

Mary Michaels

Flare

The smell of a hand cream, ‘earthy’ she called it – a dull perfume, the colour of fine clay slip. With fingers spread, she’s smoothing the soil over the dead bird, where she has buried it. Blood from the head-wound colours the water. Feathery cloud staining its clarity. They both washed. Rushing to divest themselves of marks. There were smears of red on the bathmat; the basin was blood-filled when he woke up; a line of scarlet drips meandered along the paving outside. The conductor had shouted at the wounded man to get off the bus, for dirtying the seat as he bled from a stab; in a daze, he’d complied. ‘But you can see he’s injured!’ protested a passenger, unavailingly. She’d pulled out her phone and rung 999 while the vehicle moved on.

A salt smell. Ewes’ heads lying at a funny angle; red on the necks congealed like sauce on a plasticated pizza; five of them slaughtered, heavy and awkward, dragged by the ankles, tipped into a muddy grave hastily dug, ground-water seeping in from the sides. Hairless and bloated, the horse set alight in a straw-filled barn, winched onto a cart like an upturned table, charred legs black against a backdrop of flames. (Before they could shoot, it had run around blazing.)

A flicker on the small black and white screen. With bony fingers he adjusts the knobs, like a mother rearranging a sleeping child, to get them covered by the blanket – gently, gently. The soldiers are tugging at an unarmed man in shirt and shorts, with his hands tied behind him; close-up of the watchers, the body on the ground. There was blood on the front of the nun’s white habit. She panicked. They panicked. The atmosphere was terrible. Foam coming from the subject’s mouth and they threw him on a bench – left it to the ambulance to try to revive him. Without protective masks. But at least the results of the experiment; nine drops on naked skin. They had given him a pencil and paper to play a game of noughts and crosses while waiting. The eternal binary; it circulates/ it clots.

Intermittent tinkle of a bell. This the screen does not announce, occupied as it is with names and functions, but later (coughs) (a thud) (a dog barks) (screams loudly wordlessly) (she sobs). The axe has to fly through the air towards the orange scarf from the split logs. Fabric that challenges the greyness of everything, the surge of black and navy-blue umbrella domes. Dropped and walked away from.

He says, ‘I can’t get the video this morning,’ but keeps on trying, pressing with his thumb on the key pad, eyes fixed on a tiny silver screen. And the child sitting up behind the driver, she’s got the music and listening to it loud; the same tune, over and over. Every button he touches, the ping of a note, this man

with his sculpted face and total concentration on two machines, one in each hand: every now and then a whole metallic phrase. Upstairs on the double-decker, through the front window – streaked with water – through the back window of another bus ahead and along that upper deck – travelling these distortions – from the furthest visible point, a white flare. It expands and diminishes as the vehicle lurches. Is this a portent? Is it an advert projected on the glass? Or merely a magnifying panel for the driver? The woman in the front seat narrows her eyes, tries to make it out. An icy waste. The tinkle of a sheep bell.

Mary Michaels is the author of six poetry pamphlets and a New and Selected Poems, *The Shape of the Rock* (2003), which was selected for the 'Alt-Gen' list of outstanding first collections by Staple magazine in 2005. Her poetry has been widely published in magazines and anthologies. She was a founder member of the feminist artists' group 'Sister-Seven' and, while living in Philadelphia, of the 'New Studies Poets'. Most recently she was joint organiser of *Soundings*, a poetry reading series in London. A collection of prose pieces, *My Life in Films*, will be appearing later in 2006.