

The East Wing

My footsteps echo across the marble floor
as I follow the tak tak of the caretaker's stick.
Above, the last of the evening light burns
in the cupola and I can just make out
the glass cases that jut from every wall.
We pass an iron cage of stuffed ducklings
who follow their mother across a Perspex sheet.
I peer inside but the caretaker grabs my elbow
and I trail in his wake of drivel and pricking steps
till we reach a pale statue at the end of the hall.

The caretaker turns and looks me in the eye
his voice is dry as breadcrumbs, thin as a draught:
'Do you remember your promise not to touch?'
I nod and he presses a button at the base of the plinth.
A glow spreads over the statue and it starts to revolve.
Her eyelids flicker open – forget-me-not blue
her breasts are pale lilies and her dress
is the soft cascade of a beech hedge fresh with leaf.
She holds out her hand – I look round at the caretaker
he shakes his head and grasps his cane with a shiver
but she just smiles and I reach forward, it's like
slipping a hand into a summer river.
Something creaks behind me, slams shut:
the caretaker has drawn a knife from a classroom desk.
He advances, tilting it slowly from side to side,
I cast about me, wrench a torch from the wall
cleave the air, wave it across his path
drive him backwards, down the street of cages.
I trap him in a corner but he slips
out of a window.

I stare into the night,
scan the dim outlines of stump and boulder.
At last, I fasten the casement, feel the weight
of a clutch of keys that dangle at my belt,
smell the scent of lilies at my side.