CLIFF FORSHAW

Four Poems

Wings

"Of shapes transformed to bodies straunge, I purpose to entreate..." (Beginning of Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

"Dr Joe Rosen of the Dartmouth Medical Centre and ex-scientific advisor to NASA believes that within five years he will be able to graft wings onto a human body. An American circusartist called Enigma has already had horns made of coral implanted in his skull. Each year he has progressively larger implants to stretch the skin."

(Johann Hari, *Guardian* 11 March 2002. The first four stanzas are based closely on Dr. Rosen's own words or his ideas as reported in Johann Hari's *Guardian* article.)

We use this rack to stretch torso fat, rejig rib bones to create a wing. Soon they will resemble angels, have full sensation in their new boned flaps of hanging flesh.

Bodies change and, of course, the brain is infinitely mouldable.

I welcome this conference, but, my fellow doctors, I feel I must ask: Why do we value only the average? Why are we, as plastic surgeons, dedicated merely to restoring our current notions of the conventional?

-As opposed to letting people explore, if they want, the possibilities? Only our Judaeo-Christian conservatism holds us back. We must become more.

> Our basic unit's bone. We overcome, or else we die. With these new wings, of course, you will not, still, be able to fly.

Country Matters

Long faces nosing over stable doors, a line of trophy heads and watchful eyes; shifting haunches, the hum of piss and straw; horse-whiff, ancient must, oiled saddle leather.

Old sweat-twisted tack. I've heard the word, it fits

flicked crop juddering against my plastic boots, and in borrowed jodhpurs, not quite Mr. Darcy

but, good thighs and bollocks, I can strut through breeding, flesh—appreciate a damn good seat.

Spurs

The bit's shine frothed and crusted green: this big shy face, a secret whispered in her ear. So many hands of new and nervous mare —eighteen, nineteen? I wouldn't know, but *huge*.

Saddle up, then lead her out. And at the box, check girth for slippage, the stirrups' notch. Swing leg over, mount. Take up the slack.

Thumb frayed reins. She's slow, grumping back to straw, the water pail... I kick, she snorts, clops into a disgruntled trot.

Thwack her useless bump and grind, but the crop Can't fire her. Slide out the stirrups. The stable-hand distracts her with a carrot, Hacked out chops, no arty fuss, these little triangles for nostrils, eyes. weren't meant to last or gather dust.

Set light, the kids strung him up high, lynched him briefly from a rafter. Little priests, they swung him like a censer;

the smell of burning wax wafting up as air hissed through his sawn-off crown, turned gallows grin to hollow laughter.

All Hallows, we cut him down. Three nights, he glowered in the dark, then guttered, more malcontent than clown.

Now, suddenly that gourd's gobsmacked. The bite that was incised in light's a gurning mouthful of gummy black.

The hackneyed grin hacksawed in white, the one that made light of death's now toothless, gormless by Bonfire Night.

2

The candle inside's dead, unlit, but a visual pun still takes the pith and disses us with living soot.

At first, I'd thought the kids had blacked it in, felt-tipped. Tipped up, inside's a weird skid-lid, foam-cushioned right up to the lip, black padding where the casing's holed. But then the night sky seeps

through an opened fontanelle, and you're staring through a brain-pan chinked with stars, a trepanned skull:

the nightlight waxed into a tinny moon; or a metal plate countersunk in bone, but inside out and upside down.

3

All perspective's suspect. In Holbein, the anamorphic does the trick, a tangent turns formlessness to omen.

The Ambassadors' world is fixed, measured, ordered by degrees: categorical, hierarchic.

Against these clear geometries, the foreground's strangely deformed, defaced —soft and shapeless as a new disease?

or thin and hard, reflective as a blade? What's smuggled in's your skull, of course: (left-field) revealed obliquely in an aside.

4

... And in *Acherontia atropos* you can read your future, make a book. A flutter on this Death's Head Moth shows you how the odds are stacked: an old movie of an ageless face flickered through short-winged days.

This moth cannot know what's on its back. The sun has never seen its shadow.