

WORK POETRY / POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

Glen Downie

Grieving

The door opens to light weak as watered sun
She lowers herself as though wounded
into a chair

She has written strange letters accusing
the doctors the hospital *The man in the coffin*
was grim-faced My husband
was gentle

You listen helpless while she chases
her conspiracy tale
The ragged scrap story
whirls round like a dust devil

and slams shut all possible doors
till the room has collapsed
suddenly silent and close as a breathless lung
In her fear she is wearing
the grim face her husband —
No Never

Her husband was gentle
and vanished impossibly
cleansed of all shadow
like a letter unwriting itself
like a bed sheet unwrinkling

and you are a weak door
she opens and closes again
There is only this wounded light
left to grieve for the body

Reproduction in the Kingdom

Back at the office
every form on my desk has reproduced
slyly, like the secret agents of Xerox,
Persian king of the twentieth century,
who extends his dominion
by the endless multiplication of edicts

Over the copier I lean
like a modern Narcissus
cloning myself in 8½ by 11.
I am two-dimensional
man. At the press of a button
I can cancel
I can cancel
all special features

It's my job to paper over the cracks in the system
to advance the cause of the duplicate universe
which we're asked to inhabit
gratefully
gratefully
in place of the torn original

The Coming of Spring

From Port-of-Spain
to the snow
he has come to be burned
clean with radiation,
rescued by poisons.
The hollows of his eyes
are deep pools of faith.
Chin whiskers
like fine black grass
sprout hopefully.

His words have a soft
island music. *My country*
he whispers
is a beautiful place
so very beautiful.
They drain his blood
for evidence. Under the microscope,
an aerial photo of islands.
Malignant invasion.

Against the white pillow
 his dark gleaming skull
 is sculpted
 smooth,
 imperceptibly
 closer to final perfection.
 Into his ears, the Walkman is chanting
 Koran: *In the name of Allah*
 the compassionate,
 the merciful. . . .

Living with Cancer

The new patient is appalled at the gallows
 humour before the meeting starts.
 Loose talk about death

has spooked him, driven him
 to the edge

of our circle, where he whispers to his wife
 about leaving early

Newly hired, I'm here to observe the human
 chemistry, as the group administers a dose
 of distilled experience.

Cancer is alive in the room, yet the laughing presence
 of 10- and 12-year veterans
 confounds the man's fear.

When I started work, someone issued me
 a daybook. Religiously, I snip
 a corner off each clean page

to be always in the present, to feel the edge
 of the cut day against my thumb, and know I am right
 where I belong.

Tomorrow, we will spread
 out in a bigger building, my office
 one cell in a growing cancer

clinic. Like the stranger tonight, I'm new
 to this disease, but as a comfort
 an old hand assures me
 we will soon be
 well acquainted.

Chances Are

Remember how *I love you*
sounded when my voice was all gravel and smoke?
Rougher than a stretch of dirt road in summer. Soon
it was less than a croak, just a dry
whisper like dust settling after
the car's gone by. I told you then
Tenderness is hard.

Before they cut out the voice
box, a pretty girl came by
with a book of comforting
words. It had sketches
of a man and a woman embracing, and it said
if you loved me before
chances are you would love me
again. Words, it seems, are just vibrating air

given pretty shape in a mouth. Perhaps I can learn
to burp *I love you* into your ear. If not,
I can buy a machine
that vibrates love
and rage and singing
into one robotic monotone of loss

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