

## An Unexpected Guest

(featuring Samuel Pepys)

She's treated herself to new shoes, a window seat  
on the fast train, a hotel for a night.  
She's been to the capital twice before,  
once to see Tutankhamun when she was nine  
and once when it rained. Crossing The Mall  
she's just a person like everyone else  
but her hand keeps checking the invitation,  
her thumb strumming the gilded edge of the card,  
her finger tracing the thread of embossed leaves.  
In sight of the great porch she can't believe  
the police just step aside, that doors shaped  
for God and giants should open to let her in.

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She's taken her place with ambulance drivers  
and nurses and carers and charity workers,  
a man who alchemised hand sanitiser  
from gin, a woman who walked for sponsored miles,  
the boy in the tent. The heads of heads of state  
float down the aisle, she knows the names  
of seven or eight. But the music's the thing:  
a choir transmuting psalms into sonorous light,  
the cavernous sleepwalking dreams  
of the organ making the air vibrate,  
chords coming up through the soles of her feet.  
Somewhere further along and deeper in  
there are golden and sacred things going on:  
glimpses of crimson, flashes of jewels  
like flames, high priests in their best bling,  
the solemn wording of incantations and spells,  
till the part where promise and prayer become fused:  
the moment is struck, a pact is sworn.

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*And got to the abby . . . raised in the middle . . .  
Bishops in cloth-of-gold Copes . . .*

*nobility all in their parliament-robés . . .  
The Crowne being put on his head  
a great shout begun. And he came forth . . .  
taking the oath . . . And Bishops . . . kneeled  
. . . and proclaimed . . . if any could show  
any reason why Ch. . . should not be the King . . .  
that now he should come and speak . . .  
The ground covered with blue cloth . . .  
And the King came in with his Crowne . . .  
and mond . . . and his sceptre in hand . . .*

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She'll watch it again on the ten o'clock news  
from the armchair throne in her living room:  
did the cameras notice her coral pink hat  
or her best coat pinned with the hero's medal she got  
for being herself? The invitation is propped  
on the mantelpiece by the carriage clock.  
She adorned the day with ordinariness;  
she is blessed to have brought the extraordinary home.  
And now she'll remember the house sparrow  
she thought she'd seen in the abbey roof  
arcing from eave to eave, beyond and above.

Simon Armitage

A poem to mark the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III