

Told you he was good, didn't I

but I've never seen him this nervous before.
I try to distract him. It's National Heron Day, I say.
We all have to stand on one leg. He looks at me
like a dog that's thrown up in the hall.

Next rehearsal, a high sea and mackintosh day,
he plays like his fingers belong to a mule,
more used to hooves. I'm reminded
of the clinking sound of flint knapping.
But he's good. I know he's good.
He'll be fine. Next rehearsal,

he jumps in front of a Hornby Double-0,
takes a handful of Smarties with a tumbler of whiskey,
says he's been falling from ground-floor windows,
there's no part of him that does not ache;
he's been wading through sewage,
searching for lost chords, digging
dangerous tunnels into the barrows.

In desperation, I say he's a dipper:
solid leg bones, haemoglobin-rich blood,
wings like flippers, underwater vision—
the king of river foragers.

He looks at me like I'm an idiot.
I am. He laughs, and for a moment
he's the most loving grey seal on Inner Farne.
We play again: his notes are tears in the smoke,
an old canoe, woody and solid, the hiss of water
through rocks, the dark smell of hidden rivers.
Told you he was good, didn't I.