A Scattering by Christopher Reid

I expect you’ve seen the footage: elephants, finding the bones of one of their own kind dropped by the wayside, picked clean by scavengers and the sun, then untidily left there, decide to do something about it.

But what, exactly? They can’t, of course, reassemble the old elephant magnificence; they can’t even make a tidier heap. But they can hook up bones with their trunks and chuck them this way and that way. So they do.

And their scattering has an air of deliberate ritual, ancient and necessary. Their great size, too, makes them the very embodiment of grief, while the play of their trunks lends sprezzatura.

Elephants puzzling out the anagram of their own anatomy, elephants at their abstracted lamentations—may their spirit guide me as I place my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements.

The Armadillo by Elizabeth Bishop

for Robert Lowell

This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,

rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

* * *

Once up against the sky it’s hard
to tell them from the stars—
planets, that is—the tinted ones:
Venus going down, or Mars,
or the pale green one. With a wind,
they flare and falter, wobble and toss;
but if it’s still they steer between
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous.

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.
The flame ran down. We saw the pair

of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.
The ancient owls’ nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft!—a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!

1957

Gulls by William Carlos Williams

My townspeople, beyond in the great world,
are many with whom it were far more
profitable for me to live than here with you.
These whirr about me calling, calling!
and for my own part I answer them, loud as I can,
but they, being free, pass!
I remain! Therefore, listen!
For you will not soon have another singer.

First I say this: you have seen
the strange birds, have you not, that sometimes
rest upon our river in winter?
Let them cause you to think well then of the storms
that drive many to shelter. These things
do not happen without reason.

And the next thing I say is this:
I saw an eagle once circling against the clouds
over one of our principal churches—
Easter, it was—a beautiful day!
three gulls came from above the river
and crossed slowly seaward!
Oh, I know you have your own hymns, I have heard them—
and because I knew they invoked some great protector
I could not be angry with you, no matter
how much they outraged true music—

You see, it is not necessary for us to leap at each other,
and, as I told you, in the end
the gulls moved seaward very quietly.

The Owl by Ted Hughes

I saw my world again through your eyes
As I would see it again through your children’s eyes.
Through your eyes it was foreign.
Plain hedge hawthorns were peculiar aliens,
A mystery of peculiar lore and doings.
Anything wild, on legs, in your eyes
Emerged at a point of exclamation
As if it had appeared to dinner guests
In the middle of the table. Common mallards
Were artefacts of some unearthliness,
Their wooings were a hypnagogic film
Unreeled by the river. Impossible
To comprehend the comfort of their feet
In the freezing water. You were a camera
Recording reflections you could not fathom.
I made my world perform its utmost for you.
You took it all in with an incredulous joy
Like a mother handed her new baby
By the midwife. Your frenzy made me giddy.
It woke up my dumb, ecstatic boyhood
Of fifteen years before. My masterpiece
Came that black night on the Grantchester road.
I sucked the throaty thin woe of a rabbit
Out of my wetted knuckle, by a copse
Where a tawny owl was enquiring.
Suddenly it swooped up, splaying its pinions
Into my face, taking me for a post.

John Donne (1572-1631)

The Flea

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
Me it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Confess it, this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are:
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
Though use make thee apt to kill me,
Let not to this, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege; three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
In what could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me, the weaker now:
'Tis true; then learn how false, fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

John Donne (1572-1631)
A Valediction: forbidding mourning

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
    And whisper to their souls, to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say:
    ‘The breath goes now’, and some say: ‘No’:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
    No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
‘Twere profanation of our joys
    To tell the laity our love.

Moving of the earth brings harms and fears;
    Men reckon what it did and meant:
But trepidation of the spheres,
    Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull súblunary lovers’ love
    (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
    Those things which elemented it.

But we, by a love so much refin’d
    That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assurèd of the mind,
    Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
    Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
    Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
    As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix’d foot, makes no show
    To move, but doth, if the other do;

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet whilst the other far doth roam,
   It leans, and hearkens after it,
   And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
   Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
   And makes me end where I begun.

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry ‘Weep! weep! weep! weep!’
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.

There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb’s back, was shaved, so I said,
‘Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.’

And so he was quiet, and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an angel, who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins, and set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing, they run
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind:
And the angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,
He’d have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So, if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939)

Siren Song

This is the one song everyone would like to learn: the song that is irresistible:

the song that forces men to leap overboard in squadrons even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows because anyone who has heard it is dead, and the others can’t remember.

Shall I tell you the secret and if I do, will you get me out of this bird suit?

I don’t enjoy it here squatting on this island looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs, I don’t enjoy singing this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you, to you, only to you. Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me! Only you, only you can, you are unique

at last. Alas it is a boring song but it works every time.