



The T S Eliot Prize 2009

Reading Groups:

Weeds and Wild Flowers

Alice Oswald was born in 1966 and lives in Devon with her husband and three children. Her first collection, *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996), won a Forward Poetry Prize (Best First Collection) in 1996, and was shortlisted for the T S Eliot Prize in 1997. *Dart* (2002), her second collection, won the T S Eliot Prize in 2002. *Woods etc.* (2005) was shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize and the T S Eliot Prize. In 2007, her poem 'Dunt' won the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Single Poem) and in 2009 she also published her latest collection, *Sleepwalk on the Severn*. The poems in *Weeds and Wild Flowers* (Faber) are accompanied by etchings by Jessica Greenman and the collection was the Poetry Book Society Spring Choice.



Hairy Bittercress

Hairy Bittercress
ought to drink less.
She's so full of sadness.

You should hear her mutter,
her voice compressed by long thinking,
on her own all evening
in her TV loneliness.

'Blithering business!'

When she pulls off her tights
and sits with her white feet bare
and her legs a-prickle with hair.

What with swiping at flies
and a nasty word for the dog
and her ardent cindery shrew-small eyes,

all round her house
there's the fog and smell of old failure,
there's a dudness
fuzzing and shadowing round her.

'Blithering business!'

She sits so long
with that thought on her tongue,
sucking its bitterness slowly in
and stroking the tufts on her chin

and the way she weeps is so creepy-strong
in her tumbler of gin

ask her dog what went wrong.

Snowdrop

A pale and pining girl, head bowed, heart gnawed,
whose figure nods and shivers in a shawl
of fine white wool, has suddenly appeared
in the damp woods, as mild and mute as snowfall.
She may not last. She has no strength at all,
but stoops and shakes as if she'd stood all night
on one bare foot, confiding with the moonlight.

One among several hundred clear-eyed ghosts
who get up in the cold and blink and turn
into these trembling emblems of night frosts,
she brings her burnt heart with her in an urn
of ashes, which she opens to re-mourn,
having no other outlet to express
her wild-flower sense of wounded gentleness.

Yes, she's no more now than a drop of snow
on a green stem – her name is now her calling.
Her mind is just a frozen melting glow
of water swollen to the point of falling,
which maybe has no meaning. There's no telling.
But what a beauty, what a mighty power
of patience kept intact is now in flower.

Bastard Toadflax

Ponderous, obstinate,
cold-skinned person.
Very swollen eyes.
Gets fidgets often.

Makes passes
at unsuspecting lasses.
Tips chair, untips chair.

Tips. Untips.
Sits in damp places
flattering and heckling.

Pushes pudge of tongue-tip
into bulge of lower lip.

Loves tickling.

Gets terrible itches.
Tries used-up matches in his ears.
Keeps young girl waiting while he scratches.

Full of blotches.
Wide-mouthed, winking.
Has monstrous appetites.
Is always drinking.

Many a helpless motherly lass
smoothes down her dress,
cooks quantities of porridge.
And mentions marriage.

Marriage?

Extreme headache
slides over one eyebrow.

Only swearing can help now.

Buy Alice Oswald's *Weeds and Wild Flowers* from the Poetry Book Society's online bookshop:
www.poetrybookshoponline.com.

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