

ESCAPE

Stirred by the alarm-call from a stolen moment's sleep,
We stashed the remaining cases in the car,
Made final checks on tickets, passports, foreign cash,
Then closed the door on neighbours we had never known,
And left at dead of night.

London slept like a dragon
As we slipped through the coils of its empty streets:
Traffic lights hung green like lanterns luring us
Through the city's cinematic underworld:

The lovers framed in half-lit doorways,
The drunk serenading a sober, unresponsive moon,
The prostrate vagrant and the biblical passer-by,
The constable's soliloquy of calm upon the intercom -

Actors fluent in the cadences of darkness!

And as these fluorescent lives flared neon-bright and died,
So, too, the dragon's malevolence dissolved:
Why flee a creature whose sleep bespoke so lyrical a labyrinth?
Who are the couriers that drive us from this dream?
Whose hands are these upon the steering wheel?

ROOMS SUFFERING FROM AMNESIA

And so we quit the 99-year lease,
Tore up the tenure of our lives,
And drove on to the safe harbour of the sea,

I recalled the set of empty rooms
We'd left behind in perfect order
For the next inhabitants to move in:

Rooms stripped of ornament, rugs, mirrors:
All the evidence that tenants plant
To try and prove their permanence;

How, on leaving and turning for one last look,
The walls, newly repainted in amnesiac white,
Had returned our stare,

In blank denial of any intimacy,
As if, perfidious as a lover,
The room had already lost all memory of us...

DESCENT

Disembarked on foreign shores,
We drifted south like spirits dissociated
From the dead bodies of our former lives,
And, not knowing we had died,
Roamed the strange underworlds
Of towns lost in siesta. Sometimes we sat,

Deceived by the soft trickle of fountains
In the calm shade of still squares;
Sat stripped of all purpose,
And robbed of all currency of time,
Or, moving on in the heat of the day,
Raced the moon-rise along motorways;

Checked in at dusk at backstreet hotels,
Dined out in 'dives' on the credit of novelty;
Got drunk on the perfume of orange trees,
Drained the sweet wine of strange dreams;
Drowned in sleeps deeper than oceans;
Forgot where, when, why - who we were;

Were woken by cold washes of dawn light
Our windows poured over us;
Got up, still hung over, showered, packed,
Checked out, and drove on;
Climbed purgatorial mountainous roads,
Gained temporary access to heaven;

Stood, photographic, astride snow peaks,
Fantastic as angels in renaissance paintings;
Descended prophetic down mountain-sides,
But with no time and no message,
Spiralled on down into dark valleys,
Under vast cupolas of cloud;

Surveyed sudden congregations of sunflowers
Stilled like worshippers at prayer;
Accelerated south again, whilst days changed to nights
And nights back to days, like a light-switch
In the hands of a child; and sun, moon and stars
Hung within reach like decorations strung over a ceiling;

And so, at last, we arrived at dead of night;
The Italian landscape undulating like a snake,
(The dragon's relation, no doubt),
Around our solitary rented house.
In the hot midnight air fireflies drifted like sparks
From the furnace of the day that had died.

It must've been then,
With silence - darkness - aloneness -
Flooding our bodies, coursing into our veins
With a sudden, intoxicant rush,
That time broke like a wave back into our minds:

We drowned in sleeps deeper than oceans.....

INCOMMUNICADO

Eight a.m. in this rustic, middle-of-nowhere:
Already the Tuscan plains are hot.
The peasants did their rounds an hour ago,

Slaughtered the pig, rung the chicken's neck,
Collected eggs and watered the tomatoes...
Eight a.m. and already it's too hot to think of work.

But then I don't have to get up: I'm incommunicado.
There's no mobile signal, my battery is dead:
The digital analogue of my conscience lies redundant

In the draw. Ironically, this is a heavy burden:
I lie agenda-less. - With no dates to forget,
Or duty to rebel against (and thus define myself),

I am alarmingly at liberty to identify
Precisely what it is
That *does* get me out of bed in the morning;

Am at liberty to titillate a dangerous inclination
For self-knowledge - worse -
Maybe even indulge a serious appetite for epiphany.

This is a petrifying prospect for a good-natured slob
Who has always relied on other men's tribulations;
Who, hitherto, when asked for the meaning of life,

Reached for a bedside book....

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Laid out with desk, pen and paper,
Framed with the expectancy of a waiting-room,
These bare walls declare my status as an alien.

Dry as a document, the poem I write you
Consists of verses
Like sub-sections that formalise our love.

We are becoming strangers, not just to each other
But to ourselves, naturalised into solitudes
Whose landscape we cannot quite translate;

I have no status in the olive grove
And a simple walk in the market square
Betrays me as a transient and fraud.

You use side-streets to avoid friendly locals
Demanding deeper acquaintance.
Together, we frequent supermarket anonymity.

Back home again, the voluble sunlight and vine
Gabble a language whose native beauty
We excelled in as children but have forgotten,

And, though your progress discredits my timidity,
As dusk descends we wonder
At the wisdom of this crash course in Latin eternity -

Here, where each day contains a dialect,
And every heart an idiom;
Here, where there is no authority to school us

And time has no curriculum.

BEREAVEMENT

Sunset bereaves the villa of daylight,
Veiling its facade in shadow deep as grief.

Related by ties stronger than blood,
Widowed by thoughts of winter,

I mourn a naïve dependency upon the sun...