

## 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 –

As you become unknown  
even to yourself,  
going on ticking and beating into the unknown  
where you fight or yield, obey –  
as oxygen detonates your lungs,  
the catheter  
milks your bladder –  
or drown.

Is anything beautiful  
left in the world?

You've placed fear on my finger,  
ringed river-bird.

Draw the curtain.  
Beds fill, empty and fill.  
Is there any music to justify this?

Take me back to the midsummer river  
hidden under brush –  
that trickle of meaning.

Your fear  
and mine  
make a verse with no answer.

Knee, hip, shoulder:  
in the window's mirror  
look  
at the body  
floating up  
to the surface of night.

## **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?



## Of Perpetual Motion

Noon, and the Mistral's a confusion  
of air and colour –  
                            that dusty blue  
blurring the Vaucluse –  
twisting your hair  
as if to turn you around.

Easy to imagine it peopled with devils,  
airy creatures, bat-winged kittens,  
who tumble in the corners of frescoes  
or out the shadow-eaves  
of the Papal Palace –

                            Tremendous masonry,  
limestone bleached as marble,  
that craftsmen kept moving  
first with hieratic spots and stars  
in the skirt of the seated Christ,  
then through tumble and interplay, form  
half-turned to form:

In the square below the Palace  
a Japanese boy and a Moroccan are learning a dance routine.  
Their bodies change shape  
                            moment by moment,  
cursive as alphabet.

                            The Moroccan's a deer:  
entirely flow  
he passes through the sequence  
as through a skin which falls round him  
and which he rises out of –  
resuming his horse-play –

                            Hieratic language  
but the Mistral, being a wind,  
can join it to everything else  
using flying spots of tamarind pollen  
which are everywhere.

\*

*Mistral*. Name from childhood.  
Half lavender mist

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.

\*

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?

## Night Fugue

### 1.

Gathering left-over light, a barn owl  
turns, pinkish wings  
                                oaring strongly up  
then lower:  
                                turning at the end of each  
disciplined row  
displays  
                                his wide human face then – on a twist –  
sinks  
in a heart-shaped plunge of white  
                                splayed feathers  
carrying light,  
carrying the eye,  
into long pale grass –

                                He lifts again almost backwards  
onto dim currents;  
                                the perfect chime of balance  
in his wingspan  
where light concentrates, a barium glow,  
as if feathers are a print  
of something hidden –  
the body like music;  
form opening through time  
in a breathing line  
                                a cry.

### 2.

On the car radio, bell-like notes of John Cage  
hang  
as if there were no break  
between you  
                                and this somehow inexact nightfall;  
between each hair  
trembling on the leveret's back,  
each compacted bud,  
and the hum of your consciousness:  
as if the unseen's primal halo

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.

3.

You place your world between my teeth.  
I take it with care –

this instrument on my tongue  
beautiful steel.

Your words bridle me.  
Where are we going?

Into pain that breaks  
                                every bone in my face?

Moving your words  
quietly, you fill my mouth with world –

bright, bitter coin!