

PASSERINE: A Quartet

(Dictionary – bird of a group, including all songbirds, with feet adapted for perching)

1

His was a loaded shadow-bag and he as small
 as a seabird louse. Outside the frost was waiting
 on the grass. No letters fell on this or other days.
*All the same to me, he whispered, memories
 are too costly when they're few.* Behind the glass
 the sky was white as bone. A storm of dreams
 began its swirl inside his winter head.

2

The apples on this tree, *she thought*, are sour. Even wasps
 ignore their scent. There was a wooden gate just here

 with a broken hinge, where the boys would climb and kick their feet.
 That gate was fit for burning, even then. Every garden in the street

 was neat and trim though overrun with produce –
 fresh green spinach, new potatoes – I can almost smell the earth –

 and strawberries as well – the boys would eat them up
 before the rest of us could pick them – cram them in, their faces

 stained with red. *She was glad she had re-visited her home;
 wondered why nostalgia felt like pain.*

3

He had been reading the poems of Catullus and felt he had sunk to a low frame of mind. What a strange expression he thought: a low frame – like a porthole or knee-high window where someone would crouch and make himself small in order to see – a secret attic, a recusant's chapel behind a false wall, a hay-loft offering him dust in his nostrils and scratching of mites on his skin.

It must be the sparrow, he decided, spinning him into these nook-like spots – Lesbia's sparrow, her darling pet, as Catullus had longed for the girl to be his. *O factum male ... O evil deed* the poet wrote when the poor bird died and he was further than ever from achieving his love. *Passer, passerine ...* the very words were elegiac. A songbird that had sung, now silenced. An image devised by a long-dead Roman, fluttering down the years to perch on a new window frame.

4

Rome was constricted in hot August sun,
streets hard and glittery, old fountains dry.
She longed for a courtyard shaded with trees,
a sleepy old dog and jug of white wine.
Told of the death of a man she had known
she read Keats' last letter and thought about love –
thought about being unloved. Climbing up steps
to a darkened cathedral, she dreamed Botticelli himself
might appear, light candles for angels and her.

Mandy Pannett, originally from London, now lives in West Sussex where she is a creative writing tutor. She also supports several local writing groups and runs an Arts Cafe. Her first poetry collection, *Boy's Story*, was issued, with original music, as a CD. Two further collections have been published by Oversteps Books – *Bee Purple* and *Frost Hollow*. Her work has been widely published in small press magazines and online and some of her work is currently being translated into German and Romanian. She is currently working on a new collection and on a novel.