

## The Angel of Magnetic North

She is the shepherdess of sailors,  
the patron saint of migrating geese,  
of Navigators and of shoals of fish.

She is the ancient shaman of the tundra,  
proud reindeer shed their antlers for her,  
blue whales sing hymns to her honor.

She spins on one leg on top of the globe,  
her arms cupped like a gyroscope, and  
she dances on the tips of compass needles.

She looks down on all the shipping lanes,  
and the filigree of arcing flight paths,  
she counts the slow waltz of the continents.

She is the tingle in the dowsing rods,  
her scent is the ozone of copper dynamos,  
her veil is of gold thread and tungsten filament.

She knows months of night and the secret  
constellations of dark satellites,  
and furtive submarines beneath the ice.

She is the sixth sense of the hippocampus,  
hers are the keys to gravity and destiny,  
and to a crumbling dacha on the Barents Sea.

Distilled from Yin and Yang, from plus and less,  
this angel often plays the part of Ariel,  
and stand-in for the herald Gabriel.

Behold, as she ascends, she leaves a chink  
in the curtains of heaven, and there  
we know her, by the names of all her avatars.

She is the Angel of Magnetic North,  
she is arch-shepherdess, arch-shaman, she is  
the legendary eighth archangel. See  
how she dances - she's Aurora Borealis.

## Shipwrecks

This Sea of Life, on which our vessel sails  
conceals a thousand ways of floundering.  
The shallow reefs, the currents and the coasts,  
the summer hurricanes and winter gales.

The ocean charts mark old sea battle sites  
where famous warships sank with all their hands,  
scuppered by Greek Fire, or kamikaze.

A few lost ships get sad obituaries,  
“The gallant captain steady at the wheel...”  
though no mention of the empty keg of rum.

One more line in the Register struck out,  
the bronze bell at Lloyds sounds once, for whom?

You can only drown out the Siren’s song so long,  
drawn to the rocks by a foghorn’s wailing,  
“going down, down, full fathom down.”

Each one alone on our maiden voyage,  
towards uncertain harbors, unmapped shores,  
may be lost without trace in sudden storms.

And on the burning deck or the freezing lake,  
just when you think of jumping overboard,  
of swimming to dry land, you learn they lied.  
There are no rubber rafts and no cork jackets.

So like a dying heart rate, so remorse,  
the last log's **dot dot dot, dash dash dash...**  
Won't some passing lifeboat Save Our Souls?

Please throw a wreath on the evening's ebbing tide,  
for all we lonely sailors shall be one day lost, at sea.

## The Nativity

This is the moment the heralds spoke of,  
that the comet augured, that the shepherds  
heard their sheep chewing over, and for which  
the Magi crossed whispering sand-dunes  
astride their stoic camels.

The stable scene is set. The doting parents  
hold center stage. All have bowed their heads,  
the stubborn donkeys, and the elephant  
who has strayed in seeking honey cakes.

No one moves, even the baby strangely calm,  
when out of the satin-curtained sky  
a giant hand descends  
and moves the crib a hair's breadth forward.  
To the spot where all the eyes bear witness.

Someone audibly drops a pin, or rather, puts a needle down,  
and in the room, a recorded choir begins to sing.

## God's Garden Shed

How to fill those days of endless life?  
My hunch is that God's a closet hobbyist,  
collecting specimens of this and that,  
building plastic models from boxed kits.

She'll have all the gear, a leather hat,  
long canvas waistcoat, loads of zips,  
a net for butterflies and birds.

With so much time to spare, she'll hunt  
the Spotted Yellow Natterjack,  
just to hold it for a moment, marvel -  
thinking *I'm the one who created that!*

She keeps a book-lined study in her House,  
so many dry old volumes filled with Law,  
and almanacs of all the tides and stars.

But God also has a huge old garden shed,  
filled with jars and test tubes, spiderwebs,  
a mirrored looking glass, a microscope.

There's a massive freezer humming near the back,  
a top-range cryogenic model stacked with racks  
of the seeds of all the fauna that God's found,  
and of tiny universes, waiting to be spawned.

## In Solitary

When I look back on Gingerbread's short life,  
I am ashamed. We kept him in a cage,  
he rarely got the chance to chew fresh grass.  
In human terms, an isolation cell.

His cage was in the garage, cold at night,  
unlit, with just a messy nest of straw  
where he curled up. We seldom visited.

We fed him bits of carrot through the mesh.  
He'd squeak or warble, if you stroked him,  
though no real sign he knew your face or smell.

But he would keep himself in shape, he'd groom  
his orange fur. He had a large wire wheel  
in which he'd run, a fun-size treadmill  
and my first inkling of samsara.

My mum's a kind of guinea pig as well  
these days. She ventures from her room in time  
for meals, she shuffles down the corridor

and round the high-hedged garden when it's warm,  
perhaps she thinks she's at a boarding school.  
The nurses and the carers are all so kind,

they help her wash and dress - always blue skirts.  
She feeds herself, so no one minds too much  
she has dried food stains on her cardigan.

Mum hasn't said a word now for some time,  
nor sung - her language skills have leaked away.  
The daily pill's supposed to slow things down,  
they say, though no one seems too sure how long.

No way of telling what goes through her mind.  
Does she still dream of dad, or India?  
She's in her own dim isolation cell,  
locked in - a cage without the chicken wire.

She can't match our names to faces, photos,  
but she clutches tight to her old black bag,  
with its toy banknotes and her Tesco card,  
as if she's waiting for a shopping trip.

Gingerbread died alone one summer night.  
Did he crave some company, his brethren,  
or one last special meal, of lettuce, say?

At his funeral beside the roses,  
no one cried, as a death's the price to pay  
for life, my mum and dad explained to us.  
He was our guinea pig in that as well.