

Fulbright Scholars

Where was it, in the Strand? A display
Of news items, in photographs.
For some reason I noticed it.
A picture of that year's intake
Of Fulbright Scholars. Just arriving –
Or arrived. Or some of them.
Were you among them? I studied it,
Not too minutely, wondering
Which of them I might meet.
I remember that thought. Not
Your face. No doubt I scanned particularly
The girls. Maybe I noticed you.
Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.
Noted your long hair, loose waves –
Your Veronica Lake bang. Not what it hid.
It would appear blond. And your grin.
Your exaggerated American
Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.
Then I forgot. Yet I remember
The picture: the Fulbright Scholars.
With their luggage? It seems unlikely.
Could they have come as a team? I was walking
Sore-footed, under hot sun, hot pavements.
Was it then I bought a peach? That's as I remember.
From a stall near Charing Cross Station.
It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted.
I could hardly believe how delicious.
At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
By my ignorance of the simplest things.

Your Paris

Your Paris, I thought, was American.
I wanted to humour you.
When you stepped, in a shatter of exclamations,
Out of the Hôtel des Deux Continents
Through frame after frame,
Street after street, of Impressionist paintings,
Under the chestnut shades of Hemingway,
Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Gertrude Stein,
I kept my Paris from you. My Paris
Was only just not German. The capital
Of the Occupation and old nightmare.
I read each bullet scar in the Quai stonework
With an eerie familiar feeling,
And stared at the stricken, sunny exposure of pavement
Beneath it. I had rehearsed
Carefully, over and over, just those moments –
Most of my life, it seemed. While you
Called me Aristide Bruant and wanted
To draw *les toits*, and your ecstasies ricocheted
Off the walls patched and scabbed with posters –
I heard the contrabasso counterpoint
In my dog-nosed pondering analysis
Of café chairs where the SS mannequins
Had performed their *tableaux vivants*
So recently the coffee was still bitter
As acorns, and the waiters' eyes
Clogged with dregs of betrayal, reprisal, hatred.
I was not much ravished by the view of the roofs.
My Paris was a post-war utility survivor.
The stink of fear still hanging in the wardrobes,
Collaborateurs barely out of their twenties,

[36]

Every other face closed by the Camps
Or the Maquis. I was a ghostwatcher.
My perspectives were veiled by what rose
Like methane from the reopened
Mass grave of Verdun. For you all that
Was the anecdotal aesthetic touch
On Picasso's portrait
Of Apollinaire, with its proleptic
Marker for the bullet. And wherever
Your eye lit, your immaculate palette,
The thesaurus of your cries,
Touched in its tints and textures. Your lingo
Always like an emergency burn-off
To protect you from spontaneous combustion
Protected you
And your Paris. It was diesel aflame
To the dog in me. It scorched up
Every scent and sensor. And it sealed
The underground, your hide-out,
That chamber, where you still hung waiting
For your torturer
To remember his amusement. Those walls,
Raggy with posters, were your own flayed skin –
Stretched on your stone god.
What walked beside me was flayed,
One walking wound that the air
Coming against kept in a fever, wincing
To agonies. Your practised lips
Translated the spasms to what you excused
As your gushy burlings – which I decoded
Into a language, utterly new to me
With conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings –
You gave me no hint how, at every corner.

[37]

My fingers linked in yours, you expected
The final face-to-face revelation
To grab your whole body. Your Paris
Was a desk in a *pension*
Where your letters
Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth
Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.
Was a dream where you could not
Wake or find the exit or
The Minotaur to put a blessed end
To the torment. What searching miles
Did you drag your pain
That were for me plain paving, albeit
Pecked by the odd, stray, historic bullet.
The mere dog in me, happy to protect you
From your agitation and your stone hours,
Like a guide dog, loyal to correct your stumblings,
Yawned and dozed and watched you calm yourself
With your anaesthetic – your drawing, as by touch,
Roofs, a traffic bollard, a bottle, me.

[38]

You Hated Spain

Spain frightened you. Spain
Where I felt at home. The blood-raw light,
The oiled anchovy faces, the African
Black edges to everything, frightened you.
Your schooling had somehow neglected Spain.
The wrought-iron grille, death and the Arab drum.
You did not know the language, your soul was empty
Of the signs, and the welding light
Made your blood shrivel. Bosch
Held out a spidery hand and you took it
Timidly, a bobby-sox American.
You saw right down to the Goya funeral grin
And recognized it, and recoiled
As your poems winced into chill, as your panic
Clutched back towards college America.
So we sat as tourists at the bullfight
Watching bewildered bulls awkwardly butchered,
Seeing the grey-faced matador, at the barrier
Just below us, straightening his bent sword
And vomiting with fear. And the horn
That hid itself inside the blowfly belly
Of the toppled picador punctured
What was waiting for you. Spain
Was the land of your dreams: the dust-red cadaver
You dared not wake with, the puckering amputations
No literature course had glamorized.
The juju land behind your African lips.
Spain was what you tried to wake up from
And could not. I see you, in moonlight,
Walking the empty wharf at Alicante
Like a soul waiting for the ferry.

[39]

A new soul, still not understanding,
Thinking it is still your honeymoon
In the happy world, with your whole life waiting,
Happy, and all your poems still to be found.

Moonwalk

A glare chunk of moon.
The hill no colour
Under the polarized light.
Like a day pushed inside out. Everything
In negative. Your mask
Bleak as cut iron, a shell-half –
Shucked off the moon. Alarming
And angering moon-devil – here somewhere.
The Ancient Mariner's Death-in-Life woman
Straight off the sea's fevered incandescence
Throwing black-and-white dice.
A sea saracen and cruel-looking.
And your words
Like bits of beetles and spiders
Retched out by owls. Fluorescent,
Blue-black, splintered. Bat-skulls. One day, I thought,
I shall understand this tomb-Egyptian.
This talking in tongues to a moon-mushroom.
Never wake a sleepwalker. Let the blame
Hit the olive-trees.
The black blood of their shadows
Might cry out like Abel's.
Who's here? That's the question: Who's here?
The doctor who humours, and watches
As the patient dies in his care.
Something else shares the skin of the day.
The mimicry of possession, the set of the mouth.
Would be awful in a dream. Awake
It's a question of patience. Like a phantom
Womb-tumour. The full moon of radium
Had stripped herself for the operation –

What witchcraft might ponder it. You never
Said much more about it.

What happened?

Maybe nothing happened. Perhaps
It is still there, representing you
To the sunrise, and happy
In its cold pastoral, lips pursed slightly
As if my touch had only just left it.
Or did boys find it – and shatter it? Or
Did the tree too kneel finally?

Surely the river got it. Surely
The river is its chapel. And keeps it. Surely
Your deathless head, fired in a furnace,
Face to face at last, kisses the Father
Mudded at the bottom of the Cam,
Beyond recognition or rescue,
All our fears washed from it, and perfect,
Under the stained mournful flow, saluted
Only in summer briefly by the slender
Punt-loads of shadows flitting towards their honey
And the stopped clock.

Evil.

That was what you called the head. Evil.

[58]

Wuthering Heights

Walter was guide. His mother's cousin
Inherited some Brontë soup dishes.
He felt sorry for them. Writers
Were pathetic people. Hiding from it
And making it up. But your transatlantic elation
Elated him. He effervesced
Like his rhubarb wine kept a bit too long:
A vintage of legends and gossip
About those poor lasses. Then,
After the Rectory, after the chaise longue
Where Emily died, and the midget hand-made books,
The elvish lacework, the dwarfish fairy-work shoes,
It was the track from Stanbury. That climb
A mile beyond expectation, into
Emily's private Eden. The moor
Lifted and opened its dark flower
For you too. That was satisfactory.
Wild, maybe, than ever Emily knew it.
With wet feet and nothing on her head
She trudged that climbing side towards friends –
Probably. Dark redoubt
On the skyline above. It was all
Novel and exhilarating to you.
The book becoming a map. *Wuthering Heights*
Withering into perspective. We got there
And it was all gaze. The open moor.
Gamma rays and decomposing starlight
Had repossessed it
With a kind of blackening smoulder. The centuries
Of door-bolted comfort finally amounted
To a forsaken quarry. The roofs'

[59]

Deadfall slabs were flaking, but mostly in place,
Beams and purlins softening. So hard
To imagine the life that had lit
Such a sodden, raw-stone cramp of refuge.
The floors were a rubble of stone and sheep droppings.
Doorframes, windowframes –
Gone to make picnickers' fires or evaporated.
Only the stonework – black. The sky – blue.
And the moor-wind flickering.

The incomings,

The outgoing – how would you take up now
The clench of that struggle? The leakage
Of earnings off a few sickly bullocks
And a scatter of crazed sheep. Being cornered
Kept folk here. Was that crumble of wall
Remembering a try at a garden? Two trees
Planted for company, for a child to play under,
And to have something to stare at. Sycamores –
The girth and spread of valley twenty-year-olds,
They were probably ninety.

You breathed it all in

With jealous, emulous sniffings. Weren't you
Twice as ambitious as Emily? Odd
To watch you, such a brisk pendant
Of your globe-circling aspirations,
Among those burned-out, worn-out remains
Of failed efforts, failed hopes –
Iron beliefs, iron necessities,
Iron bondage, already
Crumbling back to the wild stone.

You perched

In one of the two trees
Just where the snapshot shows you.

[60]

Doing as Emily never did. You
Had all the liberties, having life.
The future had invested in you –
As you might say of a jewel
So brilliantly faceted, refracting
Every tint, where Emily had stared
Like a dying prisoner.
And a poem unfurled from you
Like a loose frond of hair from your nape
To be clipped and kept in a book. What would stern
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances
And your huge hope? Your huge
Mortgage of hope. The moor-wind
Came with its empty eyes to look at you,
And the clouds gazed sidelong, going elsewhere,
The heath-grass, fidgeting in its fever,
Took idiot notice of you. And the stone,
Reaching to touch your hand, found you real
And warm, and lucent, like that earlier one.
And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,
Peered from the broken mullions
And was stilled. Or was suddenly aflame
With the scorch of doubled envy. Only
Gradually quenched in understanding.

[61]

The fountain threw off its seven veils
As the air swayed it. Here was your stair –
Alchemy's seven colours.
I watched you as you climbed it all on your own
Into the mouth of the azalea.

You imagined a veil-rending defloration
And a rebirth out of the sun – mixed up together
And somehow the same. You were fearless
To meet your Father.
His Word fulfilled, there, in the nuclear core.

What happens in the heart simply happens.

I stepped back. That glare
Flinging your old selves off like underthings
Left your whole Eden radioactive.

9 Willow Street

Willow Street, poetical address.
Number nine, even better. It confirmed
We had to have it. We got it.
A tower of the Muses. Freed from school
For the first time in your life, this was the cage
Your freedom flew to – a view of the Charles River
And Cambridge beyond it. Over my table
I covered the windows with brown paper.
Pushed ear-plugs in on my inflamed nerves
And sank. In the other room,
Perched up in the glare, on the cliff-edge,
You hammered your new Hermes,
Your Panic Bird chipping at the old egg,
While I rolled in my sack, with my lumber,
Along the bottom of the Charles. We huddled. Me
In my black sack striking sulphur matches
To find the eyes of Jung's nigredo. You
In a paralysis of terror-flutters
I hardly understood. I folded
Black wings round you, wings of the blackness
That enclosed me, rocking me, infantile,
And enclosed you with me. And your heart
Jumped at your ribs, you gasped for air.
You grabbed for the world.
For straws, for your morning coffee – anything
To get airborne. My bubbles
Wobbled upwards and burst empty
In the reverberations of the turbines
Home and College had assembled in you,

That thundered the parquet
And shook you to tremblings. Your day
Was twenty-four rungs of a fire-escape
Hanging in ghastly swirls, over nothing,
Reaching up towards nothing.
What an airy Hell!

Boston clanged

All its atoms below, through all its circles
Between Harvard and Scollay Square. Alone
Either of us might have met with a life.
Siamese-twinned, each of us festering
A unique soul-sepsis for the other,
Each of us was the stake
Impaling the other. We struggled
Quietly through the streets, affirming each other.
Dream-maimed and dream-blind.

Your typewriter,

Your alarm clock, your new sentence
Tortured you, a cruelty computer
Of agony niceties, daily afresh –
Every letter a needle, as in Kafka.
While I, like a poltergeist fog,
Hung on you, fed on you – heavy, drugged
With your nightmares and terrors. Inside your Bell Jar
I was like a mannikin in your eyeball.
What happened casually remains –
Strobes of a hallucinating fever
In some heaving dimension of chemical horror.
Our only escape was into arms
That reached upwards or reached downwards
And rolled us all night eastward with each other

[72]

Over the bottom, in the muddy current.
What a waste!
What did our spectre-blinded searching reach
Or wake to, that was worth it?

Happiness

Appeared – momentary,
Peered in at your window
Like a wild migrant, an oriole,
A tanager, a humming-bird – pure American,
Blown scraps of the continent's freedom –
But off course and gone
Before we could identify it.

It took me a dizzy moment to make out
Something under the chestnuts, struggling
On a path of the Common, down near the Swan-boats.
What looked like a slug, black, soft, wrinkled,
Was wrestling, somehow, with the fallen
Brown, crumpled lobe of a chestnut leaf.
Suddenly, plainly, it was a bat.
A bat fallen out of its tree
Mid-afternoon. A sick bat? I stooped
Thinking I'd lift it again to tree-bark safety.
It reared up on its elbows and snarled at me,
A raving hyena, the size of a sparrow,
Its whole face peeled in a snarl, fangs tiny.
I tried to snatch it up by the shoulders
But it spun, like a fighter, behind its snarl.

A crowd collected, entertained to watch me
Fight a bat on Boston Common. Finally
I had to give it my finger.
Let the bite lock. Then, cradling it,

[73]

Gently lifted it and offered it up
To the wall of chestnut bark. It released me
And scuttled upwards backwards, face downwards,
A rearguard snarl, triumphant, contorted,
Vanishing upwards into where it had come from.

At home I looked at the blood, and remembered:
American bats have rabies. How could Fate
Stage a scenario so symbolic
Without having secreted the tragedy ending
And the ironic death? It confirmed
The myth we had sleepwalked into: death.
This was the bat-light we were living in: death.

[74]

The Literary Life

We climbed Marianne Moore's narrow stair
To her bower-bird bric-à-brac nest, in Brooklyn.
Daintiest curio relic of Americana.
Her talk, a needle
Unresting – darning incessantly
Chain-mail with crewel-work flowers,
Birds and fish of the reef
In phosphor-bronze wire.
Her face, tiny American treen bobbin
On a spindle,
Her voice the flickering hum of the old wheel.
Then the coin, compulsory.
For the subway
Back to our quotidian scramble.
Why shouldn't we cherish her?

You sent her carbon copies of some of your poems.
Everything about them –
The ghost gloom, the constriction,
The bell-jar air-conditioning – made her gasp
For oxygen and cheer. She sent them back.
(Whoever has her letter has her exact words.)
'Since these seem to be valuable carbon copies
(Somewhat smudged) I shall not engross them.'
I took the point of that 'engross'
Precisely, like a bristle of glass.
Snapped off deep in my thumb.
You wept
And hurled yourself down a floor or two
Further from the Empyrean.
I carried you back up.

[75]