

by the same author

The Creationists

Lung Soup

Andrew Elliott

MORTALITY RATE

B*editions*

*I think I'm being followed by a very big man
and so I look over my shoulder
only for my neck to bring me full circle
and I find that I have gotten ahead of myself.*

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FROM THE GERMAN

Bin Man

I was rummaging in a bin in Berlin –
it's a thing that I did, I liked it –
when I noticed, under everything, a briefcase.

Now, had I been asked on starting out
what I had hoped to find that night,
what I would have said was, *A briefcase!*

so I wasted no time, I leapt into that bin
full of unwashed wrappings, takeaway cartons,
the picked-clean, licked-clean bones of hens,

and pulled out that briefcase intact, stained
though it was with an oil of some sort. *Hardly olive,*
I thought as I sniffed it, *sunflower, perhaps, or peanut . . .*

Extracting myself from that bin proved a struggle
so that by the time I was hurrying home –
afraid of having done something deemed to be wrong,

glancing back, skirting the Wall like a wainscot,
clutching my case like a case of tummy bug –
the sun had come up like pots of pink and purple paint

had been issued in lieu of national service
to every man in Kreuzberg and the gaps in the skyline
war had left allotted like so much cheap canvas.

Wearing only a T-shirt that stopped short of her bottom
my wife was brushing her teeth in the kitchen.
When, foaming at the mouth, she said, *You are going to wash that?*

I demanded that she bring me my slippers, my pipe.
What slippers? she asked, *What pipe?* Her ego being boiled
like an egg in its id – it was something that could take up

to three minutes – she was obviously in no mood for irony.
How quickly a decade goes by! I thought, *How quickly
the bins of a city turn sour . . .* The briefcase lay on my lap

like a lid. Only later – *much* later – would I open it
and find inside the pages, blank like the man
who had owned it had died without a stain on his character.

Amerika

We were sitting in a kitchen like a kitchen in Kafka,
his *Amerika* open on the table between us
like we might one day go there
and be bellhops in hotels where the swells stay.

Backlit by the sky two black-backed tenements
blocked, for now, our setting forth –
like the kind of goon you got in Chicago, we thought –
but what after all was our hurry? It was then

the fact occurred to me that all bellhops are boys.
Was it my fault your face crumpled up into tears?
Now nothing would do but I go through the drawers,
find a pair of kitchen scissors, cut all your striggly hair off,

then take down my trousers and show you my willy.
Your eyes by then were red with tears
but you smiled and peeped underneath at my balls.
It's silly, you said. *Silly?* I said. *It's silly*, you said

and we quickly reached a stand-off. *Amerika* lay
on the table between us. I was so angry I wanted to close it.
Let's call ourselves The Happy Piranhas, you said.
I'll sing and you could play . . . you could play . . . you could play . . .

hmmmm . . . what could you play? I shrugged
but already I had it all there in my head, *The Happy Piranhas*
spelt out in strip lights. The buzz was tremendous.
My hands were trembling. I fetched a broom

and you lifted your legs as I brushed up your hair.
I looked at you then, your temples clamped between your knees.
There were little black hairs creeping out of your panties
while behind those black-backed tenements the sun had set

like an orange banner, sagging, stained in places pink.
Or even The Dust Mites, you said. By the time
I replied (having played it cool, non-committal), *Bites*
on balance would be better, your arms were beginning to rise.

White like bones, they were hairy, limp-wristed
and as they rose your jaw descended. I could see how dark
you were inside, how sharp your tiny teeth were. *Don't*,
I said, *You'll wake the dead. The Happy Piranhas it is then.*

And you scratched your head instead and frowned
at the flakes of skin like long white hairs falling straight to the lino.

Philosophy

You have only to think of two bodies in what would have been the mid 1980s,
the window above their bed framing the moon and some chimneys –

the latter like tubers exceeding their stacks and giving of the stoves
of which they're a growth a somewhat less than healthy prognosis –

to think of how she had been reading Arendt, how he had been reading
Heidegger . . .

And how, too poor to eat an apple each, they'd ate one bite about instead,

then agreed to eat another one (we know this because there are the cores,
lying on the floorboards, left to discolour like objective correlatives) . . .

How, like a honey-haired girl at a lecture on power, her spectacles had sparkled
in a way that bewitched him so that, seeing what she'd done to him, she'd sighed,

wondered if she might not still finish her chapter, then, concerned that the
diversion

of blood from his brain might contribute to an impairment in his understanding

of Heidegger, marked her page, set it aside, took off her top; and how, soon
after that, her thighs, blue-veined like lightning, had been flashing out of the
corners

of his eyes . . . *I'm Superman swooping to the rescue*, he'd thought of the damsel
to whom he would later apologise . . . (*Hey! No way, it's a good source of protein!*).

Then damp like pages peeled apart, the print of the one coming off on the other,
how they'd each picked up where they'd left off, him into Arendt, her into
Heidegger.

Woods

Being terribly fond of the woods as I am –
fonder by far than of people to be honest –
I can be a little woody in myself sometimes.

Dismal as people sometimes say about woods
when the trees are in their undead state and birds as big
as thoughts like these: *How am I here? When I'm dead will I know?*

tumble from their messy nests and blunder branch
to branch, accompanied by lightning, thunder –
you get the picture, I could go on but what's the point?

The crack a stick makes under foot? It can't echo –
can it? – down the light years to come and be
picked up and held as evidence that someone must

have come here once, walked about, got lost obviously,
managed their panic, did a little damage, carved
their initials in the bark of a tree, nothing any sane man

might have thought of as serious; lay down, slept,
woke again and took a while to realise where they were
was not a place they could've lived and been happy ever after.

Lung Soup Condensed

Heartless

Sabrina, who began at the age of fifteen to dabble in prostitution –
hence the line in the first draft of *Breathless* that would have seen her,
lying flat on her back, pull upon a chap like a bottle of schnapps
from which she'd been attempting to extract the last drop, if I hadn't

thought better of that (a wise decision, not one I regret) – would later
read *Das Kapital* and never meet a man – of a type you see a lot of
in the art of the era – whom she hadn't been able to drink under the table
where, for all their industrial nous, their expertise in the manufacture

of steel, the hydrogenation of oil from coal, the production of chemicals
(which it's hard to argue with), they'll wake a little later and wonder
if the feeling of constriction in their chest has to do with the tab
that's been pinned to their lapel like a flower with its roots in their wallet . . .

She is in other words the kind of woman who has gone to the trouble
of living a little before sitting down to write poetry which was, strictly
speaking, not necessary, but goes perhaps some way to explaining
what more than one critic has claimed to have found, lying at the heart

of her writing: that scene for example near the start of *Der Hirschfänger*
when the eyes which we'll follow through the pages to come
ascend the stairs of a Potsdammer Platz keller and we see the swirling
lights of cars, the neon shop signs swirling too – *Tempo! Tempo! Tempo!* –

as if we had lived all our lives until then in the kind of town where a girl's
disappearance would have left the pastor to rebuke the women
for their prattle of vampires and the men of whom none
was in any way guilty unusually subdued for a week or two afterwards.