

stones through the windows  
to the soul.

*Poems by*  
**Humphrey Astley**

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## Crisis

He dreams he is fishing in a small boat  
floating on a lake. The uniform  
trees along the shore  
enclose the space like lashes  
around an eye, but no one is watching  
save the large bird perched  
at the stern. Mute,  
it does not move until he casts off  
again, when it shifts its nervous weight  
from claw to claw.

His count down from ten is cut  
short when the line goes taut—  
he reels in the catch, a bloated infant  
hanging dough-like from the hook.  
The bird flops from gunwale  
to thwarts and swallows the body  
whole, its gut as deep as its hunger.  
Reaching for his bait, he wonders  
if the creature can be sated.

Oppenheimer wakes,  
looks at his watch. There is still time  
to run some checks before daybreak,  
though the numbers on his wrist  
would make a nine-to-fiver wince.

He straightens up and lifts the cup  
from the papers on his desk.  
To his dismay — a coffee stain.

## Chet Baker, Amsterdam 1988

He is lying on his back, on a hotel bed, with a tune in his head.  
How nice it is to lie on your back with a tune in your head,  
he thinks. To close your eyes and fraternize in city noise—  
yourself and your song—ghosts among the valentines.

He has a woman of his own, but in what way is she real  
if she's not with him in this room, holding the damp towel  
to his brow? The melody flows, the loose change  
in his pocket is still cool. Soon it will go into needle, then vein,  
where it will be warm. He's stolen a million hearts—yet  
how nice it is to lie on your back with a tune in your head.

Tomorrow brings another show,  
and in a moment he will rise and go to the window  
to get some air, to put his tune  
to the test, and gape at the moon.

## Rimbaud Sleeping

Like a vagabond or lover, the little Master  
snoozes. You could smother the little bastard  
with a pillow, but if you failed to pull it off,  
you'd have to bear the brunt of his Molotov  
temper. You could never defeat the Warlock.  
You could cop a feel for the size of his cock  
and scoff and tell yourself he's just a child,  
but so what? Long before you whiled  
away your youth imbibing the Major Poets,  
this *enfant* had thrown the broken mould  
out of his pram. We can't all be Great, or so it's  
imagined, and it's unfair to scold  
a sociopath for enjoying his singular power.  
So enjoy yours—after all, he loathed a coward.

## Homework

*Rule, Britannia* dog-eared in a navy  
blue tome of dry leaves. It's close  
to midnight, I'm in bed with a cup  
of blood-red wine, which is stymieing  
the studies I can't take for granted.  
But something has departed

since a friend shared the story  
of this foreign girl on British soil  
who waits for him in London, and waits  
for him in vain. The man is an island,  
for he lost the Northern muse he loved  
to someone he thought a comrade.

So the heart that enslaves him,  
that he keeps for a slave, is his own.  
And then there are the young men  
responsible for the recreational  
drugging of my sister in the parallel  
universe known as

the real world, the same world  
where my Irish mother gave her youth  
to England, only to learn to keep  
her voice down in the street. Now,  
between these wrongs and the denial

thereof, I am stuck in the middle

class, where there's fun to be had,  
for sure, where laughter's galloping  
through the walls, though I won't join in  
just yet. I'll stay here with my wine  
and soldier on with this bloody song,  
neither dreading nor envying Thomson.

But I would love to get him drunk  
and take him to a wedding or a rally  
and be gentleman hooligans who slur  
and sing off-key, and as *from out*  
*the azure main*, rise at morn  
with tongues like two dry leaves.

I drank white wine last night,  
which is rare for me without  
your taste for it.  
That I drank it  
with a friend  
whose love has run aground  
means nothing,  
but there was something  
of those stories  
about the bottle. Let me  
put it this way—in the flavour of it  
now was the essence of it  
then. There  
you were,  
kicking  
to the surface of my evening,  
and not to show me  
something pretty  
found at the bottom. I  
watched you kick for quite  
some time.  
It was the white wine  
keeping  
us going,  
wasn't it? Through  
the fiasco like two  
old thespians carousing  
for their lives along

the deck.

What's not an act is the ache  
in my gut  
from staying up late  
with the white wine singing  
broken love songs.

## The Scrapbook

When I was a child,  
I lifted my stepfather's  
Book of Nudes. He was into photography,  
I was into puberty.

The book was an old grey hardback  
the size of the seat on a classroom chair,  
or so it seemed.

The women were quite  
beautiful—European, statuesque,  
full-breasted models poised and posed  
against an untarnished landscape shot  
in gorgeous black-and-white.

Outwardly, the book  
was a slab inscribed with little  
but a name. Yet the talent of the artist  
was apparent to me then—women  
didn't always look like this. How  
had he captured them so well?

No one could blame me for taking  
an interest, but it wasn't enough to steal  
a glance at the book from time to time.  
I wanted to acquire what I'd seen.

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I took an oversized pair of scissors  
and cut the most exciting figures  
out, working around a subject's curves  
the way one circles sculpture.

Liberated briefly,  
the cut-outs were moved  
and glued to some sheets of paper—fixed  
to a fragmentary collage where the pieces  
did not touch.

Disembodied bodies.

To fit them neatly into the scrapbook,  
some of the women ended up losing  
their heads—but I had seen  
the Ancient Roman works  
and knew that this was normal.

## Untitled

That skank  
that freak of natur  
Tyra Hunter who  
came from the street

she came off the road  
one night  
and the glass flew up  
like birds and bees

to fetch the cream  
of Washington, D. C.  
hard hat cunt men who  
weren't born yesterday

“ this ain't no bitch ”  
lo and behold  
it doesn't look right  
in all its blood

an unconvincing red  
a queer rouge in pools  
they mopped it up  
with dollar bills

a dowry from the state

a buck for every pore  
in the average human  
body.

(Tyra Hunter was an African-American transperson critically injured  
in a 1995 car crash and left to die by the emergency services.)

## Pope Approves Condom Use for Male Prostitutes

Hope

is like returning  
to this dirty patch of lawn  
you've carried in your mind  
since you explored it as a boy,  
and finding dew.

God bless this morning  
and the news that it is not a sin  
to plan my escape in this world.

The body says one thing  
and the soul says another, I know.  
But aren't I too young  
to be trailing around with this  
argument under my breath?  
Like those other street people—  
the insane bums who went to war  
and brought it home  
in their heads.

Faith

is like dew. You think  
there's nothing there until  
you reach down and gather up  
enough to quench your thirst  
or rinse your mouth.

And down there, too—so far  
down and so early in my thoughts  
it's like a rule—

there's the image  
of my mother  
and the cloth to clean up after  
her five little nightmares.  
Then there were her little dreams,  
but they were not her calling.  
What is my calling? Today,  
like every other day,  
I pray it is

survival  
but I hope it can be more.  
To make love  
and money, yes, but not to  
smudge the two—not to be  
a hostage of these lost old men  
on the wrong side of morning,  
but to wipe away  
this stale dew, this sweat.

## War

I shot a dog  
yesterday. I was going through  
the remains of the school when I  
saw the beast breathing and I  
shot it. The sound of the blast  
and the sound of the bark  
made echoes like an ogre  
throwing stones.

I went over to the body, which  
twitched, so I put another round  
in its head. Blood filled its mouth,  
coating its teeth, but I could see  
that they were good teeth.  
The dog must have been  
some kind of warrior.

When the others appeared,  
asking about the noise,  
I showed them the body and they  
laughed and slapped me  
on the back—I was a hero.

We dragged the dog to camp,  
where our captain showed us how  
to skin and gut an animal.

It lasted all night, and we enjoyed  
the little dragon ghost shadow  
made by the fire.

I believe in the story  
of man's best friend,  
but I am a child and I am hungry.

## **In Darkness (Epilogue)**

A head heavy with wonder hits  
the pillow like a blood sacrifice  
and won't be lifted into sleep's  
distances until it drains.

The room yawns and creaks  
around its dumbfounded centre,  
asking after the architect,  
the bricklayer. In darkness,

eyes adjust to the meaning of  
'What is the meaning?' Particles  
like stones through the windows  
to the soul.

Humphrey 'Huck' Astley is a poet-singer-songwriter based in Oxford, England. In the early '00s he founded and edited the (now defunct) webzine Rain Over Bouville and published collections by poets in Canada, Sweden and the UK. Sabotage Magazine selected his pamphlet *Reasons Not to Live There* as a recommended release of 2012; its lead poem 'Homework' is reprinted here. He is the author of the three-part concept album *Alexander the Great: a Folk Operetta*, which he describes as 'a queer runaway myth of two young friends and their fall from grace in Dixie'. The accompanying stage show, which was funded and developed by the PRS for Music Foundation, debuted at the Cambridge Junction in May 2014.

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*Stones through the Windows to the Soul*

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