

*What the painter
saw in our faces*

Peter Boyle



What the painter saw in our faces

poems by

Peter Boyle

Other works by the same author

The Blue Cloud of Crying , 1997, Hale and Iremonger
Coming home from the world, 1994, Five Islands Press
(as Translator) I am going to speak of hope - selected poems by Cesar Vallejo,
1999, The Peruvian Consulate, Sydney

(as co-editor)

Australia- Poesia Contemporanea, 1997, Trilce Editores, Bogota, Colombia
Midday Horizon, Roundtable Publications, 1995

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What the painter saw in our faces

Part 1

The margins of the sky

It is difficult to live so long without words. Not even the clear descent of a single flute to mark our going.

The tree seen from the point of view of the roots is a grotesque monster of hair. Though there are a thousand names to the monster, today we will not pronounce one of them. In the stillness of this half hour, on benches left empty by the sea's glitter, the woman who longs for a child and the one abandoned by her lover and the one who grieves always for her son who is lost, rest, washed clean by the sun. The water is true or the breast or the hardness of a lover in the first days when touching is ecstasy. That is enough or it should be. Only sometimes when we are dead an embarrassed stammering startles us.

For my son who lives in the strangeness of this world I tap these words. Somewhere buried in a dream the fury of language erupts. Today, if I can read the elements, a clear blessing rises from the fish in their heaven of blue pebbles and twilight.

I don't know anymore what things are blessings.

The most beautiful part of the night sky is something scribbled in its margins.

In the small hours

It's three a.m. in the morning
of a day you won't enter for so many hours.
Where you are
yesterday's sunlight still bathes your feet as you walk
and tonight hearing your voice
I worried that one day
I'll lose my images of all those I love.
Outside the city's still restless:
taxis alert and shiny as golden birds
waiting for the crumbs of dawn.
At fifty five I know so little how to live.
In cafes across this city
lovers still hold hands
and cups balance on the edges of tables.
Darkness falls around me like soft snow.
Beside the narrow bed
my night-light is staring right into me.
I will hold your voice inside me as long as I can.
When I sleep you'll go on walking
through a steady explosion of white flowers.

Journeys

It is now I would like to fall
into deep sleep and to travel
far into some remote land,
feeling every bump of the local bus bearing me
further and further away from every known formality:
work, income, house, family,
at each change of transport
leaving a further item of baggage behind
till there is nothing left to dispose of,
only myself and what I stand up in
without wristwatch or book, pen or paper,
with only the sun for calendar,
the white face of the sea to soothe my aloneness,
and seated beside me old women and their grandchildren
bumping along in the same bus,
speaking only village dialect I can't recognise,
and smoking and flicking lighted cigarette stubs about
in back of the bus that rolls around with spilt petrol
and when I try in some patois of the islands
to warn "hati hati benzin"
they all break out giggling and toss
little sparklers at me
as we lurch forward,
the first stars above the coastline
winking at my elbow.

Cecile

No one will phone you up tonight
and I won't smell ever again the nuoc mam
and red slivers of uncooked meat,
the fistfuls of flowering coriander
rising in steam from your bowl
as you ate in your room alone.
No more animated small talk
in the gentle fierce abrasion of half French
or tracing your wanderings on the map
or preserving the silent rapture you needed
to watch "Prisonière",
your one hour's weekly self-improvement in Strine.

Of the two of us
I'm the only one to reach the Andes,
that high rim of the world you always travelled towards.
I'll never sort out your stories -
India, Nice, Hanoi, the Isle of Pines -
and I keep expecting to find
somewhere among my papers
your snapshot of two Iranian students
posing shyly under Tehran's wintry trees
while at their back
the cars, exploding, curl into black smoke.

Everything's interwoven now
like the beads you threaded for your jewellery
to hawk at the Cross.
The night I first got cancer
I stumbled into the post-op ward with N,
my friend, your lover, to visit you -
your thin being and extraordinary hands
and how my gaze held you then
in the soft sticky pain of your eyes
while N picked a fight and temper tantrumed
and in a flash I saw myself at twenty,
my own inability to love
gathered into one foul gesture,
and still I seem to be watching the two of you,
my gaze drinking you in,
your eyes almost touching mine,
you, my soft undrunk elixir.

The view from the Adelaide Hilton

I don't know that it's time yet to start under earth.
This city is so big it scares me.
Others say it seems quite normal.
The hills peer down into the hotel window
and the great lonely statue
whistles all night in the park.
I dream this is a dangerous place.
It is like unrequited love for the dead
like something horrible that loved us so much
and died deliberately
to circle us now,
the white sun passing through me, chalked space.
It whispers me at night.
It wants to take me back.

A lifeline almost stretches
to where my feet and heart are buried
but the red sand's too dry to cross.
My love's frail body
withdraws beyond the horizon.
She dreams we have carved our bodies into tea sets
to crate them off for the divorce.
She goes quiet and won't speak.
She uses the television as a weapon.
She uses the washing (cutting and folding,
cutting and folding) as a weapon.
She is so far from here all weapons are useless.
No line of earth or air can join us.
I am already sliding into earth.
Touch me, I ask the air.
Hold me, I tremble before the window
where night is quartering the statue
and the green rider
abandons his stone horse,
his marble eyes filling with desert.

I could return at any hour
but the planes have all been cancelled.
They tell me transport's a luxury
fit only for the very young.
The hills keep looking slowly into my window.
Things which are so dark come out of there.
In the swarming stillness of three a.m.
bats twitter, singeing the arms of trees.
Each night the sun withdraws to ice.
Each dawn it sucks back its own life
through the bent straw of daylight.

It thinks maybe apes would have been more interesting
or a planet of purple quartz that endlessly halved light
like the small coins stamped into chocolate
the very poor lick and pass on.
Frugal sun -
my white milk of impatience.

A girl's body has been withdrawn from my body
by a mysterious operation that leaves no scars.
At this distance my love has started forgetting me:
in her far off room, soothed by the fan's regular cut,
she swats an enormous insect in her sleep.
A bloodline jewels across her finger.
I fear the dead
because they come tapping each night
and I fear the living who distil themselves
out of others.
I watch as they slowly puff out
the faces they bled.

And those who come in,
the people from the outlands
who sit around in the park and drink wine and fight,
wait for me
like the earth's shadow on the white plain
before the great halo of a city lifting off
there just in the place before where the mountains shine
a tattooed arm sawing through the jawbone.

Hurling his gaze towards the hotel windows
the one who lies there in his filth and his pain
calls out to me:

Come home, brother,
Come home.

Group portrait, Delft, late sixteenth century.

They opened the dikes five times that year to flood the land.
Cities were torched, the inhabitants bound and gagged,
then forced at lancepoint into the frozen canals.
I was executing yet another portrait of the public trustees of an orphanage
that their bald correctly-laced presences might shine
in remote museums a thousand years hence.
I enjoy the delicate way their hands rest on the title deeds
for these most Christian places
even as the order "No prisoners" passed along both sides
or another cannonade ripped through the munitions factory
burying in rubble the girls' school for genteel deportment.
Each year the orphanages increased.
The portraits grew heavier and heavier.
The regents must have thought they would lug the weight of them
into the other world.
Nice money if you can get the work
and no one questioned motives:
fidelity to realistic details
right up to the end of the earth.

These stone embankments that look like Venice but they're not Venice,
here where the dark river finds its terminus,
where the ship's prow seeks a tomb among the currents.
Every day as I paint,
winter water shivers under the footbridge.
The gaunt trees shelter their starved layer of birds:
at each level they define a new habitation.
I once captured the local birds in a Biblical triptych:
those rounded brutal mouths shaped by the one cry of begging,
stuffing everything visible into their darkening crevasse.
I wanted to paint as bluntly
as words spoken during an avalanche
yet all's this inevitable smooth,
these muted blues that are the fashion of the age
recording everything precisely as it is:
each official, each battle, the new born child,
the fruits on the table, the windmill on the hillside to the left
at every change of season -
that's what they wanted and I could do it,
making present to the touch
each thing as it passes into amnesia.

Today at the abandoned Cathedral
the Italian master continues his rehearsals.
No one notices how there's a wobbling at the core of his music
and no matter how high the dancers kick their heels
they will never find solid ground.

The goodly burghers will follow the streamers
and no one thinks twice of the five servant girls
penned in their cages
awaiting the sentence of beheading
for certain lewd practices
as reported by their illustrious employers.
Each day the ocean grows outside the dike.
The wounds in the sky slowly multiply.
Ever more threatening the viking ships come closer.
I continue these stern faces, hands folded in laps,
apocalypse near Delft, the circle sealed.
Long needles knit the great cloaks for our third winter in the trenches.
The troops of the Duke of Alba torch another outlying settlement
while the regents' faces betray no emotion.

They know the civilization I smear on this canvas will last a thousand years.

Christ visits Europe for the Winter Olympics

The trumpeter moves away from his window:
the wail of his riff's already gone far beyond him
into the deep gutters of night.
The elderly sit under trees and heal themselves.
The traffic links hands and saves people.
Under the triumphal arch I mingle with the crowd
all eager to watch them arrive -
here they come now tramping from so far off,
the guardians of banality.
The coffin sails down the river
to find its place among dolphins and seagulls.
And I come among you with so little.
Night erases my steps.
I walk past where the bodies are burned.
I sit all morning at the pool where no angel arrives.
A kindly old man is telling his grandchildren
how Hitler was really good and built this wonderful bridge
and the people who had problems with him were all parasites
who needed to be dealt with.
I hide the wound in my side from the murderer of cripples.
I sip tea in the mild Alpine air
where the dead are crying.
Rapidly, without pausing,
I write my latest testament on bright dots of confetti
then feed them to lonely moose in the Emperor's park.

On the terrace above the lake
I share bread with the blind musician -
he gives me dust of this earth.
Water blooms in my hand.
I grow flowers
and I bite their heads off.

My intricate prison is also paradise.

Married early we rarely look towards the window.

What comes comes:

children, death, broken hands.

Yet we live beside the great river.

Glimpsed even once

at the furthest edge of all the intersecting streets,

its long drift curves a slope to our lives.

What we see each day are narrow things:

the crooked arm of another lane,

the roadway's fork, cramped rooms

looking into each other, coloured saris splashed
against white walls,

illness, buried loss, the soured teeth of anger.

Rarely do we step beyond the smallest circle,

grinding seeds to make bread,

pounding hardened shells into food.

The bags of spices in the marketplace

seem already a long distance

and we have no thread to guide us home.

The wisest say, "You must remain silent

about the river. Its blessing isn't helped

by repeating, 'I saw it once'

or 'I've never seen it'.

Some nights a bowl left open by the window

will catch the light of the same stars

that swim below its surface.

It's in the tiles you step across to carry water;

it drips silently around your feet

as they fleck shadows on its milky stillness.

Some hot intolerable night

your lips will drink the river."

The transformation boat

Just an old plain boat travelling the coastline
and wherever it came to rest its prow against the wharf
from small town to small town
life suddenly would arrive in people's houses.
Dogs and children would stir around midnight
touched by the light that comes from there,
a wavering across all that darkness.
Thin stars would penetrate the hands of business men
and make them give away all their belongings
and enter into the fire
or a woman would walk out of a house at dawn
and wake next standing in the souk at Marrakesh,
her midriff spangled in gold, dancing in ecstasy,
her twining arms freed to the sky's rapture.

The boat would glide into the harbour at midnight
and sail off before dawn
and in the plaza of the quiet town
a thin girl would be rolling a hoop at sunset
while other children dart in and out of doorways,
sheltering behind bushes and tall mysterious garbage bins,
playing at gangsters and police,
and all the time
the boat's sails grew steadily like a shadow in their minds.

Someone said Odysseus was on board
and if you stood before the skipper's wheel at full noon
you'd see the crew were Circe's swine rooting their noses in swill.
Another said it was the Flying Dutchman,
another the boat to the Fortunate Isles.

In plain day without leaving anywhere
a girl at the sink draining pasta would kneel to receive the lord.
A small wren would speak from the freezer section of the supermarket
and I would take my fear of breakage and walk forward steadily
the way dreams do.

When the boat left someone saw water tumbling out of the sky -
a boy recorded how midsummer snow
was falling across the outback.
And all that blocks us from loving would pass away
like mist over glass
and our hands, wiped clean of every line,
could begin at last their journey to the sun.

Japanese poet on the train to the Medellín prison

She enters the train –
enters a green landscape they are tunneling through,
the silver pebbles of rivers,
sky of the cordilleras.
Her poems are budding slowly
on long streamers of many colours
she thinks she might unleash
in bright air above the prison.
Squid have entered these poems
and the leaves of mulberry trees.
Department stores have entered these poems
and snowfall over Kyoto
and the passionless gaze of boys in pachinko parlours.

Her dress is red and white.
She thinks she could almost be again
a young girl on coming-of-age day –
but today she is travelling
to enter the male prison alone,
to walk down the corridor of tattooed men,
to sit in the wire cage that is open to the sky
and she will let go these wild birds
she has brought with her for the gods of these mountains.

There are things so good the earth takes them:
luminous faces of white and yellow flowers in Spring,
the lips that seek our lips, the mouth that drinks us –
but what do you give the Central Juvenile Detention Centre of Medellín
where the addicts and housebreakers and rapists
and dumb hired killers
who couldn't even get their hits right
are all doing time?
What calligraphy from the mountains of Japan
do you bring for them?
What hidden path is there across the wildest ocean
to connect these lush green valleys of misery
with her secret Temple for lost cats,
her palace of the single perfect kite?
What can her singing
bring to them?
Even in the tropics they are cold at night
but she won't offer them her breasts
to let them shine under the knife blade.
She could imitate the local poets
and simply say "Freedom" over and over.
She could imitate a sisterhood
from the northern land of success

and croon a multitude of cacophonous voices,
a slit throat of broken words.
But today is not like any other day.
Even as she adds fresh symbols to complicate an image
she is conscious her poem is a tree
shedding innumerable leaves.
She is a woman aged fifty five
shedding her years,
unlearning the grace of a warrior,
giving back the coming-of-age day,
returning the Emperor's scroll.
Writing her poem,
the images no longer fall on the page –
only her wrists move, miming the air.
She doesn't know how she could measure
any poem against the rapist and the murderer
and the crack dealer whose tattooed arms she has seen
over and over in the brief film footage
of the prison she will visit shortly.
She has brought an apple wrapped in a green handkerchief.
She doesn't know what part of the poem it is.
She doesn't know if this is lunch
or seed of her country she has brought to spill among men,
a peace offering to the bewildered
complete otherness
of a young boy wielding an axe against his playmate.

And she has brought sachets of green tea
and paper of five colours for each of the five continents
and with each passing minute of the train trip
her poems have shed another layer.
Her wrists curve as she writes and unwrites
and she thinks of Jeanne Hébertune, Modigliani's lover,
who threw herself to her death from the fifth-storey window
of the same apartment block she once lived in
and she thinks of wrists as beautiful as hers
threading themselves through glass,
and knows she doesn't have a word to offer anyone

and she will sit – she sees it now – on the bare floor
and unwrap the exquisite parchments she will sing
scarcely glancing at any of them,
and though she imagines herself
releasing them all to the winds,
she will fold them up when it is over
and tie them with cloth
and put them away
and she will sing whatever she can sing
in the darkness of the single cell

obliterated by the light
in all the heat and all the misery and all the evil
that is our earth.

Habitation

I live in Project 27
quite different from living in Project 29 or 31
quite different from living in Moonville or Aquatic Acres
Security guards check me into the place where I live
They watch over my entrances and my exits
I live in the space unrolled between one wall and another wall
I live with the stairs that connect my high to my low
I have a finite number of falls to make between the carpet and the shower
My knee can be remade only so often
I have eyelashes folded away carefully in the bathroom cupboard
and in the locked drawer of the study table
I keep undisturbed an infinity of love
Today I crave mushy green chilis
but will eat breakfast cereal with skim milk
Someone has placed this small box for sleeping, feeding and dying
in a row between all the other boxes
I fit into it
reluctantly I say this
I fit into it

The bills arrive with heartfelt regularity
I ask forgiveness of the planet

I want to see the world beginning
(For Louis aged four)

In the earthly world the first day is opening.
Turtledoves, tortoises, shy bright-coloured birds,
thin trees that stammer in wind shaking their topmost leaves,
faces half-glimpsed in the passionfruit vine's entrails
and countless other animals still without names:
here on the path that bends
below branches heavy with summer.

Grey-green the lake shines towards us
opening the leaves of each season.
The sun of origins spins in a sky always free of the judgements of men.
Clouds converse among themselves and pay no heed
to the wandering band of their would-be interpreters.
The roundness of day and night, of apples, horizon, homecoming,
is all one circle,
one ever-expanding room
where the walls let our hands glide safely through.

Up ahead
the path leads out beyond forests and paths.
At this point words have made very little headway.
Here no one hoards the grains of the future.
In the heart's pockets a few simple goals:
to be tall the way mountains are,
to leave our fingerprints on the sky.

Where the road curves out of sight
the end of the earth is waiting.
I rush towards it,
my empty arms swinging free.

Orpheus guiding his family

1.

The small boat laden with household gods,
its wooden deck crammed to overflowing
with knick-knacks and memory-stones and words
that slide between language and mistake
entering the repertoire of family jokes.
Raft laden with sunsets,
wreathed in seaweed that drifts so far upstream
to where the mountain dreams itself into the water.
In my hands my love's face that is bitter and absent
shares the curve of the earth's shadow.
All around us the forest of nowhere
lines the shores.
Overhead the trees filter just a little of our death from us.
Steering into the flood,
gifted only with eternal incompetence:
my goal to head to Paradise backwards.

In the water as it slips away
I trace the nipples of the dead:
bleak buds the air carves on the sheer surface of darkness.
The boat creaks that it can hardly bear so much.
The waterfall blazes.
The swirl where the ocean enters my poor veins
shakes the boat,
almost tosses my young daughter and son into the waves.
And the draped one whom my eyes may never touch,
Eurydice,
so lost as if she expects nothing, understands nothing,
as if the cloud of bitterness had long taken her.
And then the sky rips open.
The long grey rain knifes us all.
Scattering before the storm a last seabird turns away.
Circling my shoulder,
its speech rings clear in a language I am cursed to know.
Softly it whistles its taunt:
"Orpheus,
sing, shepherd of souls,
on the long journey into daylight."

2.

Was Pluto's realm ever truly left behind?
There was a trace of it in everything they did or saw,
So he could never really feel his wife was his,

could never truly say they had arrived,
not able ever to quite believe
she would revive, would be as once before
in what seemed now a daydream
fed only by the intoxication of words
or the wild honey that grew on Mount Kithaeron's lower slopes.

And the children - only the children - were so real.
Their silence more than any language terrified him
and that they should come with him on such a journey -
yet how could they not have been there ? -
and that simple trust with which they looked
towards that veiled figure whose name he had
heard them utter only once : "Mother".
Of all the creatures whose speech he knew
they alone remained outside his spells,
as if innocence and knowledge could never speak,
would always glance shyly at the space
the other had just left.

What was it then to cast words?

He saw it once as they drifted hopelessly past
the taunt some wag had penned,
tacked up on a sign beside a sawmill:
"Orpheus with his lute made trees" -
as if anything was ever made with words
that wasn't dreams or air.

And it seemed to him that from now on all he sang would be betrayal,
that he had gone into some other country
and when she waked, if she ever waked,
he could never truly hold her into the light -
not like the first hours, the opening summer
when each moved through the landscape of the other,
when he had only to stand at a door or near a window
to feel how she folded him within her breath,
when the words of his songs shaped a new sky for her,
coaxing the flowers to bloom at every season,
and all *that* could never save her.

His eyes had now been darkened for too long.
What he sang bounced back from rocks and tangled trees -
he sensed how the birds in flight
swam uneasily through his singing -
those long spells that broke from his lips
so altered now
as if the pure joy would always be gravesong,
and all around the earth rolled homeward
in its daily passage to the west.

3.

*(The two children -
whispering to their father who does not hear them,
very quietly,
as if all words might be offense.)*

Very little light can reach us from this sky.
But just sometimes it crackles and flares within the darkness.
Why did you lead us out here to this place?

4.

(Eurydice speaking)

You reached me in a place where all light had gone.
You saw me in a way that cannot be un-seen,
cannot be given back.
In that island folded
like a small empty hand within the earth
I was not lost.
I had simply already been gathered.
Out of all the lives that blossom on the earth,
why did you choose me?

You believed so much in words - your own always -
did it never occur to you I had long been in a place
where such things mean nothing?
Your faith so open-eyed,
so unquestioning:
you had only to sing long enough,
with enough delicacy, enough patience,
and I would again be the young girl
gathering flowers on the mountain slope.

Now I am boxed and crated on this raft
beside your rug, your cooking bowl, your lyre.
Obscurely I feel your deep sadness,
how your songs fling off
aimlessly now into the dark,
no longer touching the landscapes they attempt to name.
Obeying the god's instructions, you turn towards me
averting your eyes, your hand falling away
from the veil that shields me from your world.
You ask me what I want
as if you were seeking another way to evade truth.
How can truth be segmented, how can truth be patched onto lies,
so you have a small slither here,
the great torn emptiness of your traditions there?

To my children I leave the hearth that is burning on these boards,

its fire mysterious and pure
preserving the warmth of life despite all wind and rain.
I have seen how each of you
will carefully place a small coal in an earthenware jar,
pressing it close against your chest,
rocking to sleep against its warmth at midnight.
Don't look towards my long thin hands,
my bone fingers stretched useless under the veil.
My caresses have passed from the fire
to your cheeks and shoulders.
Don't bother with my form
standing beside the household gods, the cooking pots, the crates.
You carry me within yourselves now.

To Orpheus, at the last,
let go of the boyish vanity of love,
come close, draw back the veil,
moisten my lips with your kiss
that gives me all of the earth and all yourself,
then set me free.

The Chess Game in the abandoned Cathedral

The Cathedral has no roof,
empty pews wander between flowers.
Listen for ice snapping in the deep well
where a widow's prayer has fallen.
An old man shears a loaf of bread in half
and waits for soup.
In winter's deep recesses
overcoats gnaw against the bones that house them.
A child's hand feeds the pigeons like a blessing.

They come today as everyday,
the disbelievers, the silently bemused
caught up in the round swirl of the sky,
spectators and all who remain
enamoured of pattern,
and the patient ones in waistcoats
or sporting a diffident moustache,
these statue people who move to the master's call,
now left, now right,
across the alternating black/ white marble of the aisles,
young men and women draped in the bandana of a pawn,
the cudgel of a bishop, the knight's enamelled dagger,
in this dance on the checkered floor.
In the opened palm of the mountains
players, pieces and spectators
submit their fates to the sky.
The Cathedral walls tower over them
like a ship abandoned in this valley with no sea.

The princess of snow arrives with her attendants.
They place her glass coffin on the altar.
Lilies bloom at her head. Fire rains down,
All spectacle is useless.
No princess can keep our gaze from
the chess game in the abandoned cathedral.

Now the fetiche-makers arrive.
Their great drum resounds in the empty choirloft.
The pharaonic pause of golden sash
outfaces the sun.
Here where the earth is open and frozen
everyone dreams of going back to the coast,
to the mouths of the great rivers.
If you went there you could
scoop the water
and see the heavens in your hands
but who can bear to take the nightbus to the south

when, staying, you might win
the chess game in the abandoned cathedral?

Sparks of falling stars and snow
enter our hands.
The sky is an open wound.
Whatever we build,
whatever we abandon -
all's here in this presence.
What heals in the tense lacework of the leaves unfolding,
what foams and hisses
in the acid line where the stone breaks
only a gesture can signal -
only a body dreaming another body
will sometimes speak.
The chess game in the abandoned cathedral.

At the centre of our lives

Sometimes all the photographs in a room
turn suddenly empty.
Only the houses remain, a few trees,
the desks where people sat
or maybe an umbrella is there
still shading the meal everyone has left.
So tonight there is so much absence in love
when even your laughter is the poetry of pain
as you straighten the collar of the man who was once your husband
as a small boy tries to bearhug the doomed shoulders of a father.
Tonight we walk so carefully around each other's absences
and we each carry not just a ghost
but enough space for a family of ghosts,
enough loneliness, enough death.

Tonight once more you are tucking your two children into bed.
Leaning your face against your daughter's,
your kisses flutter down across her forehead.
Trawling gently beneath your son's wayward smiles
your eyes read
the pain contours shimmering there,
his own private lost continent.
As night slowly extends across the garden
and the moon brightens,
that great white stone above the hills
becoming our one common lantern,
your face softens in the glow of other stars,
your shadow an open silent tree that gathers the horizon
in which your children sleep.

For me here
so many hundred miles away from your quiet breathing
old photos ring me like a chain of loyalties.
I wear my many loves like difficult jewels
that gash and bruise my cheek while I sleep
in a room where I am always
alone before this small shrine to what is lost.

How learn an honest tenderness to kiss goodbye?

You stand there in the hallway watching your children sleep,
your face taut and ravaged from carrying so much emptiness
from room to room,
smoothing down blankets, folding clothes.
And for me who always imagined myself holding you,
loving you,

it's as if your simplest presence is saying
"Which of us ever knows the first thing about love,
the first thing about letting go?"

And today we are putting on smiles
as if we don't all walk around
with great unnamed holes through the centre of ourselves,
busily painting the sun on others' ceilings
to warm the beginnings of their lives.

PART 2

The house near the sea

1.

Our house has been expecting rain.
Under its tin and bamboo roof
a young boy hugs a pillow, sucks his thumb
gazing emptily into the TV;
four people sit at the table and eat:
grandmother greyly pious,
grandfather, the eldest daughter, her son now grown up too,
and four others, already fed, sit about in the small room
talking and watching
soap operas they can't understand.
My wife slips in and out the doorway
of this house she once lived in so many years
and there is calm now in her steps,
the joy of simple things -
some coins for children carolling in the street,
remembered gossip for her brother next door
and the soap opera pierces the grandmother
with its treachery and tears.

Our house has been expecting rain
and there is stillness in the house for all its noise.
My writing words a kind of weaving
patched in humble silence
as our lives flow on.

2.

The house of the parents of my wife
has no glass in its windows -
open to the air,
a part of the tropic vegetation,
its frame and floor of bamboo,
the strident green of its tin roof
makes the guava trees look almost pale.
Small lizards come each day to eat the rice.
Perched above the dining table
the bravest will inch forward cautiously an hour
matching their colour to wood or cloth
to carry off the smallest pieces.

The house of the grandparents of my children
grows helter skelter in green rain
far from me, far from them
and we hardly understand its desperate simplicity.
Endlessly, painstakingly remade,
it defies our judgements.
Without tenderness, without power,

with abundant humidity more than warmth,
it withstands the wind,
it predicts change
from all of its singular window,
it endures.

At sixty four the grandmother's regal eyes are so beautiful -
she knows she has been cheated of life.
The daughters marry old men and live so far.
The sons work hard and make no money.
She never wanted to give her daughters beauty -
instead she left them
an immense expectation of disaster.

3.

Everything you walk on
is a gradual contrivance paid for with the years.
When grandfather's face explodes in painful swellings
there is only magic and prayers.
The water you see flowing in the garden
is an invention of six months,
the connection paid for
by a daughter's work abroad.
The earth is as fruitful as hostile:
the house is filled with moths, ants, spiders,
mosquitoes bringing plagues,
and mice and lizards share our space.
Everything that enters this house
reminds me I am a latecomer,
claiming too large a place
at a very small table.

Everywhere I look,
perched on the narrowest crag,
a small hut with its chickens and bamboo fence
proclaims people are living here
and in the darkest ravine
there are children washing clothes, playing naked between boulders.
No inner space, no privacy,
no road to set off into the void -
only so many faces that repeat:
understand yourself.

4.

You keep saying you are letting go
but you haven't let go.
At last the thunder tells you:
rain and this world do not care about your past.

5.

In the bamboo house at midday
halfway between asleep and awake
I sense someone moving in the room heavy and silent
about their own purposes,
a woman's body as closed to me as a sister's or a child's,
in this room, next door or ten thousand miles away,
for the moment I don't know which.
Calm falls strangely within me knowing it there
invisible and close and far off.
Impossible beloved,
the one I failed to love,
my hands fall open to give you
imaginary rings for your fingers.
To ask forgiveness would be useless -
instead I offer blessings.
Wherever you are at this hour
may calm descend on you,
may you rest within the joy you carry
in your body and your eyes.

6.

The boy on the bicycle
driving down your street each day
all the years after you left high school,
your jobs in the big city,
all the time of a marriage,
the time it takes two children to be born,
to grow from babies to the edge of adolescence.
Passing by your house,
his eyes discretely sad behind his glasses,
sometimes he'll slow a little,
leaning back against the handlebars,
letting the bicycle spin.
Sixteen years still waiting for a US visa,
since high school days
when your mother blocked him, saying No
and you were sent off to learn lessons of work not love
and for so long the attention of men could mean only rape
or that beckon you saw employers give to other girls scrubbing their floors
and the tears, the scenes with wives
and you remained folded into yourself,
cradling your pillows, closed off and blocked,
speechlessly rigid almost
until at a friend's urging
marriage to a stranger far away
as if to consummate
this cheating of a life you never had.

He speaks to me briefly each time the same questions:
"How're the kids? Where is your wife?"
and his sadness lingers after him -
an edge of something sixteen years too late.

There are no words for how we cheat each other,
how our wounds feed other wounds,
beatings behind locked doors,
rage accumulating in every cell of your body,
rage passed on
and where I thought tenderness extended
new angers blossom.
All the mistakes made
that build a wooden jetty across to
the private prison islands we construct.

His eyes open, weaving between dreams,
the boy on the bicycle
circles back and forth across our lives.

7.

(*Visiting neighbours - the house of the spurned woman*)

There are shelves of biblical and self-help books
and family photos of the son and daughter at many ages.
There are the encyclopaedias of childhood,
a TV in each room
and the shabby kitchen and bathroom of poverty.
The two grown up children still live there
and the husband is always diplomatically
"out of town on business".

In the days before his company went sour
he made up with lavishness for his absence.
Now she knows his lover must live in dire poverty
since he always placed wife and children first
when it came to money.

The house of the spurned woman has neither love nor the absence of love.
Genteely fallen,
it is a study in survival.

8.

Why did I fail?
And why did you say
that nothing felt loving?
Is it just my curse to know words
but never live them?

9.

That bleak stormy day
swimming at San Fabian in the South China Sea
when I planned or half-planned
to walk out forever into water,
the seashore's grey mud
floundering around me,
far beyond the few swimmers who clung to the shoreline,
beyond where the last palm trees
fall off the edge of the visible,
beyond the fishing prows with their nets -
the old men dragging smoke between their lips -
alone in the rippling stillness
with the shadows of mountain and sky
I swam towards an imagined China,
going out to meet the deep offshore currents
and whatever they would decide,
seeing always your lost face,
and when I knew I couldn't drown
knowing at last the sea didn't want me
I turned back immensely tired
climbing that long hill of water
towards the meniscus of the beach
where my wife and children were sitting
heat-hazed, faintly hostile
in the shade.

10.

(Boy at a waterhole)

He clenches the rope above the river.
With all his force he curls himself around the rope
hanging, all eagerness, above the swirl of the river -
his small eyes bursting -
then lets go
and as he hits the water his limbs uncurl
to make welcome the new element he's embracing.
His limbs seize the water
as if there could be no joy as pure as this -
the afternoon with its breeze, the tree branches
tilted astray casting their shadows, the few leaves
caught and stirring on the stream's surface.

Five years old and magnificent with faith,
climbing from air into water,
he leaves the old rope shaking behind him,
swinging in a circle of the stillness
in which we all move.

11.

(To the custodian of sleep)

Insomniac and crazed

I kept hearing some phrase glittering beyond the horizon's edge
and when I murdered sleep you were deftly there,
my hat of a lost hunter on the hatrack
and the benign faces of the Andes
beaming stolidly from the picture frame.

In that darkness

where the world is broken,
where the inshore breeze tilts me beyond our imaginary house
into those tunnels where the dead crouch,
I huddle in the earth.

Slight the line you toss me,

knotted, desultory, almost withheld,
yet a toe leaning against an ankle can matter
or the right to bury my head with all its pain
in the long surviving darkness of your backbone.
Dreamily you lift your head from the pillow of tropical heat
vaguely registering my presence
as I rock staring out into solitude,
my eyes slowly coming back from hope
and the wide omnivorous sea.

12.

My daughter's questions guide me slowly towards wisdom.
There is breeze now between the palm trees.
She asks me where the breeze comes from.
She asks me where stars go in the daytime,
when people first saw the moon
and how they knew what it was.
She asks if there is a heaven for dogs and cats
and whether God loves stones.
She asks me why trees grow thin and tall with sunlight
and we can't stretch our necks or arms
however still we sit.

I know her questions can't shelter her -

neither can my silence or my words.

Smoke from the mosquito coil twists slowly above her now
as she sleeps in midafternoon heat.

In all the journeys she will take

may her openness go with her -

may her wisdom grow

long after I am gone.

13.

At sunset where the river curves towards the sea
they are making bricks:
an old man and a younger man
diving for the white silt mud they slab and shape
and leave for the last of the sun.
Brickmaking at sunset
for houses or walls:
there will always be simple things
needing bricks.

14.

Near the house
in the dusty overgrown meadow
two goats are tethered.
There the remains of a kite:
sky blue and dawn pink strips of paper,
a snapped stick, the torn wing of flight,
spool of string connecting
the child's absent hand
to this singular
most ancient longing.

Up in the sky the birds glide graciously -
they know their names are true.
All afternoon you see them between palm trees on the horizon.
Now the sun is setting
their feathers move through coolness.

15.

A storm begins with lightning seen
through the frame window of the bamboo house.
Thunder and rain will beat against us soon.
Two tin sheets resting above me -
on this shared table a clock, a crucifix, the evening meal -
small things remain.

PART 3

Turtles

Lost with swollen rats in the grove of banana palms
by the river
older than our solitude

encased in a silence so complete
they forget they carry the bitterness
of earth's memories

in summer as in winter
with such clear eyes
they are swimming towards me.

Paralysis
(1955)

Laid out flat
in the back of the station wagon my father borrowed
I look up:
the leaves are immense,
green and golden with clear summer light
breaking through –
though I turn only my neck
I can see all of them
along this avenue that has no limits.

What does it matter
that I am only eyes
if I am to be carried
so lightly
under the trees of the world?
From beyond the numbness of my strange body
the wealth of the leaves
falls forever
into my small still watching.

Occupations of Late Summer

To stand before the open window
 as the light is leached from us
To feel the earth drip with the kindness of stars

To measure the depth of the bay by the sound of night insects
To walk late as the sky dips and smooths

What is it you are waiting for now?
- A last glimpse of the water.

Occupations of late summer:
children wading at twilight, fishermen,
the one who sits by the window with his beer.

Beyond the river's bend where two currents clash
the foam tumbles out into the ocean.

Song for Noël

What can I give you now, Noël?
Your tiny hands at the window,
your first steps in the corridor.
You've opened skylights,
you've dreamed yourself into water,
O my love.

There's sadness in the sea that flows away.
There's a little deranged kernel in my heart.
There's a pinch in all my joking.
From window to window
the sun goes weaving dawn across the city -
it comes to everyone but not to you,
the soft trickle of immense light,
but I didn't know and I didn't know and I didn't know
your mother couldn't love you,
Noël, my child.

They come with their rags,
scooped shells from trees they beat like drums,
the bones of an evening so wide
there is no space to walk through.
They come without mercy, without laughter.
They ask us nothing.
They offer us no second chances.
There are holes in my hands, too many holes.

Noël,
it's late now -
grandmother's there already
scattering seeds that will gather the roosters into one final song
and a girl comes in from sunset
smeared with ashes and cysanthemums
and the whole of life is lived out in one evening.
Why are so many standing there together
on the other side of the sky?

In the kitchen cupboard, in the wardrobe,
with your laughter in the house,
with your first steps on the stairs,
with your eyes looking up to love.
I never realised how wounds feed wounds.
I simply thought a pure heart could make love happen
and I didn't know and I didn't know and I didn't know
your mother could never love you,
Noël.

There's a little dab of sunlight in the hallway -
drink it with milk, any day now -
there's a little dream of twilight on your hands.
The more you cry the more your mother hits you -
it goes like that -
and now that all is buried
and now that all is living under floorboards -
take my eyes with you.
The door to your room is always open.
I didn't know there are wounds behind the smoothest skin.
You are crying always, Noël,
and I didn't know and I didn't know and I didn't know
your mother could never love you,
my one love.

Prayer to Our Lady of Manaoag

Goddess Kannon,
in your pale disguise as Mary mother of God,
as the Virgin of Manaoag,
among typhoons and dengy and cholera,
among the skies that bleed mud and fire,
guide the fisherman back to his shore,
protect the jeepney driver dodging the express buses in afternoon traffic,
watch over the tinnapay boy, ten years old and alone with all the ghosts of the
town, ringing his bell at four in the morning to sell hot bread,
give rest to the men out toiling at midday in the rice fields, moving legs arthritic
with cold, bending to the sway of pain through their joints,
comfort the women who sort and dry the rice and pour it into sack after sack
and the boys who dredge mud from the river to slab and shape it as
bricks - later they will carry them load by load to the building site by
sunset,
protect the eyes and hands of the craftsmen hammering and oxywelding metal
sheets for the sidecars of tricycles, then painting them green and gold and
lettering in luck words and boastful claims for their new owners,
watch over the dreams of the girls mopping the sweat on their faces as they turn
the chickens roasting on spits, brushing the flies away as the smell of food
passes along the street, mingling with the odours of gasoline, garbage and urine.

While behind fortified walls and security checkpoints the rich snooze after
dinner in aircon bungalows or croon into videoke machines by the tepid drip of
their swimming pools,
While the wives and daughters of the rich collapse exhausted searching for
beauty products in the world's largest shopping mall and when you stand inside
you could be anywhere: Tokyo, Singapore, Los Angeles,

Goddess of mercy,
encased in the open basilica of your cathedral at Manaoag,
bring even a tiny mouthful of airconditioned coolness
and blow it softly on the forehead of the girl
toting her younger brother to beg coins from the passing cars on Roxas
Boulevard,
be the shine in the handful of pesos let fall beside a village funeral procession,
the relatives walking arm in arm down the highway, crossing the bridge as
the traffic slows,

beyond the imported syrup of American crooning,
beyond the nineteenth century Catholic piety,
the bleeding Caucasian Christs,
the santo ninyo,
that Spanish gold-encrusted prince of this world,
beyond the dour pestiferance of Popes and their sexual curses,
let your face shine
Asian and mysterious and pure,

your presence feminine and truthful as an open page
on which all that happens records itself in invisible writing,
at once innocent young heroine
and long-thwarted, long-deceived
all powerful matriarch in some celestial soap opera
whose dénouement remains now
so many centuries overdue,

receive all those who labour without hope,
tie the threads of this shattered plot, our lives, together,
bring your people home

**Wittgenstein in Norway
(Architect)**

Snow falls so heavy on the shoulders of the man.
The castle won't be built yet.
The maze of uncompleted stones
is frolicking under the wafer shine of flakes.
It is only exactitude, he says,
that can benefit a man,
as his protractor shrinks, his ruler curves
and the plum line mimics the invisible twang of an asteroid.
He won't stop today
though the earth is burying him alive.
He dreams that purity descends
undetectedly
as a reward for the long hours of labour
against the grain of things.
He'll go away soon to the tent
as death is an impermissible option.
He'll curse the slow white chaos
that, falling, builds the page he'll never write:
so sharp, exact and wordless.
For a long time he sits under the canvas listening:
trees groan, wind licks ice as it strains
sideways in a pond.
A lone bird shatters from the wall of its own image.
All noises irritate him.
Noise leads away, he says.
In the last hour of daylight
he'll come back to measure the roof.
It must be raised another metre
so the space above the head
bears the correct proportion
to the longevity of man.

Everyday

You go to a restaurant and you eat a meal and you choke and die. It happens like that. You feel horny and visit a sauna, get careless, catch aids and die. You open a present while straphanging on a tram, miss your stop, get off in a hurry, don't notice a truck, get hit and die. Or you breathe the mould of your own body for a lifetime, day after silent day, and you turn white and die. Or you open your hand and the lines suddenly go walking off in different directions over the edges of the world and this puzzles you and you can't understand it and out of such perplexity you die. One day the face of the sunflower deity is splattered on the bedsheets and you grow prickly and are never visited by the bees that carry sweetness in their thighs and from the hunger for their soft release you die. You construct a house of stone underneath a well of pure skywater and there you bring the pillars of every deity and the offerings for every cult and you crush flowers and the tiny hands of the newborn dead till reincarnating as gesture without body you die.

On a Saturday during the football on an airplane over Antarctica in galoshes in a business suit on the holiday of a lifetime tomorrow and yesterday after five minutes of thinking and a decade of acceptance passionlessly as oxygen from a mask in this room which has grown as small as a child's crib you open your mouth to all that exits and all that rushes in and wanting so much to speak you start to mime the opening of a word

and you begin to understand
how the silence that fills you and the passion for words that overflows
is your own private and chaotic death.

The hours are long before daybreak

Do the fish in their tank sleep at night,
their faces lulled by darkness,
the soft curl of water
closing all their fears?
It is difficult in a long night
of wakefulness and pain
to understand the magnificent stem of the appletree
blossoming steadily into light.
Even a little warmth lapping at my feet
puddles slowly upwards
to infiltrate numb hands, my throat gagging on memory.

There are no ways to say these things.
Where it hurts I can't even show
since it lies outside my body
but passes endlessly through my genitals and wrists.
Someone is arriving now on the ledge of a neighbouring building:
three birds who have brought the seeds of appletree
to chip at and discuss,
glancing with an almost maternal mindfulness
towards the window where I sit.

Their blessing is a wafer I will take and break in half:
the small mouths of the fish beginning slowly to open.

Missing Words

I don't know how many things there are in this world that have no name. The soft inner side of the elbow, webbed skin between the fingers, a day that wanders out beyond the tidal limits and no longer knows how to summon the moon it has lost, my firstborn who gazes about himself when the TV dies and there is a strange absence in his world. I was looking for a great encyclopaedia, the secret dictionary of all the missing words. I wanted to consult its index and find out what I could have become. The sound the clock makes when it is disconnected and taken down from the wall but can't lose the habit of trying to jerk itself forward. The look of old socks drying on a rack in the kitchen all through a winter night, hanging starched and sad opposite the wedding photographs. A word for your face when you know you can't love but would almost like to try. The blurred point of merger between fresh storm damage to a house and the deep fissures that have always been there. Walking down the corridor to the front door with inexplicable elation in my chest as if everything was about to start, as if my love had just arrived, escaped from a burning world, and at the same time clenched in my taut wrists, my hands, the thin bones of my arms, the certainty that everything has long been over.

Woman at the Musée d'Orsay

No painting could equal her gaze.
For one long moment she held herself there
standing upright above her wheelchair -
the elegant curve of her thin black dress,
the softness of her hair done up at the back.
With a gesture of immense effort and inexplicable grace
she rose, soaring above herself, to grasp only air
and to stay there all the time needed to take in
whatever beauty men can make.
Her cheeks were as smooth as breaking petals just being formed
but there was so much pain in her eyes and it trembled in short bursts across the
line of her cheekbone.
And her whole self, as you looked closer, split into segments of pain -
flawed and not very given to survival.

I don't know exactly what painting she was looking at -
there were two so close together and it might have been either from the angle
where I stood watching her,
transfixed by an instant and wordless and hopeless love.
Maybe it was the Monet painting of boats at Argenteuil,
a delicate shimmer of sunlight on wind-ruffled water,
white sails, the clarity of summer afternoon suddenly
entering her life from another world
as close now as the windows in the room behind me
that gave onto the Seine.

Later I realised it wasn't the painting of boats -
but the fields of Argenteuil, coteaux de Sannois, 1872,
where two shapes, two people of undetermined age and gender,
stand on the very edge of the long white grassblades of a dry summer
just about to begin their descent,
with the fields below waiting for them, a few houses, a single churchspire and
the misted fields of night's approach,
and maybe she was wanting to go with them
down the slope of the hill,
to walk joyfully all the way down the hill
divided now as it was, half shadow, half light.
Then, as she tilted her neck slightly to one side
to gather everything in one last time from a different angle,
I could see the full happiness of her eyes trailing into her future.

Another moment and she had gone.
I did not follow her.

The choirs that summon us
are not all in the one basilica.
I walked across to the two paintings
and when I stood in the place where she had been
I felt her body enter mine.
She had the true fragrance of fresh-cut apples
come among us from the other side of time.

Gardener

"You practise the silent art", she said
looking into the narrow garden where a bird
passed rapidly. "You move in isolation
from recognition or audience.
And what you place on the page
is mostly read by no one and
what you value in the way the words fall
or run together,
pointing outwards to the world
and inwards to a private reticence
is something not explicable to others.
Your silent unwanted art draws me.
I have been dead long enough to hear
the cadences you hum under your breath at midnight.

"The garden is small - the fence hedges it round.
One dawn of silence and extraordinary lightness I re-entered here:
with the being of a small grey bird
I quizzed the stone, followed the long crack
in the concrete that led to a garden bed,
the peach tree with its hard green kernels,
the herbs, the blue and pink flowers.
There is always water here -
dripping quietly from a tap
or the end of a hose,
water languid and dark in bowls below the potplants -
and that small fullness of presence
the mouth grows round with.
From the other side of earth
from the underside of the night stars
I came back to wait by this small desk
in a kitchen that looks out
on my garden with its roses and carnations,
its apricot and peach trees.

"All night the bird of darkness that shelters on the roof
cracks and taps his debris,
sweeping stones and the bones of fruit
crashing into oblivion.
I don't know his purposes
or if the brush of his wings is truly demonic
while the garden lies lost in such deep darkness.
Flowers and death -
it is always so late in the world.
For you it must seem both late and lost,
shaping what never really comes to birth.
I wanted to weave around you

a little of that patience the wind knows
as it ceaselessly gathers leaves and flowers
hurrying them down the endless cycles
between life and death.

Think of musicians unearthing buried sound,
the first man to construct a transverse flute
or the girl who found herself one day
on the edge of a new sonority.

(And for how many
those unresolved new continents died with them.)

Or to wake one day
and discover in your hands
the open shell for a feeling that has left the earth
like the holder of abandoned instruments,
caressing the silver stops that still hold sounds
people have forgotten how to make -
bird-clappers left behind in a land where the birds have vanished,
tree-felling songs transported to Iceland.

Your small suburban garden is open to the sky.

You glance out, your eyes half closed.

All through the cold you sit here
trying to write.

My skin is like the wall -
an intricate face you see reappearing
beyond each coat of paint:
the circled turning of the cosmos
mirrored on a garden wall.

What outlives me are the trees I once lived under,
the earth I moulded and returned to,
a daily usage of things.

“Just as the sun moves around the garden
so when I come back your chair is in a different place,
your neck tilted differently,
the scattered papers express
a different state of disrepair.
Yet I understand your words
when I peek over your shoulder at midnight
or at first dawn when you move your chair out under the trees
to catch the stillness of the garden.

Through you I relive
a serene witness to uselessness.

My eye reduced to zero dimensions
on the backyard’s concrete floor,
I stand at the pure angle of shadowless being
while you live in and out of shadows,
cut by light.

“The tree invents the tree.

The river invents the river.

“A line of pink and white flowers
that summon birds.

And work
and dejection
and the line
that trails down.

Slashing and pruning.
Feeding that they may blossom
in nowhere.”

Zoological Gardens, Medellin

In the zoological gardens
a strange disoriented man lifts his eyes into the sky,
the politician in suit and tie
waddling past the seals
leans momentarily on the rails,
dazzled by the heat.

A girl with a dragon sleeping on her buttocks
is dreaming a slow train across the sky:
its doors slide open there behind her eyes.
The giraffe-spotter falls asleep by the racoons.
In soporific midday
a whole hillside of mountain goats wait for the clouds
to scoop them up into the Hindu Kush.

Man in the apricot hat with a moon on your back
clamber up trees
wake the parrots
startle the spider monkeys tangling in their lairs
set loose the menageries of childhood
flood this purgatorial slope with their screeching.

Crumbs from the wax tablet of the Law
cracked by the beaks of birds
scatter on eyes
lounging in deckchairs round a poolside bar
dreaming of dolphins.
I think of a ladder tumbling towards me
from the simple life of lorikeets.
In the zoological garden seeking our double,
the day slips by, sucking the spine of mangoes,
watching the summer wind fan dung in the hyenas' cage.
Indolent rainbow bubbles
break from the pouting mouths of the tropical fish.
Caught on the mountain's middle rung,
the twine of prayers twisting in his hands,
an ageing poet paces the green solarium of ferns,
the shock of his white mane
exploding in the breeze like the crests of waves.
Pouncing on words
he mimics the agility of leopards,
his tai chi of the mind stalking the arboreum.
Nearby
an ant that's wandered into the book of trees
stretches its soft diminutive head
against the long names of distant cousins' cousins -
its pincushion eyes wander through the garden
as across a drowned book.

Halfway up the sacred mountain,
here at mid-circle,
I stretch out to the toucan, the macaw,
the lemur in his loneliness,
the fruit bat in his abandonment.
Birds, their jagged faces tipped with snow, glide slowly
as the cool air of the cordilleras
spins somewhere, half a mile above.

Heeding the call of this upward spiral
a man opens his hand to the wind
and the sky suddenly
is streaming from his wrist.

To the memory of John Forbes

It was a part of the city I had never been before. High above me on the upper floor of a tall narrow-domed building a bell ringer was perfecting his art. I thought to myself, I could never hope to reach that height and almost opposite I found Forbes' address. A big white clapboard house with long verandah and a wide backyard the size of a baseball field. So, I thought, he's finally made it - a house straight out of the childhood of Frank O'Hara, and from every kitchen window along the street radios carried the sounds of the American nineteen fifties.

We shook hands in the backyard and he beamed having just struck a home run. Several familiar guys were there: Mark O'Connor, Neil Thomas, John Roberts and more. There was also what must be his best kept secret - a new girlfriend, a kind of Britt Eckland, Kim Novak blonde bombshell only just slightly overweight. But as I turned to speak to her she lay down in the arms of four of the men who took her across to what I thought was the garage but was in fact a barn. They began to fold straw around her, wrapping her in a deep fragrant warmth. "She's sleeping more now," Forbes said, "She's starting to get used to being dead."

Lines on an image from Henri Michaux

The magician walks on both banks of the river
simultaneously
he splits himself -
think of the concentration required
to hold the two sides of himself so neatly -
extending himself he doubles himself.
In the exercise of being that magician
you feel the water flow through the centre of yourself:
on one side you step carefully, dodging trees as they lean out in shadows,
on the other you stride cautiously along the towpath of the riverbank
alive in the full sun.

And the two sides of the riverbank are two men:
young and old
young battling the trees, scrambling, not minding the cold or the darkness,
old striding along in the sunlight,
impatient to reach the dam wall
where the heart goes plummeting into its other world.

You feel the emblem enter your hand.
In the cup of your palm is a door.
Where the lines cross is the lock of a door.
Inside this door is a deep sky.
Walking simultaneously on both banks of the river
is the privilege of those who have entered that sky.

Watching the doubled magician,
remembering his white cane, his comical hat, his innocent manner of being two,
your breath enters you.

“You heal yourself when you write a real poem.”

Nine ways of writing an American poem

1.

If you put
 your hand
 in fire
it hurts.

2.

Knoxville Idaho Nebraska Angel Falls
South Linesville Bridge
and Louisiana
 especially Louisiana

as Pa said on the slow road,
 "That's it."

or two skunks mating under a chainsaw's shadow
 in Alabama twenty winters ago

by knocking about
 you learn a thing
 or two.

3.

He put it in me
and he said, Suck
Suck harder
Suck it harder
and he put his fist in my eye
and it hurt.

4.

Writing to Tashkent promptly on odd-numbered days is a good recipe
 for peptic ulcers.

All of Cicero's best pupils received straight A's but did they rule empires?
Sometimes an exercise book will open in a sandwich bar in New Brunswick.
By travelling around limestone caves Hieronymus Bosch's cousin encountered
 miasmas of snowflake dispensers.

If you are breezy enough we'll all come back without problems
and who can say we don't have the best seats for walking on clouds.
Summer requires that all cats immediately empty their ashtrays and address
 their closest human as Frou-frou.

It is essential that adjectives fill spaces as coyotes hunt kinkajous in the arboreal
 autumn.

When you open a stone, twilight will bark ferociously on the nearest corner.
Do you know Hausa? Can you spell that in Urdu?
Numbers equate only as optimistically as rocks gather peppermint sticks.
The foot is alien to the subway as the eye is innocent of autopsies.
A full page is better than an empty line.

5.

Open paratwang
of helio-
trope in
door-
way
en-
TRANCE

6.

You take the stick of wood
and slice it carefully
down the centre
as smooth as you can
then you take each half
and place them
carefully
in one of the two piles.

7.

Fall rises softly in the hamlets of South Dakota.
The prairie dog roils in mid-Catskill umbrage.
I don't know how many roads
have lead me to this house
but it is a house
and it is a road.
I walk on it delicately
with two feet
and it takes me
to a place I have never been
but always dreamed of.

8.

Mallarmé opens his book
and immediately
as Delacroix once ate oysters in Eze-sur-Loire
I am finding
CONNECTIONS
Cape Canaveral is Houston is potatoes is pommes frites is

Oscar Wilde's tombstone lone in the lacework of Père Lachaise
under the still spring of the Adirondacks
Rimbaud on the high road
with the angels dressed in cowboy suits
We were all Zorros twenty haciendas away
skating on that immaculate summer ice of Greenland

At twenty seven
I still wore a tie with a green stripe in the centre
and on "see-saw summer nights"
not far from Wynnesville
where Chagal's violin played in the strawberry dance halls
and all the onion-domed churches of Moscow
kept peeling the first blush of childhood in red satin

mais où sont-les. . . ?

Not far from Smithville
the road curves to the left
and then curves back to the right.
If you stop there
you will find a gas station
a post office
two banks
three diners
and a building that used to be a department store,
then a motel, and is currently up for sale.
When it was a department store we used to buy things there
as did most people.

Heemingway Pound Scott Fitzgerald my cousin Elie
my best friend in fourth grade, Max
and my dog, Sam
all came this way
or they might have
if they had only
stopped.

9.

Here where the angel of unknowing rips from the jawbone's incandescence
calling in the long bonfires
a last first breathless haul away from the space
we all enter in the midstream's circuitry of fire

as the lone birds carol in unison
this unscrolled catalogue of the bleeding obvious
and the fire almost breaks from the fingertips
in one last desperate lifesurge

and the water almost falls in one miraculous drop from the faucet

If you look closely enough in the dry bonetalk of the hillside
grassblade, rat spoor, pine needle,
the upended radishes of becoming

the mortal wound opens
and the bear goes back to his beariness.

Woman and the moon

The moon enters the house
of the woman who lives alone
with her two children.
Tenderness of daylight
has fled into the photos on the wall.
Humble and muted
the eyes in the family portraits
stare out absently,
still clinging to a life they have outgrown.
The moon's face brushes the mirrors
as they fill with cold.
Branches stripped of leaves
scrape the sides of the house.
The woman without memories
keeps beginning again.
Holding a pebble
she learns to hold the sea.
She sleeps in the large empty bed
billowed by storm clouds.
Her body drifts through pastures of riversnakes.
The spine of the mountain looming behind her
pierces her throat like a long cool needle
and no one passes in the street
and no one knows.
For one brief moment
in the mirror
the woman and the moon
slide through each other
and neither flinches or moans
and neither holds back
from this sharp penetration.
The moon is a silent rider.
Silver gleam of the fish in their tank;
flowers in a vase by the window
lean their long hair in the cold.
On the marble floor of the kitchen
the moon's face bleeds like iodine.
Moon washes the curtains where they hang.
The children stir uneasily in their beds.
So deep in trance,
their tense limbs milking the emptiness,
they are shielded by dolls
and the great open pages of storybooks.

Around midnight the woman gets up,
pours water into the kettle, boils the jug.
As people sleep they leave the earth;

they ask us to keep watch
over all they had once considered theirs.
The moon slides across carpets, waiting clothes,
spills into the cupboards between the folded blankets.
As she sleeps
the woman's delicate face enters the sky
while the moon takes her place in the bed.

Requiem

You slipped out of life into the silence
one long afternoon of the cries of birds
and broken water in a rounded garden
waiting for the call that dinner was ready,
the table set
and the narrow beds with their blankets folded back
prepared for sleep.
You slipped out of the noisy corridor
into perpetual dawn
with the first birds stirring over the broken backfence
with footsteps moving over the frost
in the vegetable garden.

Someone had come by with a late birthday present
and we searched the house from the laundry to the front door
trying to find you
that was when we realised
you had slipped out of life all by yourself
and we left the present
with a bread roll and a glass of water
by the backdoor
knowing you were somewhere near
and would come back for them
if the time seemed right.

Dream Poem – at fifty

*When what we were
stands face to face with what we will be*

The old man appears suddenly under the elms.
A crisp night of stars has blown him into our garden.
All the light of an extraordinary travelling
flows in his long white hair,
in the smudged dirt of his rags, his silent presence
under moonlight.

What is a house
that it should stand
between wilderness and road
denying stars?
It proclaims all journeys end here.
Yet the walls glow transparent in stillness,
the whole frame an archway
leading from darkness to darkness.
All around us
trees and night cicadas echo
across the flooded valley.
When the old man and myself meet
we are left staring into our own strangeness.
Then it seems
that the house is the ghost.

It is evening when I walk outside
and see the old man waiting in darkness,
his eyes sifting back the cruel world
under the elms.
I have built the wind with my own fingers.
The stars, the trees, the water:
these things are all outside me.
They become
all that I know.

Old beyond the counting of years

I still circle wild tracks that have no end.
I crouch under trees, moving slowly beyond the glimmer of houselights.
Then I see him, my double, my brother,
his legs hanging careless on my side of the fence.
Poised between darkness and another world,
his gawky innocence has the shape of an ill-fitting house,
brightly lit, its doors open, the windows leaning out above departure.
Confused he watches me as I come forward under the elms.
His eyes tell me
when the house is still I can come in –
walls and floorboards won't block me then –
I need only breathe slowly and let myself move
across tiles and doorways, along bannisters and railings.
And when I leave at the front
to wander out into the cul de sac,
he'll be glad I've moved through him with the wildness of darkening bush,
the savagery of all he's rejected for so long.

At the end of all our life
pure need blossoms in our hands.
Even in dark water
swirlings of light curl along
the downward scoop of branches
and higher up the summer air
swarms with invisible life.
For the first time I let my body go,
slipping quietly beyond me
into the wide recurrent contours of ancient scrub,
this earth restored,
set free from all our houses,
all we have built and willed.
When I wake after midnight
the old man's gaze,
fierce, damaged, benign,

travels with me all the way down the corridor,
his ravaged eyes
still seeking a way out.

For how long has the old man been there,
hiding or loitering
in the rough straggle of bush
between the backfence and the sheer drop of the gully?

A child again,
I watch tables being readied for the celebration of night.
They place counters on darkness –
small candles melting their patterns onto evening.
i walk again the sprawling family home,
ringing with echoing voices.
Everything placed by women's hands
falls into a stillness beyond me.
Shining parasols and carafes brimming with wine
balance on the edge of the light.
A sulphur flash of bird-wings spins out over the void.

They are dancing quietly in the ghost world.
I trail my hand towards you. Is it for this
you came forward in the darkness?
The party of long ago still moving and turning under the elms,
the mother still young –
her hands fragile and nervous,
steadying the world –
and her voice, her laughter trembling still
like a wineglass by an open window
before the storm breaks.

The old sky opens its windows.
The bougainvillea is tearing out a space in the night garden.
Wandering towards me from where the earth ends
he reveals how thin my life is:
the house not even a shadow on the deep drift of water.

It takes a long time being born,
a long time growing old in the dark.
I was waiting for the days to shine,
waiting for someone
to take and remake me
yet the kitchen light goes on being
my one true companion.

The old man can't stay too long in the starlight.
He wears away his eyes
and soon they will be all he has.

A wave of white glittering light

where the fence should be
and my eyes sting with the dazzle of blindness.

Before me just a few more steps to the gully,
to that slow descent where,
one by one,
everything I have is taken back –
as if the world was teaching a small child
not to walk.

They creep out in half-seen corners of the garden:
the secret flights of cowardice and all they shape –
a sprig of weed here, a dark root twisting sideways there.

Higher up
the open hands of lemons among dark foliage
waiting for the storm:

there is a ripe fullness
in the flash of a stone
as it enters the sky.

Among all these strangers
the old man's gaze seeks me out.
I go towards him,
leaving the shadow of the house
that is always falling.
Above us both
trees shine along the overhanging slope.
They are suddenly one tree of many stems and branches.
It has gathered all the light of this sunset.

We are fading more rapidly than the dwindling day.
We will soon wear
only starlight that mingles our breath.
I am an old man now
dying all afternoon slowly in my bed.
Outside, sounds of a cricket ball
and children at play.
Vanity breaks like some last bubble in my head.

The doors open and the table gone,
the words the bread
trailing off into darkness,
small crumbs leading to the vanishing point –
the palm's criss-crossed X
opening out under the elms.
Wind takes the last crumbs
off and away into the gully,
the doors flung open to the oncoming storm.

If you can make your way
down into the gully
clinging to the thread of the rocks
picking and swinging what is left of you
If you can descend
between jagged knifepoint
and flattened hardness
dizziness into dizziness
descend without falling
with the difficult tenacity

of one who has
no place to leave
no place to arrive

If you go far enough
along the trail that keeps disappearing
the sulphur birds
splashing their radiance around you
the walls of rock
echoing the brief moment of a cry.

The old man is gone.
Outside, the sheen of damp sunlight on boulders,
the view from the cliff-face across into other worlds.
My childhood shrinks and shrinks –
a stone tossed down a deep well,
hurled into the inward sky
where I travel to meet my grandfather.

And always the same hour –
the young woman bounding up the stairs
never seeing the steps she leaps,
the curve of her back brushing past, her hidden face,
the small quick sounds of her feet

all I will ever know of her,
the ice tunnel that winds from childhood to death:
none of it avoidable.

The glacier is moving always underneath me.
We were only ever meant to be
thin additions to this earth.

PART 4

Jottings

The bed had become an apparatus of the body - the winch at its side looked like a device from an abattoir. The disinfectant could never remove the smell. The neighbour's voice cheered its way through the stale house. The vacuum cleaner had wrestled its way into the laundry.

Nothing could be sadder than writing this. It was as if the last of him had left him. The tubes that busied themselves with his functions. The empty mug with the teeth. Only the dim light of a confused anger flared intermittently in the sickly beacons of his eyes.

*

The photographs in the hallway are of her wedding and of her children when they were small. Now the children rarely visit. For twenty years the old man, her husband, has shrunk and shrunk. She lays out the things he wants in the way he wants them. She copes with his near choking at every second mouthful of food. By now she has lived longer with this angry self-centred stranger than with the cheerful energetic man she married. In the evening at this time of the year the cicadas shrill their song of the rage for life - it lasts barely fifteen minutes.

*

Swarming - it's what happens when your eyes extend too wide and, instead of sleep, pushing yourself towards the edge of vanishing entices a plague of red and black mites. They occupy the space between your eyes and the rip in the fabric that marks the overcoming of days. In swarming the noise of the world, crystallised in a particularly virulent form, suddenly floods in to fill an accidental loophole of silence. The victim, believing at first it is a one-off coincidence, is protected by their own inability to imagine that everything, including the most ghastly and arbitrary acts, is inflicted on us in full knowledge of our inability to solve anything.

*

For a year - she said - they don't bathe but stay inside the house in their old rags, letting their hair grow, letting the sweat build up against the tiredness of their eyes. They don't clean their clothes or their houses and only eat the last food - the crackly dry rice no one else will eat, the leftovers even the lizard and the cat have passed up. They don't talk and look away when spoken to. They let the long thread of an invisible needle coil deeper and deeper into the vortex of the ear till it reaches a space of absolute tiredness at the back of the throat. Only in this way can they be saved.

*

It is true that the hand wandered far in its quest for vanishing, its hunger for a different life. Off and on the sponge divers returned to their pedestal, the tall

pylons driven far below into the coral and detritus of the harbour floor. Crabs roamed freely among the haversacks of the young travellers. The ferry seemed to be delayed forever on the other side of the headland. You argued in a bar about politics and your heavy mouth hung open as if words alone could define us. You let your fingers rest, grazed lightly by the opened blade of the Swiss Army knife clutched under the table.

*

Things that were unmanageable were beginning slowly to manifest themselves. Waiting for an answer out of the void like an old man waiting for a boat to come - the river dry, shrunk almost to vanishing. The disused gas tower, the golf course built over the farm and the landing, the barn-like arts centre replacing old storehouses. Feeling with your fingers for lumps under the skin. As if all these things might be an approximation. He stayed on strumming at the nothing-space where the guitar frame ended.

*

All evening they had been cutting and sharing a quiet monstrosity.
There was plenty to hold them:
the onions, the crisps, tins of sweetened milk,
higher up the half-eaten bread, old potatoes
and at the pinnacle
a biscuit tin filled with old stamps.
No reason to glance beyond themselves
to the circle of insects at the window
bristling to take over
or, beyond that, the shimmering of night.

Best to stick with the visible.
Small clear observations
with menace wriggling in the concealed pocket
of the drowned woman still seated
under the apricot tree.
When she sits on the terrace at the front
the storm goes away.

*

The day bottomed out yet we felt almost buoyant.
Catastrophe had been spliced out of the headlines.
In the room next door they were making shadows happen.
We had spent the afternoon inventing colours,
then sitting back to watch them spread across the landscape.

*

They passed words back and forth all day
with no way of knowing which ones were lethal.
A sentence sat for hours
in the yellow envelope they had folded and set aside.
Above he could hear small drops of rain
waiting to detach themselves
from the densely humid sky.

*

She did what was right and a little more of her died. First the door and candle
that were shelter and welcome, shining from the space behind her eyes. Then her
left arm, her quick words, the breath in her mouth. Goodness was killing her
with the slow precision of any other illness.

*

The children have gone their own way now. The enormous family table rests in
the backyard between the birdcages and the laundry. Three cleaning buckets
stand on its patched cover. The cleaning of the birdcages has been put off for
years now. The saddest bird, the one that died last, used to gaze at the buckets as
if their colour could make up for the sky.

*

In the time when I was in love
your presence was the beating of wings
just outside the upper story window -
the small black inquisition of the bird
that brought you close.
Birds carry their world
completely open to the sky -
light covers them all over,
their faces bruised by the sun and winds.
For those three months
separated by so much space
only birds and clouds passed freely between us -
an invisible openness
that ran for some short while
alongside our lives.

*

Through the long hot afternoon the sea with its marooned container ship leans a
white breath of coolness above grandfather's heavy shoulders. Later there will
be the aunty two doors down and the pink and silver cockatoo in its green cage -
its strange voice mimicking the elderly woman - and the tall glass of lemonade
balanced on a plate with biscuits. In the religious print in the hallway the wide

hands of Jesus like a sinister magician threaten to come out of the photo, to pour their blood down the carpet of the house. In the cemetery on the headland the stone angel wants to plunge deeper and deeper into the ocean but the gatekeeper won't allow it. Some shadows don't lengthen or disappear - they choose us.

*

Someone seemed to live behind the windows of the old house. Stunted yellow trees grew up close to the wall. That house - you said - I'm too scared to look. When rain set in early one evening we waited to see if someone would close the window but no one did. All we could see was a dim glow far inside. Get up, walk to the basin, scrub your eyes. Useless to hunt for evidence. What nourishes us comes from so far back we have no image of it. The insects slowly become more focussed for having lived.

*

Further down the street the ocean began - a smooth green rock jutted out into the circles traced by small fish and seagulls. Birds of all kinds gathered in the trees by the shore. The need for a mate torn so deeply into them it rises into the pure invention of singing. Under whatever name it may still linger, this faith that it would be possible to be guided by the world.

*

First the ending came with pictures and symbols, with beautifully cadenced sounds and finely crafted artifacts. But then the ending happened a second time and there were no words, no gestures. He simply sat there silent in the room everyone had left. By night - the nurse said - the rats seem more at home in the world than us. Twilight has many colours, only a few of them visible.

*

Already the room is seen from the height of someone standing on a chair, a rope attached to their neck swaying now loose, now almost taut from a loop suspended to a door jamb. The dizzy smallness of everything is the main thing to be seen, its infinite variability - the fact that everything could so easily be different. The potplant, the basket of washing, the cups at the sink which could have been laid out on the floor - the arrangement of magnets on the fridge or the curtains, for instance, we didn't need those curtains. The eye wanders briefly over each object set free by the smallest shift in altitude. If it was only possible to release the cord from your neck, step down and still see everything floating, detached from itself, in the clarity of leaving.

Windows rattle on a cloudless night

There is a city called "Kite". It dreams for itself a thin vanishing. Secretly by night it folds up its expanses, deserted streets, old archways, shuttered buildings and becomes a pale hand open to the wind of the stars. Made of stone condensed into air, the temple it offers us is all transparency.

Lives that narrow from oceans to measured streets, from wide boulevards to manageable rooms with small square windows and finally a voice in a room wheedling and apologising. Already the cicadas shake their rattle of heat and death. What is under the earth so longs to join the air.

The ship that sails out beyond the limits trails the last of the land bobbing at its shoulder. We shall not altogether go under.

Far over me, in the space of dreams, this city gliding resistance.

The acceptance of silent waters

A steady indistinct humming rises from the water today and drifts towards the houses. I make my way down to the edge to find out its source - this one long note like someone singing at a pitch I have never heard before. A boulder has broken loose overnight from the cliff-face and lies there in the shallows. Perhaps the ripple of its fall has set off a vast engine, washed in at some time from the wider ocean and now lying just below me on the seafloor. When I reach the road's end and the wharf I realise all the usual sounds of daylight and water and the city across the bay have been removed as if everything for one long moment has stopped.

I am standing below the headland. Behind me is the road that leads to my parents' house, to my right a wharf leans out into the harbour. A magpie, landing on a branch nearby, riotously calls out that a thunderstorm is on its way and I think perhaps I should go back to warn my parents that their place with tall trees carelessly planted so close may soon be struck by lightning. But would such unsolicited advice serve any purpose? Just off shore Lynne's house flounders below the waves, its roof still visible above the surface. A submerged sun is shining towards me from its windows. Never before have such scant rays reached me with so much kindly warmth and, as I gaze at this drowned world, I understand Lynne is elsewhere, her life intact and solid and unknown to me.

Later I waterski across drowned buildings, shimmering facades of the Banco de Bilbao, Paris Opera, the Melbourne Stock Exchange, St Paul's Cathedral, places I might have lived or almost lived or where I hesitated once thinking I would begin a new life - and the exquisite contours of ghosts smile softly, their cheeks still moist with an excess of tenderness. Swerving to miss some ungainly low-tide rocks I glance behind me and see a figure in a dinghy, with straw hat and lobster-red neck. He is fishing but has just hauled in nothing at all and blinks at how much weight it had - as if the same line didn't pass with wavering but unfaltering precision across the living and the dead, across what was and what we so passionately imagined.

Graveyard by the sea
- variations on a poem by Paul Valéry

O récompense apres une pensée
Qu'un long regard sur le calme des dieux!
- Paul Valéry, *Le Cimetiere Marin*

(Our reward after all thought is done,
this long gaze into the calm of gods.)

1.

Calm rooftop where white doves are gliding
among the pines, among the tombs
it trembles
riddled with fire:
the sea the sea.
Where the sun rests on the ocean's depths
time shimmers its long blue gaze;
white sails skim
the carved curved face of gods.

Surrounded by my seaward glance,
I climb this hill where flametrees twist.
The cicadas' sharp cry grates against dry grass.
Among the white flock of peaceful tombs
all's burnt, unmade, fed back to air.

Like fruit that melts into sensation
trading absence for delight
in the mouth where its form dies
I breathe in here the fine smoke of my future.
Waves thud against the edge of rocks.
At each step climbing the hill
I grow used to what I'm drawing into my lungs:
not salt not foam but time
sharp as dry air
subtle as sun bent by waves.

To walk here among cousins and unknown intimates
to whisper the blue eyes of my grandfather
sifting the nineteen twenties through ears of grass.
Among the roots of trees
the sharp cries of young girls,
their eyes, teeth, moist eyelids,
the blood that shone on lips as they opened,
the last gifts, the fingers that controlled them-
these lives passed on to wilt among the flowers.

Between the void and the pure event,
I listen for whatever echo my fate holds
like someone pressing their ear to a rusted water tank
to catch, reverberating in its depths,
bitter pure black sounds.
Down the long aisles of this stone city
my shadow outpaces me:
thistles in yellow heat,
signatures the spiders scribe
on the rafters of a house.
These once inhabited heads -
the faithful sea is sleeping on my tombs.

2.

If I stand on this hill, setting my back to the ocean,
I can look clear across the harbour's tidal run
into my childhood:
the familiar cream wall, a patch of greenness,
the red-tiled roof where strangers live now,
and that thin road that climbs above the beach.
Sunlight caught by waves
reflects from windows of cars descending streets
where my childhood has become
a silent ball that bounces
and does not bounce.

From too much watching, the scene trembles,
starts to slip
just as sometimes at night alone in a house
we become aware how everything is moving:
the house creaking, rearranging itself,
expanding and contracting floorboards,
shedding its skin of paint, its crumbling line of dust,
and we see
how the shelters we make for lovemaking
are also tombs.

I lift my gaze beyond the gravestones:
sea,
eye that seals within itself
so much sleep beneath its veil of fire.
Out there on quiet waves
the sailboats like startled birds
peck the thousand crumbs of light
midday sets rippling in its blue unfolding.

Standing thin and clear
on this hillside poised between two seas:

my childhood harbour and the wider ocean:
out of a difficult idleness, thirty years late,
I have wandered to this place of shining,
grey tombs at midday above a sea
where white boats tack in wind.

My shadow moves slowly
along the houses of the dead:
red mud, bright flowers, what we become.

PART 5

What the painter saw in our faces

The lightning in the sky
and everything taken from us.
The three days walk to the frontier,
the burning of villages,
police coming suddenly to tell us to get out,
the uneaten food still in the pot
and the rapid choice of clothes for the journey.
If I got up at dawn I would see it.
If I got up before dawn I would still see it.
We would begin again in different houses.
We would die earlier or later
and we'd block it from our mind in the usual ways:
a game of cards, a shot of scotch, a trip to the shop to buy stamps
and small bright yellow flowers
would blossom there as well along the roads at winter's end.
Life would bring its consolations:
postcards from friends, a new set of teeth
or, just once, a journey of several days to sit by the cliffs
and watch the whales
and when none came that year
we would eat the food laid out on a small hill in the sunlight
and the wine poured would sit in the glass
with its refined bitterness.
Life would pass.
Clouds would grow out of rivers.
So we'd move on quietly,
our small routines of solitude
easing themselves into memories.
Once briefly for us too loneliness glittered out
like frost along a window pane
when the sun's first rays pass over it
and one day, quite suddenly,
we realised that in all our lives
we would share no more than a single act of supermarket shopping
and the pears and cherries would later rot in the fridge
and the meat bought would hang sadly
like a dog's tongue when it's blind
and can't recognise us anymore.
And a girl would go by, younger than any of us,
carrying her first-born so proudly
down the long aisle of the football stadium
and we'd take our places,
confused, shamefaced, unrecognised,
in immense crowds of people fleeing,
glad just to own our feet or hands,
rapidly learning to forget everything
but the panic for survival

like the day when the planes swooped and the tunnel flooded
and by night from the flat near the station
I heard the liquid oxygen tanks exploding
less than ten minutes away, lighting up
the whole sky.

So we went on,
innocents transmitting hurt
like the abused child tormenting the boy who stammers
or the husband who almost said
when his wife asked him "Do you want another child?"
"Yes but not yours".

The years spent waiting for tenderness,
for an embrace not merely *faute de mieux* -
somewhere numinous as a lighted doorway
in the deep spell of night.

It seems almost unlimited the number of layers
waiting to die within us
and none of us knows
how many deaths we have to give this world.
And yet all the time elsewhere
a still life was slowly, meticulously being painted
by an apprentice master of another galaxy,
his hand moving already on the far side of the next millenium
capturing here now
the narrow space of light we never learned sufficiently to value.

One day,
we had one day,
warm air off the ocean lightly caressed our hands
in the seaside cafe writing to our love
in the days before all was scattered -
a thin man twisting his whole frame to stay within the light
and the music that came from his lyre
there by the river,
making the girl fishing turn back her head
and the frontier villages already smoking
at the hour when the earth extended infinitely
and light focussed on the smallest objects:
a wedding ring tumbling from the bridegroom's hand
to be buried under the bulrushes,
the pink strip of towel that shields a woman's breasts
from the man she will never undress before again -
an image that stabs over and over behind his eyes
till it too joins
the undifferentiated scapheap of loss.

And what would he make of us,
this young painter from a far off galaxy?
Would he see us as sad or brave?

Would he understand all that we squandered?
Would he forgive us?
One night eating a scrawny chicken with friends,
the grease clinging to our fingers,
in a ravaged city under an uncertain sky,
waiting for the slow drumming of the rain
to bring us resignation and an ending.
From the outdoor cafe's small circle of light
we could see the prostitutes sitting in their windows
in the place they called the Wall
where, thirty years before,
torturers gagged their victims,
the blows of rifle-butts still chipped into the concrete,
the blood lying deep over everything
and we wondered, suddenly guilty at the grease on our fingers,
how it would be,
that last walk through shuttered gates
into an underground already filling
with cyanide gas -
while behind us,
high on the hill's shoulder,
the white hospital still gazed towards a different life.

Often at night I wake to a voice
close, familiar, unknown
whispering, "There is another life -
if you could only move just slightly
you could seize it."
I get up, I pour a drink in the glass.
I break open the sleeping tablet in its bright wrapper,
lifting it like a comradely toast to the double absence
of you now, of you then.
Other nights, passing under a doorway,
it will come to me, appalling and certain,
how if you had placed your hand lovingly enough on me
the world would have regained the rhythm of its true,
secret life.

The village burning at midday, the view from the hill as we left,
and strapped to my back
the child never complaining of hunger
or tiredness on the icy road
and always we were walking higher up
towards the frontier -
us and how many others?
everything happening as it had for centuries -
the professor snatched from the classroom,
doused in petrol and torched -
and we crossed once more in our minds

the place where one sea empties
into another sea,
limitless into limitless,
a stretch of barren grassland in the heart of winter
where wind shakes five crows perched on the single blackened tree,
where the sky darkens with its promise of unceasing rain.
And always it seemed that somewhere close by, almost
visible, was a resting place,
a different valley dazzling in light,
where the twisted mountain has the shape of a forest god
playing on his simple pipe,
that we had only to start off down a different road
or say the smallest, most obvious thing:
"Something is troubling you, tell me"
or "Just talk to me tonight, you are so frightened"
or if we had walked across to the woman
seated by the subway exit
and said, "Take my watch - I won't need time
where I'm going"
and we might have stayed even one night
in that valley.

Mist on the path winding between boulders.
Mist covering the final slope towards the frontier.

Not far outside the capital
the wide plain had become the plain of ashes
in those days when the mountain tore its head off,
mud of grey ash darkening the shallow pools,
tent city of the wounded and burnt
in the park beside the lake where
the young lovers used to cling lip to lip,
their hands lightly holding all that life offers.
Now children make kites from a pile of shredded rubbish,
a blind man plays guitar,
strumming the familiar love-worn tunes
in the lunar world of smoking pumice.

To arrive.
To cross over.
To know the calm of dawn
rising as mist from the dew-soaked ash.
To come in from the avenue of distance
shaded by the lacework of the cedars,
the ripe excess of the apricot tree
buzzing with fruitflies,
to arrive in a place
both very small and unexpectedly large
with water flowing in the still precious pots

beyond the fear of the rain.
Shrapnelled, with all our life behind us,
to arrive at the doorway
and say:
"I am seeking the true landscape."

* * *

The painter is shaping what he sees from such a great distance.
The light comes towards him from birth,
from the white operating theatre,
the curtains parted with the outline of dawn across the harbour.
The newborn child, the first-born, is focussing the light.
Other galaxies have bent it
and passed it on.
It carries something stronger
than time or space.
It breaks into the fingers as they uncurl,
into the eyes clear and remote
as they stretch out quite suddenly towards us.

The painter is shaping the light that comes
from the end of our millenium.
In his eyes the patterned floor in a far off kitchen
remakes itself -
like the computer image of a photo
gradually layering itself out
till it is a photo,
an image of something contemporaneous but delayed.
So the hollow cheek of the woman
whose world is burning
glances up into the camera.
All the valley behind her is defecated with loss -
tents shredded by wind,
people snatched away in the night,
a pram left behind on the slope that is smouldering.
She is crying.
No one has bothered to translate her words.
The camera has moved somewhere else.
Yet from so far off
the painter knows how the light is shaped by her.

There is a light even stronger
that comes from the place further off
where quiet has descended on the winter valleys
and smoke rises, twisting and curling,
from the villages beyond the river
and already the man with the lyre has gone,

the girl fishing has gone,
the silver trays of food prepared for the marriage feast
all gone.
An immense silence rises from the laneways and villages.
The same green and white signs hang from awnings
over the freeways.
The signs shadow us into villages and cities
that no longer exist.
Whatever comes from there has suffered
an extraordinary bending.
It carries the silence
of trees without birds,
apartment blocks detonated and smouldering,
the hillside where five hundred men stand
waiting to be shot one by one.

What kind of animal are we?
The animal that wounds its own kind.
The animal that only loves through wounding.

In the landscape claimed by the people of the wolf
frescoes of half a dozen churches
scattered across several valleys
sold to the young men in the cafes
bought in one breath
by the young men laughing and smoking and drinking
shots of rum to chase down the beer
and the girlfriend nodding her head to the rockmusic
smiles into the camera:
"Yes, we'd die for that."
Their leather jackets, their mobile phones
hum quietly in the evening air,
reckless, defiant,
waiting for the first bombs of that night.
So we trade our life for a falsehood -
so we line up people against a wall in the name of dead stone,
so we excise a lover
suddenly after breakfast because that's what you do.

And those in the small hamlets
who didn't know if there was a next village
or if the sun knew any fields beyond their valley
or if water only bloomed for them -
the pitchforks at their throats, the jeepload of drunken militia,
the spray of machine guns in the stalls
where the roosters lay bloody and scattered,
leaving only in their clothes, no food, no water,
told - There, look, it's that way,
get walking -

and they didn't think to ask what it was called,
there where they had to walk,
night's drizzle already coming down
and the cold dark of the mountains where wolves lived
and the bombs under the earth that took half the children
and the fear of whatever groups they would meet
there where no laws exist, no customs, no known parameters -
their only clue that they must always be heading up,
the dawn sun at their backs, the setting sun in their eyes
and scooping the water from drains
and the sores from the wet wrappings on their legs exploding
and the dead, white-haired and tender,
gracing the loneliness of earth in the fields where they laid them.

And the masters of the world have nothing to offer death
but death,
lightly letting it slip from their hands,
wounding become mechanical gesture
as if you could hurt the world into compliance.

Feeling dies.
Is it only things like this life has to teach us?
Feeling dies.
The face in the wedding photograph becomes unrecognisable.
"We always killed our own"
he says to me,
designing a slaughter room for the new house
where he could hang the carcasses of animals he's butchered.
Torn from out of us,
the thunder dialogues with the rain.
Letting your ghost go
as the soul walks out of me, the anger built up over a lifetime
rippling out of me till the lightbulb in its socket
popped.

I flip the cards from the deck of images.
However strange each image,
all of them have my eyes.

A man towards sunset
writing a letter in the cafe near the ocean
and perhaps never like today
will the women walking by on the esplanade
be his equals, bathed in their beauty,
with no sense of their distance or their disdain for him,
never again like today
will he feel so relaxed in their presence,
with no trace of envy for another,
with the immaculate calm love brings

in the hours it believes itself reciprocated,
as the waves come, as the waves go,
and his letter - this letter -
is all in the heart
unwritten.

A boy who has lived his life in and out of institutions,
seated bolt upright in the hospital bed,
violently with all the pain of his neck and arms
swings his body back and forth,
his prayer to abandonment.
The ward nurses pass around him,
pretending not to know or observe
while I too take on his rocking.
He will be twelve in eight weeks.
Aloneness is a state of the soul.
It eats you.

The light rests on the surface of things:
a tree comes to birth in light.
Light spills from its branches into the knotted heart of its trunk.

Where does the poison come from?
Why does all the light suddenly go out of me
in a doorway, in a moment,
as if the process is all outside of time,
repeating itself outside of time?

You will walk alone across these mountains.
You must not so much cure yourself
as breathe out steadily and move forward,
ignoring the poison, ignoring the pain,
walking steadily uphill towards the frontier
where stormclouds cover the peaks -
the part of you that walks there
and the other part wiping dishes in the kitchen,
folding the towels,
stroking a child's hair as she leans upwards for praise,
and you realise you are completely split
as if so many animals
all fed and cried
inside you.

* * *

It was the biggest house we'd ever been in -
how could we just walk away?
Even though it didn't feel right,

the great open cavern of downstairs,
the floor littered with dereliction
and upstairs sunny as if light and air would always be there.
Even at first and with every step forward
it felt scary, wild, unlucky.
It must have been something in ourselves
that made us go on walking first to the doorway
then beyond the doorway.
Maybe it was just the fact that we'd never
lived inside a house
not one like this,
one you chose and wanted.
I remember we both doubled over, crying,
and I started cradling my own head
rocking back and forth, back and forth
as if everything I'd ever lived through
was starting all over again -
and upstairs both of us thought of a bed,
of a long perfect sleep
and the morning, every morning would from then on be different.
A wind out of nowhere went through us
like in winter long after midnight
following a railway track over the crest of the mountains,
standing there with snowflakes speckling the dry tortured nettles
and slowly filling our shirts,
a place so high and frozen
it looks like the summit up ahead is the ending of earth
and we'd go beyond it only to join the dead.
I remember as if I've always known it,
some stretch of track like that,
the stars collapsing and we had to run
and night holding us both
whirling and whirling
towards this place no one chooses.

* * *

I listen to the delicacy of a man
plucking threaded strings
in homage to the lost ones.
The music has gone down the street now,
moving beyond all of us -
following the street as it meanders towards the harbour.
A cloud passes, then another,
and the music, caught by the wind,
stands still a moment
in sunlight curdled by the late afternoon.
Outside the apartment block, a bird about to land,

its wings trembling wildly,
a sudden flurry of agitation
as if it was steadying itself
to enter the narrow altered world
of a different time.

Three days after I entered the city of earthly beauty
the war started.
The sky lifted villages in great dustclouds
and I walked all afternoon through a fine mist
that filtered the burnt skin.
Whirlwinds gathered the cries from remote landscapes
and they fell in glass slivers
across the throat of the river.
I took your body in my arms, my beloved,
I kissed your breasts, your belly and your armpits,
I brushed my tears against the curve of your womb
and when I rested there
all that had once been good on this earth
rose and surrounded me
with its fragrance of sweat and life.
For a little while I held my head against your skin
pausing to breathe as deeply as I could
and hold as long as I could
the soft stillness of your body.
As your hands stroke me and fed me into you
I didn't know what to offer you anymore.
The dark forces had come among us.
Outside in the Place de la Paix
a girl took a child's bottle and dipped it over and over in blood
and emptied it each time in the fountain of happiness.
All night and all the next morning you kept shivering
even though a great fire was burning
right outside the window of the twisted hotel
and hour after hour
more trees, tables, posters, shells of cars,
more boulevards, walls of buildings, more rails and lampposts
slid by themselves into the fire.
I tried to warm you with my hands
but you shivered through my sweat.
I held you not even knowing who I was
in the thin hotel that had broken from its moorings
like a strange ship floundering under stars.

In the cafe a green drink swirled in its glass
suddenly spontaneously seized
by the spinning of the world.
A hand lay open talking on the floor.
At the Brasserie des Beaux Arts

a last couple were dancing at four in the morning
when a cloud of sulphur came
and the stench of all the bombs dropped on other lands for a hundred years
exploded in a handful of almond blossoms
a girl had left on a table.
I reached for you in the darkness when you had gone
and your voice was in a small box
lifted by a flock of white birds
scattering at the end of the long corridor.
Your hands were searching for me when a window opened.
Full of tenderness your green eyes trembled.
My lips were crying into your mouth.
Hold me, you said.
Say my name, you said,
even if you don't mean it, even if it's not true.
With a pain I can't imagine
you fluttered beyond earth and air,
plunging from loneliness into darkest space.
When you had gone completely and I couldn't even
summon your eyes,
I knelt rocking, folding my arms
around your absence.

In the abandoned house
the faces in the photographs become white ash.
The hands, once joined together,
go their own way
like gloves turned inside out in altered space.
The smile the bride put on that day
enters empty mirrors, fades
like drops of mist against a hillside.
An infinite draining
peels away our hands our hair our skin -
rapidly we walk through fire.
A dark flame worms its way down the bride's dress
removing all of herself -
her body's almost pout, the precise way
her whole being leans towards life,
and the groom's ridiculously regimental stance
as if he at least could withstand any blast.

The gold frame of the photograph
catches the hall-light as a soldier turns it slowly -
a lampshade swims gloomily across the glass -
this man, this woman
and in the burning of the photos
it's as if everyone's body is burning.

* * *

Is this a portrait of marriage?
The bridegroom's face totally rapt, his eyes almost crying
yet his gaze fixed not on the bride, not even the other women,
but in the sky above.
As if intense love is always a looking up.
Both hands pluck the harp his eyes have forgotten.
And on the hill behind him
the twined garlands of marriage,
two sheets laid out, crumpled by future lovemaking,
two large womb-shaped bowls ripe and full.
Red drapery hangs from the tree
that they might enter into love clothed only in flame -
that their marriage be green of the earth,
red of passion, gold of divine silence.
And the two girls, bridesmaids perhaps, gaze attentive at him.
The snake is almost invisible. It curves in the grass.
The woman who has seen it stands transfixed -
as if, though some distance from it still,
she already surrenders to its bite
and welcomes it as singly as the husband
welcomes heaven in his gaze.
So that each tumbles into some chasm of the self,
precisely there
where all the symbols are of giving.

Did the painter mean this for me?
Where my sleep is one continuous dipping and floating
gasping for the breath of you.

Who are we? Where are we going?

That night you sat crying in the restaurant,
Help me, help me, you said,
and I didn't know what to say or do,
my kisses useless, our hands unable to save each other,
the rain outside falling enormous, constant.
What you held in your eyes, under your skin
was your death,
small and clear and unarguable.
I couldn't lift it from you
and as I listened and watched
and again and again
brushed your face with my lips,
your phone kept ringing
connecting you to a drowned continent
that you kept trying to hold
only each call died away from you

and when each voice stopped the pain throbbed more than ever.
You had wounded yourself again that afternoon
burning the soft skin between your elbow and wrist
and you blew a child's tear-moistened breaths across it
while you talked to me and the invisible others
in a vast abandonment I couldn't reach.
I took you to bed but that didn't help.
I would walk with you across the sky but that didn't help.
Beloved in your distant land,
your land of exile and of loss,
the drums of your Africa you played once
are stilled now
and all the slave memories your wounded body carries
and the chorus of birds you laid across bright tiles
are shattered in the dustclouds of this war
you re-enact upon your body
and that no one knows how to stop.

In the train carriage a man is writing a letter in Arabic:
that script you loved so much:
his hand curving an infinite line on the void.
My lover with green eyes,
my lover with hair white as the sands of the beaches that ring your island,
your words curve out against the void.
Ignoring the horizon's red-grey tinge
later we'll skip through the rain
and your fingers will find their way again under my clothes
as I kiss you,
our time running out by the seconds.

* * *

Asleep one night by your side
in that peace your presence gave me,
in a dream of cockatoos and burning lakes
we slipped past the vigilant glances of my parents
as they arranged again the house of sunlight and bright piano scales
death had woven for them on the summer lawn,
and on the fence that sealed our world
we met a sad-faced monkey
who sang us a strange guttural opera,
moving off above the branches of the forest,
forgetting even the trace of our astonished gaze.

Later, in a dream of hunters, I was standing at the bar
beside the stripped lovers in the bald nightclub.
No attendants, no waiters, no music
only on one wall the long screen of plastic icons,

stylized images of food, drink, a mouth to kiss,
a breast to suck,
and as my hand stroked each image
what I touched would appear in the air before me,
materializing on the plate of darkness
in this corridor where speech had gone -
the single process:
to want, to touch, to seize:
everything adding itself to the emptiness of the plates.

Stone for the hunter - for the magic of grasping.
Water for the lover - for the mystery of vanishing.

So the nightowls of the automated cafe
each alone
filling their bodies from the touchscreens
with later a capsule bunk,
some computerised sex, a videogame
and the endless arrival of the world.

Have we always been in the lost cave,
night filling an earth lit only by rarest fires,
lying back on a rockledge below the picture gallery of longings
where creatures named and hunted for their wide leaps
crowd meekly together to nibble at our sleep?
Listen,
the girl whispered, guiding me to the screen,
I will leave you here, this is all I can do.
And I noticed how old we were, all of us old
as if the formula - to see, to want, to touch -
had made us all old,
the dreamers of unlimited possession.
And the cafe plunged forward
dragging the winds of the universe in its wake.

* * *

What is it that you saw when you came back from death?
Whatever wounded you
left you these hands that write and paint.
I think of how birds can fly
because they live in the wrong time compared to us.
The patchwork of winter sustains their ballet.
I will place my hand on the table before me.
Place your hand on the wall near you
and you will feel me.
Don't be afraid that it is cold.
An immense space even birds can't cross divides us.

Let the warmth in my voice
caress you.

* * *

One week before on the night flight,
stumbling into darkness, while two hemispheres unravelled
in the small wars, the half-concealed genocides
blossoming just outside the cabin window,
I dozed and dozed, waking later among crowds of tourists
in the marble mausoleum of a transit lounge
to see a detainee out of Africa,
his linked hands raised as they dragged him onto his plane,
his eyes brushing us all, fixing us all
with the bewildered certainty
of his passage back to death.

* * *

In the words in the writing
in the strange curve of the unknown script
left to unravel below the moss on an ancient wall
we hunt what we can't find:
the single light of the railway station at 4 am
where the train shuddered into silence
and your hand woke me, Get down here,
and we started off down roads lit by mist
and sculpted frozen shrubs almost leaned out towards us
as we walked hand in hand across the deserted city
and yet now when I think of you
you seem to be not my lover, but my daughter
lost in some enormous fog that won't lift.

The light from the doorway is presence.
It floods towards us.
Suddenly it has the gold-rimmed form
of a kindly, slightly crotchety man,
an artist, Vermeer perhaps
or Velazquez or Nicolas Poussin,
as he might have been remade by chance
through the random jumbling of all atoms
in an alternate world governed by other galaxies.
And as the door behind him stays open
we see his face tilt towards us
and his brush is silently
mixing the hues our earth has yet to discover.

Why do you want to paint us?
We are going down into darkness.
What draws you to our shapes?

With the road lost again where the buildings loom,
if not a painter from another galaxy
who could be saving us?
Beyond the coastlines
out there in the oceans that separate us
there plunges and spurts among icy waters
some creature so large we could be its dreams,
our puny viciousness
some inflammation of its skin that will subside quite easily
when the delicate skein of another million years
lies tangled among swaying algae
and the tall spikes of budding corals.

Since we will be no more
what does it matter?
You asked me that night, "Why must I die?"
Over and over it was your question.
It caught somewhere between our tongues as we kissed.
It writhed like a third partner
slithering between our arms,
stinging us back from the edges of pleasure.
"I have done nothing wrong, why must I die?"
The death imprinted deep inside your body
was growing every minute like a child
whose voice kept breaking from your lips
in the same bewildered words.
And there was no answer I could make -
nothing that could help,
not conversation not kisses not lovemaking,
and yet you gave me that night
all of the earth in your hands.

"I don't want to be famous after I die", you said,
interrupting whatever I might have been thinking,
breathing the deep honey of your body.
"I just want to live."
And you turn your face from the painter's eye
as from the cruelty of the lens.
Yet the painter understands your reluctance.
He erases the biographies.
The painter has lost all our names:
he is more interested in that moment
when a man stoops to tie his shoelaces, there at the streetcorner,
or in the vein-darkened hand of the woman, in the savagery of her wrist
fighting back the tangles of her hair.

They have come with a scanner to issue people names
and with plastic cards to give people back their identity
or let them choose one
or invent one
now the world has gone away from them.
They are building a metro station
there at the frontier camp,
there at the highest point of the mountain ridge
where all the rivers of the earth have their origin.
APEIRON XENODOCEION
Unlimited Hotel / Enormous Refuge for Strangers
they have called it,
that the language of Orpheus
may take this pain and transform it.

Not so easy our lives.
Wind scours the empty rooms,
the tables, the chairs, the camp beds,
all the refuse let fall behind the buildings.
A cup of coffee was burning on the table
where it had stayed on alone -
the afternoon gathering the uncertain
insignia of rainclouds,
the city you had walked through so many times
and that I would soon leave forever
and lightly brushing your eyes,
a burnt text of sadness almost,
the Arabic newspaper left abandoned on the table opposite.

A kiss - a world destroyed - all taken back.

On the chalk banks
where the snake of the river slithers rapidly towards the sea
the children release their kites
fluttering and rising over everything.
A single line stood on the ancient wall,
its curved script dotted with interrogation.
You could read nothing
yet you felt its presence.
The house that had fallen once
would fall again.
This graceful line travelling
from right to left across the void,
moving crabwise backwards to its source,
all its flourished refinement now only
a hand marking the death tally?

Beyond the snowline

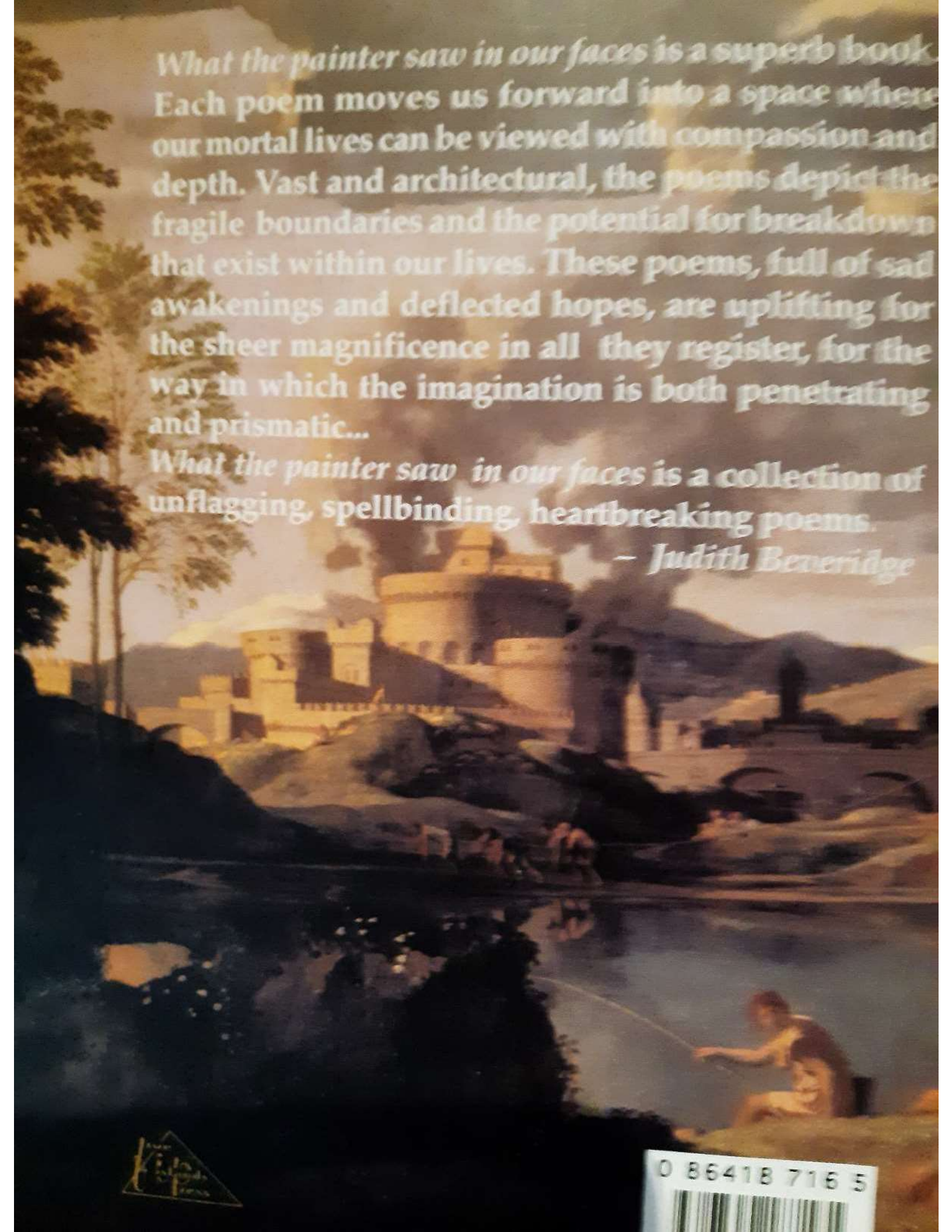
stakes mark out an ancient vineyard reclaimed by crows.
Maybe you walk there now among the crows
on the high edges where rivers begin -
maybe it's the same river the artist was painting
with the world in flames on the other bank, some tributary
that later will carry old ramparts and smoking villages
in its depths
resting silent a moment here
where your hermitage is hidden.
Your motor stopped,
you step among rocks by the roadside,
your jacket hunched around you in the cold,
breathing a cigarette as your eyes frame the scene
in one last photo.

That night at a table across from us,
fresh from his wheeling and dealing
the businessman carousing two women,
his swaggering fascism clipped with exploits in sadism,
glares mockingly across at us,
the two of us thin and haggard as junkies,
shaking and weeping the cold
of our last night together on this earth,
and the women beside him half embarrassed half fascinated
by the sly outrageous crassness of his taunts
and none of them knowing, as they nursed
the long green twilight of their swirling drinks,
that the glass had already shattered,
its thousand fragments flung wide
some of them lodging deep inside us,
your face already come open like a flower,
your hands opening into my hands,
slivers of the mirror of this world
scarred into our throats,
nicking traces of remote stars
at the turning of the elbow,
caressing a red line halfway up your thigh
where my lips would brush against it and weep

and as we walked out of the restaurant into night
leaning our woundedness against each other
rain was falling with its debris of other lives.
The war seemed quiet that night -
only its banners dismantled by the wind
shredded themselves around the spikes
of desecrated flagpoles.
In a shopfront window a lone TV talking to itself
showed other villages torched and burning
there beyond the river.

A tiny cockroach
almost not quite born
mechanically stuttered its first shiverings of antennae
along the rim of a drain.
That night - every night those months

Everything indicated that the end had come.
The river had packed and freighted
its cargo of survival.
Water, once spoken to,
no longer boiled.
The women had moved their tents beyond the snowline.
The crows assembling pecked at broken glass.
Fragments of death like stone
lay in the water.
The sky, cradled its whole life
by the twin arms of river and ocean,
shivered at the caress of stone and glass.
I watch you leave forever from your other world
only a little less distant than the moon,
the last time of closing a suitcase,
the last time of your hand in its mechanical tiredness
grasping soap,
the last time for the pressure of light from the open hotel window,
its shutters drawn back against grey morning,
light that is flooding you for the last time,
holding your face with all its pain
for the last time
yourself not knowing as you fold the clothes
as the time in your travelling clock runs out
as the room leaves you
yourself hesitant, confused and tender
in all the light that sheathes your body
fragrant with the lovemaking of all your life
as you go to the window and the day explodes
shattering you, shattering its fragments
into you
and the world ends.



What the painter saw in our faces is a superb book. Each poem moves us forward into a space where our mortal lives can be viewed with compassion and depth. Vast and architectural, the poems depict the fragile boundaries and the potential for breakdown that exist within our lives. These poems, full of sad awakenings and deflected hopes, are uplifting for the sheer magnificence in all they register, for the way in which the imagination is both penetrating and prismatic...

What the painter saw in our faces is a collection of unflagging, spellbinding, heartbreaking poems.

— Judith Beveridge



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