

The Art of Medicine

Poems

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the butterfly collector with alzheimer's disease

years
since they've been by and
you've missed them, softly
committing themselves
to suicide, brushfeet tapping
on your windowpane and how
they unclothed themselves
in the silence of silk to live again.
snowbound
by this disease, your
sheaves of brain lightly stitched
together with senile plaques but still
you can hear their inaudible wheeze;
notes, so tiny quivering from
sails of jaspé, kallimas
sent overseas like presents
of purple mourning—cloaks to warn you, of
sarajevo, where you
met her, your faithful collector of memories pressed
between two sadnesses, sent
whispering to you and somehow still scented
after fifty years of winter, slurred speech,
the warnings of peace deals falling through as
you sleep
beside her, incontinent, holding her hand but not
remembering her name though she's kept the first
butterfly you ever gave her
in a frame.
years
since you called out for her, and she's missed you,
living out like tiny mutinies against a pain
felt years before
when you first lost her and she knew it was too late
to unclothe,

to love again.

(for Dr Amelia Onij, aged 86)

the schizophrenic

she held
four little white-egg knuckles in her hand, and rubbed them
so softly i was afraid
they might break into those paper-tissue seabirds
we bought once in cuba.
the file said
her eyes were blue, once, years before they took blue sadly
and only
scorched-earth memories troubled her now.

of some ivory jigsaw she knew
was lost, love's
careful seashell like bone doubloons washing
ashore and breaking up
on her nerve-lined coast.
"they are
listening to my thoughts, i have
antennae as sensitive as spiders' webs" and i remember
now
years ago, a burning desert, our
broken-down jeep and the refugees tuned
to some satellite tethered
over morocco and whispering
"amy? amy?"
our drugs have left her
struggling, these capsuled gifts we bring
like some peace-parade that's passed through, we have
waded
in amongst her love
and torched its tissued wings.

(for Alèv)

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still birth

they say christ
has holes in his hands,

i will fall through

christ's wounded palms.

abused child

(labour ward)

you dreamt of being a dancer, but frightened
of being found out, and beaten, you made a
batik secret of all the colours you never knew, and hung it
like a backdrop in case
they held auditions for love;
but they didn't, so, unable to catch the snowflakes
in your sleep, when he came
to hurt you or just break
the watersbone beneath your blistered feet, the ballet ended
with the poems and curtain calls i could not reach you with.
the policeman said
you were "inconsistent with life" when they found you
almost unburned
of all this innocence, this tiny stain
that may have been marks of lips
or the wing-prints of pain
that beat out against you like a candlemoth.
and the pus that oozed
from your scraped eyes was the colour of jonquil
seahorses
washed ashore,
like tiny envois of peace to tell you
it would soon be over.
they have called me to close your eyelids
down
like awnings on this day i found you
dead, festered, beaten, stung,
all along the insides of your dancer's legs
where, between the marks of lips and
the wing-prints of pain,
the snowflake fell

the batik hung.

(for Sorcha, aged 6)

mr. thompson with a stroke

your hands, flowers of cold flesh prized open
by orphaned shivering nerves to taste
the warm sun from the window by your bed
a yellow fluid oozes
from an abscess in your head out through your ear
and i collect it in a vial with a pink lid
and send it to the lab.
such strange noises
come through the charred flute of your throat
into a tube that your children
are frightened by you and do not visit today.
when you convulse
the neurologist talks of you in terms of lobes
and tracts and silently degenerating myelin sheaths
that thread through
your bruised skin like fine silk strings
to hold a marionette on.

or a mariner; when i read your chart i see
you were a sailor, once, before this beaching, this washing
ashore.
off baja
did you witness, once, a southern lightshow, a million
turtles
drifting slowly by, the moonlight glistening
on their cobbled carapace; before this stroke did you
strum them
in an undertow of their innocence.
off baja now, only a few remain, huge nets have caught
them
and in your troubled sleep: know
you heard them, over oceans, their noosed throats find
you
nautical miles away in this hospital bed
paralysed, drooling saliva down
your salt-stained skin, no scan
we do will show this pain
how you have had love stolen so softly from you, we
didn't notice.
fell asleep on this cape of storms,
and dreamt of blue turtles,

turtles,

turtles.