

Clive Watkins

OLD STORY

This is what he heard, resting in the shade of the plum-tree: a stifled cry that dragged his thoughts from the story he was reading.

Behind him, the house was silent, the windows closed. The book slipped from his grey blanket on to the grass.

This is what he saw, peering through the screen of the hedge: plucked flowers on the pond's clear water, a sun-hat dropped on the lawn, its mauve ribbons tangled, the heel of a boot turning by the old conservatory.

The cry again, muffled, more distant.

Too late: a brightness flashed and was gone. Earth-shadows at the wall-foot, a sound as of rushing wheels, a machinery of air grinding.

Smoke, oils.

Then this: the woman weeping, her black skirts trailing in the uncut grass.

Nettles in the flower-beds; the windless air choked with pollen, with bitter juices; the pond dried to a hole.

He sat down again and returned to his book.

Twilight, owl-light: his glacial daughters brought tea, and bread and butter.

The sky thinned and thinned. Soundlessly, a plane flew over, a hard seed shining.

The pages of the book flickered on the grass—black and white, black and white.

FIVE WASPS

for Bob Etherington

On the white sill of my little hotel room
three wasps lie dead, their black and yellow bodies
cramped and curled like tiny bristling hooks,
still venomous in death. Drawn to the light,
they butted out their lives on the cold pane.
Beyond the glass the mid-October sun,
watery and mild, flickers across the fell,
a sharp wind buffets the wood, the beck is roaring –
and now here's a fourth, a live one, buzzing up
from the apple core I left on the wash-stand.
It flies into the window's deep embrasure
where I crush it with a map against the glass.
So, how are they getting in? I ask the girl
who draws my evening pint in the residents' snug.
A nest in the wall, she says, beneath the sill;
and I imagine the frail papery cell
lodged in the dark between the canted slates –
their laborious hum, their long homing flights
for the last late-fallen fruit, last insect prey,
last gobbets of sweet carrion, before the cold
returns to crisp them in their banded shells.
And overnight indeed the weather clears –
frost on the scarlet hips in the little garden,
frost on the bracken and scrub along the fell,
a fringe of ice where the beck goes jouncing down
through the sunless gill over rocks the colour of blood.
My last day, and I climb the ancient track
to the small tarn and the broad summit ridge:
the wind, shrill harbinger of fiercer cold,
flies howling upon me as if it would bear off
the one unrooted thing in this stony place.
On the far slope cloud-shadows stream away
past intake, fold and garth, while wave upon wave
beyond the crags that close the valley in
the higher fells unroll. They glitter as if

with snow-light in the bright, abounding air.
But now this evening, crossing from the shower,
my bare foot finds a fifth—dead, though its sting
pierces my heel with a needle of quick pain.
The kindled smart cools to a fiery ache,
but I am weary from my walk and know
sleep will come soon. —A last look at the sky:
the moon is up, and fine stars prick out
the roof of heaven in zones of wintry jet.
I dream and am the tenant of my dream:
stone, and grass, and the tarn as hard as iron,
and this pattering in the dark cove of my skull—
the wind's dry ghost, the white whisper of frost
fastening itself once more on berry and leaf,
the rustle of wings sealed in the frozen rock.

Great Langdale, Cumbria

"Intake" —A piece of land enclosed from the fell

"Garth" —The lower ground in Great Langdale (and in other Lake District valleys) is separated from the higher slopes by a more or less continuous wall, the ring garth, which dates from the middle ages.

"Cove" —A recess with precipitous sides in the steep flank of a mountain, a feature of many Lake District valleys.

Planting the Fence Post

Soft rasp of cloud,
bog, bird-haunted upland:
day declares its bright distances,
miles of unaccommodating air.

The black shawl drawn close about her head,
she steps sideways down three
steps to the grooved stone of the yard.
Her dog barks furiously at nothing.

Dead leaves frosting into the grass,
a whistling at the edge of silence:
stone walls skewed, briars
choking the field-corner.

Stooping, he sinks the pit in its place,
the dark socket.
Balked by stone, the blade returns
through polished shaft and handle,
through hand and arm,
the ring of his downward thrust.
His shoulder jars.
He leans into the mute clay.

The crow maintains in the larch top
its posture of attention.

Black Clough

For a Gift of Hokusai Prints

***Carp in a Waterfall*¹**

Thrashing her thick tail
against the heavy scour,
she leaps into the spill,
leaps and will not tire.
Thundering down the gorge,
ice-melt and spring rain
quicken in her the urge
to mount the falls and spawn.

***Fisherman*²**

Into the wind he leans
above the grinding roar
to drag upon his lines.
What hunger drew him here
to this narrow tongue of rock?
Some rare undreamed-of fish
that, arching its strong back,
gleams in the sucking wash?

***Exile*³**

He turns to watch the moon
rise in a vast sky
and shine as white as bone
on the small boats in the bay,
but instead what haunts his gaze
are hills, far-off and green,
on which her lustre lies
like cool hands on skin.

¹According to a Chinese story, a carp which succeeded in climbing the falls at the top of the Yellow River and reaching its source was transformed into a dragon. The dragon was a shape-changer, a symbol of power and the human passions and a bringer of good fortune.

²The fisherman is holding the lines to which his cormorants are tied.

³Abe no Nakamaro (698-770 AD), sent as a youth by the Japanese court to study in China, was never allowed home and died there fifty-four years later. Hokusai's print illustrates Nakamaro's most famous *tanka* in which he describes himself watching the moon and thinking how its light falls on his home-land.

Nuit Blanche

We turn the key and enter. The room is white –
white walls, white floor, white ceiling, curtains, bed –
everything emptied of colour as if colour –
even the lily's drained passionate white,
apple-blossom, orange-blossom, pear – might burn and burn,
nothing to save the maddened flesh from itself.

Bone-white, ash-white: snow's feathered silence
drifting into the dark; and we must breathe
as slow as those ghost flakes, and soft and slow
your stirring at first light, the awakened blood
glowing – that deep bloom – in cheek and lip.

Christmas Morning Visit

Frost is a powder on the grass,
the ground iron, setting a ring to the heel.

Crusts on the lawn are baked hard by the cold;
gulls bloom whitely in the parks.

Turning, I notice how empty the world this morning:
a year's love will not fill these hours.

White between stiff trees and houses,
the sky crumbs into fine, soft snow.

The Address Book

The address book
is down at the
bottom, buried

under last year's
holiday maps. It is
full except for

those strange letters
X and Z – mostly
in Father's

hand. Father,
you have been dead seven years.
Mother, your wife, has

crossed out
some, has added.
Her handwriting still

keeps your slope
though stiffer now, less
fluent. – Thank you,

she says.
Now I can
get on.

Clive Watkins's poems and essays have appeared in many journals, both in the UK and elsewhere, including *The Hudson Review*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *The Malahat Review*, *PN Review*, *The Dark Horse*, *The New Welsh Review*, and *Agenda*. His collection, *Jigsaw*, was published in 2003. He is Associate Editor of the Waywiser Press, London, and lives in Yorkshire, England.