

BORROWED LIGHT, BORROWED DARKNESS

THE DESERT

Call me Cynthia,
the sun's message delivered in translation:
pale, of moon-shaped face
dented with the fall of tears
and sunken eyes that saw too much in the desert.

How to forget
the crash of grit beneath the feet
as I traversed the tempered surface
of the swept industrial yard,
sun-checked as for play with knife-sharp solids:
white glare of pain and black displacement of despair.*

How to forget the precise shape
of one cinder, larger than the others,
and the way a boy bopped by
with busy, toilsome walk,
rolling on the balls of his feet,
dipping his shoulders like oars.

*Cynthia was arriving at the Doctors Block to be roasted by Puttie, Clay and Sand, P.C., as her tiny,
Breathless baby, a tube clogged with old food stuck up her nose, turned daily black in the face.

My eyes as if amacerated stared,
becoming part of the sight, the motion.

Hear the landscape hiss and hum.
Full of the dull ache of sultry days,
the torpid glow of lurid colors,
it offers opposition to humanity.

The bottomless shades suck one in,
black holes plucking at the soul.
In no time at all, the self pours out
through its wounds and soaks into the ashes.
How may the lost return from the bowels of darkness?

CLICK! Time stops, mired in the sticky tarmac
and treacy air, sweet as the scent of death.

How still is grief, immobile, soundless.
How bright is pain, burning, intrusive.
How dark the advent of despair,
how loud, how false, the evil.

CLICK! The brain obeys the shutter;
it will not forget this focus:
not forget ever, the hard yard
in the hot sun, fixed by its searching lens,
the breathless landscape that suppresses breath,
intensity of detail picked out
by blinding rays of pain,
the fire in the chest, the throat closing,
and all the little princes fallen.*

*The pain will always be there now, Cynthia, like an artificial limb, forcing upon you a new persona.
However, if you had only known, for example, the botanical names of the weeds in the yard, you could

have repeated the Latin to yourself as a sort of litany and somewhat mastered your perceptions instead of their mastering you, much as one treats an unsatisfactory surface with a good coat of paint.

THE SILENT SISTER SPEAKS FROM HER MOUNTAIN

I knew Cynthia in the lowland of youth
as she leapt from one tough tussock to another,
from spinster social worker to professor's wife
to careerist and her children's mother.

One misstep and you can lose your footing
and be sunk. The second child was her undoing.

Nothing was the same again.

Nothing is the same again.

This is the cruel season,
when Cynthia must view her life too nearly,
like an impressionist painting
dissolving into tiny senseless stains.

But the past is not built up in layers;

it is a dimension of the present.

It is never over, as in wrathful winter
every tide leaves something of itself behind
in the brilliant, brutal artistry of ice,
daily sculpted by crushing many pasts
into a present recombined.

The future also is a facet
of the present, not its replacement.
Youth is burdened with much future,

most of which may never happen,
as if with heavy, awkward backpacks.

On the trek through the desert,
the only dimension apparent is of loss.
Time stops, unless the desert as metaphor,
like the naughty personifications of the ancients,
can help to keep us sane.

If life gives you nothing but desert,
you may fail, or if you lack the vision
and the spirit to make the desert bloom.
Both connectedness and the capacity
for transformation are required.

A spirit of displacement infects our age;
it is the death of belonging, fellowship.
We are homeless souls, outcast and estranged.

We howl, craving peace of place.

For the human race,
the stories and the pictures have run out:
awe at the night sky
away across the ruined land,
and wonders of the sun
in the infancy of Man.

Now the race grows old and sad,
and the cruel season reminds us nothing lasts.

As life ebbs, we see that others
have molded, then consumed us.

Family and town
have made their expectations known.
To rebel is to be cut adrift,
abandoned by the caravan.

How others see me is part of them.
My refusal to care is part of me.
To the madwoman only, nothing is irrelevant;
she is menaced by narrow critics
of her scrubbing, her baking, her hairdo.

Caught in the changing of the tides,
most women are hermits without vocation
to whom retreat is closed.
We hide in plain sight,
in each a core or wedge of darkness.

From the rage of the fathers
and the alienation of the mothers
spring new ways of being.
The Church has given to some of us a place
to be as we truly are,:
withdrawn from what is passing,
attached to what we know of what is lasting.

Living neither fully as clergy or fully as women,
but like Ledbetter drawing mighty music forth
from a cigar box strung with rubber bands,
or like the Birdman of Alcatraz,

scribbling notes on freedom as birds swooped
about the rock on which he was caged,
my creative spirit is empowered:
a great flowage pent in a narrow race.

CONCLUSION

The fight does not concern possession of land,
that dream of former empires to own the world,
but tokens of no intrinsic worth, unmanned,
just scraps of paper no longer backed by gold.
What can we do with plenty but mend this world?
Without good will, no one and nothing will be saved:
just eat and drink too much and jetlag every day.