

**Servant Minding a Seat for his Master Before a Performance of *The Rivals*,  
Covent Garden Theatre, 1775**

**By Jonathan Edwards**

I do what I'm told, me. What does sir need?  
Some pleb to take a load off, guard your seat,  
to sit right back and put his paid-for feet

up, three hours, four, sat on your hands –  
guv'nor, I'm your man. Sir, master, boss,  
it might seem wasted time but it's no loss –

my master is a god to me. The one  
thing that bothers me is Gossip John  
who minds the next seat over, passes hours,

now whispering about our master's trips  
after dark to some house on the docks,  
now of our lady's preference for cloth

to silk, or how she passes like the breeze  
through servants' rooms which echo with her squeals.  
It's all a gas for John to sell or share

their weaknesses, their joys. I wouldn't dare –  
he spills the beans and turns to me and winks;  
I blush and turn away and bow my head

and say the thing that's often been heard said  
about my master by the Duke of Gloucester –  
his dignity, his wit. It's a relief

when master comes, leading his frilly daughter.  
Now nobody would see, we're up so quick,  
the subtle look that flicks from her to me,

as master's arse slips snug onto the seat  
I've warmed for him. I've never seen a play,  
but as I walk away from this performance,

the sound of clapping, listen, dogs my heels.

## **My Friend Juliet's Icelandic Lover**

By Jacqueline Saphra

He floated in through the window  
on an ice floe, pissed as a puffin. I sheltered  
inside my flannel nightgown  
like a Victorian chaperone and trembled  
as he exhaled north wind into the room.

While he wrapped you in reindeer furs  
you begged me to stay close, whispered  
you found him repulsive, smelling  
as he did of Brennivin and hákarl: you shuddered  
at his ghost-white skin, his hairy face.

He was a theatre director from Reykjavik  
and you were prim and pretty  
with a modest acting talent  
and a long term boyfriend who was  
perennially unaware.

You were steeped in English waters,  
with your permanent pearls and that neat way  
you had of sitting with your legs crossed  
as if to emphasise what lay  
hidden between them

and you listened through the soft  
and falling curtain of snow  
as he pronounced the reasons why you should.  
With him. And why the Fat Friend  
who'd never get a man

should go back to her room before  
she broke her teeth  
with chattering and how you'd never tried a Viking,  
had you, Juliet, never heard the word for fuck  
in Old Norse.

And still I stayed because you asked me to.  
I even forgave you  
after I went home to London for a fortnight  
because of the pneumonia,  
and came back to find you

topless, glowing, perched  
on that blue, blue glacier wide enough  
to fill the narrow hall,  
and the flat filled with the smell of him:  
putrefied shark, sulphur, crowberry and ice.

## **Cutting Chips**

By Laura Seymour

A colander of potatoes on his head,  
my father makes his light brown horse  
curve its neck like an apple-slice,  
using only a crooked baby finger  
and spider-thin red thread  
I could break with an eyelash.

I skin potatoes in the cellar,  
Those soft bright hearts  
that jump into my bucket  
without an ounce of disloyalty,  
my father kisses.  
All tobacco-black rotten ones  
he stamps to raw mash.

My own ventricles and chambers  
seal up, drain of colour,  
waiting for a safe spring  
to tuber in.

CCTV cameras lean  
like leopards all over my father's walls.  
Some neighbours do get through the gate,  
bringing pasteles, wine, business proposals.

Most remember my father stripping  
all the clothes off the priest  
and mocking him for two long hours.  
Others recall conversations  
about Montaigne and Spanish politics,  
unsure where to put their  
elbows on sofas propped  
on elephant tusks.

Lobsters lumber gently across  
the kitchen.  
I kill them for my father  
as he tears neon antennae,  
leading straight to the government,  
from his oldest potatoes.