

Medlars

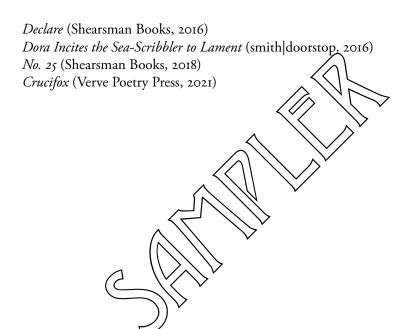
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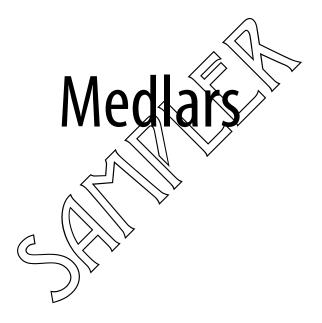
Monica's Overcoat of Flesh (Nine Arches Press, 2020)

Dream Island Home for Isabelle Huppert (Verve Poetry Press, forthcoming)

Снарвоокѕ



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First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by Shearsman Books Ltd PO Box 4239 Swindon SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office 30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB (this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-868-8

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the editors of the following Journals and presses, who first published some of the poems included here: Anthropocene, Beyond Words, Blackbox Manifold, Bucker's Dog, Envoi, Festschrift for Tony Frazer, Grist Press (We're All in it Tegether: Poems for a DisUnited Kingdom anthology, Huddersfield University, 2022). Cutter Magazine, Ice Floe Press, Iota, Journal of Civic Architecture, Live Sanon, Magma, New Boots and Pantisocracies, Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal, Poetry News, smith | doorstop, Poetry London, The Poetry Review, Shearsman magazine & Shearsman Books, Tears in the Fence, The Dark Harse, The Interpreter's House, and Verve Poetry Press.

AUTHOR'S NOTE A 'marplot' (see p. 86) is a meddlesome, interfering person

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Everything you told me came untrue,

as if your eye at the witching hour when you told us bedtime stories was faulty on its target. Perhaps

your seer's hands, smooth and oiled from washing up, slipped in their tracing of force lines on your crystal ball. Maybe

your too-hasty breath flustered the tea leaves, distorted picture portents dredged on china.

Your prophecy that I might die young faded after you'd aired it eighteen times, once each birthday, for bad luck.

The blade of your sibyl's claim that I wash meant for marriage, that lovers would recoil, blunted (though I grasped it still).

And the old domestic curse – that I would never write, that words would fail to join: the black source like treacle, stuck,

trickles freer with each poem that comes, Mother.

Medlars

England like a medlar, unbletted. When they come to score the cardboardy hide, to get at the lush nostalgic mud inside, the sting causes them to backtrack and search for better butter elsewhere.

Let the hard-to-grow fruit grow ruddy
like fat peasant cheeks
etched into blue glass sky
not splayed on racy dishes for royalty –
the Kingdom split, grinning wide
at the hinges, creaking, just holding for now.

Apocalypse (Synopsis)

A thousand starlings plop like gobs of tar from corned-beef skies, for no apparent cause. Then fish, with twisted fins, and six-inch scars, turn up in private gardens and offshore. Domestic pets climb rooftops late at night and yowl, as if, despite themselves, they felt the pull of iron in their bloody bite a rankle or an itch below the pelt. Grand beasts, like tigers, amble with their cubs to play with ducklings fledging in the part soft-sheathe their claws behind the flower excel at karaoke after dark. Two-headed babies grizzle at the break Yhe best'. And tabloid hacks keep schrum it's for

Myself as Medieval Horsewoman

after Two Scenes from Der Busant (The Buzzard), Tapestry, 1480–90, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

My medieval streak to the fore, blond horses and my buzzard, a tarnished tame-ish bird behind me, who am two-dimensional with a downturned mouth, my opulent brocade slightly unlaced, and a saddlebag – for my books, medlars, and picnic sweetbreads – flung over jewelled harness straps. Our horses stepping over bracken and oak-leaves mysteriously rising from forest earth, innocent. And you, my comparion all gold-bestial in shaggy lion suit, on all fours, what are you like. My horse, round-eyed, spiritual, prancing Orchida dimbing decisively, derisively, around our borders. My area sliding down my horse-side. Mini-prountain clouds. In a flat world, I clip my sight A heavy crown I'd hardly noticed, de sapphired. My uncertain glande, horseleadwards. Rich rhenish braids, no bonds. Arrested as I dismount. A banner over my head Nanno read.

Sidewinder

St John lost this prize-winning volume – *The Blue Fairy Book*, inscribed by his father. No music late at night from the Ark.

Book One

Mallory and Malachy breed for Egypt, seeking to populate pain. A mass of till, a chance moraine, brings a maroon quiet to the helm at dawn, a muted swoon. Lot looks out at last over a salty waste, his wife's waist encrusted in memory, the round of it. Copper céilí drums kettle in at the corner, all music pickled for the time.

Book Two

I would like – the captain's wife began her voice querulous, unruly, like whalers or pirates were trying to rain it in with harpoons, but it soared to land in an ashram, found a home in a chantress's breast. Carry-on in the choir. Six exultant postulants pooled the evidence they'd pulled, ova and ova. But dark whistles and they can scarcely raise the purser. You wonderful electric being, the live-in widow coos to her landing lamp, lost in St Dominic and white.

Book Three

No-er, no-er, mock the twins, twirling fake handlebar moustaches over the rails, a little off. Doves squabble with olive boughs and boysenberries.

Methuselah rejuvenates sappy knees with aloe.

The rain starts up again, rats return. Michael Archangel loiters near the figurehead, stands ready. All the quiet earth bends its ear.

Blaue Blaue Blaue

You have this, Mother: we are private here in our alcove, fresh-flowered each Friday; bowed to by devout schoolgirls, albeit perfunctorily...

[Albertine Alba's daughter (private correspondence)]

Blaue! Blaue! And blaue your mantle, which is magnificent, and will keep us from ham.

We eat green leaves gathered from the herbarium Tue–Sat, in order to be less undeserving.

I composed something outstanding while I was waiting in the shower for the steam to clear and the blood to flow less sanciv.

Machines all over town nudge pound coins into gutters and drains, enriching the rats who spend, spend in unsecured kitchens – two preening like ladies-in-waiting on the sugar shelf.

Nallybance and the Light Potion

When Nallybance came among us, his sowed light – just a pinch at first into broken-cupped hearts which winced with the tart unexpectedness of it – was welcome. We lined up on the second day, Nallybance's lieutenant having telegraphed instructions. Two spoonfuls for the sickly kids – straight to the front of the queue. Lumpy ladies with pendulous breasts had theirs watered down, and just a single chaste spoon. Not many men were called. There were a few stripling boys with angel faces and bright less-than-beards who skipped in and took full draughts in clean ringing vessels. The girls mainly resisted, and by the end of the seventh day he had left us.

Dumpland, Graveland

Edgar, the Thin-Eager, arrives in Gloucester, some lifetimes late, lifts his head above infant fog darkness, surveys the century, and the county, feeling festive.

Dumpland is pretty at Christmas with litanies of lights, strung hand over fist over skips, foiling the reverse sheen of the gorged land – harbour of filthy thoughts and stay-at-home stench. Touch me here, gulls. Flighty scavengers.

Would you marry your king?

Would you bury him?

By chance, Graveland is next to Dumpland with bodies curated into slim subterrapean cubicles regular as the seasons and sealed with intricate ground cover, busy lizzies, creeping phlox, bugleweed, occasionally a rose. Bespoke animals willing.

Edgar reverses deep into the Cosmolds, secures a private cot on the wold, complete with candles and running slaughter and settles to sit out time.

Ring when you're home safe, Baby Scratch

The Mother General was taking the class that evening, novel in itself. We'd had a two week break, for personal reasons of the usual Sister. Two latecomers, rough 'uns, come and sit beside me, ask if they can just listen. Irritating. I hiss to the girl, 'Why are you here? Who is it that you know who comes here?', sensing an agenda. 'Baby Scratch, who died,' she said. Wow, I thought, writing it down, but by this time her fella is telling the nun the whole thing – a veritable ballad of Baby Scratch –

'I knew Baby Scratch', he said, 'her hair falling over. I walked her home that ugly night. Johnny, she said. I smiled. Whiskey, you're the divil, she said. Her laughter loud in the moon-spilt yard. Her hair falling over. I spit, and spat. A night of howdy singing, of far talk, and chicken scraps, and a long-nosed man on a four-stringed guitar. Ah-oo I tried to catch her wrist, the little bone, the hopping vein. She snarched it back, a smile on her half-puckered rosebuddy mouth, running on, running in. Don't ruck my dress, don't knock the doon she said. The folks'll wake, she said. There weren't no folks, we knew in this 'hossle' for girls like her, they didn't use a key, ah-har They didn't need a key. That moon's in Africa, as well: she cocked her head from the window above, sighed all dreamily. Leave the door on the latch. There's another girl home after. Go now. There's someone else here after. I could've, should've, pulled it to. Or rolled a rock across. The Kittle tap Vater, Verhaps she thought it was me, her hair falling over. All pretty, the door left on the hook for another coming after. I knew Baby-Scratch-who-died' - he said - 'her hair falling over. The clackety-clack of her bangles and heels, her delly-cat wrists and ankles. I took her home that moon-spilt night. I should've stayed – I could've.'

I was taking notes but looked up to see MG, her eyes like an eagle's and next thing she was inviting him and the girl up to the front, for a prayer, hands held: 'Baby Scratch, beloved of us all', she said. 'Your sweet fair hair, your cherub lips, and pretty birthmark. Have mercy, daughter, on your dispatcher, releasing you from evil. They meant you no harm. Surely, they didn't, little girl.'

And the whole class thrummed, 'Amen!'

The Placenta Effect

A bonny burbling baby emerged in June at the Harvingtons' house, at the edge of the wood.

'You need to eat the afterbirth', the home midwife urged (Lady Harvington looked limp and wrung, wrong): 'It'll pep you up.'

The Lord was hovering at the door, his whole life before and behind him. He pooh-poohed Ms Grist, the doula, then slipped her

a crested plate to procure it for himself, the nutrieur dense organ to be enjoyed at supper with bay and pepper,

sure to prolong his good looks and influence and perhaps, the doughty Ms Grist, too, might join him for a glass of Shiraz

and the fruits of his wife's labour. He salivated. She agreed, and bore him four more placentae in the next four years.

His wife declined.