

The Light

Allen O'Leary - 2020

The game

The great diurnal swing
scything out for time's pulse
comes for us

on Christmas morning. The dawn rain
draws out a fat-streaked London sky
& the call comes in on the land line

always a bad sign. You can hear
in the crackling even before anything is said
the weight falling from the sky towards us -

your father
suddenly
at home.

We throw clothes at suitcases
as if they should know how to fold themselves
as if they should know how to do this.

Then once more back & across
the theory of heaven, spinning stars
from left to right swinging

indigo to starlight, snows
to sun, the arc of the plane
calling out a brighter version of the moon

until our eyelids scream
so we grind them open
with another movie

until home below, the other home
shows radiant, the blade dripping
with jewelled water, our slick feathers

covered with useful oils
as we preen ourselves on the incoming air
getting ready for the weight of all this.

And that first step back down
forward into the glorious dawn, *it is the light*
is it the light, the light rising

over the ocean edge, bellish
burnished vast & brazen
not embarrassed at what it must do -

punch us back into the old time zone
into the shock of inversion
& deep into the game

of tides, of loss
of love, the suddenly deep
distressing loss of the beloved.

A blessing

The funeral director is coming up the path
his acid-sharp suit doubles the prickly heat
on the parched lawn. The buzz of mowers

states the case for the ongoing cycle of life
& already we have to talk details. The Catholics
are good at this, there's an order

that you can lay the experience onto –
rigorous enough to guide Rob a trillion
miles to the target of his expected heaven

yet personal enough to hold
godless mourners like me inside it.
The priest with an accent like sheep dip

& oldish & round & properly
wonderful, covers the cancerous spot
on his head with his bible as he steps

out in the blaze & blesses the house
so we can enter. In the front room Rob's shoes
wait on the floor, he'll be back any moment.

We sing hymns to break the silence.
The priest asks Baxter & Tim to take
one shoe each & place them neatly

by the fire, as their grandad would.
From that moment of holy theatre we are lost.
The real, barely nudged away by the fact

of travel, steams at us. Now I notice
the hundred pair of his glasses
scattered over the house – some on chairs

more in the workshop, the bedroom,
the kitchen, beside the bath. Each pair is soaked
with a million words – the war histories

the spy novels, the formidable bank
of English romantics – remnants
of the curious mind

now bending the air with
their perception, now empty,
now still, now watching us

& marking our ritual as he would
with dry amusement, a red pen,
a critique of the phrasing.

The things

I have to step back. It's her father after all
& while I am helping decorate the casket

it's for Hilary to do it – she wants
the control, it's her job now.

We drive down to Mitre10 & settle
on a litre of Deep Pacific Ocean.

Baxter paints the lid of the casket. He takes it
as well as someone who spends their days

on an xbox can – slowly, sticking his tongue out
like his grandad, taking as if forever. The sides

have maps & tickets & badges glued
to them. Travels, late in life, mostly to see

old friends & runner mates or students now in
America or volunteering at various

commonwealth games. There's even
the turquoise jumpsuit to prove it. Kuala Lumpur 1984.

I have figured out a neat way to get paper
to go perfectly around the handles

with a small cardboard template & a blade.
Sebastopol even. A ticket to the Moscow

underground. War graves.
Moments & maps drop out of boxes

bright & new & freshly breathing.
Pieces of history crammed into corners

decades ago & unmoved since
now ambush us – a curse, a blessing.

The shed door is open to let the fumes out
& the lawn is brushed by a dry wind. The towels

on the line dance, bright shamen in
the pakeha vernacular of meaning.

This is the doing of things in a time
that is full of things to do. This is the doing

of things he never quite got to, a benevolence
of chores. But all of the things are empty

of the one loved thing
we wanted to these things for.

Rapaki beach

Acid softened with milk the
drifted bay eases out of time & tickles
a song from nothing. Children's laughter

overlays gossip. Friends lie about
protecting the sun
from the earth with their bodies.

The water itself is mottled with humour
a lazy rhythm of hot cold hot
as we wade into it. My son

seems different again, indulging me
& judging but neither with any sense
of malice. He is so far not of this world

that I have to teach him how to
flick water into tails. Fun
necessarily constructed.

We are here different. An hour
inside the summer that is inside the winter
that is inside the other side of the world.

Kayakers pass the mouth of the bay
moving wands through bright arcs
conjuring movement out of time, pleasure

from exertion. The waterlight spills
from everyone as they move, a wave
of time crushes us with a fizz

of perfection. I struggle to remember
what I was doing last week & drop
everything into the bay - a stone

a flight plan, a piece of somewhere else.
London dissolves
in stringent alien beauty.

An hour turns, time to go.
Baxter hasn't even missed
his phone, he laughs

& forgets to be travel sick
as we re-thread the loom one
hairpin at a time towards home.

Back in the bay our shadows remain
& drift loose of time. Some benevolence
watches them – ever there, here, there.

Pidgeon Bay

The funeral director talks
like my grandad did, a man of the forties.
'Righto' he says, 'terrific.'

The sextant is safety orange, leans weary
on the side of his truck. Yesterday he fainted
in the heat as he dug the grave. His accent

& his rough tats give him away – he did a runner
decades back, slit his life from London & rolled the dice
in the new world. But he talks about New Zealand

as if he has just arrived, his blue eyes
tension the skin around them, his face
bark-gouged with daily light.

He says 'now you've started you have to finish'.
So challenged, we strike into the pile of earth
with an attack of townie vigour.

Everyone takes a turn, long enough
to feel the burn, the heat of the effort
coming through on the breath.

I am, casually included, family.
It's taken me decades to see it
& only now through loss. I am bro

to the sis & bloody Allen to
the other bro, sticking my beak in
putting my neck out

to see if it gets broken. So now
I am digging too. Later I hover
as they line up & scoop

the fine sand into the grave
with the hand trowel, repeating politely
what we have just done

in fact. I am in the second line
after my son, the grandson who
pours his attention in. It's not so much

that we are filling a hole
it's more that we are feeding a lineage
one singing spadeful at a time.

Toast

When we come back from time
to time we always take a

bottle of gin to the plot &
sit on Patsy's grave & take

a libation in her honour. It's a proper
James K kind of place, nowhere & nothing

but cleaned by the sky & lazy laced
with graves. You'd have to know

it was here, up past the farmer's house
on the unmapped gravel road, among the macrocarpa

& the jewel green grass. A very catholic
secret, a quiet revelation, a strategy

to turn our habit of drinking our way
to truth back on to us.

Patsy & now Rob, have left us & you are
the oldest generation, no cushion

between you & destiny, nothing but
this man beside you, a curious

loving stranger, who pushes at the sky
& shares the scouring tonic of the sea

A view

All around, hills. The close ones
right behind the house & the distant
a jaw of ancient teeth. Each one

shames anything in England. You shouldn't
of course compare but you must judge
where best to live. With one aspect

there is no beating this place, from another
it's empty. What is it full of
other than memory? To come back

you'd have to see it as coming forward.
You'd have to think it forward for
all members of the family

& we're not there yet on the whole
not by a long way. For the now
I am stepping into old Zeno's creek -

the point is not just that the river changes
but that you change too. If you could
just stop for a moment

you would see the trick of the light
& perhaps you would take
a moment where

the refraction became
an oblique happiness
& you could work out

a way back, now
that you understand yourself
as the river, the river

as self & the whole
nature of emptiness.
It doesn't matter where you live

nor should you care
about the wet foot
or the old man's curse.

The fold

We lowered him into the ground on nylon straps
our sun-baked backs & white shirts

slapped together in easy sweat as
spade by spade we layered him into the ground.

Robin Anthony Creed take your place in the deep press.
Turn the dial down to earth time. Return him

to the ground of being, the elaborated
eon-long compress where the body

is no different to a stone or a weed
a shovel, a blister. Everything pools

& pinches, folds & so lives again. All then
goes & goes on in one form

or other. From my pocket I take a hanky
I took earlier from his draw. I fold it once

& then again, bat at my brow & selfishly
wonder at the time of my own compression

how it will come to that, how I will face it.
If our measure is the manner of our ending

then Rob was a fine thing, even now as he falls
back to his reduction, falling like stone

like sweat, falling spade by spade
back to the primary bedrock of the beloved.

His bach

Looking down on a rubber mattress
that is forty years old or more, the must

drifts up like grassy heat. A kind
neighbour has given up pillows for the night.

The white rectangles are windows
that cut through to modernity, they lay

against the flowery seventies sheets, the broken
rocking chair with it's tartan blanket, a rattly

fan heater, a yellow lampshade in plastic
& the bright blue curtains, washed by recurring suns.

This tin house he made. It's a triumph of thrift
or neglect depending

on how charitable you feel. To heat the bath
you fill it with cold water & place

a kettle element in it suspended on a long flex
& a convenient length of twine. An hour later

the water is good enough for a splash.
The point is time is beside the point.

Out on the balcony, the infinite birds
lace the dusk with threads

of song while behind that
pips, buzzes & squarks scatter the air –

handfuls of deep space thrown at a mountain.
Standing here, standing as the night

softens us & the birds
stutter to silence, a great clatter of rain

drops from the sky like an untethered boom
falling to the deck. Twelve blessed hours

of that song that London tiles mute –
the holy chorus of rain on a tin roof.

The verses of old holidays & youth sung out
by the southern weather gods, the same

who sing the waves around Antarctica surround
this tin box, worn out & bleached,

a temple of Zylandia, a distant pole
to my bricky normal. Now the pilgrimage

feels real & Rob is laid to rest. We have
shovelled dirt to keep him safe &

I need nothing more than sympathetic water
to wash all distance from my face.

Tough

We all know there's only one
fine day in Wellington a year

& I have hit it square on. The harbour
is copper soft, gamelan

rubbed with shimmering fingers.
There are layers beyond hearing too

deep strata of memory, half-dreams
& lost causes. Old haunts

are empty now or animated with new players
& I am profoundly irrelevant

& happy enough with that. Twenty five years ago
trouble & troubled & searching beyond

for something I already had with me, I left this.
Twenty five years is a mountain. You can't

come back over that in a day
or maybe even a lifetime. Places always belong

to those who live it most so freely
I let it go. It belongs for you

to take back sentence by sentence
the slow hard work of taking bad history

& making it a workable future. Even so
that I am from here makes me different

elsewhere. It's an attitude etched in –
comfort in weather, on steep hills

& happy with cold rain & waves
as big as English mountains. Here made me by turns

remote & chill, close & hot, a boiled mess
of uncertainty & ill-expressed ambition –

Pakeha I guess. Never quite belonging
even as I belong here with you.

I am grateful for the full catastrophe
of experience, your friendship, my shattering

life even as it hides itself inside
the broad cloak of a perfect day.

Stuff

Here everyone has
so much more of everything.
In London we have a flat that is

dinky. No garden, a square
of gravel at one end & a post-box red door
at the other. It's narrow

like a ship with cabins off
a dark long corridor. Inside we have two
beds a kitchen table, a day bed, a coffee table

an easy chair & three chests of drawers.
Of course assorted other stuff
x-box, computers, many drying racks.

But here everyone has rooms
that stretch to the horizon, garages are full
of canoes & bikes & garden furniture

whole catalogues of plastic shit made in China
& tipped into lives like an assortment
of cheap, unwanted sweets.

Too much really, too much shit.
Rob's house, now without an animator
is a catalogue of stuff held on to just in case.

Depression era, no waste. A legacy of stuff.
Some of it is even interesting in itself
the old maps, five percent of the books – I slip

one into my suitcase for later.
But the things that hold the most value
are the cheapest – the array of photos

that cover every wall & surface, tacit
proof of a wide ranging love.
The space is empty, scoured with silence

& the space is full, it wraps the air with loving
care. If you took that space & listened to it
it would tell you great things – there

the dawn chorus, a love of mountains,
a cup on the edge of a table, three kids
clattering around, full of beans, winsome.

There are riches enough to those who
stop to take them. You need less things
You need more time

to rest, to listen
to remember
rejoice.

The light

A stroke then. The smallest catastrophe
a black hole pulling everything into it
a skull flashed with galaxies &

meteors of thought & memory. Then
the starving light shatters inwards –
whole books made paragraphs then words

then floating syllables & gutturals
slapping like a lazy tide on rock
& inside that the sliding primitives of life

come apart in a staggered cease
from the last moment's chisel that
parts breath from its purpose.

There is also grace in this exploding light.
I think of his God reaching down
& touching his brow

showing the wonder of his creation
in a moment of beauty &
kindness. *Come back to me son*

let me take you home, come
now & he brushes Rob's cheek
& reveals everything to him

in a strong trade – the knowledge of
his creation, his body of light, in exchange
for the one mortal body of clay.

Gallery, a Hotere

Here the past keeps falling
out of my pockets – awkward

metallic, larger than the house.
Or maybe something

like a shadow, a certain
shape, creases in

the air so full of dark
it casts shadows into night.

Upstairs there is frail light, a dryness
concealed inside the art, while

all the water is in graves lashed
to the ceiling. Here removed

from context I am a puzzle solved
waiting for a clue, a tube

of conjecture & uncertainty,
pavlova spread with oils.

Here I am a willing &
long victim in the crime

of dismantling self & finding
dissociative voice. Here echo

victory, death, response.
I am, here, unravelled

when I am left alone
& to myself for

three hours I become with
the artist again, a black cross

on the orange idea
of a dissolving safety

white words beating
on an ocean of wavy tin.

Crossings

It's a long way out now
if we're lucky half a life away

& that half rammed with meaning & enough
of pleasure to get us by until we are ended.

Or next year, or one or two beyond that –
something cruel & lingering

something where the best you can do
is cope. We don't know what

or where or when but we do know
the moment stands there. A gate

a door, a portal, a lapse, a strike, a stir
we can dress it how we like. We can try

camouflage, we can call it a bridge
a reconnection, a mercy. It is a fact

with nothing more to say & nothing more
needs to be said about this, yet.

We are back on the plane. Baxter
throws up three times in quick order

& I put my hands out to catch it –
the old parent reflex, now useless

& embarrassing. We measure lives
in birthdays & these flights, these

grand crossings. The miracle of flight
itself flies against the primal truth of it –

the airport is a ford, with us wading
groggy through the flood of time.

We complete the ritual by buying gin
& anoint our return

with 37 botanicals for the two parents
lying together now at the bay.

They live on, their best traced out in
Baxter & Tim, in clever & kind.

It's not a push to say my son
is my greatest achievement

& all I need for eternal rest
is for him to one day honour me

in this way – to push me out
across the ocean of return

in a small paper boat with a sail
& blow me over the threshold

with a breath full of flowers
& a sweet spell of dissolution.