Building a Terrace

R.F. Brissenden

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— R.F.B.
Contents

Acknowledgments v
Hymeneal 1
The Van Gogh Exhibition 2
A River Remembered (with Two Pictures) 3
Tell that Big Yellow Taxi to Wait 5
Variations on a Line from Judith Wright 6
Los Angeles Mornings 7
Reading a Poem on the Death of Shelley 11
Building a Terrace 14
Three Poems for Michael Dransfield 16
David Garrick Remembers Mrs Margaret Woffington on the Day of her Death 19
Three Poems for Kenneth Slessor 21
Rock Crabs: Pebble Beach 24
Meetings 26
Birds about the House 27
Dawn Fishing 29
Big Red 30
Two Birds 31
The Major's Garden 32
The Maker 34
Michal 35
For A. D. Hope, O.B.E. 36
Letter to Yevtushenko 38
Conversation with a Friend 40
Sea Beach and Cave, Durras 42
Losing his Grip 44
The Stake, 1633 45
A Voyage to Cythera 46
Ruthcutters Bay 49
Poor Tom's Song 51
HYMENEAL

Heavy rain at night
After long drought: the sound
Of water on roof and ground,
Thunder, the sudden light
That floods into our room —
All bring us both awake.
We feel the earth slake
Her thirst. In the damp gloom
Leaves that were cramped and dry
Glisten and unfurl; fern
Fronds tremble with new
Life. Gently you turn
And take me, and we too
Remarry earth with sky.
THE VAN GOGH EXHIBITION

How much we forget! That colour should be so fresh,
So brilliant and alive, and paint at once
So thick and tangible, like fruit or flesh,
And so translucent—so that these pictures look
As if it’s glass they’re painted on, not canvas,
With Van Gogh’s own great living, loving sun
Burning behind them. And how much we remember!
These pictures were like this when we first saw them.
The world is like this—yellow, green, red, blue;
Shining with life, with love—if only we
Allow ourselves to see it, as last night
After the long blind years we saw each other,
Naked, tender, free; and found together
How much we had forgotten and remembered.
A RIVER REMEMBERED
(WITH TWO PICTURES)

'Tell me about the river.'

'It was green
Like glass, or ice, and glittered in the sun
like the grass beside the water or the leaves
that hid the bird above our heads
like glass.
And the stone house was old, and the rooms huge,
Filled with light and air. And in the morning
The tiled floors were cold beneath my feet.'

'Tell me about the river.'

'It was green
and bright with flowers beneath the bare dancing
feet
like glass. And the old woman spoke
No english
and in that picture three on the soft
grass with linked hands
staring at me
As if she thought I was a whore

dancing
And I looked across the water
or the small
precise waves green in that other ocean lapping
Each day to the further shore, that is,
To Europe
the great shell where venus rides
Which I saw but never reached.'

'Tell me.'

'I remember it was green. And I came back
Alone

naked with long heavy hair
and light feet treading the great shell of love'}
TELL THAT BIG YELLOW TAXI TO WAIT

All right, all right—
So we all ought to be thinking about the unthink-
able;
And, yes, I know about the lemmings,
And I've heard that other old furphy
About the Gadarene swine;
But, in the face of all that garbage,
I just want to say
You are beautiful—
As Paris, sniggering at the wooden horse,
Whispered for the umpteenth time
Into the bored ear of Helen;
As Bennelong, looking with disbelief
At the Supply.
Said to whoever it was;
As somebody said to someone
Just before dawn
On August 6 1945.
VARIATIONS ON
A LINE FROM JUDITH WRIGHT

For R.L.B.

This angel morning on the world-wild sea
Light gleams like love. It is our seventh day.
We greet it naked, and in joy we gaze
Upon the new world in each other's eyes,
Where the unsullied hills and ocean blaze
Green blue and silver through the slow sunrise.

The air is still. The animals and birds
Eat from our hands and bless us without words.
The winds have not yet risen with the sun.
The deadly fruit still hangs upon the tree,
And it is love that gleams like light upon
This angel morning and this world-wild sea.
LOS ANGELES MORNINGS

For Janis Joplin, killed by heroin

1
Strapped safely in my shell of glass and metal,
My second-hand Dodge Dart, each day I ride
The freeways of this town and hear you sing
   Dead girl, of love and freedom.

Windows wound tight I keep the radio high,
And through my tinted wind-screen and dark glasses
Watch the bright machines with living names —
   Mustang, Jaguar, Firebird,
   Pinto, Colt and Barracuda — scream
Past in air-conditioned silence: blood cells
That flood these stone-webbed arteries and flow
   From nowhere into nothing.

At Marineland through the double glass I watched
The diver feed the fish. I could not see
His face behind the helmet’s barred face-plate
   Or hear his muffled voice.

I could not see the far side of the tank:
Fish swarmed and faded in a sifting rain
Of shredded food and droppings: garbage that shone
   Like dust-motes in the light.
The morning light is grey. The city towers
That loom beyond the down-town interchange
Merge like a smudged Atlantis with the air.
   Nobody sees the mountains.

In Baton Rouge it’s raining while you sing
And hold your lover’s body. Did it hurt
The night you died alone, the night the horse
   Kicked back and kicked your heart?

You voice — alive, raw, young — hurts now, but still
Prevails. Stalled on the Santa Monica
Off-ramp a crumpled car flashes a window-
   -sticker: ‘Janis lives.’
The morning after the earthquake—and we run,  
My son and I, our usual measured mile,  
Jogging along these lawns and sidewalks where  
Nobody ever walks.

Anchises with Aeneas—did they run  
Like this, I wonder, on that day they saw  
The first light catch the line of Grecian sails  
Moving toward the shore?

Beside us now the endless cars move past  
Along the boulevarde, but nothing seems  
To stir behind the spyholes in each locked  
And chained suburban door.

Nothing in this neat neighbourhood to show  
How the earth can suddenly shake buildings, trees  
And people loose like an old dog worrying fleas  
Out of his itching hide:

No buckled roads, smashed bodies, shattered walls—  
Though when the mountains jerked another inch  
Towards the sky and in the valley the houses  
Fell, we felt it too:
The floor rolled like the deck of a tilting ship
Beneath our feet—for a moment hurled me back
Into that dream, where you run to the world’s end
And fall off into nothing.

The home turn: as we lengthen stride and last
Night’s bourbon breaks in sweat I see the world’s
Den and Bunyan dreaming in my dream
the man began to run
READING A POEM ON THE DEATH OF SHELLEY

1
I read a poem on the death of Shelley
And look at the sea.
Two weeks ago a man drowned there
His boat upended by a wave.

Under the steady westerly
The bombora does not show at all today.

2
I knew the man slightly —
Had spoken a few words with him of fish and weather,
Helped him once or twice
To haul his boat up onto the beach
Out of the surf,
Had touched his hand
Briefly on rope or gunwale.
He looked a strong man, but it was his hands
That failed him in the end:
Cramped by the cold sea they could not hold
The smooth sides of his upturned boat.

They saved the woman and the boy
Who had to watch him drown.

We shan't pour oil and wine upon his corpse
And burn it on the beach.
I met the poet, briefly,
Years ago,
In a black midlands city where
For a time I lived —
A long way from that bare Italian coast
Where the light skiff, ‘Don Juan’,
Broached in a sudden squall;
A long way from this coast.

Thinking of that cold town as I watch
The bright sea I remember
Snow, its feathered sound
Against a broken window;
A woman’s voice, a clutching hand,
Love in a narrow bed.

They were middle-aged and lovers.
If she could only see his body,
She said, if she could only see
His body.

On the beach she looked grey, shrunken, old.
It took them a long time to unclench
Her frozen hands.
The fire burnt everything, Trelawney said,
Except the heart and a few scraps of bone —
'The heart remained entire.'

I watch the sea
And read a poem on the death of Shelley.
BUILDING A TERRACE

Sentimental nonsense of course to talk
Of the ‘living rock’ or the ‘honesty’ of stone—
But the words are in my mind each time I dig
Some stubborn chunk of sandstone out of the earth,
Split, dress and settle it into place
In wall or terrace; and I think of two dead men:
My grandfather Will Rogers, and Archimedes.
‘Give me a lever,’ he said, ‘and I’ll shift the world.’
Rocks that a man can’t lift can smash a foot—
And when, after crowbar, shovel and mattock have done
Their work, you feel a big stone gently tilt
And shift at a sweating finger’s touch you know
In your bones what the old Greek meant. Archimedes
May have been just a name to Grandad, but
He loved stone and worked it till he died.
Seventy-five he was and stood as straight
As when he’d landed thirty years before
With his box of tools, his family and his lodge
Certificate: Oddfellows Master at Bridgnorth
In Shropshire—Amicitia, amor
Et veritas beneath the eye of God.
In Sydney it meant nothing. But he worked:
Anonymous flagged paths, hearths, terraces,
Fireplaces that draw and walls that stand
Are his memorial. He whistled, sang,
Was gentle, smelled of mortar, sawdust, sweat
And the open air. ‘Drunk again,’ he’d say,
Laughing under old-fashioned moustaches when
I fell running to watch him split the stone.
He was an artist—he could knock a tune
Out of an old tin can, they said—and when
His sledge-hammer rang on his steel wedges the rock
Broke clean and straight. I touched the fresh
Rock-faces that had never seen the sun.
At home, he said, sinking a well they found
A frog alive inside a hollow rock
Ten feet beneath the ground. He built a wall
The day before he died—surprised by death
Like that old man in Syracuse who fell
Under the ignorant Roman soldier’s spear
Face down across his drawings in the sand.
THREE POEMS FOR MICHAEL DRANSFIELD

1

M Ward

*Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.*

Driven 'home' to the Community
Hospital after your night's leave
You offered us coffee in the lounge
Of the psychiatric ward. We watched
An eighteen-year-old kid pace
With regular tight steps up to
The unbarred window and swing back
Like Rilke's caged and blazing panther
Towards the unlocked door. The price
You'd paid was written in your face
And wasted body: yet when you spoke
About your seventy new poems
I half-envied you your freedom.
We said goodbye outside. The boy
Grinned at us from the door. I thought
Of Kafka laughing as he read
*The Trial* to his troubled friend
Max Brod—beating himself bloody
Against the wall of his own forehead.
Rimbaud

We remember the brilliant boy: the words, the life
Bursting like super-novae through the night
Of bourgeois France and darkest Africa.
Pressing against your eyelids till the light
Fountained inside your skull like shooting stars,
Or music, bright and plangent as the smell
Of unseen flowers, you rocketed into
The black romantic sky, flared out and fell.
Should it have ended there? Perhaps. Your death
In fact was sordid, agonised—one leg
Chopped off, your blood-stream rife with cells gone mad,
At the end you turned to God again to beg
For mercy. You died longing for what we have:
Wife, children, debts and middle-age and love.

Fire damp

You are dead: I think of men
Terrified in a mine.
They sweat and hold their breath
Because of a bird's death.
Each day beneath the ground
They listened for the sound
Of bird-song: while they heard
The voice of their caged bird
They knew the air was clear.
Now it stinks with fear.
They dare not run: a spark
Struck by boot from rock
Could turn the air to fire.
Hot, blind, they strain to hear
The miles of earth above
Their heads begin to move.

Under that falling rock
And in that stifling dark
Michael, you lived your death:
But to the end beneath
That avalanche your voice
Still cried, ‘Rejoice! Rejoice!’
David Garrick Remembers Mrs Margaret Woffington on the Day of Her Death

London 26 March 1760

I would kiss as many of you as had beards
That pleased me . . . —your last words upon the stage.
I was not there three years ago to catch you
As you fell, fainting, into the wings;
Nor by your bed, today, my Peggy. Long,
Too long, since we two touched and talked as once
We did. I cannot think of you as dead:
I see you now alive, laughing on stage,
Or turning to me on the pillow; hear
The words you spoke to me that night in Dublin
In your own flawed and lovely Irish voice.
Peg, Peg, you kissed too many, and too many
Pleasured you. Taaffe I could have borne,
The Duke and even Darnley—not the rest:
Hanbury-Williams, Edmund Burke my friend,
Your choice Italian swordsman Dominic,
And Colonel Caesar, faithful to the last.
‘Yourself you give without your heart,’ I wrote
In bitterness: it was not true—you gave
Your heart to all who loved you, but yourself
You knew you could not give: nobody can.
Queen of our feigning, mimic art you held
Your mirror up to Nature, made us see
Ourselves for what we are. Now you are gone
This more than ever seems a world of mirrors
Where reflection glimmers at masked reflection
And voices echo voices. Even when
Our bodies meet—lover with naked lover,
Or murderer with victim—each still moves
And postures on some private playhouse floor,
At once the audience and the actor. Yet
Somehow we touch, speak, watch and love and kill
—And die, dear Peggy, as you died today;
Or as we died that night you danced and sang:
Time and Death shall depart, and say, in flying,
Love has found out a way to live by dying.
‘Do those die easiest, too,’ I asked, ‘who’ve learned
To dance?’ And with those words our dance
Began. Apt words—but not my own: stolen
Like all our words and attitudes. What were we
Then? What now? Who am I? Who are you?
How can we tell, whose lives are all illusion?
Other voices stretch our throats; the clothes
We wear are not our own. Where does our Art
Begin, our Nature end? That night I tossed
The prayer-book down in Goodman’s Fields (and heard
Them gasp and felt my heart stop in the hush)
—Was that I, David Garrick? Or the Bard
In me? Could it have even been the crook-
-backed King? Can David ever be himself
Again? Ah, Peg, my dear lost Peg, we know
The mask can sometimes drop, the glass dissolve
If for a moment only: eyes can meet,
Blind hands can touch. It was my flesh you felt
In Dublin, in Smock Alley, on the bare
Boards of that darkened stage—it was your voice,
Your own voice, I heard then and still can hear:
David, you said, Oh, David, David, David

20
THREE POEMS FOR KENNETH SLESSOR

1

Sydney

I met you only once. The lunch
Was long and good, the wine and talk
Enough to give me nerve to say
Something of what your verse had meant
To me—that Sydney always would
Be your town, always Slessor’s Sydney.
 Afterwards, sitting by the harbour,
Watching the evening fall, you said,
Pointing your small cigar towards
The darkening water and the lights
Now coming on, ‘I never thought
That I was writing about this.’

2

South Coast

When the voice on the radio told us you were dead
I was watching the moon rise over your mackerel-backed
And diamond-quilted sea. I heard it fall
And surge back from the sand.

The night was still. The moon’s light on the sea
Glittered like living silver through the dim
Lattice of trunk and branch. The voice went on:
Three other men were dead—
Russian cosmonauts, killed as they came home
From space. Old thief of the moon, I thought, old lover
Of life and wit, at least you have companions
Fit for that last voyage.

3

At Carcoar

The frogs in the cold green creek under the bridge
Sang ‘Belubula, belubula,’ and the stone
Church with A.D. 1870 carved
On its yellow buttress crumbled in the sun

And looked down its Irish nose at the Anglicans’ spire
Of soft grey shingles below it on the hill.
Saturday afternoon—so the churches were locked
And empty. But down the street at the Royal Hotel

The public bar (its brick walls papered over
To look like stone) murmured with country voices
Talking of weather and how the crops were looking,
Till the ritual tranny drowned them with the races.

No wonder we both should have thought of you, Ken Slesso
Poet of country towns and summer days,
Who knew what friendship meant, and memory,
And time. It seemed the moment then to raise
A farewell glass: and so, saying your name,
We drank our beer; and left the pub to see
Across the road the court-house clock-tower turn
Four blank and faceless dials to the sky.
ROCK CRABS: PEBBLY BEACH

For Paul Moline

1
There is a froth of bubbles about their mouths.
They have six jaws. Their eyes
Move on stalks. They eat
Carrion. They are different from us.

Rock-pool, rock-shelf, rock-face:
Rime-dry, or dripping at low tide
Or roaring with white water at the full—
This is their world.

When you loom, an improbable giant,
Over their horizon
They retreat sideways—quick, alert, careful,
Tyrannosaurus nippers raised,

Then, skittering on eight legs
Over the wet rocks, drop
Backwards into the boiling surge or fall
Like floating spiders into still pools.
The evening after the big storm
That had blown for seven days
Wrecked ships, smashed houses, shifted beaches,
rocks,
And killed my friend

I walked these flat rock shelves.
No ripple broke
The shallow, brilliant pools,
And nothing moved

Except the crabs—
Hundreds of green and purple-grey rock-crabs
Gleaming like stones; and one reef-heron
Stalking that black rock-edge

Where once, the drowned man told me,
He had played
And killed his biggest fish—
A thirty-pound blue groper.
MEETINGS

After the angry voices
The misunderstandings
The loud and dubious promises
I went home sick,
Excited, shaking.
Later,
In the dusk outside our house,
I stood still.
A small kangaroo
Came out of the forest,
Quietly out between the dim soaring columns
Of spotted gum,
And with delicate teeth
Took bread from my fingers.
BIRDS ABOUT THE HOUSE

That year it was the whip-birds we noticed most:
All day the forest rang
With the male-birds’ brilliant drawn-out whistling lash
And their consorts’ echoing song.

Lovers and friends from the house we’d watch them move
Quick through the dappling shade
Of burrawang fronds, thick grass and underbrush:
Shy couples but unafraid.

Ten years have passed — and those who were with us then
Are scattered now: one dead
That was beautiful, one rich, one lost; the lovers
Long ago have fled

Into their storm. But round our house new birds
Have come: currawongs eat
Our bread, and kookaburras bring their young
To take our scraps of meat.

Bright parrots flash through wind-stirred branch and leaf
Like fish through swaying weed;
And bower-birds, bronze and dark metallic blue,
Flutter to hop and feed
About our sawn-log table. And today,
By some unguessed-for chance,
Most timid of all, high-stepping and alone,
A lyre-bird came to dance

Or play — at least to reach or touch somehow
The elusive mate he’d found
Reflected in our windows. So with tail
Flaunted and the mimic sound

Of every other bird he wooed his own
Faint image in the glass
Until he heard us move. Then, as he ran,
I thought how summers pass,

And how the whip-birds came — and how, although
Their song, as it did then,
Still rings beneath the trees, we have not seen
The shy whip-birds again.
DAWN FISHING

Pale sky and fading stars,  
A setting moon.  
The dark sea breaking quietly  
On rock and sand.

The boat lifts to the first roller,  
Shudders, drops,  
And surges forward.  
The air smells damp and cold and clean.  
Your lips taste salt.

Two birds,  
Fast, low, with dipping wings,  
Skim the long valleys of the swell.

Humped hills behind you lighten.  
Far ahead,  
Over the moving spindrift edge of the world,  
Intolerably bright a burning disc  
Floats free.

Somebody says,  
*By Christ that bloody sun*  
*Is coming up quick.*
Big Red

For Peter Nicholas

Old man, old traveller, great golden fish—
Chrysophrys auratus — as you died
Your red scales whitened and your burst bag sighed
With wasted air. And then we watched you thrash,
Gone, but still fighting, as the colour came
Back to your splendid shoulders and humped head.
Ten years you lived, killed, spawned unthinking; dead
You trouble and delight me: there’s some shame
As always that a death should bring such joy.
And yet it is your death that makes us free
Of this dawn world where hunting man is one
With bird and fish; where, arched against the sun,
The racing dolphins break the shining sea
About our boat, and leap and kill and play.
TWO BIRDS

Two birds, each beautiful: above the bay
And level with me in the middle air
The hunting fish-hawk, great white-breasted sea
Eagle floats. I watch him dip and soar

On the light morning breezes. In the pure
Dazzling waters under his hooked feet
The swarming fish he harries strip and tear
Each other: anything that moves is meat.

Nearby — so near that I can see his bright
Quick eye — a spine-billed honeyeater clings
To the red grevillea flower he loves. ‘Sweet-sweet!’
He sings, and curls his loving tongue and sings.
THE MAJOR’S GARDEN

1
An ordered life: within this garden’s bounds
Tree, shrub and flower obey the gardener.
Like raw recruits the wild irregular
Children of nature come into his hands
And learn to move and grow as he commands.
Under the discipline of secateur
And kindly knife, stake and espalier,
Each plant assumes its destined shape and stands
Ready to take up its appointed place
In a perpetual full dress parade.
Each dawn like banners new green leaves break clear
And buds as they salute the sun explode
In silence. Flying the battle-flag of peace
Flowers troop their colours through the changing year.

2
Red-gold
A flash, a flicker
Like flame at dusk:
Here at the still heart of the garden
Fish move
In the clear depths of the rock-pool.

Above the water
Dwarf maple stretches wine-dark leaves
Towards the copper-fronded flax.
On the perimeter
With arms reversed
The blue-green juniper stands sentinel.
Each in its ordered place: tree, shrub and flower
Turn to the sun and rain. The gold fish gleam
In their quiet pool. The major walks through his garden.
THE MAKER

Potters use a wheel that goes
neither forwards nor backwards, yet
goes both ways at once. So it is
like the cosmos.
— Heraclitus

The wet clay in his shaping hands
Grows on the turning wheel
Into the living form that fire
Must harden and anneal.

Four elements the potter takes:
Water, fire, earth—
And what gives life to Adam's dust:
His own informing breath.
This is remembered: the half-naked man
Dancing his prayer before the yelling street—
The sweating, hoarse-voiced singer lifting his feet,
Hands, voice in praise; above him his bitch-queen
Watching, despising in her heart her own
Husband and king. She sniffs the smoke and dust,
Hears trumpets bray, men shout, girls squeal their lust,
And sees the spittle drying on the stone.
David comes in. The unforgiveable words
Burn in her mouth: 'You made yourself a free
Fine show before those screaming sluts today.'
And he, who loves her still: 'I am the Lord's
Anointed and before Him I shall play.
I'll take those whores. You'll bear no son to me.'
FOR A. D. HOPE, O.B.E.

The sun sets on the empire;
   Her armies all retreat.
Dominion over palm and pine
   Shrinks to a bitter street.

Racked with an ancient hatred
   Her oldest province burns.
Dead, impotent, dishonoured,
   Her exiled king returns.

Yet still the rituals linger—
   The royal gesture's made:
The king receives his exequy,
   The poet his accolade.

A meaningless performance?
   Perhaps—but when the state
Accords her doubtful honours
   It's the man we celebrate.

And when the world's forgotten
   That man who now lies dead,
Your words will still be living
   Where poetry is read.
Horace knew how to say it.
  He spoke for all of us:

*Exegi monumentum*

*Aere perennius.*
LETTER TO YEVTUSHENKO

'One need not fear the strong. All one needs is a way to beat them. For every strong man there is a special ju-jutsu.'

—Precocious Autobiography

Zhenya, the flowers you gave my daughter
Are dead and withered; the words you wrote
For me across your book are fading;
The page turns yellow.

But what you wrote today
Won't die or fade:
*When truth is replaced by silence*
*Silence becomes a lie.*

They said you'd sold out and become
A trusty—but the blade
You smuggled past the guards has kept its edge,
The hidden bread its freshness.

We can't pretend to know
What it is like to live and write in Russia.
'How can a man who is warm
Understand a man who is freezing?'
And even to say that
Is to sound absurdly condescending
(But to say nothing is not what you want:
There has been too much silence).

Well, you have broken your silence, Zhenya—
And now the king-hit brass-knuckle bastards
Will be waiting to break you. My friend,
I hope you can remember your ju-jutsu.
CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND

The night is still and clear. Beneath the trees
We watch our fire burn red against the rock,
And listen to the surf, and drink and talk.

We have been here before: the stars, the sea
Are as familiar as the wine and bread;
And what we say we know we shall have said

In part at other times. Today we climbed
Through burrawang and gum to reach the heath
Along the cliffs. Swallows and gulls beneath

Our feet spun through the spray-wet air. The path
We took we’ve often followed—yet we found
New flowers springing in that well-known ground:

Tree-orchids spilling from a wind-bent trunk,
While at the tree’s foot others lifted small
Cool purple lance-head leaves. A fuchsia’s bell,

Dark pink, pale gold and green, swung on its stem
Above them. Where the banksia scrub broke clear
A fantail fell and hovered through the air.
And now you talk, as you've not talked before,
About the war and flying: how the first
Time, terrified, in the enemy sky was worst;

And how, wounded, your crew shot-up, you turned
Back home, shaken with simple, savage joy
To know that none of you would have to die.
SEA BEACH AND CAVE, DURRAS

Sunday 22nd April 1770... saw the smook of fire in several places... [We] were so near the Shore as to distinguish several people upon the Sea beach. They appear'd to be of a very dark or black colour but whether this was the real colour of their skins or the C[lothes they might have on] I know not...

—Captain James Cook, Journal of The Voyage of the Endeavour

A cave is a beginning—and the sea.
It is the cave that gives this sandstone cliff,
This beach, their meaning; though tonight the fire
Burns on the sand outside.

This morning in the cave, crouching, they touched
And turned to where its blackened mouth-edge framed
The sky, the flashing sea and the white surf
Tumbling upon the sand.

Then, as they rode those long waves in, their boards
Pointed towards the cave—it was a mark
As natural as the channel and the reef
That runs out from the shore.

A good place for a camp: stripped to her shorts
The girl slept face-down in the sun, then woke
To watch the boy, black in his wet-suit, take
The four-pronged spear and dive.
At sunset, in the deep shade of the cliff,
They cooked the fish the boy had killed. And now,
Caught in another wave, they turn and take
Each other on the sand.

The fish-bones smoulder in the cooling fire.
The spear shines in the moonlight. In the cave
Behind the sleeping lovers the earth floor
Minutely shifts and settles,

Drifts over the other bones, the other spears—
The fish-hooks carved from shell, the flakes of stone,
The bones of bird and animal and fish,
   The blood, the long-dead fires.
LOSING HIS GRIP

The worst one: he is climbing a steep hill
That suddenly gets steeper. He is alone.
The light is dying and he can’t turn back.
The slope up which he crawls is now shear stone

That slips beneath his feet and hands like glass.
The rock-face straightens, becomes vertical,
And as it swells into the overhang
Above his head he knows that he must fall

Forever. Now he screams; and straining, cracks
His frozen eyelids, feels the nightmare break
In time. Sweat pours—he stares at nothing, thinks:
What happens on that night when I can’t wake?
THE STAKE, 1633

After an engraving by Jacques Callot

The casual elegance, the careless grace
With which the tall young cavalier commands
The scene is what we notice first: he stands
At ease, assured, pointing a slender mace
Towards the burning man. His King Charles face
Under the plumed hat looks tough. His friends
Lean on their pikes or rest their idle hands
On swords and muskets. In the flaring space
Before them soldiers work—one starts to make
A grave; one, setting down his lute and drum,
Piles on more faggots, covering his eyes
Against the flames; another, at the stake,
Strains tight the ropes about the man whose dumb
Face turns in torment to the empty skies.
A VOYAGE TO CYTHERA

After Baudelaire

Free as a bird my light heart soared and spun
Above the masts, between the singing shrouds;
The boat, beneath a sky swept clear of clouds,
Leapt like an angel drunk with the bright sun.

What’s that black island? All our poets call
It Cythera and celebrate its joys —
Sad heaven of all the ageing randy boys
It seems rather a poor place after all.

—Island of secret festivals! Above
Your seas the splendid ancient presence
Of Venus hovers like a cloud of incense
Filling each heart with langour and with love.

A green and lovely island, fresh with flowers,
A holy place, set by the world apart
For worship, where the sighs from each rapt heart
Breathe adoration like the scent from bowers

Of roses or the ring-doves’ murmuring.
—Cythera is a dead hole, harsh and dry,
An empty desert, troubled by the cry
Of loss: and yet I saw there a strange thing.
It was no shady tree-set temple where
The young priestess whose virgin body glows
With secret fire gathers the flowers and throws
Her light robes open to the wandering air;

But, as we passed the island — so close by
Our white sails set the troubled birds to flight —
A gibbet with three arms came into sight,
Like a black cypress, sharp against the sky.

And there a flock of fierce birds wheeled around
Their carrion feast, a corpse already green,
Each one plunging his beak like some obscene
Instrument into every rotting wound.

His eyes were holes, his guts were falling out
Of his torn belly and looping down his thighs;
So gorged with food that they could hardly rise
The birds had ripped his balls out by the root.

Beneath his feet, their heads erect with rage,
A troop of jealous beasts prowled restlessly.
Amidst the crowd the largest, proud and free,
Moved like a hangman with his entourage.
Man of Cythera, now beneath her blue
Clear skies you mutely suffer these insults
In expiation for your filthy cults—
The sins that stand between the grave and you.

Absurd hanged man, I know your miseries!
Watching your flapping limbs I feel behind
My teeth like vomit the long, sour, blind
Flood of old sorrows start to surge and rise.

Poor devil, with your memories bought so dear!
I too have met the panther and the crow,
And all that beak and fang can do I know:
It was my flesh they loved to seize and tear.

The sky and sea are beautiful—but still
For me the air is black and thick with blood;
And buried here within this smothering shroud
Lies my own heart: this is my parable.

Love, in your island I found death and lust:
Hanged man and gibbet, symbols of my fate...
—Ah, God! Give me the strength to contemplate
My body and my heart without disgust.
RUSHCUTTERS BAY

The Hotel Belevedere is gone—a raw
Wound in the rock filled with the sound
Of hammering machines
Where it used to stand.

Merged with the city’s roar the noise
Beats distantly against this green
Island of sea-light
Bird-song and morning sun

Where the swaying water, as it laps
The sandstone steps, flakes
And glitters, mirroring the tall
Masts of yachts, and breaks

Gently against the harbour wall as a boat
Passes. Two fishermen cast,
Retrieve, and cast again.
The athletes jog past;

A man sleeps on the grass; and the tall
Buildings clamber up each steep hillside
That flanks the park—almost as quiet now
As when the two rushcutters died.
It was a day like this—a May morning—
When three spears transfixed the breast
Of William Okey,
And his skull burst

Under the stone-axe hammer blow;
And Samuel Davis, a mere lad,
Fell, like a boy asleep,
Beside him in the mangroves, dead.

Innocent blood for innocent blood:
Their two lives for the life
Of the black man who had died—
Slashed with a convict’s knife

Across the belly. He was the first we killed,
But no-one bothered to record
His name. The eyes from William Okey’s skull
Were torn out by a bird.
POOR TOM’S SONG

To see the light gleam
On the knife at the world’s throat;
To test the cold edge
Of the blade;

And then to sing.