

Selected Poems

Voyage Perpetual

It was meant to take days -
We packed our feathered lines and our shabby hampers
And headed south from the harbour

We made sure we kept close to the shores
Following the curve from one island to another
Making the most of the common breeze

We anchored in bays
Only the gulls knew -
Gathering as we beheaded our spoils

We hardly noticed
When the compass stopped spinning -
Becoming prey to the caprice of wind and tide

And here we are, years later -
The boat older and the sails
slight and shredded in places:

Where did the shore go?
How did we get so far out to sea?
When did the adventure stop and life begin?

Night Swimming

Out come the photo albums -
Sepia faces drift to the surface of this hidden pool -
Some have names, some have been forgotten -
Their voices unheard, a breeze of whispers.

What shocks me is the intensity
Of their stare – they are looking straight at us
With a wisdom they didn't even know they had

She traces their features -
Placing a shaking finger on their lips -

She can no longer walk –
but she can swim – and with a wry smile
She swims back fifty years and more

*She swims back through her loves,
Through the houses she lived in,
Us as children, her as a child –
The house on the hill, the school in the valley.*

I remind her of her cooling tea -
And she turns as if wondering who has spoken -
She looks around her bedroom -
The chair by the window, the dressing table,

The doll's house....

She is surprised to see the album on her lap -

Shuts it tight with a clap -

The water's far too tempting.

Old Spice

Watching him shave -

The solemn ritual of soap and blade -

The fish-like splash of the water

As he rinsed one from the other -

Pretending my comb was my razor -

I pull the same faces -

Zeroing my mouth -

Tweeting my nose

Towards the end, he would wipe his face

With a towel,

producing a bottle of Old Spice -

Slapping it on with unnecessary passion

The final act to this quirky play

Was to pour a drop into my hand

And, with a wink -

Encourage me to pat my cheek

In dark moments, I buy myself

A little white bottle, shaving for real this time -

Slapping with unnecessary passion

As the scent conjures the man I loved

The Silence of Candles

I have come to bear your silence

Lighting a candle and an incense stick

May have worked once -

The time has gone when I swore I heard voices behind favoured songs
Or odd words seeped into dreams where my arms were wings and flight was
possible -

Or in a chapel overlooking the shivering Aegean;
whispers creeping from the corners like mice

I wondered if your brevity was the sacrifice you both made for a dark wisdom -
That you would call us to attention if a danger threatened or loneliness clawed -
There was a time when a sad coincidence took on the mask of significance
And for a day I would tread carefully, stunned by your watchfulness over me

None of this is true -

The sole truth is the passing of time, of three slow decades -

Whoever said time heals?

Grief is grief because it never stops -

It sometimes will pause, giving the impression of completion,
But it hasn't gone anywhere, it waits for a moment to tap you on the shoulder
when your gaze is distracted elsewhere

Yet I still light the candle, there is something unforgiving in its flame -

Yet I still strike a match and allow the grey unfinished plume of the incense to fill
the room -

And we gather round a stone scored with black letters

And we share the songs of that time

And we let tears smart our eyes and run down our cheeks unchecked

I have come to bear your silence -

I no longer listen for your unheard voices

Or search for meaning where meaning is meaningless

You are only in the silence -

You're in the pause between notes

Or a hesitation between words

Or the strange moment before the first raindrop falls

I will light my candle and I will light the incense stick

I have come to bear your silence

Because that's where you live

The Conviction of Water

1

I open a window and I hear the sea -
A hushing sound of a thousand children
Tutored to shush and pause
Chaperoned by winds spawned in another ocean

2

This island, this island which is not an island
But a floating bone in a listening sea -
I recall that every road leading into town
Would be reclaimed by water when moon or season contrived -
Edging across causeways and creeping out of the harbour
Spilling onto beach roads, backwaters seeping over pathways –

At these times, the sea, not constricted by land,
Bullied its way back in -
Homes toppled into brackish marshes –
Broken bridges, piers floating away -
And one quagmire the graveyard of a thousand men
Sinking in full armour for a cause they had forgotten -

3

Every afternoon like a whisky priest who believes and deceives in equal
measures

I follow the daily command to wander on the exposed shore

Choosing a time when no others are there,

No dogs or cider drinkers, no tourists or loners -

Where only the crows and the gulls scuttle or scamper

Between waves

like choir boys shuffling between hymns -

And every time, the surf works its magic,

The waves themselves clapping their little hands until you listen -

4

One day our walls and our barricades will not be enough -

They never really were -

the sea will ride into town, an emperor returning to

A Rome emptied of wasters -

The roads and the streets will become rivers and streams –

our terrace garden will become a ship's bridge –

And finally, with waves meeting each other, east and west -

They will hug like lost twins, brother and sister

And the town will be lost

But the sea will be refound, everywhere and happy

A Fire at Grenfell

even as the tower smouldered
the crowds began to doubt
It stood like one big fat candle
a candle no one could blow out

the crowds moved across the town
like water moves, seeking rest,
with the groan of a thousand voices
shouting No love! No love!

the crowds fused into a gallery
of messages, pleas and hopes
of flowers and dolls and photographs
already looking like ghosts

a second explosion of stories
the agony of not knowing
caught on camera or in print
the agony of knowing

and the crowds began to flow again
like waters in a storm
moving this way, moving that way
the choir of their voices spreading from ash to sky

No love! No love!

Sara

You have become a goddess
Slipping in and out of the shadows
Making a nonsense of time

I saw you today, the bob of red hair,
Disappearing in the crowd.
For a moment, I saw you in the shop.

There you were down the beach
By the harbour, in the sea,
In the pub, drinking that sacred drink.

I even heard you laugh -
And last night in my garden, your face shining in the moon!

You have become a god, Sara
You are everywhere but here.

Returning to Ithaca

The worst times? When I couldn't recall her face
When I could sense her presence, but nothing of her beauty.

It was meant to take ten weeks to see her; it took ten long winters,
the winds conflicting, storms appearing like giants smashing the seas with their
fists

I lost my head, driven mad with longing and misery
Devoured by shadows I couldn't hold together

I tried to find your face in others
I tried to hear your voice in the singing waves

It was like this: The thrust and pull of tides, never-resting, opening in whirlpools
Loss everywhere, the six-headed monster of emotion

And you, quietly waiting, pacing
The headland, looking for
Broken horizons, seasons
Melting into each other

One dusk, the sun tipping into space, dressing the waves gold
I shut my eyes and wished no more, wanted hope banished, wanted memory
blinded

As if the soul permits its own dissolution before it becomes itself,

The new sun brought Ithaca into view

At last, I could breathe the warm air

Knowing which tracks and pathways

Would lead me to your door.

I feel her moving still

I feel her in the smoke of the incense, in the silent explosion of cloud, in the chorus of the ceaseless sea.

For years, I went without so much as her breath on my neck or her sigh in the trees yet now I feel her everywhere.

My dreams are her sacred ground, where she can be anything she wants, coming to me through a horse's charge, the round tower on the coast, the crumbling cliffs on the shoreline

I feel her between the beat of my heart, so close, so close, she sometimes breaks the pattern of separation and I sense her movement in the house of my body –

Wandering from room to room, as curious of what belongs to me as I am of what belongs to her.

This was always where I was meant to be, where I was always destined to arrive, not at any particular place but at the very cusp of a strange kind of love.