

Penn

by Sara Berkeley

Raven Arts Press, Dublin



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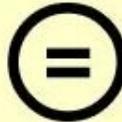
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Penn

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To my parents

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Seasons

I wish you would come now —
before the long days, the evenings
receding in a fearful, breathless hush
of heat and falling suns, laying the layers
of day before they sleep,
grudging even the flimsy dusk
that billows with a sigh from my
turned head, and, brazen,
showing their true colours at five
or before.

I wish you would
bring the round music, thought and vision,
full circle of your name.
Long vowel annunciation that takes plenty of time
rolling from a mountain top
gathering with it all the consonants of dust and snow,
the fresh forked prints of deer
leaving the clay bright in their tracks
wet prints of panic or a near miss —
the shot that sends your name in avalanche
down quick winter slopes
crushing the buried gorse, spurting echoes
in episodes from the mountain sides;
and when you come,
we will scale the fissures of no man's season.

Everything Green

Seems like this day is winding on and on,
shedding things as it goes
down towards night.
Everything green
is pouring out of crevices,
when I go out the heavy boughs
bunch their blossom into tight fists,
hailing down the mouth of earth.
I am asking green to heal me,
or in some gesture
mutely to acknowledge me,
but the wind is changing colours
back and forth, somehow preserving purity
of green, on the top, and on the underside,
green closing her throat
to my tentative desires.
Am I not worth that one sign?

curious george

its a long day thursday and curious george looks at it sideways
the sun is hot but the wind blows it all over crazy daisys field
when winter comes and the sky is bitterly blue
 then flocks of hungry waxwings come back to cirrus bay
curious hungry george is watching cloudbanks happening
in a lonely windfilled sky there are no questions
in winter skies the rain comes when the clouds are hard and smooth
 then curious raindrenched george is quietly glad
all along the ridge on otis mountain
windfilled reeds are whistling and bristling flattened to the east
shy otis mountain barebacked in the wind
 curious georges mountain and he smiles when he hears its name
trees that are quiet in the sunshine
square off a field that belongs to a widowed maid
the rest of the world is wild but the field is sleepy
 and curious sleepy george is still, watching the sky
the long day thursday is nearly ending
and all over pennypies island theres a thousand island pines
dressed in many splendid nightblue shadows
 but curious shadowswept george is afraid of their trembling boughs
rain will be long days washing the summersoaked mountains
and later on when ice is dry on the windfed reeds
otis mountain with darkly slumber through sleep in the face of winter
 and curious winterwarm george will be smiling again

Penn

I woke this morning and Penn was there.
With him I walk barefoot on broken glass
and swing sideways from the breeze
spreading the summer dust.
Breakfast with Penn is a shady corner of the day,
he watches the floating orange peel, I tell him lies,
like children do.
Penn gets in his car and drives
and when the dust has settled
it is clear and noon and I am drinking
cold liquid by the pool. Can we
cross the world by Tuesday?
I say it's hot today. Penn thinks so too.
Together, apart, we swallow
tastings of the day. They slip down easily.

And down the strand on Saturdays
the grasses stripe young lovers
(we are not watching
but our eyes burn anyway)
and beach-long waves sift around
stories of heartbreak and of calm.

It is evening. Penn sleeps
and I become much older
with this late shaking of the leaves.
I have promised I'll die easily. Penn
says I never miss my cue.
Through the gratings of the evening
he gets on his bike and rides,
and in the small, receding shadows of the day
the wheels turn in a loose, metal kind of grin.

Crossing I

I saw a horse's madness in this street today:
the whole afternoon becomes his tangled reins,
hot midday stillness splintered by his madness,
like a lord he writhes and rears,
in every frantic leap a hundred struggling colts are thrown from the womb,
strange harmony of lunacy and reason
as the walls of stares break before him like matchwood,
tread and tumble; he will not spare our fragile restrictions,
a circle of frenzied vaulting
and he has marked this street forever.
But something breaks even above the mad horse froth and rolling eyes,
sweet melody of sounds and sighs
as he breaks against the spitting cobbles
and the dying afternoon loosens its white anger grip.
This world deals so capably with death
this street does not tremble in taking one of its own.

Crossing II

City.

Below me, on your face, the spheres of light shape the darkness,
but all night's bustle does not hide the silence,

for death has a silence that we smother with useless words.

Our street's silence boasts nothing of the afternoon
but one phantom, who rears in shadow.

Do not saddle my phantom king,

no spurs can bring his shivering flanks to obedience.

I saw his madness in this street today

and now, the whole of my life is written on cobbles,
carved out by each victorious leap of the eloquent hooves.

Tonight the wind will carry far the sounds of afternoon,
and tomorrow no horse will leap or fall upon the cobbles,

as this one reached from slavery to mastery,
the bright day tearing the hooves as he crossed.

Out In The Storm

This storm explodes while it is still dark,
I have no light to watch my flight
From here on up – riding, riding my storm.
She blows the sky aside for me to pass
And from her back the ground looks
Faraway. Rainswept. Black.
A coiled coastline writhes in a swirl of sea,
Lightning spills yellow road across the fields.
She swoops. Riding storms is fun.
She bucks and rears like real horses.
Who is old in her timeless gale?
She blows a tunnel through the years.
Winded words from the doubling trees
As she gallops past. Riding storms is easy!
Gliding on a tide of rain –
Oaks are not afraid of rain.
Time to bring her home, my storm
But reining her is hard.
And long after she has bolted to another sky
Below me waits the road, yellow in the silence
And the oaks that are never afraid.
Driving storms is fun until they crash.

Brainburst

Sad, tremulous light
stands shyly before intrepid shadow;
the integrity of darkness
hides not but washes me –
I am too bright. It is making me cry out.
Walls topple towards me but never fall
and red cars
smash green cars
again and again, though I scream a warning,
always slow smashing through the pinhole of a pupil
which will not look away,
rivets do not swivel. So I rhyme
to comfort: an odd wish for confidence in metre.
I tick,
and soon it is no longer I who am bright,
who cry out.

The Flowers

I do not belong to this night,
nor to this bed, no doubt given to some child
in her third year when the cot was worn.
I hear her creak the bedsprings,
that feverish child who owns the world around her.
She keeps me armslength from her night
as if it is only a beginning –
but I turn over, wary of visions as I am.
The darkness eats the darkness in here.

I am a travelling keeper of time,
chocolate samples, sales, and shaving in the traffic jams at nine,
and when I leave this hotel in the morning
I'll leave the room to the undivided silence it desires.
Someone else
can torture the bedsprings at three fifteen
and curse the sticking window;
better their oaths than my sighs
and shifts at three and five,
unmerciful hours in a city hotel.

When I cannot sleep
I always see the same flowers,
remember how I lost my soul
that time when they blossomed in the moving night
and after the flowers
tinkle the chocolate conversations of the day
and sales, and souls, and shaving in the undivided silence.
And when this night disowns me
I will count time for a little more.

Four Minutes

God, God this waking fear.
While I sleep in my bed at night
Sister America
stares, and screams her thoughts aloud
across the vacant streets
of her crowded cities, awake and boiling
as I tremble in dreams
crowded, too, with light –
with sounds that rise towards the wall,
pricking the drum
that beats more wildly as they swell.

Sometimes the sounds speak slow rhythms
to time my uneven dreams
while night flits in the shadowed corners
of my room – filled with words
that I have spoken. They lick the walls like flame.
and Sister America
(she who knows deserts
and fog
and the blown wolf cry that streaks the night with sound,
the primal crying of the forest
and the dawn)
calls her gods
but they are useless beasts
who crash the skies with open fists
while I, not quite awake, await the beating silence
of the last four minutes.

Revival Night

Hard and hot in her room, way down in the brittle heat
where no birdsong reaches her,
her wordless cries shock the sleeping night;
names and numbers draw back
and she sees nothing in the paper gloom.

Coiled grief curling her limbs
she cries out, making the mirrors crack
and water spout, waking the walls;
but still the stubborn earth will not move
or open wide enough for her to fall.
Outside the blowing sand bleeds,
staining the shadows red.

Long after the last ocean drains
she lets a nightdress make her pure again
and, warm and tender in the healing light,
loses hours in a rippling sleep,
waking with washed eyes, searching behind the crusted lids,
she hugs the morning, her fingers
working funny shadows in the silver light
like small impatient flickings of a silver knife.

Agatha

Cold as a churchyard, folding her beret
Agatha breaks the shell.
Composed and shaped of ordinary dust,
well-planned and finely balanced,
she likes it near the edge
where she can walk – she's not afraid,
so sure she can see straight.
Walks to the end of walking,
she strings words and shakes the raindust
from her curls – Agatha
can't remember what she's fighting for,
notes shed their octaves in her inner ear.

All her time is swirling down the drain
with leaves and bits of eddying soul
while Winter folds into the ruffles on the lake.
She thinks maybe she runs in last year's race
and finishes late, with three days of darkness
warping the moon; Agatha hums a piano tune,
she's not so
very plain, she'll get washed away.

Agatha –
how do you explain
stepping lightly in the dancehall,
playing no false play,
all your time is
Agatha
running down the drain.

I Am Lying Where I've Fallen

I am lying where I've fallen
and I am not proud
of night swinging crazily to and fro,
for the sands are swallowing over my head
and I know the hidden rock.

Straight as the stone is cut
the shadow falls,
and you, in an ugly mood,
say the soul must know what it is looking for
and carry me under one arm, roots dangling.

Yours is that hard mercy –
blood and bones and spirit of mine
kicked in the womb against living,
and kick all my life against
so many different things that could be my death.

We go back and we come forwards
in the bitter knowledge of perfection;
the pendulum of spent rage
hung still when I left your circle
and the flesh healed as though I had never been.

I still lie where I have fallen,
in the dust and clay where you've been
running rings around a mountain foot.
Looking just the same
you come,
Oh you
you
you.

— the glass bubble —

1

the glass bubble drifts a little across the lawn,
there are butterflies and things of a summer day,
and the waterdrops are drunk with heat
making the shadows stretch
over by the playing courts
where couples pick-pock in white,
the shorts so short, the high, unbending thighs,
only the thin survive, framed in the light.

2

the glass bubble wanders, aimless in the heat
close to the tinkling of couples drinking tea
under those white umbrellas on the stone flags.
their feet rest lightly on the ground,
their napes just touching the chairs,
they chatter and sometimes they let fly
mouthprints that stay like kisses in the air.
so small, so inaudible — a tiny bubble sigh!

3

music swills and slips like water to the rim,
the still breath of the bow,
the clear, unblinking pools where a fly stirred the river
spreading outwards on a butterfly's wing.
the sun frills the clouds
and sharpens the mountain-points,
real hands dangle limply from the warm, white arms,
real knuckles curve from the dry river-bed joints.

4

the glass bubble drifts a little across the lawn
— dew on the grass in all the footprints —
sits on a patio chair, letting in air
and out air, thinking of balloons on snow,
thinking of the ruffles of a feather fan
to keep cool, thinking of white on black,

and when a ball tocks out,
reaching down to throw it back.

5

the glass bubble treads the cold lava flow of love;
with their embrace she will receive
a little glass heat, she smells the burning
as it used to be when the flow was molten
and lawn and courts rolled up and back,
a little dizzy and a little afraid,
and not understanding the nature of her search,
she is borne downstream into the shade.

Chrysalis

I find you washed up on your own shore
among the small stones dragged up in reluctant shoals
with the pull and swing of the water still in your veins
and the brittle shells whispering secrets bright in your inner ear.
It must be close to four by the way the shadows fall and settle,
should I tap the glass web that shrouds your limbs
to plumb the silence of your coming,
or wait by the chrysalis for your soul to emerge
with wet and crumpled wings — a flickering, frightened thing,
shedding the hours like loose skins,
while you slip dreamlessly through the layers of day
and the wide earth stretches in unbroken song,
yawns a sigh to touch your folded limbs,
keeping the clouds idly at your sleeping fingertips.

At evening when the rain glances off the hours
and the shy friends gather in the dark,
duty bends me smiling to the earth —
your trail blazes nakedly in the open sky,
casting your shadow to drag the deep
where minnows tremble in their quick flight,
yet such a thin slip of life scarcely parts the air
and letting me put my two hands into your side
you still ask across the aching silence —
now are you full of pride?

In St. Etheldreda's

You do that small thing.
Know nothing, think nothing,
where the unlit stone
supports dead prayer of seven centuries
massed in drifts against muted glass.

The slow beat of awakening consciousness
is the one you move to,
and climbing, memory on memory,
remain unsure of the presence, three-personed, whole,
which moves to your side after so long,
and doubt, and climb back down.

In St. Etheldreda's
the echoes are prolonged
and purple is worn,
brushing up against the candle flame,
and you have been close as you will ever be
to an admission that the flame,
that same flame, burning,
is causing you pain.

Although you know nothing
and may soon stop wanting
the reassurance of feeling again,
for now, you do that small thing —
understanding nothing, believe all,
and the certainty is awful, reverential, calm.

Unseen

The only blind man in the gallery
is missing Whistler, Braque, Matisse;
tells me not to try the colours out
on such forced memory, but asks instead
that I be part of his absurd joy
on the street, the open street,
because down his mind
he sees the tiny soldiers charging —
it's the Light Brigade —
and somehow
the colours in Still Life On A Mantlepiece
begin to fade.
I have no words for such things anyway.

He says the city
is forcing her skull through the flesh of streets,
lays a finger on the pulse of coming trains
(that rumble is the dark grind of suture upon suture)
and long before warm air stirs the jointed stick
he has heard them cry their sweet whistle
along the veins, under his feet the white bone
shivers into fissures
as he steps quickly in the train to take him home.

Land Movement: North Africa

Nine sixteen strikes a sudden chill in every pore,
delving, in the time it takes a wing to cross the sun,
down from the sky — The End
rides up behind on a soft breath, gets reined in,
hangs fire in the gritted shadows,
and I see something laid open from beneath a stone,
some crawling, wriggling thing,
some four-fingered hand
curled where the dust colours thin to an even brown
and it was hidden where I looked before
it
was
under
the
rush and falling air,
blown in the flight,
in the great wingless flap of air,
an opening where no opening was meant —
and the stones list uneasily in the glare.

Easter 1944

A thin, metal engine-hum vibrates my sleep
deep in the channel like stones the lies
lie and they settle where I step
beyond the reservoir of sleep
or out of water — so, like stranded fish
who stare and twitch, History gasps
the fighting air of five angled, war-bled years.

Clear of the trees, and down
to where the stone sits, humped,
rope grains in the dusty, life-old pores
your house is empty
and I can hardly believe
the sweat-cracking, light-splitting granite skin
that blows to on a grey breeze.

To the tomb lured in, and you have left
the woven cloths, one piece from neck to hem,
but I know the feet are in many parts,
you will trail blood wherever you walk,
be it down the tunnelled trenches of my sleep,
I will not follow — my desert's prophet sits behind a desk
or stands erect on platforms where the crowd roars.

Seeding

The shuttle works onwards from winter's backward draw,
springtide washing driftwood high on her sighblown beach;
the woman waits, tight-limbed,
time-dried, for her babies to begin.

Other circles weave revolving arcs into her day,
splitting a pea-pod — the tiny explosion
of ripe, tense seeds, spiralling back along the wind-curved edge,
the floating time seeds of the dandelion
and burdocks fuzz the grass, sycamore on a dizzy wing,
false fruits of her pangless labour.

A myriad of scattered grains
when the stamen bends with belly full
and swelling buds listen
to the easy breath of blood-veined leaf
in the rhythmic black-blue, black-blue night
and tenuous quivering light.

Wider circles weave their shadows on the earth,
high on the brow, wind-dried, hardly bruised
with handling — the fruit of no rain.

Early morning draws water from the driest eyes
in crop and field, waiting woman drinks from thin air
tasting dry in her mouth, the seed quiet
deep in her virgin earth where winter leaves
the trees bare.

Foetus

Surely some magnificence must sister this gulf sorrow,
I throw back some covers from my eyes
and still there is rain.

Round, round foetus, alive in tendril hesitancy,
who would you know when you were born in the gentle morning?
I loved already the first sky I had painted, green streaked
for you, and silver — with cloud.

I remember the light-spilling sea as it looked last night,
I know each cleft in the hanging rock we climbed;
the rock knew the child,
it knows you when you tremble like that,
carries the tremors deep to its own earth-cradling core
until the grasses and small weeks shake.

And if they want to know whose child you are
let them find the light as I left it last night,
not the circles or the lines that say on paper
of him and the way he wished for me and how he never broke.
Of me: of the mornings when I let the fire splash light on my watching face
before I knew
of you, small, so small, seashell. You foetus.
I am losing hold on the tumbleweed hope,
loosening grip on that long morning when you were to be born.
And if you could ask,
I would say, well, it is this way —
When you would grow you might have seen men shoot
you might have asked me mummy why do they shut their eyes
and I might have said
they do not want to see his face before they shoot.

If only someone long ago had asked
I could have said with certainty that you were mine
but do not make me think of the tight bud fist
or the funny way it clings like curling petals, tipped,
because I cannot call you mine
or see the fist before I shoot.

Coming To

I wake from some distant place of dread
(is everything spinning sadly out of gear?)
but you like sleeping and I'm sure you dream
(how fine to build a house without foundations
and coolly scar a treeline with the roof)
coiled shyly about the bed
you are a brute, lunging, wondering does he bruise;
sleep drags this admission from your defenceless form
calling me cousin, sister, wife.

Over at the easel
colours have wrapped themselves on canvas,
fierce in the patterns of our dreams,
a picture two lives deep.

Learning to Count

Sounds in the dim washed room
like the sound in a mother's throat as she takes her baby back;
the music of blossom, and sight
from the stars always yellow over where she lies
in one, fine, expansive gesture of sleep.
The child whose hand I couldn't let go
even when we found sticks and things with wings.
We threw them and they flew.

She learns at last to be silent and be still
and I no longer follow where she sleeps, running through the dreams
that came so fast — dreams like white metal
bright up from the fire. In one, we ran so far
past wet ground with the wet brown trees leaning on us
so dripping grey and I thought She should be at school.
But the best bit, the most frightening,
was after all the running when the wet lanes were past —
an angular house with the walls marching round us
and a woman at the door. Her apron was the only white thing;
like on canvas the afternoon dripped brown and grey,
even though that woman had roses above her door.

It is falling cold outside.
I think of women who have roses above their doors
and weep into their aprons.
Those are the ones with sons who always died in the war,
the photographs burning into firelit sideboards
while up from the flames they come, as young sons do.

Over there, she sleeps through the shrouded night,
she blooms with such pretty grace, snapping in my hand
like the daffodil, dusting my fingers with the dry powder of her lust,
curving up from the earth as she will,
neither drooping nor withered. But now she sings nothing at all
but the shy, resilient beat of the nursery rhymes from school.

The Judas Flower

The sun purples the low end of the day,
he obediently lights the room.
Here is my chance
to stroke his hair
and touch the soft, round collar-ends.
But tonight he is staying very still
to separate the restlessness of limbs
from the fearful, early stirrings of a sense within;
his clear skin so easily fingerprinted
by the blundering of my hands,
and though I want to ask him for another chance
I say instead it is time to end his play.
His eyes obliquely roam the familiar walls
burning the air in a delicate, suffuse way.

My son already knows
the cord is cut and tied,
the liquids of birth long dried.
He tries in a childish game to take narrow breaths,
restrict the rise and falling of his chest.
Without looking, I know that it will stir again,
hold out until the last and then
reach up and out and back in the ceaseless draw of life;
it's a suffocating, impotent, leaden-legged flight,
and he lights up my eleventh hour,
my son, my Judas flower.

He Drew Back Always

When he dived in water
the ripples spread out,
out to the ground we stood
and I suppose we thought
how heavily he breathed when night was down,
how he was the perfect son,
and then
something in him was shot far wide
and they said sometimes you can read the sign
in the pattern of dropped sticks;
tried to make out the fault lay
not in the way he was shaped
but in the way
a star warped its orb
long before we thought of love.

And his eyes would way
that air mustn't torture us the same way
when I asked why
he hid his face
walking the North Strand on Saturdays.
Whether the fault lay
in air or sound
or in the way
dropped sticks hit the ground,
he drew back always
showing the screaming bones
and I had to lead him home.

All this
because a pair of swallows crossed the sun
as he was born
or on the day he was begun.

To A Sister

When she is little they pass her from hand to hand,
moulding the soft clay,
knotting rhythms into the hardening limbs,
they lead her down to water
where the animals drink at dawn,
drawing from the tightening strings
a symphony of youth.

They have taught her to poise
in the massive forward motion of the day
and she grows, a midnight red,
trailing the day behind,
the years within her tumbling round
to make sand of the rock and stone,
until, through the steel-tempered night she passes
into the marble arms of fear.

To A Brother

Born of the dizzying flame,
and rocked in this woman's arms,
with the womb still warm in his mind,
breath is a secret held tight between finger
and thumb, spinning something timeless
from a space inside.

When once he stands in the open looking up,
sees the grey and lilac lift
and the city beyond, teeming over the falls
into the night below,
the storm will be a welcome rush of power
and, feeling strange in this new, tight skin,
he will understand the open flower.

Sehnsucht

Against the bars
you struggle to exist
moving round the shallows
till the urge to strike out to the deep
sends ripples to the floodgates in my head.

I feel the brittle steps of a shadowed dance
like delicate piano play upon my skin
the unwritten of, the undrawn,
you pirouette beyond the abandoned chair.

We tremble along the edge
of time in a memory where the air is thin.
Old, forgotten planets murmur briefly into view
and our distant earth whittles rings into the deep,
spinning webs to net our imagined past,
the slope of a skate on the frozen lake,
the fields, the stick-sprite trees,
light imprisoned round your face — those taut days
blowing funnels of crisp steam
that spilled into the freezing air
and your glance would lope like rabbits across a ditch.

Too shy to crowd the memories with words,
you linger before the beckoning chair
and though I weep beyond the stillness of my face,
your colours melt to sepia,
the untrodden on, the whole,
and the spirit leans
from an open-wounded, cut-throat breeze.

Poem

My name is pencilled on a solid rock,
on the underside,
where winds cannot catch and tear it off.

I scored the letters
with an arrowhead
on man's uncomprehending brow.
I caught his first word
and moulded the warm word
and let it go.

I walked the long mile to the earth's edge
to stare into the conquerable.
There, on the world's ragged rim,
my name is flying
on a white flag
and it flowers in a hundred soldiers' mouths,
they speak it as they say
'Before the war —'
and mumble it in fever wards,
it flutters on a thousand sterile walls.

I read my name in an open fire
so I took a flame
and twisted it
and threw it back
to burn the evidence to a pale ash,
the colour of man's.

Song

Yesterday I heard your song of being no longer dead.
You sang to earth three times
and hearing no answer
you sang to me instead,
opening a silent drawer full of good things.

The sharp pain
was folded there among the scarves
and fluttered lightly to the bedroom floor
let fall unseen
as I became many childish things
before the mirror — Empress, Princess, Queen.
The perfect image came of wanting it,
of course you would allow me vanity
and a little pride.
I was thirteen and three-quarters when you died.

You, in a crisis,
always threw a wide expanse
between you and the nightmare visions
crossing the horizon,
a camel train in a constant desert,
there the narrow tunnels,
there the great heights,
but though you allowed me vanity
and that little pride,
you also threw me from your refuge by your side.

Yesterday I sang your song of being no longer dead.
I sang,
and sang again most loudly in my distress,
they were three cries to earth,
each without answer.
The answer comes from wanting it
and I have never stopped wanting,
so I sang to you instead.

Death in a Stranger's Head

Four years since you
laid your hand on the wicker gate
coming with a half-child's face
as close as you dared,
looking to me for reason
having died in a lover's head somewhere.

And I —
I saw a running light and describing it said
It is love without beginning or end,
it is the tightest circle round the sun
and you will thrive in the memory of no-one.

But having died in a stranger's head
you were looking for the moist earth,
the silence of burial,
and it was not reason
saying here was a man, coming
unbound to a nub of pain
from a lover's unopened door,
nor was it reason
dictating that you should come to me for more
of this troubled shame.

Four years since the night
I slept, while you were torn apart,
questioning whether the elements really were
air, fire, water, love, earth.

And when you came wearily to my bed
I felt that you were hot to the bare soles
and later I heard you in your sleep,
you said no, no.

From a Boat

I see all things from a small boat,
unmoved, in still water, with the coast slipping by,
and you, twisting round to see
the soft shape of waves
chalking a cliff
up through the blind grass.

And I would miss the small sounds,
the way a laugh would echo
when there was no call,
and the slight latch sound
breaking some thin membrane at our front door.

Your small wrists tightly bound
you are putting on ashes,
climbing up the sheer face,
sending showers of small stones
down to where I am
smoothing the lie of a wingless feather.

We were the first to see summer
fling a stockinged ankle on the land.
Thin Autumn rocks us gently on her way ashore,
loaded down with the first frost
and a barrel of something warm
weighing down the whole bow.

A fishhook dangles from the cliffs,
the bite in black-gold sun,
and the sea blazes on and on —
Yes, I would miss
the way a laugh would echo
when there was no call
and the slight latch sound
breaking some thin membrane at our front door.

The Return

I

I have no arrow to send,
blind prophetess, quivering flesh
over acres of scorched land,
down paths of hungry fire.
I have no symbol of return.

II

Running, I am warrior, sun and earth,
shadow hugging the cropped grass,
burnt at an angle down pale slopes
and being no bearer of flame
draws my skin into tight curves.

III

Then in the quiet green
echo the laws of this difficult return,
laws of the family gathered darkly round
and how, by some sudden grace, are
all the proud men brought down.

IV

Over my home
birds begin their slow fall
caught in a cross-breeze
or a change of winds
and fat drips on the fires of welcome.

Cycling Back

A sense of your name fills the place,
he has left the bicycle quietly weeping in the hall
and climbs the stairs—a dead umbrella, dead cigarettes
litter the room where he thinks you are.

A sense of the recent past
spreads its stain on a blank page
where the four white letters of your name
throw stiff shadows across the day.

Your absence sends out feelers along the walls
he is standing, picture-bright, framed in the door;
you had filled up every space with so much self
that the empty air rusts down in flakes.

Your skin smelt of honey and salt
and he searched for some meaning to your dreams,
sure he could rest in their familiar arms
but they had the aimlessness of wild things,

and when he reached out to still
the restless, yearning movement of your neck,
you recoiled in a tight spring; a shower
of vibrant, blue triangles sent across the room.

He is cycling back to any age,
pedalling blindly, dimly aware
that he cycles away from an empty room
where he thought you were.

Oranges

The orange colour fills the veins,
the orange threads the bones,
she glides into the driest of my dreams,
that boat with oranges on the canal
cleaving the water with her orange-laden bows
through great June nights. She does not come in little pieces,
she is tidal, unified and smooth.
You lay your hands on them then—like two round, firm breasts,
the orange glowing in the veins;
no miracle emerges, only the prickling of skin leaving the flesh
or oranges that slip quietly by the banks
from Fairways where the meadows bob
and the opiate afternoons drip like ice.

Someone has found a church, someone else has thrown away a stone
as easily cast as chosen, like oranges
with their clamorous colour, with their voice—
wrung from a supermarket trolley
or picked from the boat where the others bubble
to fill the gaps; and the ear is ripe
for the water-throb of the engines,
sensing the barge loom,
hideous in night's gaslight, staid
when morning's feathers settle placidly to noon
and white milk curdles with each of the orange drops.

Hejira

Have you left the silent bed
or is a shadow hovering,
trapped within a life or girders and the grey pools
reflecting sins and dimpled with the sleet
on iron, snow-dressed days?

When the sheet is drawn
and you hide, naked, from a bitter reproach
I am rocked, petals blown,
the world begins by swallowing me whole
and spitting out the yellow aftertaste of grief.
Ghosts already crowd the corners of the room.

They have shorn the fields since then,
rising like stubbled jaws
grey-massed, grimacing, and no birds alighting for the grain.

You will never let warm air play on your
bare arm again.

The Parting

1.

You lower my emotions, sealed in their casket,
to the sea bed, knowing I have nothing to say;
paring down to presence and absence
the sad abstractions of our last day.
My throat grows heavy between your hands,
my heart gets tossed away.

2.

A shadow is working hard against the night,
working furiously on a morning wall,
the shadow cast by fifteen beams of light.
I am a child's bright stone
longing to be the weapon of your fight.
I am the fifteen beams coming straight down.

3.

In brief moments when a nerve winks out
it seems as though you will always be there,
the heart kicks—and then you are removed,
you are climbing down the angry white stairs,
you are the shadow resting on my skin
and we, a double splash of oars into the still air.

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