Labour/Le Travailleur

Grieving

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Grieving

The door opens to light weak as watered sun
She lowers herself as though wounded
into a chair

She has written strange letters accusing
the doctors, the hospital. The man in the coffin
was grim-faced. My husband
was gentle

You listen helpless while she chases
her conspiracy tale
The ragged scrap story
whirls round like a dust devil

and slams shut all possible doors
till the room has collapsed
suddenly silent and close as a breathless lung
In her fear she is wearing
the grim face her husband —
No. Never

Her husband was gentle
and vanished impossibly
cleansed of all shadow
like a letter unwriting itself
like a bed sheet unwrinkling

and you are a weak door
she opens and closes again
There is only this wounded light
left to grieve for the body
Reproduction in the Kingdom

Back at the office
every form on my desk has reproduced
slyly, like the secret agents of Xerox,
Persian king of the twentieth century,
who extends his dominion
by the endless multiplication of edicts
Over the copier I lean
like a modern Narcissus
cloning myself in 8½ by 11.
I am two-dimensional
man. At the press of a button
I can cancel
I can cancel
all special features
It's my job to paper over the cracks in the system
to advance the cause of the duplicate universe
which we're asked to inhabit
gratefully
gratefully
in place of the torn original

The Coming of Spring

From Port-of-Spain
to the snow
he has come to be burned
clean with radiation,
rescued by poisons.
The hollows of his eyes
are deep pools of faith.
Chin whiskers
like fine black grass
sprout hopefully.
His words have a soft
island music. My country
he whispers
is a beautiful place
so very beautiful.
They drain his blood
for evidence. Under the microscope,
an aerial photo of islands.
Malignant invasion.
Against the white pillow
his dark gleaming skull
is sculpted
smooth,
    imperceptibly
closer to final perfection.
Into his ears, the Walkman is chanting
Koran: In the name of Allah
    the compassionate,
    the merciful... .

Living with Cancer
The new patient is appalled at the gallows
humour before the meeting starts.
Loose talk about death
has spooked him, driven him
to the edge
of our circle, where he whispers to his wife
about leaving early
Newly hired, I’m here to observe the human
chemistry, as the group administers a dose
of distilled experience.
Cancer is alive in the room, yet the laughing presence
of 10- and 12-year veterans
confounds the man’s fear.
When I started work, someone issued me
a daybook. Religiously, I snip
a corner off each clean page
to be always in the present, to feel the edge
of the cut day against my thumb, and know I am right
where I belong.
    Tomorrow, we will spread
out in a bigger building, my office
one cell in a growing cancer
clinic. Like the stranger tonight, I’m new
to this disease, but as a comfort
an old hand assures me
we will soon be
well acquainted.
Chances Are
Remember how I love you
sounded when my voice was all gravel and smoke?
Rougher than a stretch of dirt road in summer. Soon
it was less than a croak, just a dry
whisper like dust settling after
the car's gone by. I told you then
Tenderness is hard.

Before they cut out the voice
box, a pretty girl came by
with a book of comforting
words. It had sketches
of a man and a woman embracing, and it said
if you loved me before
chances are you would love me
again. Words, it seems, are just vibrating air
given pretty shape in a mouth. Perhaps I can learn
to burp I love you into your ear. If not,
I can buy a machine
that vibrates love
and rage and singing
into one robotic monotone of loss

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