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Devil's Thunderbolt

At a cliff's foot
I hunt ammonites
in fissile layers
of flaky silt-beds.

But a belemnite
tight as a rifle bullet,
finds me.

I turn it between fingers.
Thick and unwieldy
as the graphite-tipped stub
that rounded my first
laborious letters.

It's an inch-long pen,
but lightning-acute.
No wonder Whitby dialect
calls it a 'devil's thunderbolt' –

it writes miniscules,
eyes mouth muscles,
pennate tentacles,

writhes on the page,

unspools an inky sea,

hides in its own essence,

leaving this shale core.

Each time I think

I've grasped it,

it swims away

into itself.

Dry Bird

He's called shinbone flute-singer,
lyricist lyre-stringer,
August dry bird, jar fly.

His body is soundbox, drumskin, motor,
He taps his timbal – a ratcheting vibraslap
revving to a tom-tom.

He braces to the branch; wings and voice strain open –
when he amps it up to a whirring steel howl
his ballad could burst your eardrum.
His chirring fills woodlands, porches,
your sleepless house!

On windscreens, in gardens,
his kind lie in drifts –
lyric cicadas exhausted from calling.

He'll sing himself into death.

Deerhart

Dàmhair, 'rutting month'
at Loch an Daimh, the stag's loch.
Rust-flanked stags roared, tasted rivals
in the wind with stripped-back lips.
They caught my muffled footfalls
and stalked into the next glen.

I read gracile limbs in prints
and spoor on burn-margins, peat-hags –
envisioned their eyes' startled intelligence.
They foiled me following their line
and lost me in the wood's antlered shadows.

I tracked their traces through myths
beast-musk-rank with age.
Two-toed hooves slot smoothly
into stories: a cross flares
between a white stag's antlers –
yet old tales are ink trails, their life gone cold.

The mist-coloured reindeer that lapped from my palm
on Cairngorm were ghosts of Irish elk.
Weeds fur elk bones
under the North Sea's vault –
but a new fawn couches unseen in a covert.

I trace the signs of their tread on paper –
as if prints on a page could capture them.

Hide

I knocked on your den's window this morning,
sent blackbirds spraying alarm-calls
from the bird table.

I listened for 'Cemetery Gates,'
your voice on the phone –
peered in. Your roosting books slept.
A Painted Lady trembled out of hibernation
from between their covers.

You weren't there –
your forest-patterned bird hide was gone.

You'd picked your way
past the 'Crack Shack's' rotten walls
to brambles and ivy –
blue tits buzzed to your cupped hand
and a wild fox skulked closer.

I waited until the blackbirds returned –
an augury
that you'd pushed deeper into scraggy coppices,
unfurled the hide's invisibility.

In Ovo

[*breathing*]

Wipple wipp wip wip quicke quicker whipper whipper who

Tok toka tok

Whick whicka

Tok tok tok tok

Yappa yapa who? Who thatta?

Tck

Chrrr

Ha

I'm worried, I don't know how much air he can get down in there

I suspect that turning him would be not be a normal thing to do

Screech – ah

Quick peep pip

Hmm ha

Peep-a Chipper quicker

Pipper pipe pipper pipe pipper pip

Pip pip

Whickerwihcierwhickerwhickerwhica –a

I don't know, that didn't sound very good to me

Pipple whipple whipple whip

I just saw him coming out

Yappa whick –a whick-a yip yip yoo pip pip pip –a

Pe-op pip pe-op pip

Whicka *whick-a pip-a pip-a ooo*

Wheep

Chipper

Yipper yip-ah

Chk Peep-ah peeah chicka pipper pipper chick ah

Chickerchickerchickerchick-ah

Pip-a pip-a

Squeekela

Maybe he burst out with his back like straight out

Maybe all of a sudden he seems to go whoomph

Maybe he's got his feet around that too and he just pushed

I think he must be very strong

Chip-a chip-a chick – a chik whip-a-whick

Whick-a whick whick a whick, chick a whick

Chipper

Whick-a-whick

[*breathing*]

How It Feels

Once from a leathery egg,
then each month from skin's flaked scales.

First I'll slough old age,
shuffle off its loose skeins.

Fold them away
with pastels and florals.

Unspool middle age, its sidewinding
stretch marks, thicker waist.
That skin peels into children
who drink youth through a curled cord.

Strip my twenties –
their silks and Lycra.
The empty sequins
of my sun-freckled scales will bask
on rocks with dry snakeskins.

I'll rush to peel away adolescence,
its constrictor grip, its whisperings.
Wriggle out of stretched, blemished skin.

I'll emerge
a child, watching damselfly nymphs
shed water, dry wings.

So this is how it feels to keep being born.