

Love is love: a tenderness shown, fingertips
brushing at specks on a beloved's shoulder;
unconscious acts of familiarity, hand or wrist
taken when walking, and the whole body turning
in towards and touching the other, hip to chest. Love.

Tower guards fire bursts down at the dogs
that disturb the graves beyond the fence.
Gate sentries have been seen to follow,
with their gunsights, a highflying crow
or gull, say "Bang." The dogs are left unburied,
grave rags and pink bones partially uncovered.

Bartering morsels for medicines, attentive to
the other's every breath, this one man advertises
his love, beams his pleasure in his lover's recovery.
Other prisoners look on this enactment of love's gestures
with dumb wonder, recall themselves being fathers,
that same gentling kiss upon a son's sharp hair,
headslant smile of companionship to a beside-them wife.

A slow drizzle collects on latitudes of wire.
Drops congregate, meet and merge, run along
to the lowest point, and drip; shattering on lower
strands and making miniature cascades. Singular
drops snail backwards down the vertical.

Believing all water here, because it is here,
to be undrinkable, dehydration has created a
vitamin B deficiency, adding to his delusional
state. The already lack of vitamin C
means that his skin has spots and lesions,
his gums are swollen and his teeth loose.

Beyond the rhomboids, ellipses and rectangles of the fence
are waist-sawn stumps and lime-spattered graves. Beyond these
sunken and hummocked oblongs is a line of sparkling trees
- a few birch beckoning lightness; but mostly the inner dark
of conifer. Beyond the trees' wispy tips a mountain, its peak
wearing a cyclist's helmet of cloud. From the diamond-mesh
gate, the road curves into the green-black trees.

The human brain weighs just over a kilo, has ten billion nerve cells. Physical sensation of a new idea is that of a curtain thrown back, or of two matrixes connecting, eyes coming wide with comprehension... most idiots are occasionally savant.

On the guardhouse birdtable, it's the male sparrow who anxiously tends the fledgling, grown in all but tail, that flutters and wide-beaked cheeps at him. Soon as the parent flies out through the fence, the young bird unfluffs its insistent helpless pretense, pecks with smooth efficiency.

Rainbellied clouds hang over the towers. A young man, sense of self gone, breaks off a piece of plastic guttering and, weeping his despair, swings it and pokes it at other prisoners. A guard, in passing, shoots him, comes to examine the body, his face cheerfully expecting the attacked men to be grateful. He studies their grief.

He wears the secret smile of an unassailable man.
Certain of his own death, nothing bad can be done
to him again. Springtime birds are frantically feeding.
He leaves a clip of scrawled poems dedicated to his
'always dead self', and woven with an intricate symbolism.

Tower guards, irked by their apparent
complacent waddling, shoot to kill at
the crows; but only to scare, chuckling,
the dogs away from the graves. Because
they, once, petted dogs like those? Crows,
caught young, it is argued, can be tamed too.

The hut's would-be scholars disagree over
the poems' meanings. One says, getting louder
- and hope is as essential as food here - suicide
is no sanctification of any truth, is simply
an obsession fulfilled or a life found to be
not worth living. White florets on leafless
blackthorn speckle the background of conifers.

Where death and dispossession are arbitrary,
where life is only as certain as the last meal
(not the next), the unusual is frightening. But
food will be taken from the dead man's bowl;
and his clothes, if not whole, used as patches.

Out of this day's wormbright sky, the mountain's
grey peak has attracted a single white cloud;
which, having been caught, has to slide and
slither free. The ring of dark firs have new green
branch ends, brown candle stamens. In a naked
blackthorn is a winter-collapsed magpie's nest.

When death is daily anticipated, but unpredictable
- the guard does not, at that moment, like the look
of you, or has decided beforehand - to prove to
himself or to others - to shoot the nineteenth
prisoner he sees that day, and the one standing
to the left of him - then a man can come up with no
schemata for survival, build no value system from it.

The guards wear white convex masks and genuflect
as the blue-skinned cadavers are carried out to
the fires. (Rumour is the disease is an experiment,
prisoners expendable.) An orange sun and a white moon
take turns to float in the weaving of black smoke.

(Rumour is the guards have been secretly
vaccinated.) More prisoners, feet bleeding,
are pushed in through the gates. Their camp
was bulldozed. (Rumours are of more killing,
of guards needed elsewhere, of a war lost,
a war won, of more prisoners taken.)

The tower guards only pretend to shoot at the rooks that
daily arrange themselves in the died-back branches
of an oak. (Rumour is of a village or town in that direction.)
Daylong grind of heavy machines has rumour of tanks, then
of a convoy. Final conclusion is combine harvesters,
a dust haze silting the sky to the east. One guard one day
is merciful over a dropped bowl. (Rumour is of release.)

A cirrus sky-frost re-patterns the sky,
creates a double smear of westering sun -
replicating itself in a herringbone
segment of refracted rainbow. Up,
up there, a planing gull cries, and cries.

The white man in the shower, beaten blue
face down among pink suds, and crouched
in a fearful death; backside dripped upon;
has an arsehole like a purple mouth. Thin
slippery limbs straightened - for carrying -
the anus becomes a brown asterisk.

A meadow brown butterfly, on day's warmed
stone, opens its wings, a one-page book.
When flown, the kneeling man looks over to
the guardhouse garden, watches petals close
around day's end sun, considers
properties of colour and light, the electro-
chemical processes of thought and being.

A passing through shower divides
the camp into light-dry/dark-wet
as arbitrary as life/death. A quiet
guard says, "All I'm doing here
is my job." He can take a tablet.

Plasmodium is a protozoan causing
malaria. Vector is the mosquito.
The infected are not infectious to men,
only, once parasites develop, to a new
biting mosquito, sucking in pathogens.
Here men walk the geography of the head,

an idea of roads, explore the inner universes
of cranial folds, with each their childhood cast
in neural perspex, a static time and place,
ageless each for each its owner's lifespan. Parts
may be temporarily hidden by memory's mirrors,
revealed upon re-examination. None, though,
characters nor landmarks, can be changed.

Summer green, this showery day - each tree
picked out in 3D rain-bright clarity;
part-moon the same dirty white as
the wisp-ends of clouds, fledglings foolish
funny in their false starts and alarms.

Longer they too are caged the more the guards
regress. In idleness they draw on and dye their
arms and chests, add ribbons to their caps, plait
leather and metal round their wrists. One has
come by a short spear, another a sword. Soon he
will invent a ritual for the chopping off of heads.

Clouds have lain hold of the mountain. Two
jackdaws, in a glide, fall across the sky.
In the lee of an oak a squad of rooks surf
the eddies, sliding up over one another,
skimming down the wind's face. Gusts push
and pull at a trailing bramble, which saws
and shreds a hazel's wide leaves, winning light.

A half-dead plant, feeding on its own decay, produces a single blue, bell-like bloom beside a floor support. To each man's surprise other prisoners reveal themselves to be aesthetes too; and, in corners, they marvel together at the sheer magnitude of each their own life's being.

For three days, beside the parched tamped earth of the compound, this one white-starred flower, its broken stem leaking jewels of sap, becomes an object of reverence. In clear sight of a tower, however, these pilgrims do not kneel: they hang a step, join in praise where not overlooked.

With the nose-wrinkle of a glasses-wearer he looks up to skylark and swallow singing on the wing, points out the black round eye of a magpie, blue of a daw, the fat semi-discs of bracket fungus shelving a birch; and, on a concrete post, elfin pillows of brittle lichen. The commonplace of beauty is agreed upon. The shock, always with men, for men, is how quick and absolute is death.