

SOMETIME BEFORE WORDS PERHAPS
by

Michael Jennings

Art creates space in the clutter of fact. Poems are like white rooms where the Large Mind of the reader is enjoined by the Large Mind of the poet in shared breath, touch and tongue, the secret idiom of the dialectics of abstract and concrete, sacred and profane, living and dying - the residue of a few black words the faint, odd fingerprints of being.

—Michael Jennings

Sometime Before Words Perhaps

your arm moved —
a glitter of small hinges.
Or was it your leg,
its calculated unwinding?

I was asleep, say,
or lost in thought.
I heard your blood
though, how it sang,

and I felt your cloudshadow
coming, crossing my face.
I looked —
you were full of yourself

dancing. I looked —
you were the waterfall of yourself
dancing. I looked —
your breath drank my eyes.

I listened — your feet drummed
shut my ears. I groped,
but your skin turned fingers
to spider webs.

Sometime,
out of the dark of my body,
I spoke.

Where She Dances

Purple jaguar midnight
of lost imaginings — ebony, jet,
obsidian lakes of fire —
Hers is the drumbeat spanking of bare
hard feet, far off wafting of laughter.

Come dance with the daughter
of rag-tag summer. See the turn
of her fiery wrist. Moon
paints her shadow. Sun
cannot find her. The fierce stars

bring her to bliss.
Once she was tree trembling in moonlight.
Once she was river
tied down by her hair.
Once she was wind, once she was breath —

Now only flame
in the flare
of a pupil,
a delicate rustle's
velvety purr.

When She Makes Mountains

she paints them shadow-dancing,
rivers their flexions,
weaves the drapery wind. Dozes,

crosses into dream-space
with long-thighed stepping, her sleep-heat
burnishing the low hills.

Out of them come women for water, bright
as flowers, a dozen Salomes
with braceleted ankles and hard brutal feet

who crouch on their haunches
under the thick scent of limes, their mud
village creviced above them,

its brown face among the cliffs immobile
as a blind man's. She breathes
them her gossip, whiskers their thighs,

puts the wheels of their hips
in slow motion. Jars grow from their heads,
jars in the shape of women

heedless in May, the time of new grasses.

Her Dalliance

Between her fingers
the plucked stalk of your brainstem
blossoms

petal by petal in the empty air.

Between her toes
Tigris and Euphrates divide

and multiply. She loves you.
She loves you not.
Perhaps you are the pinprick rain

on the sheer face of an autumn lake.
Perhaps you are snow.
She is dreaming of crossroads

and you are the emptiness.
She is playing with dolls
and you are the mad muttering.

She is gossiping by the well
and you are the strewn fieldstones,
lidless eyes of the desert

waiting for rain. Her indecision
is delicious with cunning.
The mountains heave. Your leaves shiver.

Pythoness

You want her to unravel your future,
make time stand still,
take the pinch of your skin
off.

But how dry the whisper of her coils,
ton over ton of slow muscle
like molten lava.

Her split tongue hisses,
emptying your skull like an eggshell.
Your fate is calamitous,
reckon your chances.
Bring only the candle of yourself
into the cave of unmaking.

Slide between smooth stones.

Peering, lidless, yellow eyes.

Out of the Egg Dark

pure dark,
dark of black flowers,
unfurling of feathers,
shuddering thighs,

comes the elk's
trembling branches, crumble-cliff
ecstasy, wide-nostrilled rising
agate-eyed god.

So she brings fire to the ragged dark
in the flare of her hip bones,
swirl of her thighs, tapering fingers
seamstress nimble, spidery smooth.

How far will you come down the river of joy—
deep lapping,
slow slapping,
her skin your toy, your shadow her drum?

Near and nearer
the tiger-painted
sundown sea,
ebbtide whisper,

sea caves' bronze blood-light
and bullroar absence—
floating anemone bliss
in the wave-trough silence.

And now your absence glows
in the vaults of her belly,
toss of her hair
The slippery dark dances.

But already she is elsewhere,
tomorrow or yesterday—
phantom of your best self
curling into smoke—

dawn inventing the near hills—
the charred black
of your face bones
wobbling back into morning

When the River Flutters

her wings, she is no longer the Amazon
floating the crescent moon as her navel.

She is your shadow rising to meet you.
The nightsilk mountains bend close.

Something in the lisping silence grieves,
exalts, dies its thousand deaths.

Your body is also a river with wings,
with talons, a place of betrayals

where shadowy gods, horned
or with twisting serpents for hair,

are drowned, torn to shreds,
then rise again into stars.

Tomorrow, at dawn,
something shaggy will come down,

peering out from the night-drugged leaves,
dazzled by the spokes of new sun.

The Eye of the Mountain

is inward and honeycombed,
aswirl with the nectar and knowledge of ages—

what the mouth knows
but the tongue has forgotten—

glacially calm in its weeping—
its tears the blood that becomes milk.

