

Last Wishes and Four Other Poems

Last Wishes

Lantern the horses that have come to us borrowed,
Taint the air with your sweet kerosene;

Thirst me from the darkening well,
Drink me its cold-black waters echoing;

Hunger me the windfalls from the orchard, peach apple pear,
Then sop me the meat-blood planked upon the table;

Candle both our faces, there between the pages of John and Luke;
Snow my child eyes and white them to the frozen moon;

Razor my cheeks, sagging with age,
And make them smooth as wetted stones;

Death me into the softest ground,
Speak me into tears;

Let the angels dance upon my scars;
Bones to ashes, ashes to stars.

Trespassing

For the third time this week,
I cross into the yard of the town suicide,
To toy in his blood for a while.

Next to the front porch,
I run my stick under the chins
Of some neglected roses,
And knock their white petals to the ground.

I check the door; it doesn't give.
But I lean my shoulder against it anyway,
Just to sense what might lie beyond it,
There in the stilled rooms of the house,
Where absence unredeemed now makes its home.

I step off the porch and cup my hands
Around my face to look in through the living room window.
I see a broken vase on the floor,
And chairs spun out of place, evidence they left
In an urgent daze, stunned but still walking,
Like animals hit by something hard
Coming out of the dark.

I let my mind wander up the stairs
To his room with the twin bed and the movie posters,
Where the drawn plaid curtains can be seen
From the street. It was here that he planned
To erase every life that ever loved him,
To kill their right to sleep, to smile, to remember.

He had his reasons, I suppose – a mother
Blowing like winter around his ankles,
A father steeped in the vocabulary of indifference,
A talent for friendless invisibility.
Even I never saw him
Until they told me he was dead.

I wonder about the things he gave up,
Like that girl down the street.
Did she ever make it up to the soft darkness of his closet?
Did he kiss the white stalk of her throat?
Was he haunted

By the unvirtuous shape of her mouth?

I go around back, through a little wood gate
That needs a new coat of paint.
Rows and rows of lemon trees fill the expansive yard,
The fruit rotting beneath the leaves.
Did he play here when he was younger?
Did he hide among the trees
And cover himself with lemons, waiting to be found?

There is something in this place that oppresses me – all of us.
Maybe it's the heat. Maybe it's the weight of green things
Turning brown.
August never knows when to bed down and let go.

A thirst comes on me, so I kneel
And put my face down near the garden spigot.
When I first turn it on,
The water is hot, molten, coming up from
The summer ground;
But I wait and let the evening drop down
A minute more, the water flushing out.
It grows tepid, then cool to the touch;
Seconds pass as it plashes
On the ground and now it's cold on my tongue, in my mouth.
It is the water of deep under-earth,
The water of burials.

More and more cars pass along the street
In front of the house, casting leaves like birds into the air.
My time here is almost done;
Just one more threshold to cross.

Through a half-open door, I enter the garage.
Still wrapped and knotted around the rafter-beam
Is the lime-green extension cord meant for the electric mower.
It dangles weightless now, frayed slightly where
They cut him down
And held him for the last time.

I think his name was Jacob.

Lisbon, Portugal (1974)

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I am the king of broken flowers, of abandoned
Luggage and shoes left by the side of the road.

I gather up the time entrained in lost things,
And return it to the world as prayer and curse.

My secrets I keep high in the jacaranda trees
That line the quay, filthy with birds.
Can you hear them, love, when the river
Is in mourning and the barges strain against their ropes?

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It is growing dark now and I must earn my keep
By lighting the gaslamps along the street.

Come, let me look at your face,
Haloed in the fire of my torch.

You've remained young, I see,
Little changed by the trace of years.

You are still the girl who kept hearts
In cages, until you traded them all for mine.

Raise your chin, dear, lift up
Your eyes and open your skirt.

Let us explore the fragile space
Between force and consent.

There is so little to tell you,
Yet so much time. How will we cover it all?

Let me start somewhere in the middle,
Where everything begins.

Let me start with the precious things

That I thought I could keep away from this world.

My son has moved to the other side of the mountain,
Not a great distance, but the roads are bad, the wires cut.

He may as well be four oceans away.
I do not see him.

When he was a boy, we'd go
To the zoo together and feed sardines

To the seals. But the zoo is shuttered now,
The animals crated and sent away on trains.

All but the seals, which they brought to the Tagus
And let slip into the rising tide.

In my son's absence, I must relearn
How to speak as a child,

To find my way back to the voice
That called to open fields in faultless innocence.

And in this state, I will live out the small days left to me
Avoiding the odd geometries of revolution and counter-revolution;

I will seek refuge on a city park bench, the catafalque
Of all wanderers, and depart as melted snow.

Man in the Desert (*Homo Sacer*)

I.

The house sits off the road about a quarter-mile,
Cinder-block square, with deep-set tiny windows
Pocked from sand and pebbles. The roof bakes in the heat
But in the cold hours after midnight shrinks back,
And pinches against the joists. Slipped from its guy wires,
The TV antenna sag-topples to the east.

For three days he has lain on the cool floor, his hair stiff
With sweat, his skin stiff with salt.
All a vain effort to keep his mind from racing,
To maintain a predictable beat of heart.
With his foot, he pushes the dresser against the wall
To keep scorpions from coming through the spider hole.

He knows he can't stay here forever, in this position.
All the food is gone, most of the water, too.
The rattling bottle-chimes and beer-can spinners tell
Him the wind is building up again. The war
Is about to return, his war, conducted in the trace
Of the moon, on serpentine dunes, beneath god's own walls.
He thinks about dying bravely, drowning and sinking
To the very floor of this ocean without a sea.

II.

For three days he has walked without memory or plan.
He has let the wind push him where it willed.
But the painlessness of not thinking has stopped.

He must rest, so puts to camp at the base of a sandstone cliff,
The fossils watching him from their elevated embedment
While he struggles with tent and fire and wind.

Prayers for empty sleep meet with silent indifference,
So the past creeps back in, taking over the space behind his eyes
As the hours tick by and grow dark.
What ancient dances took place amid all this sand? He asks.
What ancient silhouettes did we paint along these cavern walls?
I am black ink, I am creosote, I am indigo bleeding from a fallen lamb.
Love has lost me.

III.

Days, hours, weeks – he cannot keep track of them.
Time has become an old book of recipes written in code.
It's gibberish to him now. He keeps pace with the blowing sand.
That is all.

Rain is coming from far off, he can feel it
Rumbling beneath his feet, he can taste the snap
Of electricity in the air. This is the water he feared.
Different from the water near the palm grove,
Which started so salt and bitter that it withered
His tongue before dousing his thirst.

This is water from the sky, not the ground,
Water summoned by an angry church, sent to cleanse the earth
Of man and machine, to flood the canyons,
To wash the white rime of sin from the back of our necks.
When the time comes, there will be no place of refuge,
For water seeks out and consumes each breath.

IV.

He has been abandoned by all living things,
Even his tattered clothes have left him.
Yet he keeps moving.

The body, this quivering beating mass of bone and blood,
Is slowing down. It knows
What the mind refuses to admit.

Lay me down here, he commands his knees and hands.
Stop here and lay me down, let me dig
And touch the cool wet sand.

Miles away, unknown to the man, the storm has passed.
There is no rain, no flood waters coming,
But he closes his eyes just the same, waiting.

Ekphrasis
(A Response to a Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson)

The photo is entitled, "Andalucía."
It depicts a dozen or so boys playing
In a rubble-strewn alley
Surrounded by concrete walls.

The shot is framed by a hole in the front wall;
And one senses that, but for this hole,
The entire scene would have remained hidden.
But the hole, with its jagged edges and its bombed-out
Irregular shape, provides a portal
Into this singular moment of Spanish life.

There is no ball for the boys to kick or throw,
No dog to chase.
The closest thing to a toy is the small hoop
held inertly by the smiling boy
In the middle of the photograph.

But Cartier-Bresson does not focus our attention on
The boy with the hoop, or even the boy
Next to him carrying a picnic basket.
Instead, our eyes and the energy of the entire
Photograph are directed toward
The crippled boy at the front of the alley,
Closest to the camera.

He seems to be running away from the others,
Planting his crutches into the hard ground
To push himself forward,
Dragging his lifeless legs over the broken
Plaster and cement.
He does not look backward;
He knows what is behind him – the shouts and ridicule,
The murderous laughter. He is so intent
On escape that he allows himself
A kind of determined grin, a smile.

Immediately to his rear, just off his left shoulder,
A boy wearing a dark coat and dark shoes and stockings,
Appears ready to lunge at him, to tackle him,

And push him down into the rubble,
To make him tear his shirt, perhaps –
To watch his thin, slack legs bounce against the ground.

But before the tackler can reach his target,
A third boy, dressed in white, corrals him – not with anger
Or indignation or even urgency – but smiling,
As if to say, “Part of the game is to let Antonio get away.”

The photo was taken in 1933.
In a matter of six years, the Civil War
Would come and go and Franco
Would rule all of Spain. In shiny
Black sedans, he would send soldiers out
To the little towns in the countryside
To kill undesirables, the uniform
Providing the necessary space
Between murder and duty.

I can only wonder if Antonio
Was ever visited by such soldiers,
Maybe the older brothers
Of the boys from the alley. Did they
Come through his door without knocking?
Did he have time to grab his crutches
And crab down the back stairs
Before they shot him?

Or maybe none of this happened.
It is hard to predict the future from a photograph.
The truth is often more subtle.

Perhaps he married a slightly ugly girl from Valencia
Who was good at tending chickens
And keeping secrets,
And though he did not love her, nor she him,
They held each other safe
In a small stucco house at the base of some
Wind-chapped hill that no one bothered to name.

She would chop the wood and then help him
Down from his chair, and he would kneel
At the hearth to light them both a fire.
And from the cistern outside,

She would bring in water for tea
Or coffee if they had it,
And they would drink it without speaking,
While they waited for the room to warm up.