

The Thoughts

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Sarah Barnsley

smith|doorstop

the poetry business

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After great pain, a formal feeling comes

– Emily Dickinson, poem 341

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss – we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain [...] there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height [...] And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, therefore do we the more impetuously approach it.

– Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Imp of the Perverse’

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For Louise, whose name means Hero

Ruminations

Body Found in Garden After Confession

How the body got there,
or whose it was, nobody knew,

not even the confessor,
who had been resident all their life in Brazil,

who was on holiday in the Bahamas at the time,
experts suggest, that the body entered the earth,

who was on life support after a diving accident
at the point, experts say, that the body's owner died

and *we are pleased to bring this case to its conclusion*
said the Chief Superintendent

and *the nation can feel safe again*
said the Prime Minister

and *we pray for all the families*
said the Archbishop of Canterbury

and the confessor said goodbye to the house, the dog,
took off their shoes, clothes and wedding band,

went out into the garden and
lay as still as a forgotten rake in tall grass.

This Horse

There's this horse
that can't eat apples.
It's not that the horse
doesn't like apples
or that its castle of teeth
can't crush them
or that its leather-satchel tongue
can't collect the bits
or that its upturned welly of a throat
can't tramp down the chunks –

it's that one day,
as it drew up an apple
of no distinction,
the horse had a thought:
What if I choke on this?
And the more the horse tried
to swat the thought away,
the more the apple grew,
and the more the thought grew

until the horse felt it had Jupiter
and all its moons in its mouth
and it couldn't breathe
and it was gagging
and its owner tried to reason with it,
but the horse wouldn't be told
and over the course of a year
the horse visited the vet
every Wednesday at 12

and the vet advised the horse
to try an exercise where the horse
had to choose a small globe
from a bagged assortment

and hold each one in its mouth
in a series of graded steps:
a robin's egg for one minute,
a beetroot for two,
a cannonball for three;

and the horse had to
commit to the process
and *tolerate the discomfort*
and by all means note down
its thoughts and feelings
but not respond to them
and none of this worked
and the only thing for the horse
to do was to eat oats and practise
radical acceptance
of apples as something eaten
by other horses
in another place and time
as if all the apples in the world
were locked behind
glass cabinets
in a museum
with all the other things
the horse's thoughts had
forced it to give up:
cool pools,
hugs of mud,
low-hedged fields.

Tainted Ode

O Dirt, what is this madness, how do you get me going so?
I know you've kissed the necks of bins, a kerb's lips, the skins of
bus seats; my darling dirty Dirt, I know you've kissed a pug's arse.
I think about you all the time, my love. I wait for you every night,
put on clean sheets, wipe down the soles of my slippers, wash my
hands before brushing my teeth, all because of you. I wonder:
what is Dirt doing right now? At parties I glimpse you in the floor
of my glass, in a beard, in a broken arrow of saliva but I know in
my head it's not really you, that you have better things to do, like
sleep your way round town. I love you so much I can't eat
anything that comes out of the ground, throw away tasty in-date
food at the thought of you. People say one day I'll meet the Dirt
of my dreams and then I'll have something real to worry about.
O Dirt, no one can know about us. Meet me one lunchtime,
but no texting; I want no trace of you. Dirt, what does it take
to make you come? What does your face look like when you do?
Dirt, I hate it when you don't get back to me, don't tell me where
you are. Dirt, I'm yours; come, sweep me off my filthy slippers.

The Fugitive

Now I don't know whether to report this
to the British Meteorological Society,
NASA or the police, but I'm telling you

a prison fell into my head, last year, in
broad daylight, in its entirety – walls,
exercise yard, even the bus stop outside.

At first I kept it to myself. I knew it wasn't
right to have something so massive stuck
in my head, but there it was – brown, bricky,

with pinstripe windows draping my retina
and a *Visitor's Entrance* → corkscrewing
my ear canal. And as the cars continued to

drive past, and officers came and went through
the small door cut into the gate like a wooden
shirt pocket, I carried on as usual, got up, went

to work, talked to people in shops, and no one
seemed to see it even though barbed wire was
trellising out of my nostrils; and at particular

times of day, the prison lights would go out
behind my eyes and I'd be in darkness, listening
to the disinterested hum of the outside world.

And the more no one noticed, and the more I
carried on, the taller, the wider, the deeper
the prison became. I learned the name of every

prisoner, acquired the files on all their crimes,
discovered the heartbreak and the pain of them,
their visitors, their victims, the passing thoughts

of support staff, the governor, probation officers,
the whole human pool of everything that had ever
been thought and felt within those walls,

the exercise yard, the bus stop outside, until I came to
myself and heard from someone who had noticed it
and had noticed that it had all, really, been in my head

and nowhere else and said that nothing bad will happen
if I leave it there and can I see that slant of daylight,
the deserted road which leads out of town?

Poem on Checks

check your inbox	check you haven't sent porn	check where they've got to	check you haven't killed them	check you heard correctly
check you can't be sacked	check the bathroom's free	check it's your blood on the tampon	check it's them, not you	check it's not schizophrenia
check if it'll be sunny	check you can't go blind	check your bank balance	check they cannot sue you	check the pH levels
check you haven't drunk the bleach	check there's enough paper	check your letter isn't sexy	check the joint is properly cooked	check it isn't drugs
check your tax return before filing	check you've not committed fraud	check what time we're eating	check your pans for poison	check your breasts monthly
check it's not indecent exposure	check your chin for toothpaste	check you haven't slashed your throat	check the news online	check you've not brought down the government
check no one saw your PIN	check they can't pin it on you	check directions for use	check it can't get in your bloodstream	check with a doctor if symptoms persist
check it's not meningitis	check there's a seat spare	check it can't get up your arse	done?	check it all again

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