

Bill Manhire

A Sampler

A housetruck across the paddock:
they will be eating breakfast in there,
sitting up high at the table.

Or so it says in the fable I am now
working on, where a man
comes out of the dark at dawn

and stares across three fences
to the river and the truck
by the river, grass licking

its wheels. He is hungry
and feels he is going to do something
though he doesn't know what

beyond angry. Legs and leather
are what he's got, a fist that yearns for
its first solo flight. A little later

it's night, and he sleeps in a tree
not woken by the loud shout
which is now ending my story.

I'm sorry. I never know
what to write about,
I don't know what to write.

1992

Not a Raven

A hare on the road, South Ronaldsay,
twitch of blood on his nose, frozen there
as we swerved around him

while whatever bird it was
lifted away, then lowered again,
settling to work in the rear-view mirror . . .

Was it a rook, a raven, or a hooded crow?
Someone who knows these things might know;
we didn't—though many more such things were coming

so maybe not a raven

and we were driving on to Kirkwall
—the Churchill Barriers and Italian Chapel—
half watching out for

the next of those signs that tell you that
the next thing coming up is special.

2004

Shanty

Our father was a matelot. He went to war
but we did not see him go.
He is out there afloat
on the great, great blue
while the ocean wonders what to do.
If he sinks to the bottom, how will we know?

All right for fish: they jump out of the water
and land back in. They come and go.
Likewise the light. At the start of each day
the light will reappear. Then in the evening,
why, look up there!—see how
the small lacunae glow.

Migrants are singing on shipboard,
always a mile or two off-shore.
A song is sometimes called a strain.
The sea is sometimes called the main.
My heart hurts.
They sing and then they change their name.

A dying man drifts by in a dinghy.
What should we call him?
Giddy. Our father held out his glass
and said *When I say when*.
That glass was like a baby's skin.
He kissed it again and again.

2007