

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

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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

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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

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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

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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

this morning at the address where elegy
leaking far away one person soon will die
a bed nailed to an iron window repeats a slack grin
the voice of nothing hospital shackled to dry bones
echoes gratitude for being picked clean
scorched lies count down the remaining seconds
an emptier chair hopelessly enacting a body
a person so fails to be a crown of thorns in search of a skull
a single prison term lengthens in from ashes to infinity
reserves a thunderstorm of nightfall of execution
drags 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