Visible Woman, Visible Man

... complete 15” tall models, each including skeleton, internal organs and a clear plastic skin. Of course, what you get is all the bits and pieces. So the assembler must identify the parts, paint them, and complete the finished model.
—Sciplus.com

—for Mr Davis

I. Afraid of the Ruins

There are bodies involved, but not mine and not his. If life was hummed into mud and dust then why not water? Because that is what it looks like: light inside water standing up and skin coalescing from the very first taste of sun, frit of sky in the blood and almost every bone visible. I do not like these bodies;

I do not like how they open, perfectly, along the puckered seam of each coronal axis into a glass-clear hull for the long, unbloodied bones, for the fixed jaunty drape of the liver like a French beret. For the brain’s hard cud. Knotted lash of the spine. Nothing fluid, confused, vertiginous; no loose shifting, no roll of fury for a different life. Each body on its own plastic rostrum and no matter how close always those inches of air between them. After the fall,

then, after the apple, on his desk at the front of the lab—my own Eve, my own Adam, in a new world of secular miracles, of small crucifixions under glass: hairstreak,
orange tip, clouded apollo, gatekeeper, comma, cryptic wood white, all

with a single hair-thin pin through the thorax. And all the charts

and schematics, all the graphs and diagrams: nervous systems, Krebs cycle, cell division—the spread fingerlets of each chromosome, the corset of its centromere. And those harvesters

of sunlight: the granum of chloroplasts stacked like green coins, the currency

through which light becomes chemical, becomes energy. Why would I not believe

that I could eat light and live?

II. “Bewilderment increases in the presence of the mirrors.”

July. Summer pouring slowly into its traces. Semaphore of batons as the relay teams practice handoffs on the track

while in the lab, with the top button of every shirt undone, with every tie a slack noose, we sit before our microscopes, evenly

spaced at long wooden benches between gas taps fitted with two-way teats for the rubber hoses of our Bunsen burners and

every living cell, he is saying, contains within it the primed code of its own
undoing and outside the crowns
of the oaks fill with loose shifting, green

smoke of nostalgia
for another life and I feel the weight
of his statement flex
slowly, pass through me

like an affliction, as I sit on my hands
in an effort
to straightjacket the body
with itself while outside the wind-
lashed beauty of a jet trail unzips
across a square of sky that has become, suddenly,
the most troublesome of colours, hiding
the black grasp of the infinite.

And it’s no wonder, really, that Narcissus fell
in love with his own reflection
when he saw himself thrown
into focus against the backdrop

of such a heaven. So, Deep, still
water was the heart’s first mirror,
then copper and onyx and ebony polished
to a shine. The Aztecs favoured obsidian.

Among animals, the eye is a mirror.
All it takes to focus sunlight
up through the slide held in place
on the microscope’s stage and through

the unreadable cullet of my own blood is one
coin-sized mirror.

III. Ransacking the Nave

Eve and Adam arrived
in pieces. Like offcuts, like morsels. I think about the carefully chosen thimble-sized tins of Testors enamel, the array of fine brushes. The competent hands. The quick assembly. I am a girl, of course, with a schoolgirl’s crush, but I have seen his wife—not much older than I am, so much younger than he is. What is it, really, that I am afraid of? She makes me nervous. He has an adult sadness—historic, inherited. She is a form of permission at a time when every boy my age has an appetite too large for his own vocabulary and hands that try to make up for it with the arse pinch and the bra strap grabbed through the fabric of a blouse and let snap. And here is Adam with all his ribs; here is Eve with the removable hatch of her belly where her optional pregnancy attaches like a limpet. Where the placenta, now painted, is a red leaf plastered to a window. And here is the house that contains the door that was my entrance into this world.

IV. Ransacking the Nave: Redux

Imagine: arriving early to find his lab unlocked and empty. Imagine breaking open those bodies to steal their static welter and crumble, their passive gleam, their perfect rubble, and there, in the right light, with every organ
below the diaphragm removed, there,
between the lungs’ twin duffels
of lapis blue and the sling
of the pelvis, between bone
and breath, imagine discovering
a sea cave of ambient glare, a familiar
fish-spine blue of distance. Imagine
believing that something that did not belong
to the body had entered the body.

V. “…to lose beauty in terror…”

Aggressive, cannibalistic, the larva
of the hairstreak contains

within it the directive to devour
such hungers and build

for itself underwings with a pang
of patinated copper, a tongue

like a watch spring; and so begin
a different life with a taste

for gorse and bird’s-foot trefoil which
all summer long flaunt blind,

yellow throats of blossom. Nothing
escapes (not one of them escapes, no one

escapes) the open prisons
of beauty which are the flowers.

Older now than he was
then, I forgive him

for giving me metaphor and not answers.
I forgive him for giving me terror.
I forgive him his pity. I know, now, how we must have seemed to him as we leaned like leaves towards the brilliance of knowledge:

how young we were! waiting at that unlit opened door to life, in that time

before Time, minds still night muscle, still swamp-rapt, still

reptilian black. Before the fall, then, before the naming and the lament.

And don’t tell me that it could have turned out any way but this. There was

no shirr of wings, no floral ache of copper, no sea cave

of fish-spine light, no flux of augury, no hint of a soul. No pantheon of gods. No god at all. Only evolution’s indifferent logic, only beauty manifesting as the perfection of function,

only Eve and Adam, clean and passionless

as rain-washed stone. Only Time with its blind throat

making the animal dance with terror in the cage of a body caught
so completely between breath and bone, between light and the mirror, sky

and reflection, tongue and blossom. I am, I thought, the impulse of eternity
towards form. I am, I thought, nothing but the impulse of eternity towards form.

I am void made solid. To be unmade.

Note: In section II, “Bewilderment increases in the presence of the mirrors” is taken from The Boat in the Evening by Tarjei Vesaas. In section V, “…to lose beauty in terror…” is taken from “Gerontion” by T.S Eliot.