

Attitudes of Prayer

after Beethoven, Quartet in C# minor, Op 131

One hundred and thirty-one approaches
to the problem of God.

Imagine it:

over and over
rehearsing what you don't know,
soundlessly.

Letting yourself transcribe
what no-one's said before –
in your greatcoat,
in the freezing study
where you take bitter tobacco, and coffee.

Occasionally, through the pall of tinnitus, hearing –
what?

*I feel as if heaven lay close upon the earth
and I between them both,
breathing through the eye of a needle.*

Early December.
Grey on grey, grey annealing grey,

except light, catching the high
notes of a fiddle
(*quick quick said the bird*):
Your breath
like smoke on the window.

*

Light glints on a door-handle,
draws parallels on the carpet.

When you were a child
those voices in another room seemed far off.

The Plunge

Grace is the law of the descending movement.
– Simone Weil

A cry bursts like a wing-beat:

among clicks and whirrs of language
your voice comes and goes.
Scraps from a hospital bed.

Is this our destination?
It's called a journey,
but you're not looking for something –
don't want to arrive
here
 in the cubicle dark
there
 at the end
beyond the night-lit corridor.

At dusk, mist rises from the river.
The green ball
in the drip-feed
lets only a little
pass.

We're going to the very edge,
to the darkness
where windows float their little boats.

Your illness is a kind of pact;
to bear it
is to bear even death
in this name – *love*.

Past midnight, I lean against the wall
to let a trolley pass.
It's always the same face on display,
twin cheekbones raising the skin
like tent poles,
your nostrils

dark
with the promise of air.

This is the river we dream about and dread.

Once, we saw an eel
caught by a heron,
the bird drinking it down
as if it were a black river.

Listen –

rippling polished lino, here it comes,
the wound
in the corridor's throat –
your shout
bursting the darkness open.

The giant listening on my tongue
swells

with the sound,
I walk a corridor
as if there were something to count,
as if tiles spelt clues
or numbers:
they slide away
behind me.

Even as I tighten my hold
you're disappearing.
You telescope into your own black centre.

Is this it?

All the love-feast
this salty
drip-feed?

The loneliness of your naked body
before the doctors and their equipment
uncovers me;
I feel the river's long
cold on my skin –

Anchorage

Those fasting women in their cells
drained a honeycomb brain
of every sugar drop of sense;
they made the skull a silvered shell
where love could live, cuckoo-like.

Would any question what she did
to distance her from how we live,
outside such dedication? – Shedding
the various world, so as to fit
in ways a jealous lover likes?

What flutters still is a bird: blown in
by accident, or wild design
of grace, a taste of something sweet –
The emptied self a room swept white.

On Her Painted Throne

See my shield –
shaped like a heart
it yields

at every thrust,
does not resist
but parts

sudden lips
to receive the wound
like a kiss –

as if love
might repair
what was lost,

or best defence
lay in
defencelessness –

that surrender,
so long imagined,
to languor:

the beloved couched
glimmering
among tools of Love,

each desire
a bright design
for suffering.

In every rapture a rape

in every ascent descent –
Towers oscillate
 between heaven and earth –

When I stand on the battiment
the view blooms
with the possibility of fall

From below
walls are stone let fly –
Is this meant,

the fling and catch of it?
Must it force me
open?

half wrought-iron grille,
it speeds like a train across the lowlands
between Mont Ventoux and the Med
carrying cypress, swallows and children running –
in whom you remember yourself running
all four limbs akimbo,
sandal-thump jarring skull and teeth –
the impossibility of stopping
and the laughter pumping up through your spine
out through your mouth your nose your eyeballs –
wind-madness children share
with animals.

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Blue, expensive Mistral
blow my lover to me.

Make these supervening mountains small
as those dream-blue hills and valleys

behind the Virgin
in her lapis lazuli, terrific with folds and stars.

I'm sipping my infusion
under a logo'd canopy

of terrace-café canvas –
hear it heave and billow –
and I vow: I'd oblate this rockery with Fanta,

share my sandwich with the pigeons
who coo so urgently behind the fountain,

give my last Euro to the drunk
who hustles at Zorba Kebab in the rue de la République,

to buy the Beloved – or is it me? – a throne
in this sky full of diving angels,

Love being nothing
if not expensive –
although I confess don't understand

how it hastens and blurs,
its clumsiness –

the way it makes us long for something we don't know,
that distance which is both loss and space,

understanding in each other
only *capacity* –

Where does that go
when the wind drops, and evening slows

to a composition
made of these figures sitting or standing grouped

on the enormous public loggia
before the Unesco monument:

conference-goers with their suitcases,
the pony-tailed Hebrew singer,

the Goths kissing on their scooter –
as light freezes the frame?

was unbroken
by you.

Think of chimes falling on an anvil of air
that clangs back, upward –
each bell-stroke returned

to the echo-roof;
the wide Vale suspended

between breaths, between strike
and release.

Mile after mile of smudged black.
Think of yourself –

rapt velocity
tearing through the pulpy core of a Spring night

as if towards an opening.
As if making a place through which

to close on *where-you-are-not*.
Like a pane of deeper dark in darkness:

something like that deepening of voice
when everything's seen between you.
You and it –

and hundreds of small, warm creatures
intent on this moment.

They go intently through you
towards daylight.

Blood Lyrics: From the Tokharian

1.

They set our table under a tree.
I saw your hunger and was ashamed;

covered myself with words and silence
to break the line
from your mouth to mine.

Exile blackens your tongue with knowledge,
your black pupils are ravenous for my hunger.

Every day
in the oven of your mouth
you burn and raise me –
daily bread.

I taste of ash,
eat me.

2.

When you put your hands around my neck
I didn't know
whether I was large or small.

My bones flew out into the universe
and began to sing –

a scatter of small birds.

Did you kill me
or love me?

Night rises from the earth.

Always the same night
with its claws at my stomach.

