

The Patriarchs – An Elegy

The weather in the window this morning
is snow, unseasonal singular flakes,
a slow winter's final shiver. On such an occasion
to presume to eulogise one man is to pipe up
for a whole generation - that crew whose survival
was always the stuff of minor miracle,
who came ashore in orange-crate coracles,
fought ingenious wars, finagled triumphs at sea
with flaming decoy boats, and side-stepped torpedoes.

Husbands to duty, they unrolled their plans
across billiard tables and vehicle bonnets,
regrouped at breakfast. What their secrets were
was everyone's guess and nobody's business.
Great-grandfathers from birth, in time they became
both inner core and outer case
in a family heirloom of nesting dolls.
Like evidence of early man their boot-prints stand
in the hardened earth of rose-beds and borders.

They were sons of a zodiac out of sync
with the solar year, but turned their minds
to the day's big science and heavy questions.
To study their hands at rest was to picture maps
showing hachured valleys and indigo streams, schemes
of old campaigns and reconnaissance missions.
Last of the great avuncular magicians
they kept their best tricks for the grand finale:
Disproving Immortality and Disappearing Entirely.

The major oaks in the wood start tuning up
and skies to come will deliver their tributes.
But for now, a cold April's closing moments
parachute slowly home, so by mid-afternoon
snow is recast as seed heads and thistledown.

Simon Armitage