

OIL TANKER

At the Sales

Slowly I went back to undressing in front of
that other mirror in the fitting-room,
proportions skewed. I saw that several
kind words of yours had got caught
on the edge of my bra. And some tiny
skiers were zig-zagging all over my
shoulders, larking about: your jokes.
The very thing I'm touchy about, and then
another couple of snubs bounced off the stool with
a clang of coat-hangers. One on top of another,
three modest dresses I'd plucked listlessly from
the rail, as though pleasing you were a priority.
They're like memories of girl-friends: sometimes I see them
like a chorus-line in your smile powering your
thighs and the shining teeth of your desire. I don't
bear them any grudge: their moods led you to me.
And I picture other women, the ones I precede,
and I smile: the warm ear among the hair in my song.
I see their voices... "You really notice that zip, the buttons
stick out..." It's just as banal in Euro-speak. I've chosen one
that I'll leave in the wardrobe until the day we meet.
Carlos Gardel laments from the tannoy.
At the till there's a seething mass of adolescents, offspring
of the well-to-do, professional classes, with me like a child
clutching a bunch of carnations wrapped in newspaper.
I can see how unpoetic it is. It's only a common tale
(and a short one at that) of how I spend the hours that
follow in your wake. Like a grain of sugar swirled
by centrifugal force in the whirlpool of a cup
as someone stirs it. Little by little I dissolve with no reprieve
that you'll make me disappear completely, and I change
into you with indifference, in the dubious hope that love
of the chase will grant me one more moment, will leave me
the tip of yet another morning,
the tip of yet another morning
filled with kisses

Icarus

It was your father taught you to make the wings.
For this reason, and because you escaped from the maze,
you thought of them as a good thing.
It was pretty, the land seen from above with the broom in flower.
Beside you those wispy clouds like tangles of wool
the angels' cats have been batting about.
And a spring, singing: you could see its voice
when the afternoon sun stroked its bed,
and the fact that you couldn't hear it shows how shallow your pleasure in
flying was.

Here you might recognise the eagle's lazy pride and yours,
wanting to surpass the bird: free, the lust for the hunt unknown.
(Squirrels and badgers marking out their territories unperturbed).
The air in your ears a murmur of messages from the north. And to
understand
the privilege which the gods have granted to the few who survive.
To climb and climb and climb until the sun's rays no longer beat slanting
down,
where there are no more old men weeping, or proud kings as feeble as
children,
or dawdling bureaucrats, or requests as daft as sweets made of salt.
But looking back you saw the child staring up and pointing.
And it was then you started to fall. Tenderness, sloth,
habit, clothes hung out to dry, a touch of fever, all
those drawings you made today at school, cries of *good morning, bon appétit!*,
and if
a nightmare wakens you, think how lucky you are, you were only dreaming,
all your socks are dirty, that soup is custard, the wind is blowing
and the icy lump in your side, to *make it go cold*. Your feathers are flying.
You're heavy. Like treacherous hazelnut-spread the kindly wax has melted.
You're falling. You'll never know what you wanted to know. Whether the
sun
really was the sun, whether the sea was really the sea,
or the road to the top of the sky as long and dreary as you feared.

Polite remarks

When you thank me for some happy act my hands manage,
for a flower opening in my eyes, a line from Chesterton
or the secret longing to fasten one of your buttons,
I don't say a word.

How can I say "it's nothing" if these gifts are everything?
Childish freckles that break out again with age,
dew that heaven distilled so that that bee
can come and drink.

Like the girl who leans from her window to hang out
a red dress and the workman who watches her as he spreads cement
on the house next door or the scaffolding that supports him,
twenty metres above the ground.

How could they say, "it's nothing"?

But now it's my turn to say "thank you" because you've made
this time of waiting into a splendid line for my best dresses
and my pen extracts honey from thirst and the doldrums, and I'm seized,
when I work, by a frenzy, possessed by a craving for life.

And please don't say, "it's nothing".

Perhaps "sorry" would fit this gap in our polite remarks –
which is what I always say, and you don't say a word.

Sorry because the pain of not having you never ends,
for the cloud of hope that you so easily cultivate,
for my pessimism which you dissolve like a lump of sugar
with that all-reaching dampness of yours that turns solid things
soft, and small things tall, sliding on sledges of green leaves.

(There's no point trying to get to the bottom of it because this poem
was once entitled "sewing").

My daughter

That smell, you read it on your mother's hands. Grandmother was leaning on the railings, halfway along the sunny terrace, letting the wind dry her long white hair. We were playing at spying on her, telling her she was a witch, because she was always on her own. That's why I'm scared someone will come one day and make me take the *paseillo*. Because that's how they made Grandfather die. Because maybe it annoyed them that he always worked on his own, wrapped in silence and pipesmoke and the briny smell of shellfish he lifted from the sea. Maybe other people's hate is another thing you can inherit, like the colour of your eyes, or nail-biting, or a passion for tidying the reels of thread in the sewing-box or the pleasure of some kisses, taken without leave, that can never be sanctioned.

Then, without pressing too heavily, you roll the truffle in a heap of chocolate vermicelli, until it looks like a ball. Afterwards you mustn't eat it. Butter as soft as that gives you the stomach-ache. You have to eat them when they're colder. There's a compulsory waiting time, until you have the kind of meal that's worthy of a dessert like that.

One day my grandmother came up to me with a pair of old shoes, and told me they were mine. "Senile dementia," my father said. Black shoes, just like the ones I'm wearing now.

Sit down. Sit up straight. Don't ever pull your knickers down in the street. Wait until you get home. Hold it in. You should have thought of it sooner.

There was one pot with basil in it, and another pot with mint. "Those aren't real strawberries." The real ones (the wild ones) are tiny and hard as nails. If our mother bought red iced cakes for tea, my sister and I ran five times round the table. The table was made of oak, and we polished it with blacking, same as we did our boots on schooldays.

"Mother, come here," I'm coming. Lying there in bed, you're a landscape with two small hills, gentle as Scottish mountains. I hold you tightly, so, under each arm, thin as a tender rose-stalk, or apricot twig, and I whisper into your ear that I love you. And tell you I'm sorry. I was in a bad mood this afternoon. You're so pretty! Much nicer and prettier than I ever thought you could possibly be.

Note: *paseillo* (literally *little walk*): the bodies of those arrested by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War were usually found dumped by the side of the road.

The Atlas

Page by page it shows me the anatomy of the world
(*-tomia*, meaning *cut*). Rivers, railways, cities,
veins, ribs, organs lie reduced and bound
under my finger-tips – which today must think for themselves.
Since you have made me introspective, I try to see
landscapes flattened by fiction sheltering there. Whatever
that crude representation has to do with the smell of bread
or the sound of bells or evening light touching a wall,
is tenuous. A window on the world like a rain
puddle, and someone else's children playing.
This country on the map is a woman holding a glass
of *sake* close to her skirts: dressed in a figured kimono,
eyes unfocused, homesick. Singapore, Syracuse, Sienna,
your eyes, hand, voice, all say "Look." And though
the scale is perfect, it's too small to let us calculate
where our destiny lies. The network of distances,
neatly marked, linking You and Me – two place-names
anointed by saliva's un-navigable river-current – cannot predict
what may become, at the end of it all, of this beauty of ours.
Whether, when we enter port, sun or storm will greet us,
or the cold, clammy breath of those who judge us,
or whether what we see might be the snow our lies
have trampled – for wherever we go, there the city
goes also. As for these groaning contour-lines, are they cries
of pleasure or pain? The peak of some knowledge
we should have attained? Or the place that welcomed
Adam weary of Eden, a place he found he'd never left.
North or east or here, there is always the sea; future,
present or past; our hands are the fragments of shells.

Anne Sexton. *In memoriam*

To kill yourself is easy
if you see that the basket is full of all the easy things
people are asking us to do and we don't know how to do.
To kill yourself is a pleasant idea
if the happiness they've cooked up for you
is dripping out of a funnel you can't avoid
or the moon in March is lumpy béchamel,
or the burned onion smell has crept in
like a reek of Auschwitz
through tiny holes that jostle together
like a gaggle of proprietors.
To kill yourself makes sense
when you're counting and find that two and two make one
though that won't buy you
so much as half a pound of chickpeas.
To kill yourself is a reflexive verb that starts to conjugate itself
when it sees, drawing near, the extreme-unction of the phrase "I love you".
It's a tip we leave ourselves when we've drunk up
our vodka in a self-service bar.
To kill ourselves like sheep on the altar of Exodus.
To kill yourself is one conclusion of the editor's
adding to the list of errata: for "tomorrow"
read "kill".
And poetry is a sword plunged into
the plush underbelly of an elephant,
or into the heart of an artichoke where your hand lies sleeping.
To kill yourself in America must be a temptation.
But all I have that belonged to my mother
is a palindrome lottery number and the crumpled memory
of that torn-past-mending satin blouse. And here, the moon
is waning, and with bunches of grapes
from the dark side, we're bottling the new wine.
And you can kill yourself just as easily in a wine-cellar,
but we're content to gaze at our work, and outside it's hot
and the earth is scored all over by irrigation channels
like catheters full of dark brown sludge, because there's no wind,
or rain,
until well into October.

Note: On the night of the fourth of October 1974 Anne Sexton went into her garage with a glass of vodka, and her mother's overcoat round her shoulders. She climbed into the car, started the engine and waited for the carbon monoxide to cancel her life. (From the prologue by Jonio González to the translation of the collection, *The assassin and other poems*, from Icaria 1996)

Happiness

I don't know what it is you want from me.

The happy moment? That fine coating of ice that seals
the pool into its stones? Did you think I was an eye, and could see you?

Your fears are those plastic oranges lying round the edge.

You already know that facile beauty is something sad, as all
excuses are, like being able to disguise the things we say
when they hurt.

Look at me: I'm rinsing the potato-omelette under the tap,
and searching for the stepping-stones the ants have used to reach –
as your kisses did – that corner of the heart we'd tried to isolate
in a dish of water.

There is no happiness for us.

Only a hard delight like a glass marble veined with colour.

Apocryphal gospels, bleeding gums, time that
drains away like piss.

I would like to give you something, but all I can see is the mud

I bring in on my shoes, my freedom and a path thick with brambles.

And that patch of sky with fairground clouds like breasts speaking
as they come and go.

But even before I came on the scene, that was already yours.

Coffee

I empty the filter from the coffee-pot, rubbing the dark
dregs of our two glances between my fingers.

And when I turn on the tap I watch the water mingle
with the swirl of words we wrung from each other.

The smell of freshly ground coffee, a dream's damp earth,
belongs to last night: your hair, your arm-pits.

In the blue and silver tin some kisses have grown
and with the heat inside have baked like *madeleines*,
swelling in paper mouths with lips cracked by the wind
and a touch of fever.

With my milky coffee I sip a morsel of you,
– as Proust said who sipped with some nostalgia,
and my teeth tell me how moist and hot it is.

With my tongue I take you apart, as I do the time from before
we knew each other, and when I swallow you, I swallow the thought
that finding you has come far, far, far, far too late.

And so, as I wash the glasses and think how today we'll make *paella*
with greens, I've already grasped the fact that the sun is shining and
furthermore

the tarmac on the road will remain empty and happy, that today is Sunday.

That we'll have a few years together, with any luck: the life-span
of a bird. That counting days is like counting money and it's not
time alone that teaches us to rejoice when the first swifts arrive,
rejoice in the cries of a gull, in a young sparrow-hawk's downy plumage.

To look at ourselves in such slow motion

– in order to savour every second – that we're bound to hear
that silent music that is plants talking. And one day
we'll find that we can see the invisible spiralling of new growth
on the palms. The progress, beyond the glass, towards the light.

Wendy

They say that she was the one who got excited
when he declared, "I can tell you heaps of fairy-stories."
That he only wanted her so he could take her to the Lost Boys.
"Think of something wonderful and you'll float gently upwards."
To frighten the stars by flying behind them and trying
to blow them out. And not fall asleep: the directions are
turn right, then keep straight on till morning.
Think of something wonderful, so as to blot out the vertigo.
That's what you want to do all afternoon, for today you're an old woman
in the old theme-park. The mermaids, the fairies, eating
invisible food. Escaping from the pirates. Your daughter laughs
and wriggles from one side of the basket to the other on the big wheel
with Tinkerbell inside the walnut-shell.
The wheel turns. Can anyone accuse you of having wanted to fly?
Or him, of not wanting to grow up? From up here
you can see how huge the city is, how tiny, like dandelions,
the parasols round the bar where you told me you were jealous,
and that you didn't think my poetry good enough. And now
your voice calls, "Jump!" again. "Think of something wonderful.
My button, like a kiss that hangs between your breasts
and which will save you from arrows and insults and the poisoned cake."
"Jump!" Nana's barking can't be heard
above all the noise of the fair. "Jump!" My hand
is rigid, clenched round a steel cable that seems so flimsy.
"We'll make this our last time," I say. "Oh no, Mummy... Not yet,
let's go round a bit longer." Climbing, and sinking, until
we see behind a cloud the outline of Never Never Land, our very own
island.

Carnival

The box is made of cardboard, a bit dinged-in.

Inside is a pixie-hat we brought from Prague
with golden bells on it that jingle like ideas.

And an ancient solar topee that never went to India
and a witch's hat we made some years ago
from pasteboard, that still survives.

With an old silk dressing-gown we can make

a Chinese lady's dress if we tie this shawl around the waist.

And this skirt, with its border of carnations like desires, embroidered
by my grandmother for sauntering in, under the lamps on feast-days,
will make a peasant costume. And in this yellow frill one year
you were the daughter of the sun, and in these garlands you
were spring. And one strange mixture also looks really
comic: a frivolous head-band and greenish, straight-cut dress
put on an appearance as though about to break into
a few charleston steps. You curtsy and we applaud,
not loudly, but with real enthusiasm.

When I was a skinny child like you, I sometimes tried on
the satin camisole my mother had worn on her wedding

night. I ran my hand over it and found it as thin as I now
find the time I spend with you, without knowing

for sure which disguise is the one I'm wearing today:

the prudent mother, all tied up like a bunch of olives,

the old adolescent who just won't cook, like a simmering onion,

the alchemist who crams a turkey-cock into her words,

the lover on the jetty, fleeting as a passing phase,

or this sofa-arm, shielded from the future by the blanket of the everyday,
that comes with a dark past, and with crumbs of dreams in the gaps
death makes.

Saying goodbye while you give a lecture

When I leave you,
I see how it's suddenly dark at three in the afternoon.
Silkworms creep among the mulberry leaves.
When I leave you the moon loses its white brightness
as though it were shining from inside a television set.
Is it my finger on the remote, controlling emotions?
Can I ask for more volume, colour, or switch channels
like the sparrow hopping from one side to the other?
In case your eyes suddenly re-appear, your painter's
eyes. In case time knows how to bore a hole like a cheese
we could crawl inside, your head lying next to mine,
as though we were ants beneath a hotel bed.
But time can also make a gash,
a hawse-pipe, a well of salt water
that could suck us out to sea. Would we know how to swim
with our hands tied together? Or would the waves
pile up thousands of gallons of daily life
between us, and I spend hours watching
you drown, far off?
If that's what happens, let the wind at least bring me
the sound of your voice, as now. Words that reach me
in snatches like fog and which I condense into a yellow rose
I can crush between my teeth when I'm no more than
a squirrel skin, a morsel of flesh as drenched
as seaweed, tar sullyng a fingernail of beach.

The gold-prospectors

(after James O. Curwood)

We are two photographs attached by drawing-pins
to the inquisitive notice-board of daily life.
By making a tremendous effort and squinting
we can make out our hands, and distance,
that sharp-edged rectangle that is our home,
from which we look out and it's night-time.
Then we're awake once more at crack of dawn,
which once more becomes day, little by little
with the rub of light, more mellow now,
the only kiss the eye will tolerate.
And there we'll talk about how there's something strange
in having found peace in that hole we were all afraid of,
love in what we hated, justice in treachery.
And wisdom in the filthy nails of a mechanic.
Because when you're searching for nuggets of a mineral
each pioneer pans in that part of the river
that seems to glitter most. Because the sun glances on it.
Because we've had a skinful in the saloon.
Because a fish leaps out there, all silver.
Because when we were kids we made a slide
on a rotting tree-trunk in a place like that.
No theorem can tell us more about the footsteps
that will lead us to the dark place
where a small, coarse, yellowish scrap of earth slumbers
called happiness.
For the prospector who finds and rubs it between his hands
there is not only a certainty, a poem, a syllogism, a gospel:
the gem belongs to him.