our being able to say, 'For certain,' an exhilaration which after all is our simply observing distance, and giving it a name, and saying 'There are seven now that we count, seven, which seems an extraordinary thing to say, 'seven stars after so much wind,' the silence no longer laid like a scythe against a wall for wind to dry.
Sight Unseen

A famous foreign poet came to the farm I lived on in Pukeroro. He liked the name ‘morepork’ when it narrowed the night to one complaining repetition, he said – it was February – this was the perfect place, surely, for fireflies, which at that time I had never seen, not even in poetry.

A friend, a clever attractive woman, drove him back to town. He said as they turned to the main road near the enormous Norfolk pine, ‘Do you mind if we drive in silence?’

I wish to untangle what the stars down here are up to.’ He wrote perhaps a poem which may or may not be about his visit, the wine we drank together, the feeling I had as he stood at the back door and looked intently as far as a field of corn where, if you waited with utter patience, you could hear the army worm’s destructive rustling, which I told him of, and he smiled, but it was like a smile in a Bergman movie, you needed critics to explain.

The poem speaks of how light is best loved in tiny fragments, how stars disappoint when sky sprawls so many, how an owl is a hooded pinprick at the world’s end.
Skol

A man I talked with in a bar in Berlin
once read poetry, he said, with passion, served
with distinction in an army he loathed. Beyond
which he said little. He drank Schnapps. He advised,
as we parted, to avoid epiphanies as I would gunfire.
He phrase for ordering a Schnapps was ‘to dim the lights.’

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New volumes of stories and poetry will appear next year. The poems printed here are
from that next collection, Us.’