

## Assisi

The dwarf with his hands on backwards  
sat, slumped like a half-filled sack  
on tiny twisted legs from which  
sawdust might run,  
outside the three tiers of churches built  
in honour of St Francis, brother  
of the poor, talker with birds, over whom  
he had the advantage  
of not being dead yet.

A priest explained  
how clever it was of Giotto  
to make his frescoes tell stories  
that would reveal to the illiterate the goodness  
of God and the suffering  
of His Son. I understood  
the explanation and  
the cleverness.

A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly,  
fluttered after him as he scattered  
the grain of the Word. It was they who had passed  
the ruined temple outside, whose eyes  
wept pus, whose back was higher  
than his head, whose lopsided mouth  
said *Grazie* in a voice as sweet  
as a child's when she speaks to her mother  
or a bird's when it spoke  
to St Francis.

## Aunt Julia

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic  
very loud and very fast.  
I could not answer her -  
I could not understand her.  
She wore men's boots  
when she wore any.  
- I can see her strong foot,  
stained with peat,  
padding with the treadle of the spinning wheel  
while her right hand drew yarn  
marvellously out of the air.  
Hers was the only house  
where I've lain at night  
in the absolute darkness  
of a box bed, listening to  
crickets being friendly.  
She was buckets  
and water flouncing into them.  
She was winds pouring wetly  
round house-ends.  
She was brown eggs, black skirts  
and a keeper of threepennybits  
in a teapot.  
Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic  
very loud and very fast.  
By the time I had learned  
a little, she lay  
silenced in the absolute black  
of a sandy grave  
at Luskentyre.  
But I hear her still, welcoming me  
with a seagull's voice  
across a hundred yards  
of peatscapes and lazybeds  
and getting angry, getting angry  
with so many questions  
unanswered.

## Basking Shark

To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,  
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea  
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me.

But not too often - though enough. I count as gain  
That once I met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain,  
That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.

He displaced more than water. He shoggled me  
Centuries back - this decadent townee  
Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree.

Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring  
Is all the clearer. I saw me, in one fling,  
Emerging from the slime of everything.

So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale  
For twenty seconds while, sail after sail,  
The tall fin slid away and then the tail.

## Visiting Hour

The hospital smell  
combs my nostrils  
as they go bobbing along  
green and yellow corridors.

What seems a corpse  
is trundled into a lift and vanishes  
heavenward.

I will not feel, I will not  
feel, until  
I have to.

Nurses walk lightly, swiftly,  
here and up and down and there,  
their slender waists miraculously  
carrying their burden  
of so much pain, so  
many deaths, their eyes  
still clear after  
so many farewells.

Ward 7. She lies  
in a white cave of forgetfulness.  
A withered hand  
trembles on its stalk. Eyes move  
behind eyelids too heavy  
to raise. Into an arm wasted  
of colour a glass fang is fixed,  
not guzzling but giving.

And between her and me  
distance shrinks till there is none left  
but the distance of pain that neither she nor I  
can cross.

She smiles a little at this  
black figure in her white cave  
who clumsily rises  
in the round swimming waves of a bell  
and dizzily goes off, growing fainter,  
not smaller, leaving behind only  
books that will not be read  
and fruitless fruits.