

Who Knew

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by

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Abstract:

This book of poems ranges in style from narrative to condensed lyric moment, and shifts in perspective from observation to introspection. Thematically, these poems explore everyday life through its many manifestations – memory, nature, marriage, faith and death – with an emphasis on finding meaning in absolutely ordinary things. Though their tone is often vulnerable and tender, even when it is more distant the poems are always searching.

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## Patronage

The last conversation  
I had with my father  
was about money –  
how I didn't have enough of it  
and how he too was watching it.

I recall the end of each summer  
he would hug me goodbye and  
slip a roll of twenties into my palm,  
the cash thick and warm –  
rude and kind as a tongue

but something I came to expect,  
even look for, like the silvery trail  
of a slug after the rain.  
No matter how much I resisted  
he'd insist.

So when I write to take him up  
on his offer, something in me knows  
I'm sliding back into mud  
we've passed through –  
the easy way.

## We went for a walk

You draw me out to the side yard  
when your eye catches the grey dam of mine –  
in its mirror it holds, tremors  
and breaks.  
Your hand against my head  
my head against your frame.  
I notice blue eggs hatched on the grass.

We wander some more,  
edging the clutter and the rust.  
At the bow of the old boat  
I see the wildebeest calf.  
Must be freshly gone  
for there's no smell  
and clouds still move across its black eye.  
Kneeling down, you stroke its belly:  
rigor mortis.

Why don't we pray for him  
to come back to life, you say.  
And I love you more.  
For as long as I've known you,  
your faith has had no boundaries.

## At the pool

Tchaikovsky from a cell phone  
conducts four pairs of black limbs  
as they sweep through the air  
obediently long and pointed,  
slow, as though resisting water  
point – step – shuffle – turn.

Boys launch into the pool  
playing at rambunctious games  
somersaulting, barrelling.  
A tattoo outline traces the torso  
of one who rooster struts along the edge.

In this rehearsal  
underwear and bathing costumes  
cradle innocent curves,  
feet chassé – even giggles are in time.

Meanwhile, on the low wall,  
a girl sits nursing her child  
watching the dark swans glide.  
She too knows to stretch her neck.

For the first time

I cup the egg in my palm,  
feel it with careful fingers  
    (smooth as an underbelly)  
and consider  
the weight of it.

Turning it over,  
I stare through the shell and soft wall  
    to a place within,  
and somehow I've slipped  
into terrifying territory – and yet,  
my body softens.

I see a tiny hand  
spread like a star  
    and all over as delicate  
as the traces  
of a nail's paper rim:  
it's reaching.

Morning has scrubbed  
a strange gleam across  
    this skin finish  
and simple things have shifted:  
the arc of my hand  
the curve of the egg.

## Original sin

I'm not your daughter, cried the middle child.  
Her mother, with the tone of a crisp sea breeze:  
Good. My child would never act this way.

When does it happen?

From the start we know to injure –  
to choose from ample branches  
and pluck  
just the right venom.

## Love poem

Whenever you go,  
I catch myself looking  
for little signs of you.  
Evidence, if you will,  
that we are better together  
than apart.

It's silly, I know, because  
when you are here,  
I sweep up after you

fold your clothes  
wash your cups  
straighten your papers

And when you're gone  
I look for your debris.  
And then feel sorry  
that I'm forever the neurotic wife

folding your clothes  
washing your cups  
straightening your papers

And I worry you think somehow  
my life would be more ordered  
if you weren't in it  
and the clutter  
of two lives  
isn't worth the mess,  
and in the end  
love is a chore.

I worry I only  
see these things too late,  
when you are gone,  
and your shoes,  
straightened by the door.

## Missing

The days stretch out  
like endless Tuesdays –  
too little behind us,  
too many to fathom in front.

I reach for the phone  
calculate the hour  
(subtract nine)  
retract my hand,  
it's 3 am.

This missing has a new urgency,  
it needs breath and skin.  
Now we have writing  
and I hope one day  
walking, hiking, picking fruit –  
anything to do with you.

## Standing in my kitchen

Standing in my kitchen  
you say you are lonely –  
not sometimes in the gray  
in-between but as an  
exile, constantly remote.

For a moment  
you are kayaking down a river,  
manoeuvring against  
the muddy rush,  
keeping your centre  
with each paddle thrust.

I hear what you say  
though I look at your  
body: capable arms,  
the open plane of your face,  
your full lips –  
so balanced the equation  
of parts.

I should reach out and  
touch you, but instead I pour  
some tea and listen  
as your words circle and orbit  
like steam from our cups.

I listen but I'm sure  
one firm press of my palm  
will mean more than all this  
talk – something like  
ground or gravity,  
pinning you to your  
own country.

To know

after Lorine Niedecker

Will I ever know a place  
so well as to know  
the terms by which it breathes –

specifics  
of ground and din  
the contrivances  
on which it depends:

to grow deep or to float?

to go wherever the land dictates –  
the sluice its great or narrow gait  
the overflow the water's riffle

To know words  
for the underfoot rap  
to know scree  
slough  
or seine –

will I ever remember  
to listen –

shake out my blanket  
let it settle sit  
record the sound

to alter and aver  
against the general  
and again  
be welcome

## Before dawn

I am a silent witness  
To the trill, the chill of nothing  
The almost glow, the slow  
    not-yet of nothing  
(the strain of nothing  
    the ache and pain of nothing)  
the belly sound of nothing  
the frozen ground, the grasp, the last  
the rise, surprise  
of nothing

## The teapot

tea pot swept from the countertop  
wish I could freeze time, make it stop

your finger shivers, tenses, bores straight  
no holding back now, it's too late

last night under anger's fire you lost  
your cool, your tongue – your words, caustic

maybe I made the fault lines visible  
and now it's clear again just how fragile –

but we'll be fine – nothing that can't be mended  
not like the tea pot, that one has ended

on the floor scattered like white stones,  
we kneel before it, an altar of bones

## Washing line (to my landlady)

Maybe that's why small things get to you:  
the dog doo, paper in the plastics, wood chips on the grass.  
Maybe that's why you couldn't face the leaky tap,  
advised another nail for the old bed that split in two –

For you, it's not just one morning  
sleeping past nine, letting the phone go,  
the dust settle or the dishes slide –  
such surrenders, invisible, subliminal –

terminal –  
the searing thought of an unwritten letter,  
a conversation not smoothed over,  
the washing line hanging by a thread.



## A pledge

i.

for too long  
I've wandered  
through the world  
half-asleep

thinking 'flower', 'tree'  
trading the particular mineral  
for the impression of earth  
never calling to mind  
a single name

ii.

there are those whose  
fingers know intimately  
the red soil and root-systems  
knowledge acquired for  
its use – not its novelty

iii.

today, the fern spreads  
its tight coil into a fine hand,  
the foxglove shakes  
its violet bells awake

clouds take to  
an effulgent runway –  
splotched rouge  
against crushed blue

ivy is a fresh splash  
against the brown brick  
and paper-winged seeds  
scatter the path like change

iv.

remembering to look again,  
I trace with my eye  
an ant trail,  
linger for the weaver

and again I wonder  
when the Japanese bush will  
flower its pink riot  
of last year

## Somewhere else

between  
our front door  
and the world  
I step to the lines:  
You're trying to live  
and not be swallowed.

We can speak surrender  
but only our bodies know

Can I say Yes again  
and again, how can I  
bind myself –  
a vine or a tendril  
seizing  
the closest thing –  
to grow out and up  
reach for light  
then what?

Minutes pass, days, moments  
go – I haven't felt  
I love you –  
so mercurial  
this atmosphere  
is shifting  
like air.

Somewhere  
else, in a bedroom, I know,  
a little girl sleeps with her radio:  
it is well with my soul,  
it is well with my soul  
it sings –

## Marriage

Tonight I'm thinking over things.  
Photograph of a couple  
has sent me back

to when it was our turn  
when we were that beautiful  
and we too had secrets unfolding.

As we fall asleep I tell you something –  
part declaration, manifesto, apology –  
“I believe life should be beautiful.”

You are surprised as though  
the woman you married has crawled  
out of hibernation. “You do?” “Yes.”

And I tell you something else that's  
part apology, declaration, pact:  
“I'm willing to start over  
as many times as we have to.”

Who knew  
after Nazim Hikmet

It's Tuesday,  
I'm sitting at my desk  
at a window that's looking onto  
a house occupied by beer-drinking semi-adults –  
I don't know their faces but I know their boorish grunts  
and probably,  
I know their shirtless stomachs.

I didn't know you could glimpse a spider in the dark,  
watch birds and red ivy-tendriled walls (interposed with the occasional belly) –  
who knew I'd still myself enough  
to see a bat hanging like a swollen seed pod,  
or discover the nictatating membrane over a dog's eye –  
who knew I'd ever know the word 'nictatating'?  
Or that a spider is not an insect and venom isn't poison.

Who knew instincts could be as sharp and on-time  
as the moon cycle – that moon, you can sit and watch it rise  
in the evening sky.

Who knew I'd live in a country  
with feeble inscapes and vast landscapes –  
its wildness eroding like chipped flint (rhinos decreasing  
by the dozen) but savannah grasses thriving! –  
next to flooding rivers and hills  
we've ascended to track a cheetah, a cheetah  
who's belly-full and resting beneath the bush and couldn't  
be bothered to blink – who knew we could wind our way  
through a dirt and bush lined road and you'd know  
the exact termite mound at which to turn right?

Who knew one day I'd be picking raspberries  
in my grandmother's garden and another I'd be flying over  
an ocean, circling back over a bewildering mountain  
wondering how I got here,  
knowing it was no accident – who knew love  
would hit unexpectedly, tidally,  
and I'd have to learn west without a Pacific ocean.

Who knew we'd fling ourselves  
into something so permanent so fearlessly –  
who knew the universe  
doesn't reward fearlessness.

Once I knew bus schedules, all the best coffee,  
where to thrift shop – I never knew  
hyenas leave behind a white paste  
like a memoir, or that some sea turtles  
can go for an hour without air,  
I never thought I'd care to touch one.

All these things I've learned – to look at clouds  
to forecast rain – while stumbling to the earth  
holding your hand, grateful  
and a little sad for what I've forgotten,  
like waking from a dream, lucid and alive, remembering –  
though not quite knowing –  
what it was I knew.

## Millipedes

They creep out at night:  
s's and c's, tiny crooked l's.  
Small reminders  
of my own words crawling  
and my need  
to sweep, sweep  
away these wormy fingers.

Sometimes their black bodies  
cruise like battle ships  
casting easy codes  
across my mind's ocean.

When I sleep, we make peace  
till one slips into  
the tomb of my ear  
and I dig it out,  
cursing.

In this cold-wet season  
I find them  
curled in a bathtub –  
the last letter  
of a mute confession.

## Blue pen poem

Inside the slim Penguin Poems  
sold in the 70s for 60p –  
inked in

in blue pen on a blank page,  
a handwritten poem  
as if to say: here, you forgot one.

Who said the final word  
had to be in type-script neutral?  
Besides, where do they go –  
is there some North Pacific gyre for scrapped poems?

I'd like to have a book of unchosen poems,  
and if it were written in blue pen –  
I'd like this one to be among them.

## The Forager

sitting in my garden

thinking:

I can't write – how little my life!

plumbing the last stale grains

blasting crevices for one word

anything to use

a wagtail tapping the lawn

on twigged legs –

incredible they're tissue,

muscle and bone –

bounding

as though wingless,

striking quick jabs

with his beaked head,

coming up with clouds and clouds

of my dog's fine cotton hair

how little my life –

even the birds of the air

bend their backward knees

scour the ground,

make do, make use

of everything

## For an ageing sweater

Soft globes rise from the cashmere in rebel enclaves.  
I pluck one, two, and the more I do  
I see an infinity of tufts – whole galaxies!  
You will never be the smooth  
silver-gray sweater I once treasured.

Goodbye rooms of roaring fires,  
thoughts of warmth and sipping cider  
as snow drifts lean against the cabin:  
perfect images of winter.  
Oh the plans I had for you, sweater!

Goodbye crimson lips and beatnik book readings –  
Miles on vinyl –  
learning to hold smoke, release it in o's.  
Goodbye PhD,  
my own library of cherrywood bookshelves.

Perhaps one day, my daughter will discover you  
beneath the bed, somewhere sealed with astringent smells.  
Maybe she'll imagine her mother twenty years before,  
her body firm and hair a more vivid red –  
maybe she'll see what I saw in you.

## Skinning a pear

It's winter.  
A woman sits curbside,  
her wrist to glide

the shallow tear  
from the narrow crown  
along tender flesh  
and down  
the bottom heft

sinking skins like feathers  
freckled curls to gather  
around leaded boots.

Today the world  
is black and white and blue  
but for a few watercolour curls  
nesting in the gutter.

## The Girl

I went to the pool to shake whatever numb clots were blocking me,  
it was Sunday and I was happy to be alone.

At first I sat back reading an article, morning sun on my shoulders,  
the anticipation of full immersion on my mind.

Then the girl arrives in a bright red bikini  
and I can't digest another line for her audacious smallness –  
those flat triangles slapped across her chest.

A mother and daughter look horrified.

I too make a point of shock across my face.

She readies herself like a competitor, tucking her thin blond ponytail  
into her blue goggles, stretching the tiny medallions on her back,  
the surfaced fossils of her shoulder blades.

The only thing I can think to do is burst into the pool headfirst and fly –  
a quick, phenomenal fish – show her what she is missing:  
the pure pleasure of effortless motion. I last a few laps  
then haul myself from the pool, collapse on its edge –  
fat and muscle splayed on ovals of wet concrete,  
heels drawing concentric circles in the water.

Take that!

The next minute she's veering into my lane  
and I must hug my knees to oblige  
her hapless, striving arms carrying slowly around.  
She looks up from behind blue bulging lenses,  
touches the wall and turns.

It's too much – this disappearing girl looking  
straight at me. I can't bring myself to say a thing so  
I go for a shower, wring my hair and sure enough  
she enters the locker room.

She strips down to bare skin  
and as I dress she stands beneath the shower's stream  
letting the hot thaw her back.

The water runs across her rippled surface  
down her small copper sprouted mound,  
collects around her sharp toes.

I think how angry I am, how helpless to help her.  
She just seems so satisfied beneath the stream,  
so unashamed of her bones,  
her crooked smile.

## Letter to my father

I can see you sitting on the grass in your bathrobe  
watching the day emerge over the river.  
I see your fading hair, still full,  
and how you might part your fingers  
to push it away.  
I see your cracked feet, always neglected.  
I see your tired eyes from too many trips across the dateline.  
I can see you are remembering back  
to this day ten, twenty years ago,  
thinking about a storm or a boat trip up the reach  
or when you skipped the sea-plane on the river  
and flew low over the neighbours.  
I can see you're thinking about something else  
but with the full presence of the current  
pushing forward in your mind.

There's less time now as you like to joke,  
the blue macaw on the perch will probably outlive you.  
It's a gradual thing now, to order the estate,  
unburdening the lot of its rusty fixer-uppers  
corroding faster than your best intentions.  
"Oh we're just here, honey, circling the drain," –  
and I catch the subtle stab  
of your constant allusion to mortality.  
The joke in your voice is less a joke  
and more a pronouncement: I'm going to die, it says,  
I'm going to die while you're over there.

Even if I'm not there, I see you on the grass,  
sipping your coffee,  
your juvenile blue macaw on his perch.  
You're watching for eagles or quail  
or for the morning Delta flight to pass.  
Monitoring your slice of sky  
and its reflection in the river.  
You're sitting there with gray hair  
and hearing in one ear  
trying to listen back twenty years –  
1992, when I was eight,  
living in my bathing suit  
yelling for you to rate my dives,  
waiting for you to look, dad, look!  
Look at what I'm doing.  
Tell me that it's good.

## Listen

That's the wretched grumble of a stomach. Listen – it's the nerve of the world being struck by a stone. Nonsense. All I can do is put my pencil down – it's my one foot in front of the other, my leaded tread. I want to tell you all of it and nothing. The much ado about nothing I've done. How, now that you're gone, all poems will be addressed to no-one but your false image. Stay there! Stay there and don't move. I'll throw the shoe!

your black eyes

I search your eyes for no visible pupil  
just deep and black and drowned in film

if I could touch them –  
    let the rheum run in my hands,  
layer with leaves, press firm with my palms

but no.  
it's not for me to draw out their horrors,

there –  
see the knot in the wood, the hole in the floor –  
pour them in there

I didn't know it could seed

i.

so subtly

just a germ but a sprung growth  
nurtured unknowingly

ii.

hello.

this is just a note to say  
you left me here in disarray  
total anxiety, trolling inboxes  
for any sign  
meanwhile you're free  
whatever you had to say  
now dancing in the ether  
and I'm here, a listless mess  
roaming with cold bones,  
hunger and spiritless –

iii.

It's been fun –  
an imaginative game  
a jolt for the mind

I thought I saw you across the way  
peered through the pane  
and felt a strange stab –  
good or bad it was something

iv.

for now I'll excuse the minor betrayals  
let them slide for the bigger revival

v.

I don't want to eat  
I don't want to fill feeling in my gut –  
let my belly sing  
its pulsing tune

It feels

moves and swirls  
rushes from under,

under and over  
invisible thunder

vi.

I was thawed  
by your words  
your black and blue eyes  
your whatever smile

but all I'm getting  
is sick from you  
sick from your thought,  
what you put me through

vii.

Get out of my head!  
    – give it back room –  
your needling thought  
could tear the unborn  
from my womb

## Fireflies

fireflies from Kentucky,  
stuffed in a bottle and flown  
across the country  
so my father could show us magic

they must have died shortly after,  
though I don't remember –  
their last flicker given up  
for a child's imagination

later, we'd tear the burning lamps from their backsides –  
a sticky glob to stick to our ears and declare:  
“Night freckles!”  
“Earrings that glow in the dark!”

## Animal/Animal

I feel like crawling into  
that dip in your shoulder  
that crater place  
of coarse hair and skin  
where there's nothing more  
than animal curling against animal  
where every breath inflation  
is enough exaltation  
every emptying  
sufficient prayer

morning

down the pale beach  
over the river rising  
past the seaweed catastrophe,  
the woman with the warning  
about dogs off leads –  
over soft rocks, mint-moss green,  
(one shoe sacrificed  
in a puddle of sea gruel)  
near splintered ruins and  
undulating beds of kelp;  
at the beach – the same colour  
mute honey as my lab  
who has flipped to her back  
to thrash in something foul –  
I nearly yell but catch a flicker  
of green transparency  
in the lip of a wave:  
I want to shed my clothes, shoes,  
my life on legs,  
throw my body back,  
leave the whole shell of it behind –  
shoot across the wave in one wet line!



at my desk

sitting, waiting,  
    sick and thick  
with waiting  
passing words from  
stomach – mouth – gullet  
until  
    in a fine dust  
they  
    disappear

when I'm certain  
    the world is literal  
sealed as a seed  
    and offering  
no free thing –

a bird  
the colour of morning  
    stretched through pine sap  
settles  
on my window

a new approach:  
shifting posture,  
    knees pressed  
    to the wet ground  
I crawl  
through crumpled leaves  
and loam

    quiet, feeling –  
barely breathing –  
    listening for a poem

I could make a mosaic of white –

the crisp, even-crane white  
of the boys dressed for mosque,  
their tapered stride measured  
by their gowns, their bold faces  
balanced on candlestick frames

white like wet paint – pure avenue and invitation  
white like a whistle – its first fresh draft  
white like the washing – pegged but fleeing  
white like the sun's bright spot seared on the eye

white like a cherry tree's blooming umbrella  
shading the girls dressed all in white,  
waiting to be women in white dresses

In winter

Ah, night

small rivers of water rise  
and bend towards – sleep  
(I am nearly sleeping)

—Marina Tsvetaeva

She felt it –  
that wakeful, watchful, always alert...  
She felt it –  
in the gold-grim haze of Russia in winter  
(Russia at war in winter),  
she felt that sleep was a luxury  
of knowing tomorrow will arrive  
bright and generous  
with songs and words and odours.

In winter you must make your own songs  
recite your own verse, hear your own bells.  
In winter the trees grow bare  
because it's all they can do to keep  
their middle core.  
She felt it –  
growing more hollow  
more strange  
more bitten by the minute.

## Quiet

Only half asleep because we never slept that month  
you could excuse me for thinking  
it wasn't my name I was hearing  
but the drum beat of exhaustion in my brain.

Then, again, you called my name.  
I rose from bed, descended the stairs, still skeptical –  
you'd hardly spoken to me, to anyone, really,  
it took too much out of you.

You spoke in that strained rasp of your caged body (all bones).  
You had called out for me, called me by name.  
I sat on the chair and you told me you were scared –  
you'd never seen someone as sick as yourself recover.

I started to say how there was nothing to fear –  
death is to be with God  
like pure love all around and constant –  
“Quiet,” you said. “Just hold my hand”.

## Anniversary

I remember the card he bought her  
deep, embossed with a cursive word:  
“Caress”,  
Hallmarked, bar-coded –  
from a clear pocket of those over-lit aisles

“Caress”  
shot up the river of nerves in my spine  
numbed my neck before flowering  
hot blooms from my ears –  
oh the impulse to hide in the dark!

And I’d slip between each embrace,  
minnow my hands in a parting prayer –  
it was around that time I prayed  
the small, stiff buds back into my chest,  
to regress and regress...

## Looking back

After a summer of living amphibiously –  
head swimming, ears throbbing –  
you'd lay me across your lap,  
seal a hollow candle around my ear's centre,  
the narrow vacuum a home remedy

Once you confessed  
why you sat alone at my races  
(so you could watch and weep in peace)  
and I didn't comprehend what it means  
to store every triumph and agony

Long after, your sister wrote in a letter:  
"Your mother was who she was  
then she had babies" –  
so lucid and spare,  
no sap or perfume –

Though it's come slow,  
like looking back through green glass,  
I can see what you've done:  
loved against the map laid before you,  
carved your own way through alien geography –

I mean to praise you,  
I mean to learn this path  
as you have

my mother

too many wanted to have, to hold  
to fold her soft hands in theirs  
as expensive paper  
to be creased on a seam  
in the elegant tradition  
of origami

as if she could leave  
her body behind  
resume the walk  
on ideal feet –  
no ankle bone or in-step –  
and float:

a ballerina in a box  
that stands to be ignored,  
waits only  
for desire to return

What can I give

What can I give –  
you who craves land and expanse,  
summer storms and bird sounds

you who notes beetle-tracked symmetries,  
the mid-air carve of a drongo in flight,  
who keeps time by the sun,  
holds days by the moon –

you who roams freely – native footed –  
speaking jackal in the veld,  
who has secrets with elephants,  
surrenders to silence

What can I give –  
you who considers a single red-rimmed leaf,  
the small white drip on a stalk as a gift:

my matched-step,  
my pen's observations,  
my foot's-stall, my silence  
my fierce, my sharpening eyes

## Mole

Our dog drew it from the ground  
after pushing her muzzle into the soil and snapping –

she cradled it like a puppy in her wet jaws  
before offering it to the fresh mound before her.

Stunned – all three species of us –  
you and I looked down at the raised grave:

was it moving or were these  
the last charged whips of life?

I said we should go – if it's playing possum  
it wouldn't move while we stood – if it's dead,

it would be here when we return.  
We resumed our walk, passing back

to find the little brown, still-wet brush  
expanding and contracting.

The tips of your fingers drew around its belly,  
nudging it toward the hole headfirst, and then,

as though the earth were a strong salt,  
slowly, it started to shrink

until the dark soil driving up behind it  
was its only sign.

As your body curls behind me  
into a soft lock,

your anatomy breathing, gently nudging,  
I think of the mole from this afternoon –

## Neighbour

The dog barks and I round the corner to see:  
an old man, the neighbour, digging  
on the edge of the property line.  
I step closer. He looks up, squints,  
says hello as a question.  
“Who are you?” he wastes no time.  
I state my name, affiliation to the family,  
say I’m staying a few days – the dog and me.  
“How do you fit in?” – again I tell him.  
Again, he asks my name.

His white eyebrows lift up  
like the crest of a cockatoo and I think:  
*Good fences make good neighbours* –  
how Frost’s old man might as well be this gruff old-leather.  
But he wants to get back to gardening  
so I say, “Well, it was nice to meet you.”  
“Ok,” he says, “if you need anything just shout.”  
He puts his head back down to work.

On second thought, he couldn’t be that old man –  
he doesn’t need a fence –  
he’d rather lean on his shovel, bark across the line:  
“Hey! who are you?” just to be sure there’s nothing shifty.  
His property line’s as fair and firm  
as his voice, as pertinent as his questions.  
A fence? Not for a man with cheeks like the chalk-red  
mountainside, hair like a white flame.  
Not for so striking and astute a creature  
who will be warding off porcupines  
from his vegetables until his last tick.

mime

I've passed a dozen or so  
full moon faces  
on the sidewalk,  
    stiff and silent  
in a ready pose –

as always I go  
at my regular clip  
to my usual tune:  
    no time  
    not this time  
    some other time

but for this one,  
behind a blur  
of white paint –  
I still know that scar

so what if I stop?  
offer a coin  
to the plastic cup,  
    let it drop  
to release his limbs  
    in jagged lines  
    for a moment  
until frozen –

a memory,  
calcified,  
a fleet thought  
kept for the sidewalk

## The smell of oranges

I buy my oranges from Nancy –  
not oranges exactly, the local citrus  
that lifts so easily from a loose skin –  
I'm enthralled with them.  
Each lavish parcel a vesuvial rush,  
burst of juice in the mouth –  
“skyfies”, as people here call them.

I know Nancy by now, well, I know a few things:  
her pygmy figure pushing a broken stroller,  
the regular shadow of dirt on her face;  
her sentences in perfect Queen's English.  
I know I'm not her only customer  
who's pieced her life together  
with orange fragments, mute assumptions.

She was disappointed today  
when I only bought two oranges –  
she didn't know I already spent R50  
on two coffees and a pastry and was feeling strapped.  
I tried to stay upbeat, ask after her son,  
but her round cheeks descended like heavy nectarines:  
“Oh – only two?”

With skyfie in hand,  
I think of Nancy  
walking the streets with her mesh sack,  
as polite and English as worry will let her.  
Glancing back, I can see how absurd I am  
when still something of our exchange lingers:  
the smell of oranges on the hands.

## The exchange

The coat is lying there, slumped, deflated  
the weary traveller of its posture pouring over  
the arm of the bookstore chair. So I try to ignore it,  
returning to this book of Günter Grass  
and a poem about an eraser in a pocket,  
one that erases steps, makes one scarce...

it's so heavy there (leaded coat)  
and no one else can see it.  
No doubt she will grow cold and return,  
find it here, draped just the way...  
Oh, it will be hard to catch her –  
what, and lug my whole bag...

I look back down at the poem:  
“and the waiter paid for my beer” –  
my knees bend in a reflex to trust  
and I'm running up stairs,  
past piles of books, people,  
out an open door

and she's standing there: still, small, red,  
in the centre of the island.  
I call and she turns,  
flaps her arms like a child  
and runs to meet me in the road.  
My left arm extends and she reaches out.

She says nothing but her free hand  
sweeps my wrist in a gesture so succinct,  
barely perceptible and without a name.  
I turn back to the bookstore and cover my wrist.  
Now I am bursting, burning full of words –  
oh, but I would give them up!