VENICE ELEGY
1
FUGITIVE POEM

this curled-up child crawling to the sea
seeping into the rhythm of the waves  the rhythm of dying
this curled-up child escaping to where there’s no escape

a tiny maggot  curved towards
the greying ones in a row in the sound sleep of Syria’s chemical night
thrown out of the window by his parents in Baghdad’s explosive night

people the same age on both sides for fifteen hundred years
one origin for the expulsion of all the tiny amphibians
the wrecked ruin of the broken waves

and obliged to be born again
sign winter’s freezing fog  summer’s mosquitoes
a name hastily built in air  accretion of salty stench

Venice  squirming unseen in the flesh
releasing a child curled up to lay the swamp bare at last
don’t know if he should climb out of the sea or into it

don’t know if his bent head shouts for home or for a strange land
Syria can’t wake  Baghdad long ago crushed  sky’s borders
all by the sea  fifteen hundred years and nothing stirs

choking on a piece of unformed lung
enacting an explosion hunted into seagull cries
forging more lovers’ locks  that can only be locked up in the Bridge of No Return
escape another bout of tears folded into crystal waves beneath the bridges
the tiny maggot’s reflection inverted too
listening to the swallowing sea ripple beyond immediacy

those shining portholes furtively peep out
a child dissolves in silence
the city a polychrome painting full of swaying mirages
VENICE ELEGY
2

ROT POEM

rot holds the long rows of this great ship of stone
rot holds your footstep my footstep

walking the toppled waste where the Admiral gazes down upon the water
marble window frames door lintels elaborately carved
the oil paint of the sky soaks the ebb and flow of tides under the bridge’s parapet
young girls’ eyes sparkle on the decks
never afraid to wave goodbye poems of setting sail poems of dreaming

we pass through time like swallows startled by the bells

walk the inverted rotted underwater forest
a thousand years of tamping
a stinking deep black growth-ring holds the palette of the waves
smearing your portrait my portrait
a rotted portrait is invisible yet like roots
it grows day after day poking at the sea’s black and blue wound
from deposits of sludge rise pearls and dead bones
in the sound of coloured glass violins
a row of dead sailors locked into the struggle to keep paddling

in ship’s holds flooded with brilliant sunshine
gold always pornographic enough
to make humans dizzier than yesterday

walk narrow alleys where water can’t turn back
hear seabirds cackle like ghosts
howl like infants
rotting branches gently sway in the green waves
rotting fish embedded in the silver-bright seashells under walls
the water level climbs timber stakes climbs stone steps
like a curse locks a rusty wooden door
like a collapse another balcony dragged into black moonlight
bleached skeletons pull another balcony’s snow-white bones closer
in the pitch black moonlight sway shadows of people sway reflections in water
illusion is no metaphor
periscoping centuries pursue their own termination

you this instant I this instant
the little backyard jetty moored where flows a filthy river
tastes unloaded from our flesh spread out on the breeze
winged lions vacantly stare at the future
VENICE ELEGY
3
GRAVEYARD POEM

tiny wooden gardens float over the red roof tiles
tiny wooden islands sail toward your island

green trees bow down shielding
water a gravestone, dates of birth and death erased

who wouldn’t write love poems in Venice?
as attics like capsized keels collide with dreams
as the sky darkens a torrent of birdsong rises
a book once opened is a nugget of green amber

as in my dreams I dream your dreams that no-one can return home
to be buried in Venice is like wanting to finish all love poems at once
sitting in a circle on an island they will never leave the end of sobbing
beside the wooden table Ezra’s fissured face adds a deeper silence
Joseph’s cough proclaiming halfway is passed to a poetess
one small cloud not misunderstood we embrace complaints
life’s concentration camp lamplight too harsh

white crosses of seagulls are scanning, nailed to the top of our heads
a poem fixes its own horizon in close-up
never arriving arrived long ago

the red roof tile tide swells the day’s tides swell
ropes lowered into open graves drag in flowers and spindrift
wave on wave of love poems with images newly dripped from wounds
incessantly soak unspoken love fall in love with this bank-to-bank swimming
green amber blackens each instant
facing your signal flags
VENICE ELEGY
4
SINKING POEM

Ponte di Rialto  a snow-white grandstand
departed souls survey a river of blood  flowing in the setting sun
flowing between dinners  a sacrificed child
is plated up  a page of a Syrian  a Baghdadi menu
opening rose-red fragments on the waves
we survey a river of blood  sigh in pleasure at the dainties before us

how many waists  how many kisses  little by little
polish the stone of the parapet  news of someone else’s tragedy
not in the scenery  how many gondolas holding high
the hatchet of their prow  rocking to the rhythm of happiness
cries for help snatched away by the far-off sound of the waves aren’t in the photos
ruin and desolation not before our eyes  look

a snow-white grandstand sunk by pressure from the cries of joy
other people’s nostalgia isn’t ours  certainly
not every home we can’t go back to will ferment a poem
Joseph  your dear friend Walcott
saw a miniature Manhattan among the gravestones of Brooklyn
whether or not he also split open this child licking ice cream
to touch the child curled up into a maggot  Ai Weiwei’s
metaphor not before our eyes  children that went to sleep in a chemical reaction
bit by tiny bit turn ash-grey  in a row, heads unseen
their unfinished dreams not before our eyes  no need to ask
whose hand  embraces the departed soul like salt
abstraction of death  don’t disturb life

parapet stone warm and soft as jade  as flesh
we’re squeezed tight on the edge of  a lifeboat
huddled together  never-arriving
rescue  rescue by what?
sinking  where is the seabed of the eyes?
Ponte di Rialto  embracing the river of blood under every bridge
bustlingly flows on  flows on indifferent
nothing can be seen from a snow-white grandstand
not even departed souls  destruction blends into destruction
the ends of the skies and the seas are both by the bridge  under the bridge
the inescapable ocean rises   nothing to do with misfortune
only to do with the curse   a tiny justice is enough for a child
VENICE ELEGY

5

REFLECTION: TINTORETTO’S MIRROR

I Tintoretto
hand you a mirror a world in reverse

holding the soot and roar of the tiny streets each morning
holding the salty stink the wind sighs from the fish market
windows brimming full of five centuries a sketch
trains flocks of gulls to be savage beasts of prey
your families slip out in reverse from their gilded frames

a piebald wall is omnipresent
the endless drifting of running water is omnipresent
I’m waiting for all of you to look downward
the reversed images striving to vanish upward

this morning the dogs’ barks are painfully trodden on
angel wingtips climb the narrow stairs again
flowering branches and undergarments flutter outside stone windows
neighbours’ voices hanging at recorded height
let me through all of you get through swarms of tourists
all raising cellphones two selves each side of the screen
fingers invent a flash ghost photos scatter existences everywhere
converge non-existence tag along to delete a girl
a kind of glamour dissolved into thousands of fake cities
walk in the mirror non-believers walking on water
snapping and being snapped killing and being killed there’s no real difference

deep shadow is the only living thing
oil softly gleams like the colour of night
with each brushstroke I peel shadow from beneath your skin

does light come from light years or is it secreted from the darkness?
where light is too weak to penetrate darkness conceives it all
picture frames like mirror frames you bend your heads
to see your own smiles nod embedded in the ceiling of the golden hall
once I signed five hundred years old fifteen hundred years old
the bells of Venice again as old as all of you are
to ring them is to hold up the death of a child
escape into the collective a life with no chance to jump ship
Venice is a deck that can only drift onward
a located constellation between soft light and shadow
only painted Syria Baghdad London untold numbers
a shattered horizon in the sound of explosions
borrows a curled-up frozen outline of a child
bigger than human as news of tragedy endlessly holds up its next target

as every hand pulls the gallows rope tight
not caring about the word Shame

drives a world of tears in soaring spate by Ponte di Rialto
next morning
the puddle of blood is dry
I’m open wide like new like before
the sarcophagus of water seals up all of you that checked in long ago

AUTHOR’S NOTE
Important work by the Venetian painter Tintoretto (1518-1594) can be seen in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, whose visitors are provided with mirrors, allowing them to view the painted ceilings: visitors bend over the mirrors they hold, as they view Tintoretto’s masterpieces in reverse.

ENDS