

Mario Petrucci

from Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl

'Every day I found a new man.' Ludmila Ignatenko.

Do not kiss him they said, starting back, as though
he were an animal in its cot cocking its head to listen

but understanding nothing. *Do you understand? Are you
pregnant? No? And find him milk. Three litres a day.*

I poured that whiteness into him. Felt I was feeding
a goose its own feathers. He retched and cursed –

the thin dribble each side of his mouth worse than a child.
Each time you hold his hand is a year off your life. Can you

*hear us? His bones are more active than the Core.
Understand? That is no longer your husband. I boiled*

chickens until the bones sagged, fresh, handfuls of parsley
chopped so fine it would melt between finger and thumb,

pot barley, apples (from Michurinsk they told me) pared
and pulped, everything minced and sieved, every trace

of rind or pip removed, no husk shell or pod and all of it
spewed back down his chest as though he could not take

a single particle more. The black of his forearms and thighs
cracked like pastry. His eyelids swelled so tight with water

he could not see for skin. The lightest sheet peeled away
fat as flypaper, the slightest edge of thumbnail was to him

more vicious than any cut-throat – if I moved his head it
streaked hair down the pillow as though he were a used match,

if I pressed a knuckle in – our wedding flesh – the indent
remained like hot grey putty, he coughed bile, acid

froth and lung, shreds of stomach and liver and still he
stayed – refused that first, that last, step onto the Jacob Ladder.

Those reptile eggs of eyelids, turned always towards me.
Until I said *Go. I love you. But Go.* Up to that moment

I still believed I would save him. Milk, soup, kisses. As if
he could digest the touch of my lips, feel my making of broth

in his dissolving heart-chambers. When his breath shut,
when he began to cool – then – I called for family. It was

almost a miracle, the Doctors said. Four times the fatal dose
and he nearly turned round. I felt myself the wrong side

of a door – a partition thin as plywood, thinner, as though
you could hear everything that was going on inside.

His mother hugged me. The brothers kissed me. *Now we
are your brothers.* Have you ever been the wrong side

of that door, knowing all you needed was the key and you
could walk straight in? That's how it was. We were that close.

From *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl*, Mario Petrucci, Enitharmon Press, 2004, which is based on eyewitness accounts of the Chernobyl disaster.