

## **The Emperor and The Nightingale**

**By Marianne Burton**

She inserts the key in the bird. He counts,  
silently, her wrist turns, forty-nine, fifty.  
The head picks up, the throat stretches,  
the beak flicks open to show a pink velvet  
mouth, fragile and secret as a foetus's ear.  
Click, open, pulse, close, open, pulse, close.

In the end he can't make love without it:  
the repetitive metal singing, the clicking  
into place of tiny spliffs of gold. The ritual  
beginning even before entering the chamber,  
as he sends ahead his favourite (taken from  
the ruined palace of her deceased father)

to confirm the sword smith, still sweating  
from forging ornamental blades in his workshop,  
has washed and re-embedded the loose jewels,  
stripped the machinery and oiled its interstices  
with a mole-skin bud and owl's underfeather.  
Then, flowers, towels and water replenished,

while outside hunters bring back salamanders  
and women bring back brine in yoked buckets,  
the bird's eyes, one citrine, one diamond,  
sun and moon, reflect the bed like two halves  
of a fruit, each caged repetitive movement,  
as she starts at the feet, kissing upwards.