

unwinding
from the tight swaddling cloth
as I drank from the brimming river.

There is no swaddling cloth in the original story. I borrowed it from Nativity plays to re-enact with its "unwinding" the sensation of slow-motion, of inevitability, as something terrible happens.

Finally, the ending was tightened; the language made tougher. "Flowered" was changed to "sprouted". "The river's cloudy / red-orange flood" became, more economically, "the red-orange mud". The adjectives "strong, long-boned" disappeared: they interfered with the main point of the hands — that they are "the hands that write this". I wanted the poem to move seamlessly from beginning to end: the essence of the story, of what it meant to me, captured in a single impassioned speech.

When all the water had run from her mouth,
and I'd rubbed her arms and legs,
and chest and belly and back,
with clumps of dried moss;
and I'd put her to sleep in a nest of grass,
and spread her dripping clothes on a bush,
and held her again — her heat passing
into my breast and shoulder,
the breath I couldn't believe in
like a tickling feather on my neck,
I let myself cry. I cried for my hands
my father cut off; for the lumpy, itching scars
of my stumps; for the silver hands
my husband gave me — that spun and wove
but had no feeling; and for my handless arms
that let my baby drop — unwinding
from the tight swaddling cloth
as I drank from the brimming river.
And I cried for my hands that sprouted
in the red-orange mud — the hands
that write this, grasping
her curled fists.

"The hands that write this" are, as I have implied, my hands. But the story is, for me, both true and not true. For long periods I am again handless. I have to go on repeating it. The writing of each poem involves a journey into a "forest" of drafts and because, in a sense, the poem already exists, the plunging of handless arms into a river to recover what "I couldn't bear to lose".

Don Paterson The Dilemma of the Peot

The reader may be witness to the miracle but may never participate in it; poetry must remain a private transaction between the author and God. The true poem is no more than a spiritual courtesy, the act of returning a borrowed book.

François Aussemmain, *Pensées*

My Dad found a wee school jotter of mine the other week in the loft; it must've been written when I was six or so, one of those story-and-picture jobs we were obliged to write up every morning. One entry, dated December '69, reads: "when I grow up i am giong to be a peot, and rite peoms". Apart from this isolated flash of prescience, the next fifteen years went by without the idea occurring to me again. The prediction wasn't strictly accurate: I now write poems, but I'll never feel like I'm a peot. Poetry, like murder, describes an act, not necessarily a permanent disposition, and it's the act of poetry I'll be trying to describe here, not the condition of being a practitioner, which is quite illusory — and always something of a retrospective aggrandisement. A poet should be in service to the poem, and while that's the case, nothing exists except the poem; the poem annihilates the poet. I might feel like a poet after the poems are written, but since I'm no longer writing them, I can't be; it's just self-congratulation.

A great hero of mine, the American critic Randall Jarrell, said that a poem is a way of forgetting how you came to write it; if that's true, and I think it probably is, all of what follows is complete lies, a little *post hoc* indulgence. Furthermore, to air a familiar cliché, the creative process for most writers is deeply mysterious, and some attempt has to be made to preserve that mystery, so it'd hardly be in my own interests to tell you very much ... I remember some geezer at a literary conference — he was representing some unreadable wee critical theory magazine — complaining that, although the work itself exhibited considerable intelligence, there was far too little intelligent discussion by the poets themselves of the poetic process. The reply to that is very simple; a lot of writers preserve the mystery by keeping it at a pre- or sub-linguistic level. When poets get together — as they often do — it's the last thing, in my experience, they ever discuss. I'd, if I were you, be deeply suspicious of any poet who claims to understand, and who will cheerfully expatiate on the

"process". Poetry, for me at least, is still an occult science (we shouldn't forget that Gilles de Rais, the original Bluebeard, was charged — along with murder, alchemy, necromancy and unnatural sexual intercourse — with the crime of *poetry*) and a form of shamanism: and you can always tell a fake shaman, because they're too keen to divulge their trade secrets in order to impress you. (Stand up, Kenneth White.) I'm keen to impress you too, but if I told you my tricks they wouldn't work anymore, assuming any of them work in the first place. Like any occult practitioner, there are several heresies to which the poet must consciously or unconsciously subscribe — it would take a book to talk about them all, and even then, I wouldn't — but the main one, for me at least, is that *word and object are the same thing*. Poetry differs from prose in that it has less to do with its subject matter, and is principally a *form of address*: the manner in, and the degree of obliquity with which the subject is broached. It's also a matter of trajectory — prose is horizontal, an evocative discipline, the business of describing things so vividly it's as if one were actually present; poetry is vertical, invocatory, where things are called down from above by the mere intonation of their names; for me, there's no "as if" in poetry. In the beginning was the word, not the world, and poetry reminds us of this continually.

I don't have any formulae for writing poems. Trying to write another good poem by recreating the circumstances and repeating the techniques that allowed you to write the last one is as daft as making love in the same situation, at the same time and in the same position, in the hope that you might recreate a child with the same physique and personality as the last. The almost infinitely long concatenation of causally related events whereby children and poems come into being is real enough, but far too complex for us to understand. Any systematic explanation would be quite worthless, so I'm not going to attempt one, just set down a few things that are important to me. Some, I think, are generally applicable; others are probably too personal and idiosyncratic to be of any use to anyone, though they may be of some voyeuristic interest.

I remember Michael Longley saying that poems needed a sperm and ovum, a male and female component to exist; two things come together — a familiar situation or utterance that is suddenly seen in a different context, even just two words that you'd hadn't thought of putting together before, from which the poem develops organically. Almost invariably, poems arrive in the form of words, not ideas. I don't think poets get ideas for poems, they get words; that's their gift, and they forget it at their peril. Punters get ideas for

poems, your Dad and your mates do, and are always suggesting suitable topics. To embroider Longley's analogy: the act of composition is a love affair, and the poem itself the offspring. Like all love affairs, the poem should surprise or scare the shit out of you, and allows you to reinvent yourself, or discover a part of yourself you knew nothing of. (Actually, in a Buddhist sense, the poem teaches you that you're no more than an infinitely malleable, reprogrammable set of habits and characteristics: nothing, in other words.) And like all love affairs, your relationship with the poem is completely obsessive.

There's this idea, explicit in Buddhist teaching but which you can infer in Borges, Calvino, Jung, Derrida and a thousand other writers, that God dispersed after the Big Bang, or after the Fall, and shattered into a million pieces, like a great glass hologram. The pieces are us. A poem is the literary analogue, a highly polished shard of the Great Epic: "there is one story and one story only," as Graves said, and the whole is subtly implied in the fragmentary narratives that we write. (Every shard of a laser hologram, contains, amazingly, the whole picture.) As a perfect analogue, so it's also a perfect mirror, and depending on how we turn these shards, how we allow the light to catch them, we can see something of our true nature in them. Now I'm sorry if I'm coming over like a terrible hippy, but I'm absolutely scunnered with writers who refuse to acknowledge the spiritual dimension in their work. I'm not going to sit here telling you that for me poetry is like any other job, like carpentry or rug-making. It isn't. There's the craft and the graft, sure, but there's a whole lot more besides. The whole lot more, alas, is mostly beyond the scope of this essay, but I'll tell you as much as I know about the other stuff.

So what usually happens is that I get this wee phrase in my head that I can't leave alone; sometimes it's original, sometimes a cliché or some bit of received language I've discovered something new in; it constantly surprises me when I think about it, and that's completely essential — if it doesn't surprise me, I can't expect it to surprise the reader, which is the whole point of the exercise: to blow the reader's mind. I can't stop thinking about it, and it soon develops into a full-blown obsession. At this stage I've absolutely no idea where it's leading me — which is another reason I think "subject matter" such an irrelevancy — but I can feel the energy of it, and have learned to trust that and go with it. I tend not to write things down in notebooks till a little later ... it's true that "ideas don't keep appointments", but if the words can't live in the synapses for a little

while they probably don't deserve to be written down, any more than you should have to remind yourself who it is that you're in love with. So this first stage is a matter of learning to distinguish between what's a poem and what isn't. I've even learned, should I get what I think of as a great *idea* for a poem when walking down the street, to discount it immediately, because it's arrived in the wrong form — one which flatters my own intelligence, one which bolsters my ego, not dissolves it. I've also had to learn to leave a lot of poems where I found them, since they're already complete — all those sunsets and rainbows and cathedrals ... we should remember that the poet's job is to make the commonplace miraculous (actually the greater responsibility is to make the commonplace commonplace, the present the present, "the stone stony" — to render the world back to the world — but that's an evolutionary stage quite beyond me in this life) and commonplace miracles like sunsets and rainbows and cathedrals leave us, usually, with very little we can constructively add. So I've had to learn to distinguish between the poetic *feeling* that comes over us — which everyone experiences — and the true poetic urge, the urge to *make* a poem, which only poets do. We only steal these "life-poems" from ourselves anyway, that we might bask in a little of the reflected glory. A true poem has to be made up, not stolen. (Invariably when we try to steal them they backfire, because a poem is often a motif or event set in an harmonically unique context; and in life, that's too complex, or too perfect, to ever fully recreate.) Remember that story of Bosko and Admira, the Serbian and Moslem lovers that were found shot dead in one another's arms on that bridge in Sarajevo? You could sense immediately that it was going to spawn a billion lousy poems. It was a beautiful story, heart-breaking, and what too many people failed to realise — unimprovable. Changing that one iota is no less presumptuous than adding or subtracting a line from a Basho haiku.

Anyway, the bit after that initial germination is quite strange (I'm going to mix these metaphors of childbirth and love affairs quite freely, so forgive me); things still progress in an organic way, without me feeling that I'm doing much work ... Again, if there isn't a spell where I feel like I'm writing effortlessly, even for a few lines, I suspect the poem of being willed into existence, rather than choosing me to bring it to life; I think true poems choose you just as children are said to choose their parents. I've had my fair share of phantom pregnancies, though, but I'm getting better at spotting them early. If there isn't an element of the poem that's "given", even a few lines or so, I don't trust it. So at this stage there's a lot of what you might

call verification, checking that what I'm working on is really a poem, and that I'm not going to waste a whole month on a complete turkey like I did last time. So I go away and do something else, shoot pool, play music, catch a movie, write a review, then come back and open the notebook and look at what I've written. If it's going to be a poem — and this is crucial — *I don't immediately understand* what I've written. I don't understand it because it isn't telling me something I knew already. I know it's come from somewhere else, so I get scared; as André Previn once remarked: if you do good work you should be scared by it. Then I get the shivers, or I burst into tears, or I get totally blissed out. Man. At this point I'm always reminded of Borges's brilliant definition of the aesthetic fact: *the imminence of a revelation which does not come*. You should feel like God's in the next room — nearly, but not quite, deigning to grant you an audience. Anything much less than that and I'm probably doing nothing more than bringing another mediocre poem into the world, and there's far too much useless junk floating round the universe already. Whether my poem is brilliant or not is neither here nor there — what's important is that *I'm* convinced it is.

Time for a quick word about ... stationery. Most poets are fetishistic about paper and pens, and at the moment I can't write on anything but grey Daler A5 sketchbooks with a Pilot Hi-Tecpoint V5 extra-fine rollerball. OK? It's taken me a pathetically long time to realise that the transcendental joy of poetry isn't getting your book published, reading to an audience of deeply-moved young women, getting your face on the box, winning a prize or anything else — it's the business of composition that blows you away, and the more you can do to savour it, the better. I think it's important to pay attention to those little ritualistic details which serve to put you in a receptive state of mind — even just the purchase of stationery is enough to do that for me, pathetic as it may seem. I often go to cafés to write; in fact the greater the extraneous racket the better I can often concentrate. Even McDonald's suits me just great. My current favourite, though, is the tower café at Dundee University, which as well as the racket, has a breathtaking view over the Firth of Tay, if I need to feel a bit Parnassian. Libraries are bloody useless, far too quiet, no view, and no way of getting a cup of coffee.

Where was I. Oh aye. After that, the "inspired" bit, it's my job to try and allow the poem to find its final form; just as often you have this vague sense of inevitability in the first lines of a good song, in those "given" lines you should have the DNA from which the whole poem can be developed, in terms of both its form and content. My

we haven't slept together for a month, and I know that pretty soon it'll be time for us to go our separate ways.

From the punter's point of view, the poetry reading usually isn't more than a glorified sales pitch for the book, and is often somewhat less; but for the poet, it can be a way of keeping in touch with those old lovers; sometimes it's very poignant, sometimes pretty awful and embarrassing ... Geez, what did I ever see in her? A nicer sensation is geez, what did she ever see in me? Those ones you want to write all over again, it was so good ... and sometimes, alas, that's exactly what you do.

Which brings me to something else. I'm terrified of repeating myself, and have evolved various strategies to try and counter this — well one, really: keep altering the strategy. The great danger, for me, is to continue to mine a seam long after it's yielded up the last diamond ... after a while, you're not even bringing up coal anymore, just dirt ... but now there's a tiny village near the pithead, with a grocer's and a sub-post office, and it's twinned with some crap sonnet sequence in Normandy; and as laird of the estate, you're often the last person to admit it's no longer a viable concern. Tony Harrison's "Continuous" poems — a series of elegies written after the death of his parents — is a good example of the sort of thing I mean, a wonderful piece of work, but something he should have known when to stop writing; eventually he's just bringing up sediment, sentiment, panning it for the very slightest of conceits, until all he can really tell you is that he's crying on the page again. So I've evolved this rather daft solution, which obviously has its own hazards; I'll try and mine tin one week, uranium the next, jade the week after, and so on ... I'd hate to think I was writing the same poem twice. I like the idea of the poem as a self-contained universe, the national anthem of a wee vernacular Atlantis whose laws, customs, geography and weather could all be derived from its close study ... that's absurd and impossible, of course, but probably not a bad thing to aim for.

Part of the advantage of working formally is that you can think of forms as traps, and devise forms to ensnare the particular beast you're after; obviously you're going to catch something quite different depending on whether you set out with a pea-shooter, an elephant-gun, a mist-net or a lobster pot. There's a problem here, which is that it might seem to legislate against the development of the "individual voice", which in part depends upon the *repetition* of strategies, but that's not something I can be bothered with; if it happens, fine. I believe in poems, though, not poets, so sod the

poems are often no more than one long extended metaphor grown from that one germinated spore on the petri dish, though hopefully I've concealed that. I also try to keep the poem as short as possible, for two reasons: firstly, if you choose a form that's slightly too short for the material you've collated, it acts as a kind of automatic filter for any stuff you're attached to for sentimental, or more often egotistical reasons (i.e. stuff that shows *you* off, rather than the poem), but which has no structural place in the poem — in a first draft, there's always, always some stuff like this ... if I've got twenty lines-worth of good material, I see if it can be a sonnet, or four quatrains or whatever. This can lead to very costive syntax if I'm not prepared to strike a compromise between style and content, as both require space, and are not always precisely coterminous, though they should be. The other reason is simply that concision is a courtesy to the reader, who, you should remember, always has a thousand better things to do than read your poem.

Ideally, there should be no qualitative difference between the stuff that's given and the stuff I have to make up — part of the craft is knowing where to look; poetry's just a condition of being pathologically sensitive to the weight and texture of words, and that includes words in the dictionary, the thesaurus and the rhyming dictionary too, all of which are handy if I get stuck — though usually I find they eliminate rather than suggest alternatives, which is still pretty useful.

A few weeks later, after the first flush of love has faded, it all starts to get very humdrum and domestic. All I'm thinking about now are things like syntax, meter, stanzaic definition and the rhyme scheme, and the musical consistency of the particular rhetorical idiom the poem appears to be emerging in. The discoveries and surprises, if there are any left to be made, are of a lower order; they happen at a very local, word-for word level, and no longer feel like a win on the pools, or a glimpse of Elijah's chariot, but are more the sort of pleasant, serendipitous frisson you get from three cherries on the fruit machine, or the welcome light of an approaching taxi at three in the morning. Occasionally, though, the poem can still surprise you, and it's like discovering, after three years of cohabitation, that your partner can play the spoons or get both their ankles behind their head, though that's rarely enough to save the relationship. Once in a blue moon, it turns out that for the past three months you've been living with an axe murderer or something, which is pretty exciting, and the whole poem changes course. Usually, though, towards the end, me and the poem are scrapping over the trolley in Sainsbury's about whether to get white or pink bog roll,

individual voice. All true poems are fugitive, anyway. They're too good for their authors.

If the poem doesn't strike me with the force of a miracle, I assume there's no chance of it striking the reader in that way either; this makes me automatically suspicious of anything that comes too easily. On the other hand it's essential that it should *look* easy, as the best technique obliterates the reader's awareness of *your* technique; I don't want the reader ever to be aware of the meter or the rhyme scheme — these are just the means whereby the spell is woven, if you like. It doesn't make any difference to the patient whether or not they know the chemical constituents of their cough-bottle: that's a matter for the chemist. Yeats is supposed to have been asked why he read so ponderously, pausing at the end of every line. "So they can hear the work I've put in", was his (altogether silly) reply. I don't want anyone to know how much work I've put in. It's a disgrace how much work I've put in. I want everyone to think that God talked to me and I just scribbled it down. Miracles are by definition uncontrived; a contrived miracle is just legerdemain, Paul Daniels, and no one believes in that stuff. Part of the problem, in my case, is that it looks like it might come too easily, I, or the little Calvinist in me, is in the habit of instituting a some absurdly difficult rhyme scheme or meter to slow me down, especially if the subject matter is guilt-inducing; there's a poem in *Nil Nil* called 'Mooncalf', which no doubt sounds like a bit of gratuitous horror, but came to me in one unbroken, horrendous vision on a tennis court in Brighton ... this woman masturbating and giving birth to a dog ... ugh, I don't want to tell you any more ... Anyway, when I wrote it down, I simply couldn't live with it or myself, so I recast it in four nine-line pentameter stanzas with the daftest rhyme scheme I could devise. Somehow the sheer labour and grief of trying to get it to sound natural had the effect of making me feel less guilty about the subject. I've a couple of wee ballads (rhymed not aBcB, but ABAB, which is a bitch) and rhymed dimeter quatrains (an even bigger bitch) in the new book, written for much the same reason. (I also find that subconscious can operate a lot more freely if I throw the left side of my brain some indigestible intellectual doggy-chew to shut it up and prevent it from interrupting. In that sense, form is like the honey-cake you throw to Cerberus to placate him while you nip into Hades to steal Eurydice back again — and yes, you always turn round before the end, partly so that the revelation can never really take place, partly so you'll have the pleasure of doing it all again some other time. Anyway, the muse

cannot, by definition, be successfully wooed in this life. More on this later.) The end result, anyway, is that it takes me forever to finish anything satisfactorily. The one advantage of working so slowly is that I rarely feel completely blocked, since I've always got something half-finished, and by this time stone-cold and completely intractable, to work on that I started three years ago.

Often I find missing words (especially when they've been missing for weeks — I tend to just fill in the stress pattern in the hope that they'll turn up) by constructing them on purely musical criteria. I tend to look at the vowels or the consonantal pattern on either side of the missing word, and just make up some words using the same sounds. If none of them happen to be in English, then I'll look at the nearest words that *do* exist ... Nine times out of ten, I find the solution this way ... it sounds bonkers, I know. I work as a musician, and was a musician long before I wrote poetry; in music there's no ideological conflict between either form and expression (which is why I've never understood people who complain that they find the sonnet form, say, an unbearable restriction, or refer to the "strait-jacket" of the pentameter line) or sound and meaning; they mean precisely the same thing — so whereas to someone else it might seem like an absurd leap of faith, for me it's a fairly natural approach.

This area — the way music and poetry are blurred in my imagination, if not in practice — is probably a bit too obscure and personal to be of much interest to anyone, but I'll mention just one other thing. I'm a big fan of a American pianist called Ritchie Bierach, and I've used a lot of his shorter compositions as structural models for my own shorter poems. There's never one single note in his tunes that isn't advancing the argument in some way; even though you could always say that some of them were structurally unnecessary, the embroidery itself always has some dynamic component, some element of forward motion; and his stuff is full of the most surprising modulations, yet the tune always somehow gets itself back into the original key in the most ingenious and breathtaking fashion — a little circular journey that you didn't know was circular until you turned the very last corner. You can't work out how the hell you got there, yet there's a terrible inevitability to the whole thing ... Within all this, there's this glacial, mathematical internal balance, perfect homeostasis, a complete evenness of surface tension, nothing so flashy that it detracts from the rest of the tune. Seamus Heaney's work is the nearest thing, for me, in poetry.

I'm obsessive about drafting, and it's almost become a superstitious thing with me; in the last twenty or thirty drafts of a poem

(fifty is about average, I guess, but it varies between ten and eighty, depending on the complexity of the poem, as well as the sheer luck factor) I doubt if anyone else could tell what was changing from page to page; sometimes nothing does, and I'm only writing it out again to get a sense of the thing as a whole, as if I were trying to reduce it to an equation — so I can tell precisely what's not adding up, precisely where the energy is leaking away. My writing is utterly illegible by this point, as I've more or less got the thing off by heart. By this time it's almost an alchemical process, a largely superstitious belief that somehow, by following the same procedure over and over with only tiny modifications from draft to draft, the miracle transformation will take place. The pace is almost evolutionary by this time, which means that the timescale is usually around four to eight months, although the poem might look ninety-five percent complete after a few weeks. For this reason I always have half-a-dozen things on the go at the same time, otherwise I'd never get anything written at all. It always seems, though, that there's always a bit missing at the end, a bit I have to "make up", a bit I'm never happy with ... as if it were part of the contract. What are those lines of Derek Mahon's? "The bump of clay in the Navajo rug put there to mitigate the too godlike perfection of that merely human artefact ..." Ha ha ha.

If there can't, by definition, be a formula for writing good poems, then in a way you're always cheating the system, since the only system that exists is the one that conspires *not* to allow you to write any poems ... and because your brain gets immune very quickly to any new imaginative virus, you can't use the same one twice. You know from experience that certain situations are more likely to generate poems than others; this usually means unsuitable affairs, or the deaths of relatives, both of which you're safer trying to imagine than engineer. One can usually resist the latter, but the former, as it doesn't usually result in prosecution, is, alas, easier to sell to yourself. But other than directly screwing up your life so as to screw a poem out of it, the strategies are usually technical (other people set themselves sestinas and villanelles, or subjects to write about — this never works for me), though there are also various forms of psychological trickery you can employ. One trick is to tell myself, in all earnestness, that I'm embarking on The Great Work, or The Book, as Mallarmé would refer to it: a massive sonnet cycle, 144 interlinked stanzas on the theme of the wild flowers of Forfarshire as a metaphor for the progress of the soul in purgatory, you know the sort of thing. In that way I can sometimes dupe the poetic dynamo, or mangle, in my case, into executing a couple of

revolutions before it realises it's not plugged in. It's like going to see the bank manager about a million pound overdraft, and when he refuses, touching him for a tenner which he gives you either out of sheer sympathy, or just to get you out of the place. So you might not have The Book, but you do have a squitty little poem that you didn't have before. But conceal your glee, it might not work the next time.

I think one often writes sustained by necessary myths. With boys it's usually fairly straightforward, and usually involves dangling the tripartite carrot of money, sex and fame (all of which expectations in poetry, are, er ... highly relative concepts, and are, I suspect, steadily eroded in precisely that chronological order) from the end of your pencil: very atavistic urges, primarily concerned with the propagation of the genes, which have their origins in a tingling in the scrotum or the wallet. It's slightly different for girls, as they have a different part of the biological contract, and thus a different set of archetypes — ach, it'd be fun to go into this, but there isn't the space. The poem comes from a higher, and quite ungendered source, but as men we often need a real, not a spiritual carrot to get the thing written. But while it's fine for the ego to *drive* you to the gig, God help you if it's the ego that's up on stage. The main thing is that the poem gets written, so whatever rubbish you have to palm yourself off with is neither here nor there ... provided it doesn't feed back into the poem. I think a degree of self-dramatisation is essential in poetry, a necessary operatic device; but self-aggrandisement is quite different. Bad critics can never tell them apart, but you should.

Of course the most pervasive myth of the lot is that of the Muse; we'd all like God to speak to us directly, but if He did we'd explode, so some form of anthropomorphised mediation is absolutely essential if you're not going to go crazy. It's up to the individual whether this archetype is projected onto a real individual or a blank screen. Muses can be dead, alive or made up. There are several prerequisites: firstly, the muse has to be dumb, all fecundity and prelinguistic chaos, the silent wellspring ... if all this sounds horribly sexist, of course it is: but Beatrice does and always did have her own agenda. We usually don't hear from her, though, either because we've conveniently banged her up in heaven somewhere, or — if she's not dead or made up — because her social milieu tends, conveniently, not to intersect with that of the poet's. Secondly, she should remain resolutely unimpressed by whatever you do, otherwise you'll have little motivation for trying to do it again. This is usually very easy to achieve. Just pick someone who hates poetry.

Even better, just pick someone who hates you. Lastly the relationship — if she's real, and especially if she's dead — should remain unconsummated, because that infinite delay and anticipation is precisely what provides the ache, the wound, that hollow feeling that only art can fill ... temporarily, of course. There are only ever love poems, really. And if you think that I'm now going to flesh out the above two paragraphs with some juicy personal anecdotes, you are sadly deluded.

Poems are translations from the silence, as Charles Simic has remarked. For me, poems try to put into words that which can't be put into words ... they're crap, unreliable versions of the songs the good angels and the bad angels sing, which we're not permitted to hear ... but sometimes we're standing where we shouldn't be, or they're standing where they shouldn't be, and we catch a bit of a refrain, or a single note (which happened to me once; I really heard it, and can still hear it: Radka Toneff, circa '85, and the girl was dead soon after for her hubris — okay, so don't believe me) and if we do we can't help but try to imitate them, the way some birds can't help but imitate us. So we make these little broken songs, and they're nearly always sad, because they're broken.

Candlebird*

(after Abbas Ibn Al-Ahnaf, c.750)

If, tonight, she scorns me for my song
You may be sure of this: within the year
Another man will say this verse to her
And she will yield to him for its sad sweetness.

“*Then I am like the candlebird*”, he'll continue,
After explaining what a candlebird is,
“*Whose lifeless eyes see nothing and see all,
Lighting their small room with my burning tongue;*

*His shadow rears above hers on the wall
As hour by hour, I pass into the air.*
Take my hand. Now tell me: flesh or tallow?
Which I am tonight, I leave to you.”

So take my hand and tell me, flesh or tallow.
Which man I am tonight I leave to you.

* Generic name for several species of seabird, the flesh of which is so saturated in oil the whole bird can be threaded with a wick and burnt entire