

TIFFANY ATKINSON

RUFUS'S DOG

So it takes the whole poem
to imagine his dog. The dog
was in his study when he called—

and no commandment she can think of
takes a stand on the imagining of dogs.
Across the rug it yawns with *Heimlichkeit*,

a muscled bag of hearth-warmth. Just
his fingers, where the skull collects the spine's
chords, lift the muzzle's blunt love. But

that's animals. Crossbreeds, she knows,
are fickle when it comes to instinct. Over
rolls this demijohn of fealty, open as a palm.

Exquisite, how the skin takes touch. The eyes
roll back. The universe contracts. And she
observes the soft jewels of the genitals

for she is known for thoroughness. It's
an oldish dog, but not dead. In the pistons
of the hips lie all the casual cruelties of fuck—

she sees the outraged neighbour storming
from her kitchen with a bucket of cold water—
Get that mad hound off my Mitzi! Awkward

teacups afterwards: the *Wunderkinder* pups
some brutal husband dunks into the rain-butt.
All the bevels of his no-good-boyo head against

her knee, his steady heat as dreaming tears him
fanging over plains. Where the ribcage clasps
a wolf's heart. People thinking she's the cat sort.

ACCORDING TO

Once, about the time you start to notice trees
and he found out his wife was not his wife
in any sense but name, Elijah took the dog,
two apples from the sideboard, and went out.

Not long afterwards, he came upon an old friend
bent beneath the bonnet of his car, cursing
every sprocket of combustion engines. What
do you suppose the point is? asked Elijah.

And the friend replied, I have to be there.
Throw your spanners down and come with me,
Elijah said. And so the friend did. And his name
was Tomos, after whom he never thought to ask.

And Elijah was amazed. Next there was a daughter
which, close up, they didn't know. But Tomos said
she looked a lot like his girl would've had she lived.
He split one apple threeways, and the girl laughed.

And her laugh was as a pocketful of loose change,
as the moment when you down your pint and dance.
Her name was Manon. She was heading to the clinic.
Then she got her mobile phone out. Mam? she said.

So from there they went north, telling stories. Till
they came upon a farmer, bitter drunk, for all his fields
had failed. They listened, picking fruit seeds from their teeth,
and where those fell sprang cider-presses, booming.

Soon a crowd came out to see what had been happening. I killed a man, said one man, looking thin. Shit happens, said Elijah. Sell your house, give all the money to his folks and walk with us. The man did. He gave nobody his name.

Meanwhile the crowds grew till there wasn't room to slide a slice of toast between them. Tomos asked, what's this about then? And Elijah said, just as you left your hurtful car to walk with me, so this lot feel.

Look at the rhododendrons! They don't give a toss about the stock exchange, the ozone layer. They do their own thing. Throw your keys into that hedge, ignore the cameras. Be your own true kicking self.

So Tomos did. He was a simple man, and able to draw truth like tears from anyone. Elijah said, you know the way that pressure-regulating valves secure the rear-brake lines for heavy braking?

Tomos nodded. Well, Elijah said, you see, that's you. At this the grief beat out like crows, and Tomos felt a hatching, in the space, of light. Elijah felt it too. And where they left a third, unheard-of apple, grew a hamlet,

grew a village, grew a town, where people started over hopefuller than all the Born Again Virgins of America.

These are the words of Manon, set down with the baby on her knee. Elijah Tomos, he'll be. All this happened.

CHICKEN LITTLE

So I lift your dress
and kneel before your bruises—
each a corsage; plural,

formal as a marriage—
thinking, this is how the story
stuffed you. Acorn, my arse.

It's my job to listen to the whole she-
bang; the who did which to whom
with what, and how the sky itself

was gunning for you. Most of all
I want to hear how everything
seemed lost—how hard it hurt,

how long, and where, precisely.
Incidentally, you're more than
averagely beautiful. I do believe you.

You must name it, sweetie. It is
only pain. Which isn't a punch-line
in the therapeutic sense, but then

we're archetypes, not Notting Hill
neurotics. And besides, I mean to crack
your pretty neck. I do the fox. It's nature.