

R. S. Thomas

MONET *Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine*

But deep inside
are the chipped figures
with their budgerigar faces,
a sort of divine
humour in collusion
with time. Who but
God can improve
by distortion?

There is
a stone twittering in
the cathedral branches,
the excitement of migrants
newly arrived from a tremendous
presence.

We have no food
for them but our
prayers. Kneeling we drop our
crumbs, apologising
for their dryness, afraid
to look up in the ensuing
silence in case they have flown.

Elizabeth Bishop

Large Bad Picture

Remembering the Strait of Belle Isle or
some northerly harbor of Labrador,
before he became a schoolteacher
a great-uncle painted a big picture.

Receding for miles on either side
into a flushed, still sky
are overhanging pale blue cliffs
hundreds of feet high,

their bases fretted by little arches,
the entrances to caves
running in along the level of a bay
masked by perfect waves.

On the middle of that quiet floor
sits a fleet of small black ships,
square-rigged, sails furled, motionless,
their spars like burnt match-sticks.

And high above them, over the tall cliffs'
semi-translucent ranks,
are scribbled hundreds of fine black birds
hanging in *n*'s in banks.

One can hear their crying, crying,
the only sound there is
except for occasional sighing
as a large aquatic animal breathes.

In the pink light
the small red sun goes rolling, rolling,
round and round and round at the same height
in perpetual sunset, comprehensive, consoling,

while the ships consider it.
Apparently they have reached their destination.
It would be hard to say what brought them there,
commerce or contemplation.

Elizabeth Bishop
Poem

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
—this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic
handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to.

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
—that gray-blue wisp—or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.
Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?

Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hour, "in one breath,"
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
*Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.*
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A. . . .

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided—"visions" is
too serious a word—our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
—the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Denise Riley

Letters from Palmer

On moors the dark is spangled furze. Dusk noise presses.
Water *varnishes* everything that it covers, as pebbled beds
of streams. The plainly liquid quality of all shadow.

A blind baby feeling for the breast knows the taste of milk.
Woods must be rich, in thickly tumbling light.
Real tree colour, not anything picture colour.

The glimmering-through of the white paper.
Those thousand little luminous eyes which peer
through a finished linear etching, even in its shadows.

They have built us up with great houses, and destroyed
the elasticity of the air. How should the light strain through.
Guineas are being lost by the hundreds, in losing the Spring.

Interest is a capital lever when goodness moves it.
In May a peculiar grey effect is very charming.
If a man gets a name as a mannerist it is all up with him.

Enough of green tea poetry and smoky philosophy.
The choir of greys between violet and copper.
Keeping my shadows tender clear and neutral.

Vapour suspended over the far distance like a curtain.
I saw it in nature for so long that I was afraid to try it.
I have finished the little town by the blue river.

~~the hollow of a speaking trumpet we~~
~~come to say yes, now we are ill-rid.~~

Small specks of pure white paint may glitter like the rain.
When I have gone to school to a potato in black & white chalk
I have found it difficult to make it unmistakably like.

As through a little frame a curtained spectacle
of downs and elms and matted pines. Stopping
the figure feeling intruding on the landscape feeling.

The upper shadows of objects in the air. The cool
sub-light they get from the sky. Moon-powdered
woollen leaves. The hillocks blocked in surges.

Where is the Vergilian muse? At the railway whistle she fled for ever.
Her very oxen wander the city disconsolate.
Corydon and Thyrsis meet in corduroys and Manchester cottons.

If I seem mirthful it is tinsel & spangles on a black ground.
O for a safe passage to that world where undivorced beauty
shall ever be the index and form of goodness.

Our earth is honeycombed with cells of fire. We suffer
the Poles to fight themselves out & the Danes & the Circassians
and need not expect pity when our turn comes.

Crude flake white is in hue a cold colour. Writing our
difficulties. I spring upon my books. You want something
which will not be taken away. Which will fill your heart.

Writhing for the death of my son. They may be allowed
to walk unseen as our guides in this darkness. You lay the book
down as tenderly as if you had handled something alive.

To come to the point, avoiding the temptation to impertinent
& superfluous labour. Exactness the common honesty of art.
What is prosperity without it but a violated responsibility.

The stove within me rages. A filmless sun burns. In cobalt air.
Hills fired with living gold. I am walked and scorched to death.
Drenched in a hot white mist. Grand coruscation of sudden light.

The solemn & inexhaustible eloquence of rains and mountain.
O the playful heave and tumble of lines in the hills here.
We are first green and then grey and then nothing in this world.

Denise Riley

Lure, 1963

Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime green.
I roam around around around around acidic yellows, globe
oranges burning, slashed cream, huge scarlet flowing
anemones, barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping When
will I be loved? Flood, drag to papery long brushes
of deep violet, that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in
his kiss. Lime brilliance. Obsessive song. Ink tongues.
Black cascades trail and spatter darkly orange pools
toward washed lakes, whose welling rose and milk-
beribboned pillars melt and sag, I'm just a crimson
kid that you won't date. Pear glow boys. Clean red.
Fluent grey green, pine, broad stinging blue rough
strips to make this floating space a burning place of
whitest shores, a wave out on the ocean could never
move that way, flower, swell, don't ever make her blue.
Oh yes I'm the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest
green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much, I'm
wearing. And you're not listening to a word I say.

Paul Durcan

Man With Two Daughters

I

My wife lives in another city
With - or without - another man;
Please God with another man.
We meet from time to time
To weigh our two daughters,
Adjust weights on the weighing scales.
She laughs, lighting up a cigarette.
'You have them looking like a pair of caged birds.'
I love her as I have always loved her.
We will never live together again.

My girls - do they look like caged birds?
'Beauty is the harmony of chance and the good.'

Such carriage, such poise
The little one has - she could be
Doge of Venice the way she holds herself.

Her older sister - so at ease
With the world, she stands in profile to it.

A pair of mallard ducks, vertical in canal water,
Tails-up, upended off the pebbled shore of the universe,
All bill, all eye.

The younger looks to the older
And the older looks to the world;
I look to the pair of them.

I have only to put my hands on their shoulders
To feel the hairs on the backs of my hands lie down;
To feel the peace percolate through my bones;
The medieval stream that flows beneath our home;
Our urbanity fluid between granite setts.

A sunsoaked afternoon in Brescia
With my daughters
Has a different definition of light
To a sunsoaked afternoon in Brescia
Without my daughters.
Everything I am
I owe to them;
My two infinitely gentle,
Infinitely suffering daughters.

II

We will attend to our father ourselves.
We will illuminate his nights and days
With gold skirts and orange skirts;
With the stuff of taffeta;
Green-and-white bodices;
Starched ruffs.
We will mantle him.
We will dismantle him.
He will dwindle down into a blade of grass
In a forest of silks.
We will not desert him.
We will smother him
In daughterdominion; sisterchaos; womancalm.

Paul Durcan

No Flowers

I

The day of my wife's funeral
I cycled behind the hearse
On my Hercules with dropped handlebars
All the way up to Mount Jerome
And back again.

I had a drink on my own
In The Waterloo House
In Baggot Street.
I was elated.
But after three glasses of claret
I was composed,
Ready for the improvisation.

I walked out into the night
Up to Baggot Street Bridge
Ready for the improvisation.
I walked straight through the locked
Glass door of Bord Fáilte.
When I got to my feet
I was a glass man.

I crept off in a stoop,
A stoop with the cream
Skimmed off its milk,
A bird cut out of glass,
Up along the canal,
No flowers in my claws.

II

Singing the praises
Of water, of catwalks, of locks,
Of artisans,
Of the total absence
Of dogs at this time of night,
Of towpaths, of canal bank seats,
Of lanes, of bookshops, of women -
Of women at pianos alone in flats
Playing Field Nocturnes,
Of Mary Lavin's daughters in Lad Lane,
Of the Misses King and O'Flaherty in Parsons Bookshop,
Of Michael Kane at his window in Waterloo Road.

My trousers are cut.
My jacket is cut.
I am walking up the middle of the canal
Up to my shinbones in water.
I am walking on my knees
Acquiring humility.
I like walking on my knees
Acquiring humility.
Humility is not endless.

No flowers on my knees
But the body of a bicycle
Which I hold up aloft:
Her darling head.
Are you ready for your new life, my love?
Your old frame back?

Four Figures at a Table

What do you want of us?

What have you got for us?

What are you looking at?

Oh, you mean pity again, poverty, austerity –

That has a nice ring. Isn't my face

Sufficiently set in its lineaments

Of survival?

Try to stop posing, you said.

Give me the look you gave me

When I came through the door with sister

And you assumed I was a patron.

Yes, that's it. Just a touch more

Effaced impatience if you can, the corners of your mouth

Not yet turned down

From hatred to affliction.

—T. J. Clark



Jack B. Yeats, 'No Flowers'



Giovanni Battista Moroni, 'Portrait of a Gentleman and his two Children'



The Le Nain Brothers, 'Four Figures at a Table'



Gillian Ayres, 'Lure'