

## *the trojans*

this is the impersonal skyline of the city, black and blinking yellow lights and eyes, whitewashed walls, bare and brutal spires of churches at the ends of lonely roads  
but in the backstreets and the alleyways cats with electric eyes find treasure in trash cans and boys find it in cigarette ash and damp brick walls and their own laughing mouths reflected in shards of glass -

old psychics and fortune-tellers with beads strung round their necks wear crowns of thorns and watch the news on cafe televisions, linoleum floors, sodium shadows and sweetener and men in suits sit alone in parked cars with veined and hairy hands on steering wheels and stare up through skylights at nothingness, neither past nor fitful future now, just oil and exhaust and the smell of rust

yes; this is the city, these are the faces of a many-headed god, some new hydra split away from its age, come to watch the ticking of clocks on nightstands

and so we check into motels in the early hours, before the dawn makes smooth the jagged edges of the city, fills the cracks in the concrete and muffles the sounds of cars on dry asphalt

we lie on cots in the heat and read dusty old bibles and turn our faces from the open windows and the stars and find god instead in the pamphlets we take from men on street corners

we lean against the railings of bridges and gaze down at the rapids and read joyce and talk of the fall, eve before the fall into the foam and the shadows of rocks and water

water water everywhere

and still we lie on our backs and drink cheap beer, fill our lungs with smoke and heavy air and the smell of rotting fruit and fish and

we are sailors and in these our nets we catch words and dissect them and fling them again to the winds and the lights of the passing cars which flock like moths to a flame

we know where this highway leads

reciting old poetry we become men on soap-boxes, catch sight of our own crazed eyes reflected in the windows of bars for the blind, bright lights, trees falling in silicon forests

we are sibyls, cassyndras, reeking and reeling we know that we will be old with grey beards and carved faces - and so, we say, we are prophets

we see images rising from smokestacks, images painted on walls and scrawled on sidewalks, yes we are prophets, are these voices we hear or prayers, or warnings, we swirl our

drinks and toss pennies into fountains just to watch the rippling blue, death by water  
shantih shantih shantih

and now see tantalus smiling through ash, dancing on the banks of the river, leaning in the

doorway of some old restaurant with dead roses in yellow vases, canine eyes and teeth  
see men and women half-mad, waiting at bus-stops, waiting on train platforms, waiting at traffic  
lights and crosswalks  
see tame and frightened old creatures playing chess in parks and under bridges, coughing and  
watching the smoke  
see shadows in subway stations and parking lots, shadows rippling behind curtains in yellow  
light, shadows leaning out of windows, leaping -

and we are faces, we are hollow eyes and flared nostrils, we who read road signs and  
dictionaries and find messages in muddy tiretracks and crumpled newspapers and train  
tickets  
we, with tongues forked and flickering, we with wings, we who hide in doorways and under  
awnings, we who watch the weather, who wait for wind and rain, we who have never  
seen the sea -

we are frightened, we are afraid, we with bruised knees and aching backs  
we are young and heroes  
we are the sons of gods  
we are old and weak and the sons of our mothers  
we are anchises borne from the ruins of this burning city

***Sonnet (In Response to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18)***

I know too well the blazing summer streets.  
I've watched the slinking purple shadows fall  
On wind-blown fruit split open, rotting, sweet  
With heavy age, and sweeter days recalled -  
Days which now lie languidly and rust  
In hazy dandelion heat. And in  
The orchard, once so full and fine, the dust  
Has settled, and the paling air grows thin.  
For soon the darkness falls at last: a trade  
Of time for time, and aging day for day.  
This bitter Eden even too shall fade;  
Its fiery earth to earth will soon decay.  
Oh, let the sun still linger, held in flame -  
And dusk the dappled shadows then reclaim.

## *On Visiting The Tate Britain*

### *I. Ecce Ancilla Domini*

Did Mary shiver when the letter came?  
Or did she, as the stories say  
Sit coolly by her bedside,  
Flaming hair a halo 'round her head  
Which, it seems, had not been there before  
Perhaps, of course she did -  
Or perhaps she went and sat  
And tossed her hair and cried a little  
Afraid of nameless things  
Of answers found in biscuit tins  
Or buried in the garden  
Near the fish pond, underneath the willow tree  
Which in winter looms against the ghostly snow, phantom-like and fearful  
Of lumps of sugar dropped in bluebird coffee cups  
And stirred by austere hands

And where is Mary now?  
That red-haired child would not sit still at teatime  
But bent her head towards the sun  
And dirtied her white dress with muddy hands  
Such is her reward -  
*Hail Mary, full of grace*, and other prayers, some said by dying men,  
Their mothers' kettles crying long past teatime  
Frosted windows keeping out the early winter sun

A wise man said that good things come with patience  
Come in with patience, wrapped in silk  
And smelling of spices: cardamom and cassia,  
The salt of far-off seas  
Come in on ghost-ships  
With no-one but the seagulls left standing on the prow and crying  
*Ahoy, matey,*  
*Land ahoy*  
All, of course, the stuff of children's tales

Oh, where is Mary now?

## *II. The Tin Men*

Twelve tin men  
Twelve hollow tin men  
They line up like soldiers in grey satin waistcoats  
And tell quiet stories of loss and defeat  
The little boy in the sailor suit with the chewed-at fingernails and the baby blond hair  
Blond hair that curls in ringlets round his forehead  
(Hair which will, of course, turn grey with time -  
A forehead which will wrinkle like his father's shirt  
The one his sainted mother has refused to iron -  
I'm tired, she has said, not now,  
But men, she tells her daughters, men do not listen)  
His father, of course, in his grey satin waistcoat,  
He tells quiet stories of loss and defeat  
And at the dinner table his fork scrapes against the plate as he cuts his vegetables  
And leaves them uneaten

Upstairs the tin men stand on the chipped green dresser  
Where pink hands with chewed-at fingernails will one day knock them down  
One, two, three, all the way to twelve  
Watch them fall like dominoes  
Oh, twelve hollow tin men  
Storming castles in the air

## *III. Birdsong*

The tall pine tree at the edge of the forest has seen a great many things  
Once a girl with red hair took a picnic in its shade  
And brought with her only an orange  
Which she ate without noticing the juice  
That dripped down her chin and onto her dress  
It left a mark that looked like a star if you tilted your head  
And when she stood up to go she left the peels on the grass  
It has seen a great many things  
Everyday things  
But now at night it stands beneath the stars and casts only a shadow

Only a shadow, and the stars, being blind, see nothing  
And in its branches the birds speak words of comfort -

The night owl cries to the woodpecker  
Where, oh, where did you go?  
Go west, says the woodpecker, west with the clever man  
Cigar in his mouth  
Puffing rings of spiraling smoke and words that  
Take on new meanings when taken with tea  
Or east with the pirate  
Whose gold-plated earring tells secrets and lies  
To silver-topped mountains and slow summer valleys and strawberry fields  
To rivers that tremble when winter draws near  
Go, says the woodpecker, for gold-plated earrings  
Tell secrets and lies that most men believe  
Go, warns the woodpecker, for  
Late last summer I saw the shadows of birds flying south to the sun  
Go - going - gone.

*IV. Said Mary:*

He who has seen too many spring promises come to nothing  
Has felt the years like raindrops one by one  
Like raindrops hitting stone on foggy April days,  
Running in rivers down mossy stone  
On foggy April days  
No flowers bloom in May of course, save bluebells - can you hear  
The bluebells?  
The church bells, they chime only for weddings and funerals  
(Spring promises, I say, come to nothing)  
He has watched the shadows of the leaves  
Parting and unparting at his feet, blown by sudden gusts of wind  
Strange uncertain dances like the whispers of a woman as she plucks the daisy petals  
Drops them on the ground and counts  
*Will he, won't he?*  
There are no daisies in these fields, no bluebells save the wedding bells  
The bride in the casket and the mourners dressed in white

No wars are left for me to fight

I lose a losing battle with no-one  
And leave my worn out, tattered flag  
Lying in the dirt  
It flutters in the soft late winter wind - wind that blows out winter  
Heralds spring with trumpets  
But I have told a different tale  
There is no glory in surrender