

Julian Stannard

Strokestown (Co. Roscommon)

Sunlight breaks the clouds
and the sheep are singing
Here Comes the Sun
and when I say singing I mean
bleating but one of the sheep
looks like George Harrison
and the difference between
a bleat and a song and
the difference between
a legend and a sheep
I'm not going to ruin the day
by splitting hairs.

I walk out of the Big House
with a tartan rug
and lay it down among
the choir of sheep and I lie
on the rug to gape at the sky.
The sheep are looking at me
in a most encouraging way.
The sheep are hoping for
a revelation, something
they can pass around themselves
so I turn to them and say
This is the nearest I've been
to America.

Sardines Hit Back

It was sickening being so low down in the food chain
with practically the whole sublunary world waiting for us
to make our suicidal run, like some revolving sushi table.
Only we weren't sushi, we were sardines
swarming antipasti on a heaving holocaustic bed of ocean.
How we glittered like starlight. Eat us! Eat us!

Our tactics were sub-Ghandi: not passive resistance, just passive.
Somebody had come up with the big ball notion
making us into a collective high on the proximity of ourselves.
Who would be a single discrete sardine
when you could turn yourself into a gigantic fish fest?
We continued to murmur our one instruction *Eat us!*

I couldn't bear it anymore, lodged in the ghetto of despair
the gannets swooping in like Messerschmitts.
I was reading Jean Paul Sartre before he'd thought of nausea
and when Churchill said 'We will never surrender' I went loopy.
It was time for hit and run, pay back and commando training.
It was time to set up sardine hit squads.

Most of the guys said Get real, we're out on a limb
but I gnawed at their sense of vanity and found insomniacs
whose broken dreams always involved something called a tin
and when the dolphin, our smiling Jesuit, entered the congregation
I swam into the moonlight and exploded with mackerel visions.
When I got back to the throng I was lit up with charisma.

The commissar black-tipped shark ate several thousand stragglers
but I knew our evolutionary leap would have its blood price.
When one lone gannet swooped like a banshee I flinched and smirked,
I gave the nod to Stalin's men and when the gannets cut into the ocean
the sardine ballet shimmied sideways and the sharks crunched beaks.
Gannets, gannets everywhere and each one of them was wrecked!

Now that the shark and the dolphin had a taste for the seabird
we could concentrate on synchronised swimming.
Most of my people were just happy they could live a little longer,
some of the Buddhists started praying for the plunging gannet.
But I had plans for our stateless nation, we hapless Kurds of the sea.
I wanted to take the fight from under the lid of the ocean.

So I created the Sardine Liberation Organization
and set the dolphin against the shark.
We cultivated a taste for flight and established mobile flying units.
It took a lot of practice, sweat, no small amount of luck.
But we broke through the spume and took to the wing
and became the avenging gangsters of the crushed.

William's Head

William's head comes to me like a gift.
I hold it then cup it like a jewel, an egg
for what is more wonderful than a child's head?
It was the first thing I saw of him
and he had hair, goodness how much hair!

I was the first to see the head
breaking into the world like René Descartes!
It was the child's calling card, the handshake.
His mother was letting out her lupine howls.

What is more wonderful than a child's head?
An egg of love, an egg of worry.
I was only a fragment, a seed-giver.
I seem to remember I was a woodcutter.

William's head has come to me like a gift.
I will cradle it and hold it
and sear my fingers on the voltage
because a gift is a box of grief.
I reckon Lord Tristan dreamt up the whole idea.

William's head is away now.
I see it crossing land and sea
I see it crossing mountains
I hear the guns and the dogs.

Julian Stannard's most recent collection is *The Parrots of Villa Gruber Discover Lapis Lazuli* (Salmon, 2011).
He won the Troubadour Prize in 2010 and is a Reader In English and Creative Writing at the University of
Winchester (UK).