

Shadows

The sun comes up, and soon
The night's thin fall of snow
Fades from the grass as if
It could not wait to go.

But look, a lank line lingers
Beyond the lawn's one tree,
Safe in its shadow still,
Held momentarily.

Delighted my daughter runs
Twisting from my embrace
To touch the fragile snow
Before it leaves no trace.

A Monorhyme for the Shower

Lifting her arms to soap her hair
Her pretty breasts respond—and there
The movement of that buoyant pair
Is like a spell to make me swear
Twenty-odd years have turned to air;
Now she's the girl I didn't dare
Approach, ask out, much less declare
My love to, mired in young despair.

Childbearing, rows, domestic care—
All the prosaic wear and tear
That constitute the life we share—
Slip from her beautiful and bare
Bright body as, made half aware
Of my quick surreptitious stare,
She wrings the water from her hair
And turning smiles to see me there.

Haydn and Hokusai

Masters of wit and line
Who welcome what is ugly,
Lumpish, disproportionate,
And give it grace, distinction—
Whose humor is a pool
For all of us to splash in
(And we emerge like angels
Double-dipped in Pactolus
To shimmer in bright air
That is and is not earthly . . .)

Haydn and Hokusai,
Who say to Anguish, “Go!
Out! *Retro me Satanas!*”
Though you, and more than most,
Have seen its rodent eyes
Burn in the icy dark,
And felt the fetid blast
Of dragon breath assail
Your heart, hearing the slaver
Of wide hyena jaws—

Haydn and Hokusai
Be with me now, lighten
My lumpen moods, drive off
Ungainly panics, spleen,

Purge me of selfish torpor;
Remind me that you loved
Life's dailiness, its quirks
And frumpish joy; and that
If there is heaven on earth
It's here, it's here, it's here.

Night Thoughts

For some, and maybe the majority,
 I know reality
Means what preoccupies their waking hours—
 But not for me

For whom the real is not light's rapid rush
 Of chance and change, day's crush
Of difficulties, duties, deals, distractions—
 But the still hush

Of darkness where my grateful mind has grown
 One with the monotone
Of whispered breath beside me where you sleep
 Embraced, alone.

Iran Twenty Years Ago

Each summer, working there, I'd set off for
The fabled cities—Esfahan, Kashan,
Or Ecbatana, where Hephaestion died;
The poets' towns, Shiraz and Nayshapour;
Or sites now hardly more than villages
Lapped by the desert, Na'in or Ardestan . . .

Their names now mean a dusty back street somewhere
Empty and silent in the vivid sunlight,
A narrow way between the high mud walls—
The worn wood of the doors recessed in them
A talisman to conjure and withhold
The life and lives I never touched or knew.
Sometimes I'd hear a voice, a radio,
But mostly there was silence and my shadow
Until a turn would bring me back to people,
Thoroughfares, and shops . . .

Why is it this that stays,
Those empty afternoons that never led
To anything but seemed their own reward
And are more vivid in my memory
Than mosques, bazaars, companionship, and all
The myriad details of an eight-year sojourn;
As if that no epiphany, precisely,
Were the epiphany? As Hafez has it,

To know, you must have gone along that way;
I know they changed my life forever but
I know too that I could not tell myself—
Much less another—what it was I saw,
Or learnt, or brought back from those aimless hours.

To the Persian Poets

For Sarah Johnston

What rights have I, trespassing in your rooms,
Pilfering your lines, sifting your sacred dust,
Searching for what you were and are not now?
As if I came to where Achilles flickered,
Drawn by the blood Odysseus spilt for him.

But, in another tongue, a stranger speaks,
The revenant who shows me what I am;
In whose hermetic words I recognize
The animals and angels of my heart,
My happiness, my longing, my despair.