

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, cassydras, 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

1. 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?

2. 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

3. 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.

4. 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