

THREE PAINTINGS

SPATIAL COMPOSITION

for Katarzyna Kobro

I

& this will be our house
made the way of words
on intersecting planes

collapsed walls, roof adrift
our childhoods motes of dust
afloat in black & white

our feet on stone floors
suspended above a shining sea
of all our dreams & memories

the stairwell, a brushstroke,
echoes the ardent loops
of your letters from Milan

the golden spiral of your hand
closed in sleep, as if to write

II

& this will be our house
the rooms moved
bodies of geometry:

lintel, arch & dado
marking out their spaces
like letters scored in clay

the cellar steps descend
to the underworld, where we'll
dig below the grace of *curve*

to *crooked, bent* & deeper,
down through Old Icelandic
to *round & crown*

the outside reaching in
birdsong through the window

HER MAKING IS
for Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

to lift

– the world is broken –

prickling between
finger and thumb

gingerly, not to
break (be soft!)

a piece of eggshell

loosen

– the sea surprises –

skies from water

urgent restless
reckless calm

the northeast light
(cover your ears)

sheers ice angles

& mark

– we wake unconsoled –

lines of chalk & frost

round Iron Age bodies
risen from the murk

the curve of the bay
tending towards

a circle

A PORTRAIT BY JEANNE (c. 1920)*
for Gwen John

Fond of sloping ceilings, you favoured
attic rooms, *no comforts, no heat, no bath;*
the whole house running with damp.

I thought your stone floors monastic,
your nun-like face was a *pure oval*. In your eyes
I saw *clear extraordinary blueness*.

You told me, feverish and fragile, how
at the priest's deathbed you pushed
down the cover and saw a violet bruise.

In my grief you said: *it is not religious*
to suffer long. We must go on with our
mysterious work. You did not tell me

how your letters to Rodin began: *oh, mon tendre amour,*
how you imagined a house with *quatre chaises en ousier*.

*Note: the lines in italics are taken from letters or conversations cited in *Gwen John – A Life* by Sue Roe (Chatto & Windus 2001)