

Aubade

We'd not slept in days, or else we were
still sleeping—who could tell?
Few words passed between us then,
yet somehow we heard what the other said.

In that room, we had a copper pot,
a guitar, and a tower of old newspapers.
Fruit you'd cut, now brown on a plate.

From some black clay, you were shaping
a small, tall building with no windows.
It leaned uncomfortably to the left,
as if pressed by hard wind.
You didn't bother to right it.

It had been a long time, one of us
might have said, since the last trucks
returned from the border.

I showed you an ancient silver coin:
on one side, a Gorgon's head,
off-center and missing an ear.

What's this on the other side? I asked.
(I didn't have to ask this aloud).
A stag, maybe, or a bull. We didn't know.
The body was worn away,
but the horns were still sharp.

Just before dawn, some noise
of cats and garbage in the street.
You said, Come with me,
and at last we put down our glasses,
walked in silence to the water,
where one boat was unloading its nets.

First light, fish shining on the dock
like a pile of just-polished knives.

Interior with a Closed Notebook

No doubt you believe you could open it,
pronounce some words at least, but there isn't
any language you recognize, no title
to help you, no annoying epigraph.
Only color offers its clue: the cover is black
and the binding's tight, spiraled like a helix.
No doubt you think your name is written there.

The desk itself is littered with letters,
each stamp demolished by a tire tread
of fading ink. In one of the open books
a whale, or a war, swallows someone whole.
Measure the circumference of the ring
left by the coffee cup. Inspect the veneer
for any imprint the pen forced through the paper.

Beyond the desk, take in the room, the curtains,
the obsolete globe and mangled recliner.
The fireplace is a surprise—its pyramid of ash.
Remember how the little house itself
is troubled by those three quiet dictionaries,
by the headlines you fed up its chimney,
all the lies you'll believe since you have to.

Impressions of a Drowning Man

The night he went down to drown himself
he saw two light bulbs had fizzled
above the entrance to the café
where just last Saturday he'd dined alone,
absorbed in his book, smoking a whole pack.

As for his clothes: those he left neatly piled
beneath a riot of oleander,
folding his jacket to a rectangle,
taking a moment to roll up his tie
and wedge it inside his vacant left shoe.

It seemed to be inviting him to swim,
the sea. Its exhausted philosophy
(in suspect collusion with the earth's)
left no room for ordinary human
distress: it believed so much in itself.

By then the breeze was picking up and waves
were sounding their devotions on the rocks.
Yes, the fishing boats nodded, yes.
From just over the hills, he made out
the whine of the eight train leaving station.

But nothing like this goes off without a hitch,
even if coins already decorate
his eyes, and I know he's prepaid the fare.
To imagine him here does not absolve
me of the meaning of the act. Give them

permission to die, the suicides,
since they owned their lives and chose an ending.
To see them in the fogged-up mirror
of my own worst self does not begin
to break earth for the wells they dug themselves.

At bottom, I wouldn't recognize
my own reflection, nor in the haloed
porthole peering back upon the sky.
The book of this disaster was scribbled
by an interrupting cloud, and shadows

I cast peering down. But he's gone too deep
and I can see how this one's going to fail
by succeeding, know that by tomorrow
he'll find another way to finish it.
So it's safe to watch him wading, permit

myself to feel, even, the first night air
on his naked chest, also the surprised
first gasp when he dives and begins to drift,
numb and willing, out into the offing,
stars taking over where the dusk caved in.

What a gallon of water is when you
force yourself to drink it. Salt in the eye.
The pressure of a fathom on the mind.
Should we applaud his helpless, flailing arms,
disobedient to the very end?

Even the legs giving in, unfaithful
to the uneasy task of giving up.

For those who love air and know how to swim,
we can only comprehend the knee-jerk
impulse to stay afloat, the will to be

upright, airtight. His body knew better,
we could say, and we could avoid what's next:
there's the pistol he'll purchase in the morning
with just one bullet in it, and three wet
drachmas he'll leave behind on the bar.

There's that woman peeling onions who might hear,
and optimistic thistles by the road,
and spatter on the eucalyptus tree,
and the verdict he knew we'd read into
the last couplet of his abandoned shoes.