

# ***Instant-Flex 718*** **by Heather Phillipson**



Heather Phillipson was one of the 2009 cohort of Faber New Poets, and the candy coloured pamphlets produced as a result of the scheme were effective calling cards – Phillipson was quickly snapped up by Bloodaxe who published a full collection of the droll, intelligent work which catches both the writer and her readers red-handed in the act of thought. As she puts it in 'Relational Epistemology', 'Phenomenology at the dinner table was not unusual'. Phillipson is also an internationally exhibiting artist working with video, sculpture and live events.

## **Ablutions**

The bathtub makes me weak –  
my heartbeat under water.  
Salts, oils, sodium laureth sulphate:  
I am a mountain in a lake.  
From the corridor, *The Romantic Sounds of Xavier Cugat*;  
I synchronise my loofah.  
My big toe turns the hot tap.  
Oh God, the changing temperature of bathwater!  
Hot and cold I understand;  
tepid means less than ever.  
How hard it is to get things right.  
How devastating you looked today across Soho Square  
in your pink cashmere sweater,  
your man-bag over your left shoulder.  
Like soap I am loquacious  
and I give myself up trying to say it.  
Who was it that first thought of washing?  
Your eyes are blue, I have loved you  
since I noted your lashes in profile.  
I didn't do it deliberately –  
I was distracted  
the way foam is distracted from water  
and clings all over my contours.

## **Red Slugs in Every Irrelevant Direction**

You will be surprised by your red-headed children,  
a yogi had foretold in Calcutta for baksheesh. And I was surprised.  
Where had they come from and where were they going?

If, at that moment, I had held my breath  
and waited for the sky to get a move on,  
it wouldn't have made any difference to their progress.

They wanted to be everywhere, damn their chunky souls.  
Wait, Mummy – let me in! They slunk up to the back door.  
The clouds had given them permission

to secrete their protective mucus across surfaces.  
As IF I was going to fall for this garbage –  
my red-headed children, imagine.

Up close, the grass must sound like hundreds of blunt razors.  
Good job you've got your tough skin from your father  
(whoever *he* was), I thought, but didn't say

as the minty squall inside our troposphere  
pelted the put-upon buds and leaves  
and their thoughtless heads, if slugs have heads.

## **Some Kind of Memento Mori**

Oh yes, the woolly mammoths are all gone.  
For twenty three and a half hours a day I forget  
and then a 40-watt bulb blows as I turn it on.  
It's something unspoken, the burnt-out bayonet –  
its filament no longer incandescent,  
the electric current without an outlet, and I see –  
not much has changed since the Pleistocene.  
Removal of the bulb is a change of epoch.  
These days, there are elephants in Africa, elephants  
in India, the new gloom of silhouettes and table lamps,  
new pearl bayonets in my cupboard in their boxes.  
But the woolly mammoths are gone even in Siberia.  
The glass bulb is spent, though shapely in its socket.  
I've changed plenty of bulbs but this one's gone  
and brought to light the shadows that go on in shadows  
or, as I think of it, yes, woolly mammoths.

## **Discussion Ideas**

- What is most specifically named and described in 'Ablutions'? What is described in vaguer terms? How would you describe the relationship that the poem looks at – in distinct or vague terms? Is it possible to pin down and describe *any* sort of relationship in distinct terms?

- ‘How hard it is to get things right’ – what do you understand by that phrase? Is the phrase a commentary, a resolution or a complaint?
- Reading ‘Red Slugs in Every Irrelevant Direction’, do you think it is possible to compare slugs to children, tenderly?
- ‘Some Kind of Memento Mori’ is a subtler *memento mori* than the standard still life of a skull and an hourglass. Does it still function for you as a piece of art saying ‘remember you will die’? Is it supposed to?
- The three Heather Phillipson poems we’ve selected look at relationships, child-rearing and death – the full hatch, match, despatch spectrum. Are they poems of observation, imagination or experience? Do they require the reader in turn to observe them or empathise with them? Are they more funny than truthful, or vice versa? Could they be both?

Heather Phillipson received an Eric Gregory Award in 2008, a Donut Press mentoring award and a Faber New Poets Award in 2009. Her first collection, [\*Instant-Flex 718\*](#), was published by Bloodaxe in 2013 and was shortlisted for the Fenton Aldeburgh First Collection Prize. Her text *Not An Essay* was published by Pinned in the Margins in 2012. As an artist, Phillipson exhibits nationally and internationally, including solo shows at the Serpentine Gallery, the ICA and the BALTIC in the UK, and Bunker 259 in New York, as well as being featured on Channel 4’s *Random Acts*.

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