

SAMPLER

Medlars

ALSO BY GERALDINE CLARKSON

FULL COLLECTIONS

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

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

CHAPBOOKS

Declare (Shearsman Books, 2016)

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Geraldine Clarkson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

Contents

Everything you told me came untrue,	9
Medlars	10
Apocalypse (Synopsis)	11
Myself as Medieval Horsewoman	12
Sidewinder	13
Blaue Blaue Blaue	14
Nallybance and the Light Potion	15
Dumpland, Graveland	16
<i>Ring when you're home safe, Baby Scratch</i>	17
The Placenta Effect	18
[the undutiful and the beautiful]	19
Ruskin's Contract	20
Mannequin, with the melancholy gaze –	21
The Hold Days	22
Leperskin Coat	23
A Whiff of Phosphor	24
How to Wring out Seven Devils	25
Underland	26
Mole People	27
Break Break Break	28
S.T. Coleridge Promotes His (Under) Wares	29
Pastoral Moment	30
The next day,	32
Refract: Blackbird	33
Moon Rising	34
little one	36
lemonjim hour: <i>brittle england</i>	37
Apple Snow	38
Merry Foreigners in Our Morning	39
golden opportunity, wet streets	40
Filth	44
Hopeless on Hope Street	45

Eyes in a whirl	46
Elf Sex	47
Cockaigne	48
April on the Chiltern Line	50
Wood Magic	52
proggie	54
Melody's Meadow	55
Leaving Glawdom by night –	56
Nympholepsy	58
Mablethorpe-by-Bea, 1933	59
This Heart	60
The Spoiler	61
Louder Than Jerusalem	62
Even to Kind-Hearted Men	63
Downsizing	64
Rise and Fall	65
Wing-Broke Angel	66
Book of Blue	67
Hyacinthoides non-scripta	68
Beryl-the-Peril Bluebell	69
Compact	70
<i>From Rivariations – Leam, Ouse, Derwent</i>	71
Diagnosis	74
Cold-Room Georges	75
Fool Girl	76
Capt	77
Champagne	78
After 'If—'	79
Edwardiana	81
O Respectability	82
[Autumn, most amorous]	84
<i>Now!</i>	85
Meddlers	86

SAMPLER

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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, dis-
torted 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 wasn't 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.

SAMPLE

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 park;
soft-sheathe their claws behind the flower tubs;
excel at karaoke after dark.
Two-headed babies grizzle at the breast.
And tabloid hacks keep *schrum* – ‘it’s for the best’.

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 companion
all gold-bestial in shaggy lion suit, on all fours, what are you
like. My horse, round-eyed, spiritual, prancing. Orchids climbing
decisively, derisively, around our borders. My arse
sliding down my horse-side. Mini-mountain
clouds. In a flat world, I clip my sighs.
A heavy crown I'd hardly noticed, deep
sapphired. My uncertain glance, horseheadwards.
Rich rhenish braids, my bonds. Arrested as I dismount.
A banner over my head I cannot 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 cèilidh 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 rein 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! 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 fancily.

Machines all over town nudge pound coins into gutters and drains, enriching the rats who spend, 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.

SAMPLE

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 subterranean cubicles
regular as the seasons and sealed
with intricate ground cover, busy lizzies, creeping phlox, bugleweed,
occasionally a rose. Bespoke animals, milling.

*Edgar reverses deep into the Cotswolds, 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 devil*, she said. Her laughter loud in the moon-spilt yard. Her hair falling over. I spit, and spat. A night of howdy singing, of fat talk, and chicken scraps, and a long-nosed man on a four-stringed guitar. Ah-ooo. I tried to catch her wrist, the little bone, the hopping vein. She snatched it back, a smile on her half-puckered rosebuddy mouth, running on, running in. *Don't ruck my dress, don't knock the door*, 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-ha. 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 little rap, later, perhaps 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 nutrient-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.