

from *The Marble Orchard* (Shearsman, 2012) ('Archive for a Daughter' and 'The Octagonal Tower')

Archive for a Daughter

November 1972, Derby

A dance card embalmed in sweat. Her ruthless curve of palm  
mowing the carpet into sheaves before a gas fire.

Liquidescent virgin in a purple dress.

Oil paint, shaded avocado, umbrella sun-wings.

Box 2, folder 20 'Early Married Life'

a single page:

*recto*

a fashionable centre-parting

*verso*

consonants: midnight affair nuclear affair bleach affair

*watermark indecipherable*

[But here we are jumping ahead]

The archivist notes that no exact birth date is known.

An already Western dressed 6-year-old reads the headlines of English newspapers for party tricks.

Her black eyes are blunt and unequivocal like the prophecies of pharaohs.

In a Punjabi village, she and her impeccable mother, gemstoned, oracular, princess a vernal causeway.

Box 1, folder 2 'Emigration'

The BOAC stewardesses Max Factor crinkled baskets

of sweets to soothe the girl's swinging, impatient feet.

Aviation—a risky endeavour in 1963—levels a curse at her progeny.

Aerophobia—her own daughter's—fear of the air between home and exile collapsing.

Box 1, folder 7 'Education'

Homelands Grammar School For Girls

Miss Moore leans across an oak sea and parquets a line of future mothers.

Her bovine sympathies, neatly pressed, tentacle towards the only Indian in the class.

The Georgian battlecross marking her forehead, kindly and thoughtfully, segregates.

The girl bounds wildly through the Public Library—Huxley to her 11-year-old mind  
suggests individuality—but the Savage's feet recommend no one specific exit.

folders 8-17

[Unbound Notebook, mostly unreadable]

*I thought I could become a doctor and asking found I could not think to ask to become anything*

The archivist notes that these pages are not continuous. Refer to Box 2, folder 10

'Correspondence'.

A photograph of a prospective husband and several handwritten credentials.

Box 3, folder 1 'Notes on Motherhood'

*Nursery—pram—groceries—pram—doctor's visit—cucumbers in half-lengths—  
—over each shoulder some conspicuous intellect—*

Husband-academic, wife-typist.

She door-to-doors Hoovers, Avon, thick rosaries of factory lace,  
while her children pop tic-tacs for invented ailments in plastic houses.

Nottingham hurls snowballs at her black turbaned gentleman.

Soaked typescript, fair copy of a life—

When she asked her parents for a spare suitcase for an exodus, they replied  
*my child, nothing is ever spare*

Box 4, folder 1 'Exile'

*1985, Vancouver—ablaze with cherry blossoms from here to the kindergarten.  
We arrived with one steel pot, a bag of lentils and an onion.*

folder 2

*1987, North Hollywood—submarine fences root Thanksgiving potatoes, one a piece.  
My daughter reads Laura Ingalls Wilder to her menagerie of dolls. Raft sails calmly on.*

folder 3

*1989, Oxnard—Gifted children are purse strings. We mind their collegiate years with interest.  
El Rio wizens to a stockpile of citrus and rental agreements.*

folder 4

*1995, Ventura—Bibled to real estate, gold blazers cinch round a wade of blonde, leathered adulterers.  
The neighbours tend their god-plots of lawn and hedge.*

Box 5, folder 1 'Drs Parmar'

She saunas with the ladies of the Gold Coast—  
one Japanese ex-comfort woman, one savvy señora goldbuckled and multifranchised.

*Stanford, Northwestern, Harvard, London, Cambridge—and when my husband's sisters wept  
because I had no sons I said I have two doctors (one of body, the other of mind)  
and sent my uterus via Federal Express to the village, with my compliments!*

On the verso, written in ink, is a page from Box 1, folder 8 [misplaced]

*I remember clearly when I knew that I would one day die.  
I was on the toilet and I was 11.  
The bathroom was white and oblivious.*

## The Octagonal Tower

‘History is the love that enters us through death; its discipline is grief.’  
— Anne Michaels

### I.

Whatever rage has come through these sealed doors,  
and scalded us black and frayed, we have no name for.  
We cannot explain the quiet, sleepless shift of whispers,  
a procession of shrouds along our corridors,  
or the diverted eyes that cloud to see a row of winter oaks outside  
shocked in their dendritic fizz. And if we do know it,  
it is in the blood, in this terrible synapse of sky, in the road away.  
From our house we drive down through a sunken valley  
where, like a crypt, it is forever the hour of the dead.

You have always worn the wheel, pushed your hands and wrists  
through its axes, as though it were a shackle. Driven, hunched.  
It is the same—the sting of yucca and eucalyptus, a vein of pink  
bougainvillea purged in hot pulses off rooftops—a fragrant massacre—  
and the same steady road you drive every time afraid to speak,  
afraid to ask when I will leave you alone in that house with your wife.  
I translate your favourite song in my mind: *This song of mine, no one will sing.*  
*This song of mine that I sing myself will die tomorrow with me.*

An October night, 1975. A sudden rain has liquefied the earth.  
Mud isn’t enough. There is a word you use that means more than mud,  
it is the sound of a foot, sunken to the ankle, pulling itself out—  
the awful suck of uprooting. Like a scream, it is the fear of standing  
so long that you might stay and sink forever. This sound trails  
behind you and your brother as you walk the fields one last time.  
You will leave and not return for ten years, to marry my mother  
who you’ve not yet met. Your four bare feet make an agreement  
with the earth, to remember. It prints its own response in your shadows.

### II.

Holidays are uncertain times. The marble face of an old king’s grief  
deflects the spectacle of his queen’s death in each perfect tessera.  
The Taj rises above the Jammuna, doubles paradise in the mastery of slaves.

Holidays are uncertain times; their hands are cut off arms thrown up  
in celebration. Now they too mourn, and skyward pray to phantom limbs  
in the gardens of heaven, alone to pluck and preen.

They are carted away without ceremony, along with the remains of stone  
that, like teeth, fall out of swooning heads. The funeral begins.  
Mumtaz, hollow as a bride, is veiled in by her white, carved lid.  
No one knows when you were born. They think it was an autumn month.  
At five you asked where your mother was. Your soot lashes pooled with fear.

*Gone to your grandmother's.* Later you found her picture—  
a woman propped up, freshly dead, her hands emptied of the past.  
And you, seated on her lap, two years old, holding her  
and what held her forever in that exposure.

### III.

The road widens past tracts of arched houses; you drive faster and grip the wheel.  
I say I won't leave till after the New Year, but by now it doesn't matter.  
Your knuckles are bloodless, and your stoic eyes are the calm surface of a timepiece.

Shah Jehan, imprisoned in a tower by his son, was sent a gold platter  
the day of the coup with the head of his chosen heir upon it.  
Seeing this the old king fell, knocked the teeth out of his head.  
For eight years he watched the Taj from his window, from across the river,  
in a diamond mounted in the wall that reflected it a million times over.  
The soft marble hands of his wife extended to him, to the empty casket beside her.  
When the river filled, he walked across it.

When the door opens, only one of us leaves. I watch your car until it is far down  
through the shadows of trees. The road receives you, and the house receives you,  
as does the galley of water, the trimmed hedge, the cold, sterile cell.

In your wallet, you carry a picture of my mother, from before my birth,  
when she was only yours. Her pinks match the pinks of flowers;  
she bows her head into the branch and smiles, as beautiful as a queen.  
Love is incidental, time-bound. It is the memory of love we love.  
It is the memory that fattens on pain—of these small deaths  
and these stone walls. The crown that has sunken from your ears  
and hangs around your neck is all that remains.

from *Eidolon* (Shearsman, 2015) (sections 1, 2, 4, 5, 19, 25, 30, 32, 37, 46, 50)

i.

*It was not me, but a phantom  
whose oath  
a variable star  
moldering in the reliquary  
is doubt.*

*I have not unsealed love, its taproot  
mouthing blackness  
nor seized the fairer woman  
to purge from her her song—*

*This hell-house of primogeniture, bookish  
and pale          quartering what is also  
its own and only rule  
this: fire  
and the fire that comes from fire.*

ii.

Helen, dispirited  
camera-bound          Helen  
fetching the paper from the front lawn in her dressing gown a lot of the time  
and knowing when the phone will ring  
seconds before by the click of its current

Demi-goddess—not woman, not god  
disembodied like a bowl turned over and its loaf thumping out  
Helen  
Queen of never-mind-the-time, of *you can't run on gin for all the everlasting*  
And such

moths, broiling airlessly in a sodium bulb  
smell of it on her front porch  
lights on          home

iv.

*I do not insist          that we retain the old names  
I would          know you  
ever, light          as the seed*

v.

Marketing the daylong detente     for a sliver of profit  
does not appear to bother the kingdom of saints

Ascetics her brothers—  
Spartans                     whose only god is [insert here  
the death of eleven days]

Wash the man by the road who turns  
and seeing or not seeing  
is soundless, animal  
wash him  
he is your brother  
enter his encampment (of fuel-scarred fabrics)  
and listen to his black pronouncements  
void of exhaust  
scramble up  
the highway's escarpment  
inviolable, good  
wash him  
or  
be without     brothers

xix.

*'As a wheel on its axis turns, this book unwitting to itself,  
Around the idea of thee'.* [Whitman]

Helen of Sparta of Troy in Egypt  
of no known address             of no known nationality  
refugee of no known conflict  
stateless             without property  
disappearing under a veil  
of treason

xxv.

Helen is             instrumental

*Laws permit me to refuse your advances  
although I have eaten the salt from your table*

*As for your hospitality—  
I like it anywhere just fine  
so long as I'm coming or going*

Helen             is not all but  
scattered like grain

Vituperate             ghost meaning

to greet herself            to make room  
for herself                at the table

to eat a meal of dry meat and vinegar

Helen is not vital

xxx.

*I am not the virgin mother        lamenting in the hills above Ephesus*

*I am the invective        injuring these dry plains studded with stone pines*

*I am the lateral commemorate of war  
as the steps up to my hiding place suggest  
I am the birther of sacrifice        received back into  
the earth        heavenly rockface*

*if you knew my real name        you would not  
use it so lightly*

xxxii.

An idea is not a woman but many women  
the composite of an idea

Ours is an older civilization        re-made  
dramatis personae        recast by different troupes  
rebuilt in the style  
of Ionian capitals  
and fluted pilasters  
put through the ringer of the magisterium

we see the *real* Helen  
is the false *we*  
is the eidolon

xxxvii.

You are wild-eyed  
You are Helen

The grey-blue dawn  
the Rosey-fingered Dawn  
turning the snaking cloud  
into the body of a goddess  
raising her thin spear

we glide across

the blue-eyed morning  
changing flags  
as a woman changes  
her lover as often  
as another  
lover permits  
we glide across  
zones of conflict

The wind lays down a road  
across the waves  
hiding us in a mooring of fog  
flanks of earth lighten  
like fantasy      like Leda's body  
to make way for our white ship  
of a hundred tiers  
and some thousand men

This parthenous soup  
of buried cities  
held close      we make out  
the scent of their joints  
the only real thing  
in an invented eschatology  
of free will

*Did I mention the Indiana corn  
from whence I came  
and its hot unendingness?*

Proud like crosses on a prairie landscape.  
Corn madness  
industrial corn a devil  
bleating like a harp  
made of 22 karat gold  
High Fructose Syrup  
infantile mass delusion   god  
sugar fix of empire

Helen makes out the morning freeze  
in the stillness of a suspended harvest  
what eviction has nature made  
in retaliation for these unkillable crops?  
Out out for the outing acres of frozen heads.

xlvi.

*'Put first before the rest as light for all and entrance-song of all,  
That of idolons.'* [Whitman]

*No one alive*



*remembers  
the unrecordable  
warmth of my  
breath*

1.

Helen as a beam of moonlight                      caught sideways  
Helen                      refracted onto thresholds                      her reflection a holy cult  
                    of high-born women ululating in bedrooms  
                    gripping the mirror hard that bears her standard                      Helen

*‘With beauty like a tightened bow’*

The window clapping shut like an iron gate.  
She does the latch. Empty, diffuse glow.

Now focus on her lithe and loathed silhouette  
                    see if it makes plain  
                                    how a woman could be mistaken  
by so many men                      for a ghost                      bartered dead by nudest song  
  
                                    even in this unacknowledged light  
    at this impossible angle