

## Stewart Conn

### Visitation

In pride of place on my work-surface  
are an ink-well of weighted glass

and a black quill-pen, presented to me  
when I left long-term employ:

a discarded life I heed less  
and less, as the years pass.

But every so often with a hoarse *kraaa*  
there lurches on to the sill a hoodie crow,

a gap in one wing where a primary  
feather is missing. Teetering raggedly

it fixes me with a bloodshot eye  
then zigzags, disgruntled, away.

Is it intent on repossessing  
what belongs to it – or chastising

me for treating its lost quill  
as simply a glossy symbol?

Either way, I see it as the beast  
of conscience come home to roost.

The cat meantime sits by the fireplace,  
content that nothing is amiss.

## Early Morning

You know the feeling – when rising early  
and about to start work you become aware

of a distraction: not the customary  
juddering of some neighbour's water system,

shift of masonry behind the panelling,  
nursery rhymes through the wall;

more a slightly asthmatic snoring,  
but mellifluous and in perfect rhythm.

Has an inner partition been taken down,  
some somnambulist moved in?

On the cusp of hearing yet unnerving,  
its persistence breaking my concentration.

I throw open the shutters, let light in –  
and there they are, on the garden wall:

the male cooing like a benign steam engine,  
the females all a-do. A rap on the pane,

and they've gone: clumsily, as befits the elderly.  
Next morning they're back, amorous as ever.

This time I leave them in peace. Worse things  
to have outside your window than so decorous a love-in.

**In the Canongate**  
*(for James Robertson)*

As I turn into Old Tolbooth Wynd two figures  
in doublet and hose appear, both wearing green  
tricornes: actors I take it, in some ghostie tour.  
Before I reach the archway, they have gone –  
leaving me, in the clatter of the Canongate,  
pondering the Royal Mile's varied headgear  
down the centuries: helmets and bearskins  
between St Giles and Holyrood or on a last  
journey from Tolbooth to Grassmarket;  
the High Constables' silk toppers, the white  
cockade of the Royal Company of Archers;  
the jester's cap and bells, in many guises.

The odd deer-stalker or fore-and-aft – but  
the stock-in-trade bowler and skip-bunnet  
ousted by baseball caps worn arsy-versy.  
And this being a match day, I am in danger  
of being swept away on a tide of tartanry  
and jimmie-wigs ... To escape the throng  
I am drawn to Robert Fergusson's grave  
in the Canongate kirkyard – unable to dispel  
from my mind his mother visiting his cell  
shortly before his death, to find him lying  
adorned with a crown of bedraggled straw  
he had neatly plaited, with his own hand.

**In the Museum of Scotland**  
*(for Judy)*

I come across a white horse in a glass case,  
decked with period artifacts each in its place:  
saddle studs and plates, silvered harness junctions,  
slivers of body-armour, and from muzzle to ear  
ornate fragments of chamfron - not as a work of art  
but displaying each item's ancient function.  
Going to bed that night, I cannot but wonder  
what of your "you-ness" might be deduced  
from the strewn scarves, the array of bracelets  
on the dressing-table, the jet and greenstone beads;  
and what of custom and appearance, in those items  
spilling from your wardrobe, could be implanted  
in the mind of someone who did not know you.  
My good fortune lies in having no need  
of such accoutrements to conjure up  
the warmth and gracefulness they enhance,  
the living likeness of their milk-white steed.

## **Free Fall**

At the time it was impossible to take in  
the human dimension, until on the tv screen  
the footage of those impelled by the inferno  
into leaping to the sidewalk far below  
showed one couple (work-mates or strangers,  
we'll never know) share their last moments  
swooping hand in hand towards infinity.

Mercifully we still have our loved ones.  
But when in half sleep we instinctively  
stretch out a hand to each other,  
this so simple gesture of affection  
is transformed: I shy from its reminder  
of charmed lives; grief mingling with pity  
for those who came hurtling through that funnel of fire.