

Citizen of the Evening

A Retirement Poem

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London, Herne Bay, Le Treport, Amiens, Trieste

*“And I will raise my hand up into the nighttime sky
And count the stars that’s shining in your eye
Just to dig it all and not to wonder that’s just fine
And I’ll be satisfied not to read in between the lines”*

- Van Morrison

“Real freedom is freedom from worry, doubt, fear, boredom, anxiety, stress, obsession, restlessness, shame, moodiness, frustration, anger, self-doubt and depression.” - anonymous Internet post

I may be a citizen of the evening, but I plan to stay up all night.

I: In the Court of the Myrtles

I have walked in this city for thirty years
following the imprisoned rivers
through the bitter-tasting mist of early morning
down to where ducks drift on the black water in its trench

I have visited the tattered parks badged with sombre ponds
the brown-bricked quarters of the heartbroken
and the secret hawthorn-scattered mounds
inhabited by surreptitious lovers or those who smoke the leaves of plants
and carpeted with mysterious items of clothing

I have sat for hours in ash-floored soundless pubs
I have noted the booming passing of the empty train
and the shouted conversations which seize my ears like thugs
I have overheard with alarm plans for the settling of hidden grudges

I have written down accounts of the secret processes
the unfolding of a thought from emptiness
the sickly breath of the heart's dark corridors
or the drunken career of emotions across the frontiers of the days
I have attempted to reduce them to their constituent oscillations

I have practised the hermeneutics of houses
the interpretation of bus numbers
the taxonomy of the shapes formed by the streets
and the listing of alternative explanations for darkness

I have stood watching as the new city gradually crawled upwards
among the thinly-disguised cobble and brick
scattering squat lumps of plastic and unforgiving glass
with walls made of hammered-out biscuit tins

I have met with greedy men in their hideous rooms
rank with random anger and monstrous entitlement
truculent dwarves in rumpled shirts and fatuous ties
the bony dilapidated men who are sent out selling worthless paper
and bald defeated men dry-washing their hands
before the credit-stuffed bellies of their sniggering masters

I have attended on the shiny-faced manageresses

with their tuneless trumpeting voices
each of them toting a leering self-regard
and of course the loathsome braying girls they hold in slavery
strutting peevisly among their pitiable desks

I have received them all
the smudged and sour letter on the floor of morning
the detestable knock which wrenches me from sleep
the tight and shaming agony in the blood
bearing the reek of some mechanical ritual
along the faint paths of night like a wriggling idiot

was I looking for something? - I forget
I recognise only my strange smile spiced with longing
my pallid heart lurching like a bird held in the hand
my plans like cities sprinkled on a sandy plain

enough of this
enough of this
enough

*

finally I stood in the late afternoon
on a concrete quayside piled with arbitrary heaps of poisoned soil
and slicked with a stinking grey mud
before me the Thames lay drunkenly exhaling its mist
on the far bank a cluster of metal towers and spirals silent and unlit
a city of ghosts haunting the drizzle
and from behind sounded the bawl and bluster of machines
grinding scraping shuddering and shrieking amongst themselves

as I walked on I rounded the river's bend
and passed a fragment of a ship standing hollow on some stones
the wind groaned and a mud-bank sweated ooze
the evening's breath stirred weakly in my pocket

and slowly from the bleary metal city
a dour procession flowed of souls dead and almost dead
shambling haltingly into the viscous Thames

first the preposterous blonde
with her anxious hair and industrial face
dragging her sneering handbag
her foreshortened hands knocking a window
to waken a sleeping cat

her companion the shifty shaven-headed clown
his lips congealed in a vacuous smirk
he staggers in circles throwing paper from his pockets
advertising his worthlessness like fake jewellery

and then the pale-skinned pianist
smelling faintly of the hollow entrails of her instrument
holding out her bitten finger-ends greedy for my gifts

the contemptible bristle-faced fat man on his petty throne
his funereal voice droning and whirring
gleefully reducing a shapeless schoolgirl to tears before me

the orange-bearded homunculus in his filthy coat
giggling hideously as his rancid teeth ooze pus

the huge pyramid-shaped embezzler
farting into his mirthless chair
as he fingers his loamy neck and chortles

and the self-seeking men - so many
their filthy mouths bulging with self-praise
their quick resort to petty insult
the ghastly pride they take in their repulsive vehicles

then come the short-haired stick-limbed dolls
holding before them their impoverished breasts
clutching at my face with their glistening spotted hands

and then the squawking gang of the peremptory and insolent
who would take power over you
the casual pilferers and swaggering ogres
shaking their arms to convince you of their prerogatives

and the worshippers of money in their thousands
dressed in the sallow clothing of the initiate
crowding to bow before the door of another man's bank

and the exhibitionistic mothers in their hordes
gruff with accomplishment at having borne a child
parading before me their stippled acquisitive shoulders
baying for payment and deference and acclaim

and the broken-down men imprisoned in families
pouchy and smug in their waxen stubbly pallor

exhibiting to me their rooms of pointless objects
before hobbling away to potter with soil or paint

and here at the end the lowest of them all
who brandish their greed-enabling religion like a flag
who gather in mobs enthralled by the fraudulence of leaders
and cannot restrain themselves from demanding your compliance

enough of them
enough of them
enough

Winter Interlude

in this stone-grey season
wet brown factory walls shoulder the cadaverous railways
forsaken tracks expire among dark woody shrubs and faded paper

in this iron season
the comfortless verge of the road is hung with rags of frost
paving stones shine weakly under their burden of numbing rain

in this season of funereal ash
furls of spiked wire hang in the destitute trees
the despised fox struts in the middle of a darkened street

in this slack season of seeping damp
wide slabs of milky light pattern the gravelly platform
the dusky sky slams shut above me like a heavy door

finally the white noise of snow fills my window
the business of the visible world lies unremembered
beneath its delicate comforting clarity

forgetting is the lesson of winter
as the heaped attic of finished things
is slowly layered with the vague drab dust of time

II: Approaching The Sea

I have chosen instead the curious hidden quarters
for the birth of my journey
the silent canal greenly reflecting
the discreet rivers in their soft bushy beds
the unexpected hay meadow at the feet of a viaduct
or perhaps the furtive forest in its ragged coat
rising slowly out of the dark warehouse districts

and so I spent many hours in the still suburbs
lying voiceless under their hushed blanket of questions
I traced their dismal repetitive maze
and felt in the deep distance the sea which is freedom

at last I found my way to an antique threadbare common
with a ruined windmill emptily gazing
I plumbed the seeping gully of a spring
and passed a dumb tower by a clandestine island

then I plunged among the sighing trees
and walked their vestibules of rasping branches
in the company of the rattling woodpecker's hollow voice

I forded many freckled brooks in their scent-heavy haunts
and later paced the grimy dykes which lined their banks

I penetrated the hallowed bluebell-carpeted copses
and tramped an esoteric trackway along a valley's edge

my heart rang like a struck gong
as I breasted the milk-white downs
and sank my heated hands into their woody plumage

far ahead sang the sea which is freedom
as I descended under heavy brown trees
to the glaring farmland and the fat fields full of fire

I traced lines on the wet arms of many streams
breaking from the bushes and leaping in like a released dog
I mapped their muddy edges pocked with fallen acorns
amid their sharp vegetal smell like the skin of a stranger

I strode into the porches of small towns
busy with flesh-hungry boys and raw-voiced women
once I found a dark cylindrical stone preserved inside a fence
once I sat in a wheezing inn deep among streets of foggy hush

I descended from the last wind-whiskered wood
among the smug farms peopled with melancholy horses
and in a tiny drinking house in the valley's folds
I asked directions to the sea which is freedom

I conversed with the silver estuary
and dipped my hands into its mirrored pools
and I beat my way to the clifftops with the sea frisking below
first the colour of crumpled metal
then turquoise then grey and then a series of abstruse blues

and at last the sacred sea towns saluted me
and as I witnessed the topology of their sharp-angled streets
on the faded white walls I read a message
the sea which is freedom is within
the spell of transformation is within
the jewel of the future is within

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and when they required of me a name
what could I answer?
I have no name and I have many
I am nothing but a pilgrim
I have come seeking the sea which is freedom

and in the journey's final steps
what sights do I remember?

the wriggling beck
peaty and white-flecked
chanting in its bed of umber moor

the inky solemn wood
like the mind's own spiralling roots
where a sudden spear of sunlight might crackle in my path

the sacramental sea-breathed air
taut with unimaginable hopes
bearing the fragrant secrets of many warm evenings

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finally I stand panting on a grey cliff
watching a single boat define itself gently in the mist

the sea and the sky are one
the sea and the sky are one

Spring Interlude

see the thorned gorse force fire from its points

the forest floor is full of pools
struck from the stony soil by winter's marbled staff

trees are hung with scarves of white and gold
sometimes green lacy spheres fill the branches
and once a tree was decked with balls of pink flame

and at the end of my path a transcendent oak
veiled in green like a goddess
its roots bathed in a lake of white flowers

III: At St John's Fair

let us keep silence

in the face of the interior darkness
at the nonsensical discourse of memory
against the meaningless teachings of pain
before the hollow autocracy of fear
where disgusting suddenness fractures our thin thoughts
in the terrible net of selfhood and obsession

we will keep silence

because the counterfeit world would colonise us with its vacuous melodrama
in order to redeem ourselves from the evanescence of things
before the impossibility of clear expression
in the gaudy reeking theatre of everyday fakery
to escape from the indifferent fictions of crowds
because there's always a lust for the poisonous dust of dominance

therefore we will embrace silence

to contradict the fallacy of dictated envy
against the image and illusion in which people clothe themselves
in order to defy the intimidation of fragmenting vision
to refuse the compulsion to perform
to renounce all politics
to atone for the cruelty of our lives

before the waving flame of morning we will enter the silence

to deflect the facile hoax of leadership
to oppose the truculent fetish of emotion
to acquire the habit of noncompliance
to learn the subtle manoeuvres of self-invention
to be healed of our suffocating compulsions
to uncover the faint elusive sanctuary door

and at the smoky sounding of the evening bell
we will offer the gift of silence

because God inhabits the silence

and his voice is heard rich and still in the intense distance
its words just beyond comprehension
like sunlight spiralling away behind a cloud
or time suddenly resolving out of its illusory form
as we sit before his face bathed in tears

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and see now
how we crossed the water in a hollow boat
and followed the straight roads among the flat lands filled with wheat
to find the river valley tight in its costume of green
bearing damp gardens in its hands like patterned plates

and look
the two towers of the cathedral slide into view in the level distance
between the nodding heads of trees which rise from the creeks

see
we walk in the early evening
down a narrow brick-lined alley
where intricate and lacy arches are suspended before us

we list names of streets like conjurations
the mysterious cafes begin to light their windows
and very close by we hear the liturgy of the sea

at St John's Fair
where we have come to choose our gods
or be chosen by them

Summer Interlude

the fern's dry lesson whispers under the luminous noon
as the whip-limbed willow in its green glade sways

among duck-ruled pools dozing in their haze I find my way
or beside unmoving water in its cloak of leaves

high on the drunken down under the wind's will
I stride the stones singing into the warm womb of a wood

I praise the holy geometry that the clouds expound
and wander masterless under the government of the silent sun
for the deep song of summer makes us free

IV: In the Garden of the Architect

yet I do not own the cloak called loneliness
its dim pockets weighted with the cries of the drowning

instead I glide from the shore in the bright boat of your voice
summoned by your chiming laughter somewhere at the end of our house
I entrust myself to the feline touch of your damask hair
and the sweet-tasting fire which moves beneath your skin

your face is built of ideas explained for the first time
and shines more intensely than the sea's crystal arms
you make the clock's tired hands become the petals of flowers
finally forgiving my tedious sins with a numinous smile

we sleep each night in the long silence of love
and the music of your breath conducts to me an obscure and private strength
later as we arrive clasped together at the quayside of morning
you carry the dawn in the hollow of your wrist

you are wiser than the icy voices of the stars
unexpectedly I hear you singing somewhere at the end of our house
and as you enter our room the air obediently kindles itself
all my explorations are only possible because I return to you

and as I walk the unending avenues of the silent country
I imagine your name and my ears are filled with melodies

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our staircase is heavy with incense
at our window the perfumed sea smiles like a gipsy
and in the blue morning we wake together
full of hope in our golden room

as the port town lays aside its twilight veil
we travel slowly among the benevolent streets
our journey always begins and never ends

out in the dewy valley you walk the path beside me
you make the misty hollow track a glowing corridor of light

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in the evening I cannot take my eyes from your face
and each moment opens a box of happiness full of singing birds

come
take my hand
the summer streets are filled with music
the velvet darkness is gilded with embraces
and the future belongs to us