

My Father's Places

in memoriam Dennis Eustace Ferguson

“Loose from us the sins of our fathers. Forgive us our own sins, O Lord.” - Rig Veda

before I was sent out of the garden
when God still took his walks in the cool of the evening
in the dreaming apprenticeship of my simplest years
I would visit your warm shed filled with strange tools
where you taught me the names of the tall furry-stemmed plants
which left scars on my legs as I ran in circles

and I spent long silent hours in your unswept study with its empty shelves
and I pored over your books which were full of arcane characters
and smelt of some undiscovered woody fragrance

you carried me shoeless from crowded buses
and we walked each Sunday down a damp brown street
past twisted railings and the policemen's sunken cells

later you led me on luminous walks among the glowing hills
and we washed our feet in tea-coloured moorland streams
I followed you across the sparkling edges of the sea
among sunny walled gardens I was gripped by the heartbreak of summer
we drank lemonade among trees where a salty estuary lapped
and you gradually revealed to me the secrets of your places
but they only filed me with painful desire
and stamped on my skin strange longings impossible to describe

and I remember your vast and dusty churches
where on those dark Scottish evenings only two or three would gather together
and there you were in the midst of them
lifted up on your far star-decorated pulpit
dressed in your deep gown ambiguous with mysteries
and again on the rejoicing country mornings of my blossom-painted days
when the praise-singing light flowed from the windows like sacrificial blood
you struck up your sharp northern carols
and at the commencement of the night
you would raise both your hands to bless your grey congregation

and I discovered for myself the astonishing limpid river

whose knotted banks I would tread
further and further each time
the river was black and grey and silver
the river was filled with music
the river was my cunning antique mentor all through the endless evenings
it was the river whose twisting course led towards freedom and the white sea

and you filled my vacant ears with the austere portentous voices of organs
and I searched the airwaves for my own glittering city hymns
you hounded me with your bundle of sacred tales
which made my imagination shudder with infant poems

I tolled the dark and miserable bell in its shabby tower room
which summoned the few to hear your antique homilies
and I fell under the witchery of the tenement girls I hunted in the evenings
but they always left me wretchedly dreaming alone in my hyberborean bed

you took me to visit dull relatives with their unsurpassable children
where I yearned with sighs for the abandoned railway stations you had shown me
or longed to give myself up to a book as I had seen you do

and I began to rummage and intrigue in the tattered houses of my schoolfellows
I craved the faint glimpses of worlds other than your own
I greedily snuffed the drunken perfumes of my possible futures

again and again I ached to make my escape
I stood in city streets below the interminable northern twilight
waiting and waiting - if I waited long enough, surely something would happen?
and the things that happened were dark, silent and shapeless
but I learned their names and made them come and go at my bidding
(you would have loved that bit of magic, you old warlock)

I made my way to the places you forbade
breathing in the desolation of the huge gravel spaces between factories
standing behind the skating-rink to hear its wicked music pulse through the walls
wandering beside the slatternly canal to marvel at its lubricious suggestions
and passing among the unclean shops and sinful cafes
buying for sixpence the comics you so dreaded

and later I put the wide river between us
I built walls and barred my gates
against your interfering finger always pointing the wrong way
and your melancholy childlike advice culled from another age
and I walked corridors down which you would never follow
I traced the winding river which leads towards freedom
I built houses of ideas I constructed myself out of found objects

I sought definitions and explanations which were not yours
I plunged into a world where your footsteps left no trace

I kept you in the distance under a cloak of deafness
and studied to forget your inexplicable and unspoken expectations
many times I would wish you far from my sight and hearing

but no - perhaps you should stay a while
we could have that talk we never managed to achieve
let's take one of our walks
through some old brown wood heavy with autumn
to a tiny silent pub at the far side
where we can sit alone before the last of the fire

after all, are we not the same, you and I?
surely you too must have torn yourself in pieces over women
you too must once have been so full of will that your blood seethed
you must have been consumed like me by the black strength of music
you too must have felt the bloom of a sooty imprisonment within you
until you begged to be remade - I know you did

we should touch and handle these unseen things together
things whose shape and sound only the two of us can understand
without the false coin of our careful telephone moments
or the formless and indistinct words of your old sermons

we will at last speak honestly to one another
let me get you another drink
I've a lot to tell you

Ian A Ferguson November 2014