

when I come for my outside fag
to sit and squash up my bladder
I don't want to go back inside
from the smoke-ends I toss in
from the coffee — both liquid and solid —
the butts I toss in
disappear like in quick sand
snot I thumb-over-one nostril
I blow into it, all of it
is taken on board and digested;
do the snails, whose tracks loop in and out
somehow consume them?

BREAKFAST AT THE WHITE ROOSTER

I've missed you girls, working in this cafe
as your great-great-great-grandmums
waded through stamp-sized fields of grain
and a passing poet described
your thighs, long and slim
above the water

You girls shuffle through oil-crowded air
hanging in skeins
above the floor beside the frier
splashed with batter
and the unhealthy fat of chips
taking cash, dispensing food and smiling

You moved in here
worked a week beside the vendors
Italians who had fried the fish for 15 years;
every job, from opening the register
making eggs on toast
was being done by two

At first, the learners watching
but, after half a week
the expert
leaning further back each day

from where the girl from Szechuan Province
grilled the beef-and-onion patty

Not like at home
when you steamed carp
or prepared a banquet even
for a wedding party
so many courses
so much gathering beforehand

The next Monday
you had it on your own
each dish the same
from just a week of watching
even the same numbers
of spud cakes in the *bain marie*

Just one man, hidden up the back
behind the fridges
who does the tubs of pasta
and fries the eggs on toast
six or seven girls
20 to 35

Do you have children?
Have you embraced the freedom
of having extra babies?
Do you have a man
after leaving your village
and trying to forget that handsome boy?

Open at eight each morning
till nine each night, except on Sundays
when you sleep in two hours
to be ready
to enjoy a two-hour morsel
to help propel you through the week?

Ten days off for Christmas
and that's been why I've missed you
the marking pen on paper

with the obvious Chinese flair
announcing the date today
the first time this year I'll see you

Driving to our appointment
I think of how
you cook the eggs that way
with the tiny membrane
stretched across the top
like a fragile parachute

At the corner before your street
I point for an old woman to walk;
she crosses before me
in oversized blue slippers
carrying three white grocery bags
and her handbag, hard beneath her elbow

The young guy with the stroke's still here;
well, he must be 40
but still wears the fat silver rings
and ear-rings that he made
when he was able to work
in the shop just down the road

I ask the tallest of you
— I'm sorry I don't know your name
but you have such happy eyes —
how your break has been?
"Very good! Very good!"
then I click down the coins in payment

Coming here is like going
to a jeweller's
with your grand-dad's watch
and having it work again
or like visiting your doctor
and have him say you'll live to 90

Like finding the wine
the merchant recommended

to, indeed, be excellent
or the husband your father arranged
turn out to love you
to even treat you with respect



Rita Dahl

IN YOUR STARRY EYES

tähtisissä silmissäsi
hollut juopuneet
käyvät käsi
kädess sekä kyneleet

in your starry eyes
crazy drunken people
walk hand
in hand and tears

kaikki nuo lempeää sydäntäsi
ohimennessään sivelleet
torilla käydessäsi
rintojasi omenaisia hipaisseet

all those people
who touched
your applelike breasts
while you walked in the market-place

kuinka julma
tempppelin kaarikulma
keskelle toria jään

how cruel
the arched bridge of the temple
I stay in the middle of the market-place

kuinka lohdutonta
näkyä huoletonta monta
kaupungissa nään

How many hopeless
careless sights
I see in the city

