

Naked Substance

*... ah, why
Should life all labour be?
Let us alone.*

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

This vantage point is nothing lofty.
I'm looking down into a modest valley

peopled with homes and trees, a blinking tower —
on a spectacle, in fact, that's wholly common:

no burning bush with its slight, creaking voice;
no voice but mine upon this hill

where people come to meditate
perched on the concrete footing of a bridge

no longer covering this stretch of air,
gone with the trolley car that used to run

clanking through town, from pole to pole.
Now down in the twilight-lighted grove,

the sun's like blood infused within those trees,
a pulsing, bright umbilicus to close the day.

A mower drones and porch lights flare.
Collective life goes on and looks

like nothing epic in the waning light.
We put on purposes to suit ourselves,

cutting the grass before it gets too long;
raking up leaves before they blow away;

we live like birds, collecting string and grass
building our nest from what's at hand,

under the sun and moon we fly,
oceans of light and air in which we swim,

amidst the substance of the fading day
watching the stars that one by one appear

teaching for finite spirits how to thrive,
naked and bright for all the world to see.

To Save the World

Heart Stone

It's noon. The sun is out. A hectic crowd
of workers rushes past to grab some lunch.

I watch them from a bench. The way they flock
in frenzied unison reminds me of

a wedge of geese, an artless shape in flight.
I see that something small is on the path—

a beetle in its death throes, lurching drunk,
now teeters toward my seat. But as it nears,

I see the thing for what it really is:
a cherry pit, the heart stone of the fruit,

with bits of flesh still stuck to it, dragged here
by ants who struggle with their load. Why would

they bring this useless thing? This cast off seed
would never fit down through an ant-sized hole —

it's shred of meat just can't be worth their toil.
Is this some Stonehenge, or a senseless chore?

Is it a mission from their queen? "Let them
eat fruit!" she cried, "I want a cherry tree!"

Maybe despotic instinct rules the day:
they work because the must, from ceaseless need,

that urge a hunger they must feed, and feed.
It's tough to say. But isn't *my* hard heart

a seed like theirs: dried up, the weight absurd,
a thing whose purpose is to break and grow,

to put down roots, wherever it may fall,
and lift its bloody flower in the sun?

Pavese (II)

At this hour, no one even notices a man
in thin leather shoes pacing the black streets
down to the restless sea. There is no one
more alone than the man who walks shivering

at midnight on rain-spattered pavement.
No dog barks, no porch light flares to break
his solitude. The cops, asleep at their post,
are chasing dreams. The man meanders through

the moon-lit rows of unripe crops, a shade
of darker smoke adrift in darkness.
Does he hear peasant songs within the grass?
Those swaying stalks remind him of the girls

who shimmered in the dim lamps of the bar.
They could not coax him out of his silence
longer than it took to swallow some wine,
just long enough to tell of his clandestine past.

His words would lift like egrets taking flight
toward a twilight horizon. He was
that solemn boy again with delicate hands.
Everything stopped as he spoke, holding its breath,

listening. Testing the weight of each word.
Do words, made of air, have the power
to change a man from within, or to save him?
Now, as the world sleeps on, he makes his way

down the edge where earth and sea resound,
and like a sailor, looks beyond the rim
into the wide bright chaos of the night
as prophets stare into their sacred cups

to read the faithless dregs of some stray god,
to make some human sense of what he sees.
He translates myths — stripped of their silky
vestments and sleight of hand — back into

the common tongue, where they began. The story
doesn't change: the earth, and it's children.
Their motionless faces, and the face
of the one changed by love. That face stands out

of the crowd and its gritty surroundings.
It ripples with pleasure like sunlight on water.
What does he feel through those thin leather shoes?
It is the violent change of wind and tide?

Does he feel the rise of cold apocalypse?
When all the human bonds dissolve and pop,
does lost love call and quake in tides of blood,
a creature starved and frozen in the night?

Was it that tide's thin line that drew him home,
the lonely man who walks on jetty stones
plucking the black-shelled muscles up from rocks
to toss them back into the sea's embrace?