

The Holy Sea

Recollections and Reflections from the Mediterranean

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Algiers, Oran, Melilla, Tangier, Algeciras, Malaga, Valencia, Barcelona,
Narbonne, Beziers, Agde, Marseille, Nice, Ventimiglia, San Remo, Genoa, La
Spezia, Rome, Ancona, Ravenna, Venice, Trieste, Koper, Porec, Pula,, Rijeka,
Split, Dubrovnik

Exordium I

I have dreamed for years of the sacred sea
at its heart the discarded clothes of a lover
incense on its lips
its hands full of birdsong and herbs

I have dreamed for years of the sacred sea
bearing the handsome ports towards me like friends
clasping in its teeth the mysterious islands
their orange houses floating in the sun's green arms

I have dreamed for years of the sacred sea
the cities dressed in leaves and candles
the endless surface of the water in its cradle of storms
at its shoulder a mountain with the face of an owl

I have dreamed for years of the sacred sea
folding the merciful wind on its thighs
flowering with harbours where russet fish kiss the stones
clad only in a blue veil of mist and language

Exordium II

at last | the sacred sea | the hallowed and immaculate sea | the mystic sea of reverent
astonishment | the steely sharp and sun-bright sea | the wondrous sea huge with holy symmetries
| the wine-dark | the sea dimly glinting at night before the pantomime of the stars | at last

I come down | at the first words of the righteous morning | under the harsh weeping of the
stone-coloured gulls | I breathe the radiant and stately air which is beyond comprehension | the
warm arms of the wind gather me | the apple-brown rocks or the bleached ropes at the harbour's
inconstant heart are both full of stories | I come down

at last | prodigious tales related over wine in the glistening dusk | the secret glances given or
received among the palm trees | the burnished streets which are laboratories of recollection |
walks in the morning among the buzzing of insects in ancient ruins | histories of love painted
on the city's pale walls like linen laid out to dry | or the vehement scent of music seeping
through the liquid evening air | at last

The Sea, The Sea

very warm sea jewelled hand in moonlight dream of shivering crickets under the sky's roof
blue from eave to eave

sea blue as eyes green as great vegetables sea rosy and taciturn among the apparatus of
evening

or sea drunk and quarrelsome uncompromising in dealing blows noisy and not to be consoled
at the disconsolate hour of noon

dizzy with fish the sea and roosting place of winds without direction the sea shining and
bobbing at the end of a street between houses

also vines like green gloves pinned to the ground in wide lanes leading down among pebbles
to the sea or the huge sapphire lagoons full of breezes

at night in the courtyard of dreams below trees heavy with rattling limes I wrestle the twisting
sea beside the mossy fountain and the moon a gold tear

ah! very distant the mist coming up over the sea the island of the lighthouses the brown rocks
waving in the tide the rushing sound rising in the air in the air

The Ports

open your gates to the great night
the night
your houses rising away from the rocking sea
open them
your bridges long as the sky and full of bells
bring them
bring them to the edges of my hands where I wait
listening
for the voices of clouds washing your trees with light
at dusk
high on the estuary's noble forehead in small boats
we wait
while the red and green lanterns at the harbour gate
are lit
while the shout goes up at the loosing of the ropes
we stand
in the heroic spray of waves the sound of a voice
a voice
at the beginning of the day come up
come up into the open ocean
we are ready
we are ready

Some City

I open my eyes
we are driving through the ragged fields at the city's feet
the warm night air bubbles like a distant cauldron
crickets reverberate and alien smells trumpet in the darkness
mysterious arcades are filled with the substance of nighttime
suddenly we plunge into the crevices of the city's heart
my last memory is of a courtyard painted with the sound of a fountain
I close my eyes

I open my eyes
I have awoken among a clutter of dwarf palms
vines grasp our balcony like monkeys with limbs of rope
the morning air is as thick as honey
below our house a dismal ferry mutters in the harbour channel
I close my eyes

I open my eyes
music sidles between the café chairs like a hungry cat
around me the dark streets are silent but full of invitations
doorways black as pitch ache in the yellow walls
the constellations are twisted into grotesque shapes
evening taps me on the shoulder and smiles

Dreams in the White City

I came back to the city as winter was wagging its twisted finger at me
I had been living in the distance stranded on an island
rain was hanging in the trees like a coat flung over some chairs
and as I stepped from the train the misty air tasted of kisses and Christmas

and the city dreamed
as I settled in the warm tiled cafe crammed with bald men
and music rolled in from the arches around the square
where a heap of old radios shuffled in a corner
and I wound through the questioning streets
streets smelling of fried fish, of tomatoes and olive oil, of wine corks or of the sea
doorways smelling of bibles, of incense, of the dusty odour of thick cloth, and others
 smelling of medicine jars
and alleys scented with lemons, with basil, or rosemary or with herbs which only have Arabic
 names

and the city dreams you
and following the streets is like solving a mathematical problem
and through the square there winds a procession of men chanting
and in a shop full of dark vases a woman recites the names of the streets:
the Street of the Three Tailors, the Street of the Salted Cod Sellers, the Street of the
 Architect's Nephew
and I am discovered among the booksellers under the palace walls
reading accounts of African journeys and embassies to feathered emperors in the deep
 interior

and you awake to find that someone in the city is dreaming you
as you take the lift which rises high above the level of the roofs
and the tiled houses like great jewel-boxes unroll behind the tram's platform like a film
and small squares suddenly appear scattered with trees and newspapers as streets shoot off
 like fireworks at a thousand angles
and I gaze from the high castle as ferries draw lines on the river's skin where porpoises skip
 and drift

the city is a holy picture emerging from the petals of a rose
the city is a dimly remembered face seen through stained glass
the city is a mysterious song you hear from across a tidal stream

You, Greece

I

I have imagined you all my life
your stories which I read in the savage light of childhood
rooted me to my chair among the silent trees as I waited for the future

and in the spiced world of my father's holy books
aromatic with cloth and cloves and incense
I watched the gorgeous letters of your vanished words
slip languidly across the shining page

and later as I dipped my hands with care into your ancient lake of tongues
I spent late evenings memorising from old lists
watched only by the tearful face of the streetlamp at my window

II

I walked out to the country at the announcement of spring
and lay reading on a carpet of flowers among trees dizzy with blossom

the drained marsh full of fig-trees
and the olive-heavy breath of summer rolling down
from the village of the goats
to the huge expanding plain where the river floods

the gloomy houses of the fish-gutters surround the bright salt lakes

finally the rocky graves of rivers are possessed by winter torrents

III

in a glassy wood vibrant with the bee's hunger
I await the conversation of the woodpecker

nearby the scented streams weave dreams from the stems of flowers

high among the bitter fissures of the mountains
the sea slips into sight
blue and opal and gold
bearing the evening on its forehead like a sacred sign

The Return

so returning from the sea from the shores elegant with language
bobbing out at the harbour gate through the archway of the dull quays swollen with fishermen
from the warm towns among the ragged chalkland
the streets like crammed baskets and the sharp singing smell of fish
where wailing birds descend over the filthy alley and the bright café
at the approach of night nursed into the glistening marketplace
and the long walks on the high tracks above the cliffs
the sudden discovery of a walled garden as if distant music sounded out of nothing
the panic-stricken wood deep among writhing stems and juicy stalks whose dusty blooms
 breathe sinister pollen
and the path down from the log-rolling height to the dizzy green avenue of a canal
from all this returning on a grey wind blowing through forest without end
from the easy cities where the tramlines gather you at their tangled green edges
you my foreign one glimpsed in the doorway of a crammed trolleybus
today light expands under your skin
today the green mountain rears under glass like a rose
when the journey catches fire I see your heart painted like a flag
while knights ride by in darkness I know you to be out there
and throughout the winter's muddy trench I shall stretch towards you with songs
until the great time should come
that I should go forth again into the tattered sea
that I should ride in the wind's dry alley on the stony sea
that the time should come unexpectedly out of sleep
that I should return