

Hangman's Acre

Also by Janet Sutherland:

Burning the Heartwood

JANET SUTHERLAND

Hangman's Acre

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‘Ten Rods’ by Peter Messer,

Egg tempera on gesso ground, 86.4 x 106.7cm.

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CONTENTS

1.		
Plums		11
Illumination		12
Garden		13
The lost wax process		15
Cicatrice		16
Metaphysical		19
2.		
Gathering Sentences		23
Cerebellum degenerate		24
Low Sodium		25
Five things I saw before my mother died		26
Your last sister		29
Ash		30
The chiropodist attends to his feet		31
thaw		32
Lost hearts		33
LostVoices		34
line		35
About being alone		36
3. <i>Assemblage des Beautés</i>		
Bone Monkey		41
Knucklebones		43
Assemblage des Beautés		44
4.		
Across the ice		49
Tree with fish, bird and bell		50
The backyard coracle		52

5.	
A drowned cow in the undergrowth	57
Parting 1941	58
On the tree top	59
Irish Cattle	60
6.	
Channel	65
Seaford Head	66
Malling Down	67
The robin is closely related to the nightingale	68
Like birds turning	70
Underfoot	71
A walk with five dewponds	72
Suvla Bay, Gallipoli 1915	74
7.	
Comma	79
Sea level	80
Picture Emphasising Stillness	81
a still life in four pieces	82
in Battenville, Vermont	85
Blue Abrasions	86
Hangman's Acre	88
Nearer	89

For Paddy, my mother

Patricia Evelyn Sutherland
4th April 1927 – 31st January 2007

David Miners
3rd August 1949 – 22nd March 2009

Jo Jones
12th December 1934 – 3rd December 2006

1.

Plums

lately I've been walking
in the gardens of the dead
and made myself
at home

the plum trees
are weighed down
their branches propped
with sticks such fruit

hangs abundant
as wasps scout juice
and enter the glass
traps impossible

texts are written
in their bloom
my thumbs ache
to trace them

Illumination

At dark all our houses are lit up
no one speaks but of glory in light
whatever we are most afraid of

you'd lie naked and alone
under stars
they'd make you cry if you could

be adrift
spaced, faint, distant
from fear that lights us all

rush lamp, candle, bare electric bulb

Garden

1

letting the stones drift
through soil
upwards as if gravity
could be absent
as if the heart
was light

as if the sun pulls
not just the green
leaf and stem
and the sap
which will subside
but the hard stuff
it's built on

2

bindweed and couch
unravel
their parchment
sinews
gathered in the soil
will burn like straw

3

the earliest broad beans
bitter in the pod
and I remember

it wasn't worth going home
you said
"just the white lights shining
through the dark trees and
not a soul passing"

The lost wax process

I cut my nails and make
the image of a child in wax

imagine the fragile bone
begin the heart summon

its strength stroked skin
luminous as a pearl

I look beneath translucency
to where fine webs of vessels

curl in scripted labyrinths
impossible to read

Cicatrice

spreading her legs
the labia minora
opened like a bud

the clitoris
is easy to excise
a penknife will do it

roughen the inner edges
of the labia majora
tie her knees and thighs

haemorrhage shock
septicaemia fever

types I to III in pictures
document how much is altered
how much cut
and what is sewn with gut or thorn
or held abraded till the scar
can form

how tissue thin it is
at first
the female element
how dangerous

urinary and rectal fistula

on a dirt floor or in a doctor's offices
woman to woman

down the matrilineal line
these secret lacerations

type IV (not pictured)
gathers all the rest
like pricking of the clitoris
with pins or narrowing the opening
with herbs or other harmful substances

one hundred million women
three million girls each year

infertility *still birth*

“they pulled my legs apart”
“four strong women
held me down”

and I’m reminded how we used to go
into the pen at home
I’d hold a six week calf against the wall and he
with burning iron
would press against the growing tips of horn
disbudding them

cysts *abscesses* *open wounds*

her monthly blood backs up
and exits drop by drop

when asked she says her urine flow is
“normal”
the question is rephrased—how long to urinate?
“15 minutes, normal”
is what she says

pelvic infections *UTI*

then there's the second cut

her husband on their wedding night
must cut her to consume
to consummate

vaginal closure *painful intercourse*

her husband goes to war
her husband's mother sews her smaller
keeps her pure

acute urinary retention
prolonged obstructed labour

one hundred million women
three million girls each year