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Salvation Jane

Greta Stoddart

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Extract

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Salvation Jane

What is Salvation Jane?

Little purple sturdy thistle,
dicot weed of the Boraginaceae

'But it's beekeepers' gold,
a sun-chopped sea of violet trumpetheads
– a god's bright nodding flock!'

And Paterson's Curse?

Little purple sturdy thistle,
dicot weed of the Boraginaceae

'But it's a noxious rough hairy-leaved herb,
a chemical-resistant infestor of cereals;
it chokes pastures, poisons cattle.'

Who gives these names, who tends them?

Men and women who look up at the dark
gold-tinted clouds and mouth 'Heaven',
who run for their lives shouting 'Storm!'

You drew breath

as a boy draws something silver from a river,
an angler from the sea a bale of weed;
as a woman draws herself from a bath,
as blood is drawn from a vein.
You drew breath as thread is drawn through
the eye of a needle, wet sheets through a mangle,
as steel is drawn through a die to make wire
and oil draws up through wick its flag of fire.
You drew breath as a reservoir draws from a well
of ink and a mouth and a nose and eyes are drawn,
as a sheet is drawn from under the dying
and over the heads of the dead.
You drew breath as the last wheezing pint is drawn,
as money and a bow and the tide are drawn;
as up over her head a woman draws
a dress and down onto her a man.
You drew breath as a cloud draws its pall
across the moon, across the car park
where a sky-blue line draws the way
all the way to Maternity; as all in blue
they drew a semi-circle round the bed,
a line and then a knife across the skin;
as in another room someone drew
a curtain round its runner, a hand across
a pair of finished eyes. You drew breath
as they drew you – besmeared and blue – out
and sublime was your fury at being drawn
into this air, this theatre; you drew breath
for the first time – for a second I held mine.

Really

What's the point of a vase
painted with pink and white roses

or a fruit bowl enamelled
with passion-fruit and pomegranates?

Isn't it enough for tulips to soar
from a plain earthenware jug,

for bananas and pears and tangerines to sit
higgledy-piggledy in a glass bowl

and be themselves
the bulging colourful heart of a room?

And the child in a photo
on the wall fixed

in light, in a smile
that won't fail, is dead

to the one who's now being dragged
kicking and screaming round the shops

by a woman whose heart has gone cold,
who says she doesn't know why she bothers.

On Pont Royal

'O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that
I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!'
THE FALL, Albert Camus

Here? No, I wouldn't. Not that I care
in reality, but there is something to be said
(and you probably said it) for doing it where –
but I'm thinking now that what you wrote I read
far too young, or is it from birth this urge
to jump and lose ourselves in the inky river?
Look. I'm at it again, deep in character;
I grip the rail, my heart knocks with knowledge.

Where are you now, Jean-Baptiste Clamence,
with your book-length excuse, your 'confession'?
Too late. Save your words. Stay on the shelf

for I've dropped your plot and find myself entranced
by mine – this will she won't she loop of dying,
this well-worn fiction, like walking on water, or flying.

The Swans

They are the only light
as they come
like a prolonged shock
out of the night
towards us so without
effort I wonder
it isn't the entire inky
lake sliding its way forward.

He coos and chucks from the side
but has no food.
All he wants is for them
to come closer
but who is he to trust?
They hold off,
donate what is theirs
from a certain, temperate distance.

I should never have come.
I want to undo
the idea till it's just that,
refill each glass
till I'm back, straight-backed,
in that oak room
with the last of the sun
and my resolve.