

*No Names
Have Been
Changed*

SAMPLER

ALSO BY SIRIOL TROUP

Drowning up the Blue End
Beneath the Rime

SAMPLER

Siriol Troup

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Have Been
Changed*

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for Edward

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Looking for Bitterns

If I could start from scratch
it would be here on this winter marsh,
grey wind shucking the lichen
from blackthorn and elder, everything
hunkered down, kipper-brown and husky,
reeds standing their ground,
liverworts ironed onto the shingle.

It's the same in the hides: dogged
lines of bobble-hats and scopes,
a fixity of purpose that goes beyond
requirements. A bittern flew in earlier,
neck tucked back, legs trailing like ferns.
Now it teases through the veils of sedge
existing because they believe in it —
the foghorn boom, the khaki camouflage.
They'll wait for dusk to fall,
the water's feathers to smooth
This is how it begins.

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We heard the ravens shriek at dawn

Once upon a time
huge forests grew along our coasts:
thick stands of larch and ash,
flickers of mossy shade,
logs, kindling, circular saws,
somewhere or other
a body for dissection.

We followed the trails, silent, on edge.
We weren't alone –
you with your gun cocked,
an expression of pure Romanticism.

The forests rose behind.
Streams roared down the slopes.
Trees and fruit had come to an arrangement.
Ravens perched on the spikes,
ponderous, glossy, short of breath,
shimmering, glittering plumes.
Foxes, martens, adders, nuthatches, stags...
What gender were the pines?

Oh, my craving for bilberries –
light dwindling to a thread,
leaves in colours spun from green air.
Then summer passed, and autumn too.

Was it so hard for us to show our feelings?
How long were the shadows we had to leap?

Via Flaminia

Lightning flickers on the hills, wasps
crater the plums. Madness to leave
the superstrada striking through the cliffs
and take this cranky Roman pass
cut deep in the gorge – the little forum
where we find ourselves ducking
the sun's aim, strung along sheer rock
by engineers of hope while time traps
Vespas and Vespasian in its flow.

Beyond the river's chloroform bend
the land smells of polecats,
woolly oaks, yellow-bellied toads.
Shivered with spray, the future roars.

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Dover to Margate

Thick fog fallout, a tumble
of badger guts frosted on the kerb.
One black shoe in the fast lane,
cars ahead reduced to two red eyes.
Shops barred, tills mute, salt-stores plundered.
Arrows on the pavement THIS WAY FOR CREDIT.
New Meridian villages without a soul,
fields of heartbroken cauliflowers.
A battery of laid-up ships marking the face-off
between sea and sky.

Are these the dangers
warned of on the signs,
chilling enough to make us turn
into the spit of the wind, the wind lifting
kite and gull over white cliffs and crazy golf
towards a dreamland rising past the next
lifebelt, the next lighthouse, the next
headland, the next wave, the next
godforsaken bay?

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New Iceland

Gimli, Lake Winnipeg

The town is winter-struck:
propellers jammed, fishing-boats on blocks,
lake a frozen abstract –
white blue grey blue white,
coastguard-cutter bobbing, bobbing
like an ice-hut over ink.
Blood warms itself on cloudberry pancakes
and the murals on the harbour wall.

In the Heritage Centre, crops fail
and fathers drown.
Dying children can't be saved by knitting
or a reading from the sagas.
Mothers write psalms in the snow
and watch their lives skate by on runners.

No one remembers the long nights
when wind riled the turf,
the smell of whale oil and wool,
the old life thrashing in nets
while the ones who cut loose
believed they were rowing to heaven.

Homemaking in the West Reserve

In heaven, where the body is raised
to infinite airiness, they have no need for beds.
Here, in a place of honour in the living-room
the *heaven-bed* with its panelled sides,
flamboyant scalloping and well-turned pediments
is stacked to the ceiling with blankets
like a test for the real princess.

The higher the pile, the better the prospects,
the thicker the covers, the warmer the welcome,
the snugger the guests, the higher the life ...
and so on and so forth, through twenty
counterpanes and quilts. Is it all about status,
this display-case for towering domestic skills?
Hard to tell when the layers are held down
by a handmade veil and the look of a bride
cautioned since adolescence
that pride cometh before a fall.

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Yellow Rain

for Paul Bergman

Today I found drops of cream on the garden table
as if the world were upside-down and clouds were cows.
Close up the rain was full of sand, a desert
whirled aloft by ghibli winds and set down
here among the lilacs and tulips.

Later your sweetgrass verses dropped out of the blue
bringing home my daughter pouring milk in her tea
in the town where your forefathers planted their fields.
Yellow dust swirls through the corn.
She sips and smiles, she smiles and sips.

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Raspberries at Dusk

Night draws down, draws
no distinction between shapes and gaps,
smoothing the landscape into sombre parataxis.
Stone cat vanishes through metal
grass, pond-eye seals its lid.
Field respects a new democracy:
shrubs are figures, figures
fences, fences trees,
trees abstractions of themselves.
Fingers find the gate's latched
breath, its sullen rust, the easy berries
dropping with little sighs
like sins relieved. We are all the same
in the dark. The light discovers
mildew, fruit-worms, stains on every hand.

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Stealing Daffodils

They were standing there asking for it,
heads like sounding brass,
stems as fat as charity,
great clumps of them close to the fence,
big mouths crammed with fresh air
from the better end of town.

On a cold Sunday in Lent
they were the devil's flowers
flashing between the gaps,
solid, buttery, wanton as plastic.

Remember the shock of that first snap,
the drool of spit on your hand.
How, out of the ground
they seemed too rain-blown
for even the cheapest bouquet.
How they came so easily
it never felt wrong.

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