

FROM *MISTERIOS**The Annunciation*

Morning, or early dusk. That line where things
leave their borders, dissolve into darkness
and light.

She is only a girl. She finds herself
lost inside the temple his words hollow
into the cooler side of day.

Her voice inside it croons like distant thunder.
And what it says is, Come in.

She is surprised by her candor, the force
of her own little-known conviction.
He tells her she is chosen,
in this way he raises her

above the mortal, gives her
an awesome gift, leaves her little room
for doubt, or for pleasure. She is, to be honest,
struck dumb with terror,
which she recognizes is also a form of religious assent.

What does it mean, after all,
the Yes she mutters above the angel's bright call?
She is young, her life has yet to happen
in any real sense.

In the meantime the warmth of his eyes becomes
the warmth of her own prone body,
spreading from the tips of his voice
to her inmost skin.

What does it mean to be told God loves you,
at the same time he takes your childhood away?

The Crucifixion

Finally, he understands
what being mortal means:
it means you are alone in this world.
In the charmed beginning, as in the end.

Splayed threeways into the sky,
he has never felt lonelier.
His apprentices, fey and faint-hearted men,
have recurred to subsistence fishing, or to usury.

Even his allegorical tongue has left him.
Not to mention his unforthcoming father.

What did it all amount to,
the stories-within-stories preached from a hill?
If they cannot read the plain truth in this death,
what hope is there for the benighted lot of them?

Perhaps it was not altogether imprecise,
the decision to figure them as feeble sheep.
They may well be sheep, in a veritable sense.
Their minds are the minds of sheep:
incapable of demurrals, submissive to a fault.
Which is why to them he is the good shepherd.

But the irony does not escape him.
Not in the least:
it is he who has been led this day
to the slaughter!

And even better than his witless flock,
he did not so much as bleat, or shed a tear.
Although his eyes now speak their own words
as they take in the vision of his luckless mother.
Who has stood there: awesome spectacle of her own.

What can he tell her that she may want to hear:
 this death will happen, because it must happen?
 She has foreseen it, she has forefelt it, from the start.
 Even as the injustice is, she did so only in fragments,
 the way shadows are merely suggestive
 of the immense and inarguable fact.

Now it descends on her in all its terrible weight
 and, as usual, the creature, being body, bears it all.
 He reserves a few of his last words for her upkeep,
 for the thief who recants on the edge of a sword.
 And to pardon mankind's ignorant children
 given to their acts of meaningless carnage.

The rest he mutters to his father, as is
 only proper.

Lest anybody forget: this tableau, after all,
 is his Almighty's enormous, unflappable scheme.
 In which the doe-eyed princeling, the maker of peace,
 hand-picked from the womb, crooned through the ages,
 now droops from his exalted perch to the ground.

And the point is? He must confess, he cannot know.
 At least, not perfectly: his mind, like his body
 stretched into this monstrous form, suffers
 from nothing if not form.

All he knows is what is apparent:
 he was born one beauteous evening; now he dies.
 Everywhere in between is that great act of giving
 to reach the one, inescapable end—

the Self must be emptied, till it turns
 into the Other.

Breathing this thought in,
 he lifts up the shell of an utterly finished being,
 back into the palm of its sorrowing God.

The Assumption

She was always, to begin with,
an assumption.

As in: when the invitation came
to be the prized vessel of his visit,
it was assumed she would agree.

When he admonished her
for wielding a mother's right to worry,
or perhaps to ask a tiny favor,
the narrative took for granted
she would keep silent, and not nag.

And even then, at his immolation's
bloodied foot, it was never asked
if she would not mind being looked after
by the beardless stranger who stood there,
shaking, by her side.

All their lives together,
he went ahead with his life, his death, his life,
supposing only her calm complicity.

He was a good son: he asked for
little else from his mother.
In this sense, she feels
she indeed has been blessed.

But whatever these accounts must presume
about her dumb submissiveness,
let it be known that, in the marrow of her being,
she has always understood
about her options.

As with everyone, basically:
yes or no.

She is humble enough
not to presume her own fortitude.
Assent is not, she feels, a question of the will,
for the will is not what makes a person act.

Rather, it is desire
which is the true motivator.
And with her own heart's wishes,
she can brag at least she has kept touch.

To be honest, the secret to her success
is her power of imitation.
That when she heard the angel's query
barbed with warning, sugared with flattery,
she graciously made herself believe
her desire was the same as her Lord's.

And judging from the glorious outcome
of their paired actions, it must be.

Call it the imagination, or love,
and her own unique aptitude for it,
but through it she was able,
all her life, to be certain
she desired for herself
what her God desired for her.

And because her son was his emissary,
she wished nothing except his own joy, too.
Even when it meant death's grotesque form,
and her heart shattering alongside his.

Love: the great harmonizer.
That disappears distinctions, blurs edges,
blends bitter contrarities into
something palatable.

By virtue of it, she has seen
how possibly her son and she are one.
As when she bore him in her body, their breaths,
if not their dreams, are coextensive
with each other.

A gardener by heart, she does not need to be told
that seed and flower are aspects
of the same fugitive growth.
That day and night are sides of one leaf.
That the ground wheat and its risen bread
are inflections of the same
warm blessing.

And that death is nothing if not life
turning, as it must,
into difference.

Why then should it be deemed peculiar
that she who has seen herself
so perfectly in her beloved's image,
should also follow in his wake?

As he died, so does she.
But like him, dies not into the end,
but into beginning's formless
possibility.

She rises into the sky,
and the infinite perspective it affords.
She discovers her rudimentary senses
and her love's wisdom have been correct:

she is lifted into heaven from the earth,
which is nothing if not heaven's
assumed self.

FROM POEMS FROM AMSTERDAM

XXX

The miracle of Amsterdam
is the inexhaustible flesh.

Here, in the Beguinage,
across the mocking centuries,

pious women kept wimpled watch
over the Blessed Sacrament.

Between corporal works of mercy,
they kept its True Presence toasty-warm

against the Reformation's chill wind;
into this country, it blew like a gale.

Their shrine thus needed to dissimulate
itself, assume the exterior of a house,

while the Presbyterian church across
was allowed to look its steepled part.

It is easy to see why they would not
have given up their vigil just like that,

since of the city's Eucharistic Gift
they were the privileged custodians.

A dying man, receiving the Viaticum,
had quickly retched the consecrated Host;

a maid, not knowing what to do,
then consigned it into the livid hearth,
where it did not and would not burn.
The scenes themselves are here,

inside the furtive chapel, performed
in daubed pigment and sculptural relief.

A mighty sign, a wondrous deed,
as quoted Scripture above the door puts it,

and the well-versed pilgrim almost sees
boys hopping briskly on snorting coals.

And there, indeed, radiantly ensconced
inside the artist's figured vision:

the spotless wafer borne aloft the flame's
one glowering eye. Dove-winged on either side,

a genuflecting angel. The altar itself
is flanked by portraits of Sacred Birth

and Death; at midpoint, the alabaster body
of the Virgin Mother, emerging starry-eyed,

ushered into the sky by her auroral Son.
She is the flesh of His flesh, and must only

follow His example. In her name this place
has been offered all these candled years,

for she is the Eucharist's first container,
who permitted God's swaddled advent

into the world. Ages later, the Beguines
are gone, even as their haven bravely stands,

cradling the same bright Presence. Meantime,
this city now teems with its myriad flesh,

pinks and yellows and auburns, old and new,
desiring and desired, speaking all in tongues.

I walk among them, lose myself in them,
spiral headlong into the smell and taste and

heft of them. And now, I can almost see
how miraculous the flesh must truly be,

enduring solitude and time, cleaving and
sundering into such gorgeous forms.

This city's different faces, different loves:
incarnations of the One, mysterious Life.