

Wounded Elocution

I'm learning to speak in the accents of adieu,
A language I once thought foreign,
Like the aftercry of animals in the predatory dark.

The new tones slide from deep in the windpipe,
In the lowest notes of woe—
And all wrong, wrong to my resentful ears.

I can't keep listening to that desolate silence
Between the dry syllables,
The way it aches at the root of every word.

I'd rather sing red hymns to hell, in perfect pitch,
Or anthems for the angels
In whatever heaven these unbelieving days allow—

But not to bring the dead back, not in pain and shadow.
Let me be mute,
Or glut my tongue on honey and bitter herbs.

Crepuscle

Mosquito dusk, and even the smoky wicks
Can't keep the stings away, the little
Vampires on the wing, in a sunset
Lit by blood.

All day, tatters from the white pines
Blew down, a high wind
Shaking the dead clusters from the boughs.

So sorrow feeds on you when the light wanes,
Piercing and narcotic, the veins trembling
At the touch of anything that needs them.

So pity begins at home. It warms you
Like the cold glow of the moon
Picking its way through broken shadows.
It hangs black crepe on the heart.

You're at the threshold of another night when sleep
Won't come, caught like a gaunt fly
In the sticky ruins of memory,
One of those nights where
The mind stares out, wide-eyed at nothing.

Couplets from Late March

The little buds come out as sudden as someone
Tapping a microphone before the grand announcement.

The last strands of snow lie on the north lawn
Like hospital gowns from which the patients have escaped.

Before the grass grows green, you can almost hear at its roots
The hum of worms starting their tiny engines.

How warm it feels for March, with a lilt of wind
Through the nude trees, and spring still in its pajamas.

Rain then mud then frost then sun then small pools.
The early daffodils drag themselves up through dirty water.

Hypnosis of fog this morning, so heavy you can see nothing
But a pale gleam of streetlamps guiding the dead home from winter.

First Anniversary

Outside, a restless rain, in this April of no return.

I keep the dusty window shades at half-mast.

I rearrange the magnets on the white refrigerator door:
Fleur de lis of the Saints, gondola, pelican with its eyes shut.

In some parallel world, you're still raising the bridal veil.

One glove left on the dresser, the other lost.

Every morning, I wake at two or three, the pillow damp,
And go downstairs to nothing, slave of the empty hours.

My mind stumbling in the dark, my tears like sealing wax.

What passport will take me across that cold border to you?

Cheap Weekend in Another Country

One-star hotel: dangle of a bare bulb
Like a spider from Chernobyl. Stairs so steep
I heave the dead weight of a duffel up
A step at a time. Room with a view of a room.
A bed made for martyrs. Down the dark hall,
Tub and toilet, odors oozing from the slow drain.

I walk through the Old Quarter, a squeeze of streets
That lead to the market square, to the cool museum.
What century is this confusion? I can't tell
From the stone cathedral, built over five hundred years,
Mutant where God still feels uneasy among
Saints with their hearts ripped out, saints raped,
Or pulled apart, or decommissioned by a pope.

Bells bang hard against the hour, shock waves
That send the swallows swooping into noon.
At a café on the corner, even my desperate belly
Can't read the menu: shadow food in no syllables
My tongue can say or taste, unknown to any hunger.

In the museum, past the paintings of rich men and nudes
And plates heaped high with dirty squash and hams,
In this sanctum of wear and tear on the visible,
I stroll through the statues posed over marble floors
And around the fluted columns, a whole quarry
Of maimed and crippled Greeks, bled white and blind.

Gusts of sunlight sweep across the square
Where tourists and civilians crowd the flower stalls,
Stands of spiky scents, booths of fruit piled in pyramids
Next to butchers with their bleeding meat. I watch
The scud of paper cups in a low wind, the doze
And drool of pensioners on a peeling bench.

No souvenirs. No photographs. Just a clenched bladder
And traffic of small crazed cars with a license to kill.
Tonight, I'll write the postcards, behind their glossy views
A back that flattens everything to a few words. Tomorrow,
Foreign coffee and a tram to the station, ticket
To take me away, pilgrim waiting at the far platform,
Ready again to ride myself out on a rail.