

‘I speak as someone...’

I speak as someone whose skin was thinner
than gold leaf, with a soul so porous the world
blew through him in a light breeze, whose coughing
landed his heart in his palm many times.

And as someone who sailed the panicky seas
of his own blood. In Naples Harbour
the summer served its ten day quarantine
below deck, till the air wasn’t fit to drink.

Now bats roost in the plush colonnades
of human veins, and naked arms are offered up
to the dewy-eyed syringe; so my tired hand
must hover over the séance again to write

no life without death, no death without life,
just semaphore flags and fragile bottles bobbing
from coast to coast freighted with ink and breath.

Simon Armitage

Written to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the death of John
Keats.