

If I Forget Thee

Have you seen the Holy Land,
Climbed up Zion Hill,
Stood in line to kiss the shrine,
Begged to know God's will?

Was it here the Temple stood?
Here, that Jesus fell?
Did Muhammad rise into the skies
This close to the Kotel?

Were Via Dolorosa's tourists
Indifferent to your grief?
Did you riot or stay quiet
On the *Haram al-Sharif*?

When the sun blazed down on you
From the Rock's gilt Dome,
Did you see there sanctity
Or just its vanished home?

Who or what did you decide
Decides what is whose—
Scripture? Scholars? Soldiers? Dollars?
Last night's cable news?

Say a settler shoots a farmer,
An Arab stabs a Jew:
Do you regard it very hard
To choose between the two?

Has your God made enemies?
Are you afraid they'll win?
Do you and yours fight only wars
In defense of Him?

Are those prayers that you repeat
A symptom, or a cure,
For what began when Abraham
Pulled up stakes in Ur?

Suppose you answer me at last;
Suppose my questions cease;
Would you then, Jerusalem,
Think the silence peace?

Departure

Like escaping through a siege, growing older
Hampers itself with hopes of return;
So if, over your bare shoulder,
Upwind palaces start to smolder,
Let them burn.

Woken by ax-hack and sword-clang, at once you knew
Better than to arm for the defense
Of gates your foes stream through.
You're free to act as the conquered do
When a war ends.

Whatever you cannot bear, you must jettison
To gain the stealth of lacking a past.
You're not safe till you outrun
Hearing the hoard of spoils you've won
Unamassed.

Shrieks. Towers crash down. Yet back-alleying
At a pace fit for fifty, not twenty,
You must curb the urge to cling
A moment to some random one or thing,
From the passing plenty.

Beyond the walls, your descent shoreward lies
Through olive groves long since laid waste.
Dawn miscolors smoke-splashed skies,
Leaving you no shield against hunting eyes
But further haste.

*What exiles converge on this fringe of wrack-strewn sand?
What refuge beckons from this blank sea?
Comes there no one to command
Our foretold voyage, to a land
Called Italy?*

Timor Mortis

I

The nurse's tone is flat:
"Your chest X-rays are back,
And the doctor would like to chat.
 How's ten AM on the first?"
Blurting, "I'll be right over,"
I salmon off the sofa
 And gird myself for the worst.

On the train, *Scenes from a Diagnosis*:
"What this scarring clearly shows is . . .
Malignance . . . asbestosis . . .
 You've heard that cigarettes kill? . . .
There are treatments, all of them ghastly . . .
Your insurance has lapsed . . . And lastly,
 Update, if you've got one, your will."

In the waiting room, sure
My condition defies all cure,
I resolve stoically to endure
 Whatev— There's my name. Steady.
Then the doctor tells me I'm
Something . . . something . . . *just fine*—
 At the window my bill is ready.

II

Since that day, I've begun
Sizing up each one
Of the suspects, usual and un-,
 In the matter of my demise;
(As if mere familiarity
Sufficed to preserve such as me,
 Though it couldn't keep a Caesar alive):

First in my fatal miscellany
Come sharkbite, leprosy,
Iodine deficiency,
 Scratch of rabid raccoon;
A fatal strain of gout,
Existential doubt,
 Mishap in hot-air balloon;

Next, UV radiation,
Premature inhumation,
A planetary invasion
 (You *know* we aren't alone);
Runaway dementia,
A non-Heimlichable denture,
 Or some growth better left ungrown;

Violence, my own or another's,
Gas that ignites or smothers,
Some bad gene of my mother's
 Or father's casual bequeathing;
A heart whose cadence stops,
Blood too fond of clots,
 Or lungs sick of breathing.

III
This is how it will go:
Either intubated and slow,
From the safety-bed's screen-lit glow
 A joyless deliverance;
Or else convulsing, then slack,
While belted down in the back
 Of a hurtling ambulance.

Live, or don't, in suspense
About when the fear ends,
Deem it madness or sense,
 Laugh at it never, or often;
To all of us it brings
The same two things:
 No answers, and a coffin.

Urban Life

I've got all the nature I need, here in the city.

Blocks of green speckle its grid where parks and zoos
Nestle like pets, cosseted and car-ad pretty,
While vermin and weeds, too close to us for pity,
Adapt to every toxin we dare to use.

The one time I went, the Orchid Show was as hot
And human-humid as the subway. I had to leave.
In its crowd, each splayed plant dangled from a pot
As if petaling just to please us, which it was not.
Out where the traffic sang through the streets, I could breathe.

Crews plant trees now with a bark said to repel
Pollution, which I call progress since whatever
Kills them is plainly killing us as well.
Down my block, saplings stand yoked between parallel
Uprights, the better for breaking them to our weather.

I saw a hummingbird last week, which was weird:
A hovering emerald, exotic even for Queens.
Something like joy rayed through me, only to disappear
Since wherever its wing-blur belonged, it wasn't here.
I try, but cannot not know what it meant. Means.

Eye Condition

Lately, should I look
At the farthest skies
Or a close-clutched book,
Lint-flecks surf my eyes.

Called “muscae,” they drift
In granular strings,
Just the kind of gift
A fifth decade brings.

Yet, though both eyes are
With these blobs infected,
Think it not bizarre
They go uncorrected.

Squinting through a dust
Tear-ducts cannot rinse
Teaches me to trust
Sight’s contaminants.

If some wordscape floats
For one moment true,
These amoebal motes
Swarm to smudge its view.

If horizons get
Drabber for this blur,
Well might I forget
What dreambait they were.

I see blots because
Treatment would disguise
None of the world’s flaws,
And all of the eyes’.