

STONES

Stones take to each other naturally,
Like a family of sleeping creatures,

The large ones accommodate little ones,
To create a colony of hardness;

They rest in centuries of stark stillness;
They are elephant-heavy to lush grass.

Their colours employ the afternoon sun;
They are as warm as loaves from an oven.

Each one embodies its personal death;
They are cobbled memories of the sea;

They are the solid language of labour:
Each one weathered to a perfect image.

They rest, innocent of their history,
Like a grey display of featureless skulls.

They have tasted our sweat and absorbed our blood.
They rise and fall, symbols of man's conscience.

Their persistence has sculptured their silence;
They hint that their souls haunt other planets.

They are magnets for our primitive thoughts;
They are the armour of truths beyond us.

They shape our built fears of an afterlife,
They could tempt us into acts of worship.

RAT

What did we expect so close to a field?
The frenzied wreck of bin bags was a clue;
Frayed bursts of fist holes in bloated polythene.
Then the glimpse of brown back and fleshy tail,
As it slunk to its place in our bunkered wood.

RAT. The rodent word scurried in our brains,
Filthy as road drains, sewage-pawed, sly, and quick
As a dark glance from the corner of the eye;
It swam the canal of my childhood fears,
Joined the dank rats that rummaged on the banks.

A cannibal that's almost ten inches,
A rat will feed on the living and the dead:
It will chew the carcass of a cow, devour
The frail beauty of a nest of wren's eggs.
A rat will eat the shadow of itself.

I looked for new holes in the outside walls,
Checked the old shed for rat-size entrances,
Bolted the windows and locked all the doors.
I set the bait of poison on a plate:
A cereal of blue, oval pellets.

From behind the curtain, we watched it feed;
Cautiously, then greedily. Out and in,
Out and in like a dirty, clockwork toy.
Animal voyeurs, we watched it dining,
Shifting the small plate with a nervous tinkle.

Then a loose mob of cats, our neighbour's pets.,
Crept through our garden and lolled on the wall;
Aware of the creature in the stone bunker,
They kept a still guard: a fur sculpture of cats
With the patience of cool, vermin-hunters.

I put down food until it did not come,
Until the heap of killing pellets remained:
Losing their true colour on a day of rain,
An unwanted breakfast of oat-pale seeds.
We took it in turn to watch the bunker.

I waited three days, then I cleared the wood.
“They go for the neck,” I said quietly.
“It’s dead,” you assured. “It’s bound to be dead.”
I looked for a corpse like a lopped dog's tail:
Or a sloppy, ugly dart for freedom.

I found no dead rat, only its leavings.
You scalded the back with bleached, hot water.
A week gone and the rat is still with us,
Running on the edge of our shredded lives.
In the garden we watch for blurred movements.

Tonight the bedroom could be the bunker;
For as I undressed, the dark hid a rat.
The rat I tried to catch is in my skull,
Gnawing in the corners that are not clean.
Its meal is my thoughts, a week’s residue,

Caught in the warm night's enormous, black trap.
The rat has come through a hole in my dream.
It eats into my sleep for a last feed;
It nests in a memory in my head,
Discarding a mess, a plague of rat things.