Some Words
Are Mightier

Richard Baker

25.12.1949 - 1.10.2016

Night watch

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"poetry is the house that seeks to be haunted"
(Emily Dickenson)

NIGHT WATCH

North east of nowhere
like the moon and the stars
the ever-changing horizon
seems almost too far
and so we sail onwards
like angels on Mars
until we remember
to forget whom we are.

South east of silence
where the sea misbehaves
drowning volcanoes
embracing the brave
there whales and strange monsters
flow through liquid byways
and ships and their sailors
must move over graves

North of the Pole Star
south of the Cross
across every ocean
until we are lost
east of the unknown
west of the wind
until we discover
where the journey begins.

TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OUT OF A STATUE

No biography exists to prove this case
but some of his obituaries admit
although a statue holds him to this place
he first appeared here jumping off a ship.
Perhaps it was some feature of the coast
that held his eye and anchored him on shore?
He left the sea and took a minor post
then bought a house and wed the girl next door.

They say he grew that beard to be discrete
but if he bore scars she held them in the dark
he paid for schools, fed beggars in the street
and his estate is now the public park.
He prospered that is certain. His career
records a rapid rise to great renown,
he was knighted and made millions, built the pier
and wrote the earliest history of the town.

There was another book he meant to write
with no great deeds in it, nor any plot
just descriptions of temptations and delight
plus some adventures in which nobody was shot.
Of ships forever moving through uncharted seas
whose crews were much too busy to leave signs
for the water that gives passage has no memory
and there simply are no statues to contented minds.

History is an old road choked with dirt and dust
it is a list of everything we can't erase
the comfort is those horrors were not done to us
but all that weight has locked us into place.
The statesmen and the soldier and the king
all took time by the throat and made it theirs
the noise this made drowned out much suffering
but all their statues melt down into tears.

That less is more is more or less the case
it's just that more becomes the public space.

IN PRAISE OF PAINTERS

Some painters star in their own show
others are Sunday artisans
they all remake the world we know
in order to look at man,
the best inspire the rest follow,
where accident collides with plan,
the terrible seas for Gericault
an apple for Cezanne.

Some folk think painters too extreme,
starving or overfed,
art's nothing but a foolish dream
where real life is misled.
This may be true for art must seem
an irrelevant way of recording what's dead,
to those who think Rembrandt's self-esteem
meant vainly painting his head.

Painters appear to act like fools,
always scribbling away,
like kids who muck about at school
a madness leads them astray.
But art exists to question rules
which limit the everyday,
graffiti can make a wall look cool,
from cavemen to Goya, O.K !

The experts, who know about art, do well
in essays of praise or assault
they mystify products, which they then sell
and this is not painting's fault.
The abstracts and cubists with Raphael
are hung-up in galleries and vaults
where only collectors fall under their spell.
Some icons exist by default.

Sometimes art can be the most wonderful mess
which succeeds in capturing
an essence in form and dares to express
the beauty and truth of something,
a direct route to happiness
that lends the caged bird wings,
but in its purest form art's useless
and look at the trouble it brings.

True artists don't bother what others might say
but trust their belief in what's right
and since explanations are not their forte
their work makes some critics uptight.
All painters have chosen to throw words away
their language is colour and light
there are no outlines in a Monet
but his vision enriches our sight.

ABOUT THE ACTOR

About the actor gossip and hype
circulate like mice on a wheel
passionate, daring, scandalous types
who strive to pretend to be real.
Only the actor dares to delight,
as lover, thief or grand dame;
they die like kings, after suffering,
then rise to great acclaim.

Belief in actors ignites the play
allowing the text to make clear
how life can be made to transcend every day
from Plautus to Synge, via Moliere.
Without the actor Chekhov and Gay
remain passive introspection;
Shakespeare and Brecht would only be texts,
The Mysteries stage directions.

Onstage the actor seems a divine
in a world both familiar and new
where mystery, danger and love are refined,
resolved, redeemed and reviewed.
Offstage the actor restlessly pines
like an extra with nothing to say
playing the role of a sensitive soul
they artlessly get in the way.

Beware of the actor parents advise
their innocent, shy offspring
aware that bright lights tantalise
and fame can be frightening.
Because all acting's a form of disguise
real life's either dull or a lark
while the urge to perform is dubious form
if you do your best work after dark.

Be good to the actor with your applause
rejoice when they win the girl
delight in a craft which obeys its own laws
and pretends to make sense of the world.
Behind the actor the terrible pause
when all the lights are put out
and the dreams and desires
which once fanned bonfires
are just embers left blowing about.

LOVE AND ROMANCE

The sea filled with silver beneath a blue moon
to climax a day which they'd never forget.
Two lovers on fire with their own desire
a young, unpublished poet
with a soon to be famous actress whom
no one had heard of yet.

The day had been certain and splendid
two innocents lost in a game
when their tongues met the alphabet
was simplified into their names
then he spoke while she attended
and everything burst into flames.

"I love you more than I love me
hard cash, soft drugs or fame
one thing is certain our love will be
like that star which is always the same
no matter how long we long for romance
it comes like a revelation
lovers always seem caught off balance
romance is the expectation."

Many years later the actress
recalled in an interview
that handsome youth with a passion for truth
who'd been making some hullabaloo
when an agent she'd managed to impress
called up her mobile phone and got through.

And forests were felled for the magazines
which exalted her as an icon
while her serial lovers fought one another
in the courts and the streets and the john
till her fans were au fait with the tantrums and scenes
and the rushes and pills she depended upon.

"Loving you must be my identity
without you my life is my shame
you are the person I want to be
like a shadow I follow your flame.
Regret is the reason romantics must dance
like a man chasing after his hat
for we all run around in search of romance
while love makes the world go flat."

So the poet filled drawers in attics
with anthologies of rejections
as a shipwrecked man might write in the sand
to celebrate his dejection,
while love, which is often erratic,
sailed off in another direction.

That the full moon must rise is no mystery
yet it takes us all by surprise,
belief that the stars might know who we are
fixes our face to the skies,
and the promise of everything love might be
will haunt us the rest of our lives.

DAWLISH BEACH

Suddenly a coastline and everything moving.
A broad bay curved open to welcome the ocean
in an arc as concave as an old moon at sunset
where cliffs sag and crumble a grain at a time.
Now strange as a mad thing a train passes slowly
along a stone sea wall at the head of the beach.

All day a vast languor has lain on this beach.
Birds, light and water the only things moving.
The tide is returning as gently and slowly
footprints and castles are smoothed by the ocean
and the sand is enfolding all sense of time.
Then comes a great shuffling preparing for sunset.

A sensing all this will change with the sunset
both shadows and spring tides invading the beach.
Another train passes and now comes the time
when birds leave off flying and day's done with moving
and too soon the sand settles under the ocean
that still must keep nudging if ever so slowly.

While on the horizon where clouds break up slowly
a silver moon rises to climax the sunset
entire and magnificent it floodlights an ocean
incessantly breaking across the dark beach.
Along the coastline a train of light moving
stitching through tunnels a memory of time.

Apart from the train there is no sense of time
through all this long moonlight where seconds slip slowly
only the clouds and sea shuffling and moving
and always the moon must be following the sunset
while the trains and the birds and the beach
and its secrets lay still. But never the ocean,

for of course there are always ships on the ocean
all going elsewhere, all keeping their own time
all taking their stories away from this beach.
Until moonlight lessens unveils darkness slowly
in gradual colours much paler than sunset
along a broad coastline still constantly moving.

So the waves keep on moving for only the ocean
has seen every sunset and touches all time
and still beats in slowly to start from the beach.

VENICE

Arriving means leaving the twenty first century
and entering a city of streets filled with water,
all unusual angles and endless reflections.
Here golden palaces throw open their history
while seeming to crumble into their own shadows.
Once all this was perfect. This is also an island.

We must let go of habit to live on an island.
Gone out of time is our terrible century.
Who we once were is no longer our shadow
here we are innocents sheltered by water.
Somewhere to float and be free of our history.
This city is perfect for mists and reflection.

Venice was certainly built for reflection.
Once people fled to be safe on this island
away from the backwash of too much bad history.
There's always been fighting in every century
and even this faraway city of water
is dirty with darkness has terrible shadows.

Small cities grow to cast their own shadows
and tales of Venetians might distress reflection.
Nowhere was safe once they took to the water
by fighting and stealing they built up this island.
All the crosses and carvings left by each century
frame the beautiful blood stained glass windows of history.

Nothing much changes, there is only more history
where skeletal towers lean over their shadows.
This city survives by embracing each century
and pricing the sacred. Here eastern reflection
meets western well being, serene on an island
of bridges and churches and glimpses and water.

All maps of Venice show a jigsaw of water
we are easily lost in this borrowing of history
and escape from ourselves by invading this island.
The brighter the sunlight the deeper the shadows
and the greater the need of a place for reflection
while we drift helplessly into this century.

First there was water, then came the history.
Two views of an island confused by our shadows.
This needs some reflection, which may take a century.

ON SUNDAYS IN SPRING
COMES THE PASSIONATE RAIN

On Sundays in spring comes the passionate rain
as winds sweep through gardens and fret at the windows
setting trees dancing and suddenly trembling.
Then the rain passes. Soon there are blue skies
and once more outside seems as safe as a front door.
Till slowly the visitors drive through the car park.

Then always they wait for so long in the car park,
tired from the drive maybe, frightened by rain,
yet they seem in no hurry to walk to the front door
always looking away from the house and its windows
talking of journeys while praising the blue skies
and the trees in the gardens all dripping and trembling.

The knock is expected but sets echoes trembling
and now it's too late to return to the car park.
How tempting the gardens how perfect the blue skies
how lovely to walk out for hours in the rain.
Any excuse not to look through the windows.
This is the big house and here is the front door
that opens then closes behind them. The front door
that leads to confusion and trembling,
a friend or relation grown blank as the windows
or lost to themselves like a coin in the car park
on whom life's unnatural tears always rain.
No walking in gardens with fresh winds and blue skies

more an absence of wonder at gardens and blue skies.
For not even the moon is as far as the front door
and no one who lives upside down needs more rain.
So patiently everyone sits still and trembling
and sometimes they look at the cars in the car park
conveniently parked within sight of the windows.

Wind shuffles the great trees that wave through the windows
where beyond begins and goes on into blue skies
and now there is more and more space in the car park
come all the slow rituals that lead to the front door
where the sodden and gossiping garden is trembling
in the sudden applause of the passionate rain.

Then there is only the rain seen through windows
the trees are left trembling gone are the blue skies
and beyond the front door the emptying car park.

SOME WORDS ARE MIGHTIER

A bishop met the other queen
in a game upon a board,
each in their own way supreme
both serving different lords.

`One led an army, had a plan
was fortune's engineer,
the other was a holy man.
She never had a prayer.

As pieces checked, other advanced
in tactics, feints and strategies
as skill and luck, or plans and chance
drew out the possibilities.

Till castles squared up for the fight
while kings did nothing but defend,
pawns either soon lost out to knights
or stood around until the end.

Some words are mightier than swords
some armies are misled
since everything is defined in words
whatever's being said.

Small victories won at little cost
leave everyone content,
since not one drop of blood was lost
in this enlightenment.

CHILDREN'S GAMES

All children play without their toys
beyond the sense of being taught
run wild and shout learn to enjoy
the thrill of wanting to be caught.

They take delight in seeming free,
theirs is the joy ours is the care,
electric with curiosity
they race past signs that say beware.

Their rules are simple and make sense
to those who think in black and white
beyond all play and its pretence
there is a power to put things right.

They will escape from every lock
for each new key there is a song
no rules shall bar no barrier block
the climb to where they shall belong.

Later games are redefined
unconfident, more self-aware
they flaunt in territory less confined
test every rule pretend to care.

Pushing back the boundaries
is one measure of how they grow
it seems each generation tries
to challenge every thing we know.

Nature can be terrifying
freedom fuels our greatest fears
one big bang and everything
is thrown up into endless air.

So grown ups play more carefully
as each new rule brings fresh alarms
all wanting to feel almost free
yet safe in strong enfolding arms.

IN PRAISE OF DAYS

So many days so little changes
still the heart and head contend
both still delight yet each deranges
long may these two our days extend.

When we were certain days seemed longer
as if they paused to watch us grow
daily we struggled to grow stronger
so much to learn so far to go.

In earlier days then life seemed splendid
all adventure, freed from shame
beyond our dreams loomed unattended
mysteries without form or name.

Bold but uncertain way off course
we neither found nor lost the way
the habit of what worked for us
detained us in the everyday.

Most were scarred and many maimed
as each one took days on the chin
innocent, yet often blamed
for finishing what we could not win.

Surely we were not wholly wrong
and in between the bad done good
we may believe we shall belong
and might do better if we would.

Time speeds up and we cling on
as days like clowns in circus rings
pass by. All we know is most are gone;
a few changed everything.

In these days we wait and wonder
if faith or science will make us whole
balanced between fate and blunder
alone, awaiting an own goal.

THE BEES
ARE BOTHERING THE GARDEN

The bees are bothering the garden
they plunge and pause then float away
carefree as kids in kindergarten
only choice distracts their play
fumbling without leave or pardon
till every flower's deshabillee.
From blossom fruits then winter hardens
life lifts from its own decay.

The flowers are filling out the borders
they form and flourish with the light.
Such restlessness invites disorder
a chaos cultured to invite
those bees who feign to follow orders
in their random focussed flight.
Shadows stalk these ceaseless hoarders
every day soon cedes to night.

And time is passing all the time –
big winds blow more clouds appear
fruit falls softly like a crime
whose motives trail into thin air.
Earth claims these clues, all seems supine
and once flowers falter bees are rare.
The garden yields to the sublime
and the borders disappear.

