

POEMS
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PUZZLES

The jigsaw she bought him
has five thousand pieces
cut to provide
maximum difficulty

he will spend hours
in wrapt oblation
trying to conjure
from these fragments

the finished portrait
which shows two people
in romantic light
a chocolate box design

sickly with roses.
Sometimes the night
promises much with
strict connections

joyfully made
as rewards for other times
when the pieces
will not fit

the barren spells
excitement
continually deferred
as now this now that part

seems likely
but will not fill
the required role
leaving the edges always jagged.

It goes on for years
the margins of his life
filled with
obsessive desire

to create the completed
pattern once
he got close seemed
to see the end

but returned one day
to find
five thousand
fretted remnants

of passion
scattered
and on the table
a note announcing

her departure
'sod you
and sod the puzzle
I cannot live with it anymore

I am too tired
for further words
that never touch
I remain
no longer
your loving wife
xxx

patiently
he gathered himself
to begin
again.

STILL LIFE

At the market
we buy peaches
pink, apricot

velvet
and carry them home
carefully
posing treasures
in a wooden bowl.

Each morning
we admire them
they look too good
to eat, you say

until one day
I can wait no longer
and plunge teeth
into luscious flesh

the juice dribbling
as I mumble "delicious"
you are already
re-arranging the fruit

with idle artistry
making nature's
prodigality so fine
that we can eat no more.

The the bloom fades.
One night we return
to find those firm pink
cheeks cankered

with grey mould.
I watch you place them
carefully in the garden
crowning the compost

in grim parody of funeral
their last touches of colour
artfully arranged
until the vision

organically disappears
leaving us
with out still life
decomposing.

DOMESTIC CARVING

At twilight
breaking from the arid page
he calls her name
to the silent house.

Hungry for comfort
the kitchen beckons
site of bright ritual
evening drinks and food.

It is empty, darkening
until he sees
in the sun's last rays
a fragmentary pattern

In the window frame
she kneels
trowel poised
pointing to heaven

lonely maker
at her silent prayer
poised in a moment
she will dig soundly

pushing seeds deep
into the dark
moist earth
from which the fruit

flowers and food
will come to adorn
the old stained table
at the centre

of their life
cutting and eating
decay and consumption
of what is made

with such wrapt
attention, such care.

Before the night
envelopes all

something in that last light
calls him to take
a knife for his pen
to the table's page

cutting against hunger
he becomes
schoolboy vandal
showing the processes

used to keep loss
at bay she growing
food with her plants
in a green world

which will be brought
to the board
he vainly carves
to fix against the grain

amidst the stains
of fruit and wine
entirely without innocence
her lasting name.

From: *FILED UNDER Z AND OTHER POEMS.*

NOCTURNES

Minor Variations in Homage to Chopin.

I

Now it is the minor key
proclaiming all departures.
Doors bang shut like rifle shots
as tear-stained trains slide out.
They leave no sudden revelation;
only the tangles of words remain
in knots to test and tease.
Yet these notes unravel at least
the minimum wish and hope:
that love might live and die
without goodbye, your weeping cadence,
sempre piano, hardly sad at all.

II

Leaving your parents, Poland forever,
friends travelled with you until at Wola
the final carouse; Elsner's Cantata
a choral farewell. Then the receding arms,
clumsy goodwill echoes in the sharp morning
as you cross the border, the noise of
homesickness already ringing. You think
of the goblet they gave brimmed with earth
and the letters of Constantia; all
blank spaces lost to darkness, memories of love.

III

Then it seemed there was only memory
to make; once every building, every tree,
a child's cry, that passing girl
had bred their sounding phrase. Now Vienna fades.
Images of mother, father, sister itch the mind;
no less that night outside a farmhouse
dancing with Dominik against

the fire flushed country gils
to violin and one-stringed bass. Folk music;
you hear transposed the resonance of exile.

IV

Not caring to think of politics,
for Vienna's stale cream you played
suffering the liberation of a gift
that defied and defined command.
Then, at home, revolution against Russia.
Frightened for family, shunned by patrons,
knowing that one pianist could not defeat
ten Russians with sword or gun,
what else was there to do but re-capture
Poland on the piano staking freedom.

V

Out of place wearing the Polish Eagle
at your cuffs, the smallest gesture
was important when in cheap trattorias
you could hear them say,
'God's only error was to create the Poles'.
So with embroidered handkerchiefs,
scarlet and white, you flouted
the hypocrite Viennese by day,
cried into them at night
thinking of other rags bound deeper red
round a brother's wound.

VI

Grubbing for comfort with a whore
whilst Warsaw burnt,
ideals of love and revolution
now flitting shadows on a wall
splattered with obscenity;
each beautiful, familiar building gutted.
'Fuck the revolution' echoed
through dark chambers,
as you pared yourself

with glacial notes against huge chords of loss.
Still they called you a sentimentalist.

VII

At twenty-eight, romancing in Paris
was it like first love again Frederic
composer meets novelist, an artful love?
Did she walk through all your days and dreams
until it seemed a subtle madness
nothing to be healed?
Or was all made calm through form;
passion ordered by melodious craft;
did you balance the dancing moments
and score regret between the lines?

VIII

A night of florid stars
unknowable writer of extravagant prose
already famous for lovers and mother
of two when he became entranced.
Friends said it couldn't last. It did
some many years nursing his melancholy
the 'detestable invalid' found lover,
mother, sister, friend. Honing those
losses he scrutinised night; terror and peace:
threnodies of women, the earth.

IX

I hear you play for her
in some Parisian drawing-room
thinking of home, Poland wracked
by savage Russia, your notes broken
only by the cough, you must have known
meant death. But in the early, loving hours
with what astonishing delicacy
of touch you slaked a vagrant heart,
having glimpsed in her eyes
another home, an absolute music.

X

Leave the arrangements all to George,
as long as the piano can be transported.
So to the abandoned monastery at Valldemosa
where each cell was coffin-shaped,
walls oozed damp from torrential winter rain,
you coughed blood, the kids wailed
and sex was like a monk's impossible dream.
Yet from this aerie in the mountains
you could see the ocean, smell cedar and cypress,
compose a harvest, pursuing the tang
of imaginary dances through Orange or Olive groves,
'Everything here', you wrote, 'breathes poetry'.

XI

As is somehow to decide was quite irrelevant
you placed yourself in the beloved's hands
until she tired, grew hatched cold
in slanders. How often holding her
your fingers caressed the keyboard mind
lightly, as if boldness was a pen
scribbling patterns across those five
determined lines. And then what struggle
before a cleaving *Finis*; at compositions
ruthless close, rehearsals of death.

XII

Some insist your time was rather dull;
not the Romantic dash, Byron's legend,
but quiet, rather diffident, apt to temperament
when teaching, and to brooding in the lists
of composition. Yet at how many soirees
you mesmerised the crowd extempore,
dredging disquietude from the dark,
skimming notes like stones across
the glacial surface of calm lives,
improvising as always a life, a death.

XIII

In the English darkness after Paris,
after your beloved has said 'no more',
still composing, still they said your touch
was over delicate. Women loved you
but now there was only music and the cough
getting worse. No wonder returning
to Place Vendôme to die, a stringent joy emerged;
approaching the final mysteries became
another journey, so unlike the others,
escaping every land of strangers.

XIV

Dying. Who and what came to you then?
Friends. Your sister travelled many miles.
No lover, wife, children attended.
Was this a grief; the only comfort
Mazurkas, Nocturnes, Polonaise,
small forms not spawned but made.
You spurned the rapt biology of procreation,
but bore those 'terrible children' for years,
now given to the world. At the last what use
two funeral marches finally composed?

XV

In the draught of a Northern winter
the last of loving notes and minor variations;
broken unforgiving trees accuse the sky
their lack of verdure, as rooms once gaily peopled,
chandeliered, lie empty now, benighted.
Still through such vacancies,
the quiet closing of so many doors,
I hear your piano playing on and on and pay
pale homage to this plangent haunting;
some ghosts have left the stave remains.

THE WOUNDED MIND

I

Your birth-date, 1st of April, stares and mocks
all I hear is 'fool' as I see,
from another century, two barefoot boys
gallop the shore at Dhonagadee,
with cries still-born in a tingling morning
drowned by the bellicose slap of the sea.
Yet spring accents your Irish brogue
as you hide by the rocks to watch
the schoolmaster pass in his serious cloth,
then whoops of joy, the joke's complete,
a birthday's free playing wag with Tom,
'Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea'.
But the tide does not stop at Spring: the neap
spawns jests in crueller tones than you or I could sing.

II

Schooled in the Celtic twilight years,
tumbling into this black century
left only echoes of laughter in empty villages.
No money, so the city claimed you
for a foundry boy at Mackies in Belfast,
where the belching stacks smoked ruin
as if God's fingers reached to scourge a people
with iron and steel the die was cast
forever after that. And you believed in
Empire, guilt and punishment,
signed the solemn oath and covenant
of Orange, not knowing you blessed the profiteers,
reaped exile, keening for Ireland until you died,
despite its mordant fratricide.

III

Departure. 1910. Waiting for tides to turn.
From the crowded rail, Belfast humped under a metal sky;
mist and smoke pall the cranes, a mad siren

scream jerks those homeward searching eyes.
Why he left no one knows, but the year was rife
with green chatter: Home Rule, a United Ireland,
and he a patriot lashed to God and King by dark vows;
a Republic was gangrene to such wounded minds.
So escape. But Swindon's transport depot and grimey terraces
were hardly England's green or pleasant land.
No wonder loneliness or promise of some easy residence
between hot thighs enticed a marriage band:
The landlady's niece, we do not even know her name,
or if pleasure in the sensual bed bred delight or shame.

IV

Was love so dour you had to raise your hand in war,
those large squat hands made for making?
An unfair question. And you with an Irish temper taking
prompt action when foreign greed threatened England's maw.
Rushing with all your mates to queue for death
that first August you made the 'pals' battalion,
but such zest for King and Country, Dulce et Decorum Est,
cannot explain conversion to the killer's trade.
To press both breast and trigger speak hungers of the mind;
how many did you kill before you copped the blighty
removing half a shoulder? Yet back to France you went.
Meanwhile in England the dark God's vengeance: between clean sheets
your young wife died; compassionate, they granted leave to weep.

V

Landlocked now. For you the 'twenties did not roar
With a new wife and brand new daughter,
no journeys, you swore there would be no more
but one bleak voyage. You had seen too much of slaughter,
perhaps of love. What was left? To be secure,
make no friends, remain aloof, only
the annual busman's dinner, and ashes of anger
like those of lust, apt to flare when left unheeded.
So willing calm and order, rage would strike
at a daughter's courtship through innocent woods
her delicate gift of bluebells ground to dust.
On retirement you were grateful for the gold watch
less golden handshake: much thanks for shoulders,

lungs, and lovers lost. Your broken god
brought a wheezing death, wishing for an Irish grave.

VI

The final image: an old man by the fire
yarning to the prospective son-in-law
of how it was in Flanders, poppies and mire.
But the details are unremembered, just the bore
of repetitious names: Beaumont Hamel, Passchendaele.
You were talking to yourself, sucking the well-worn pipe,
staring at coals, hoping something would last,
before we'd heard of built-in obsolescence or
natural wastage; trying to fix the past
for pleasure or to exorcise some hopeless guilt.
Maybe it's for the best so little remains;
like the rusty nails you kept, screws, bits of string in tins,
things to be handy for a rainy day,
stray gatherings from which an ordinary bloke might build
the warp and weft of generation, spinning words.

MENU PLANNERS

Driving to work
in frosted silence
past paddocks
where sheep seem statues

our habitual conversation
about dinner
breaks the ice
who should buy what

for evening's comfort -
we discuss the relative merits
of moussaka, chops, or casserole;
a consuming interest

until a glimpse of red
rebellious sight

diverts our wintry palate.
Ewes are dropping

their young onto
glacial cleavers;
spring lamb in mid-winter
farmer's delight.

As your eyes touch
slashed with greed
frost is melting
blood-stained.