

## The End of Limbo

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# The End of Limbo

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<Dedication>



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## The Suitcase

My life is divided from kitchen and dining room.  
It is a long hallway, walled by peripheral vision:  
a living room spacious as a departure lounge.

Here waiting stretches time's muscle  
through the weight of shortcomings.  
All I carry is a suitcase containing the time of day.

Its lining familiar as my skin, its handle worn,  
slightly arched like a collarbone, a potential key  
to sagas, the yarn of my emigrating ancestors.

The suitcase is rigid yet made of impressions.  
In generations we will have wings, mutate like finches  
with beaks as sharp as knives and forks.



I admire the spiders, how homely they are,  
never satisfied with a napkin-sized dwelling.  
They aim for tablecloth-sized webs,

even though mostly it catches nothing but light,  
pure as goodness in the killing of flies.  
Only a spider's loom can capture such lumen.

If I could embroider my life with this threat  
I would make a needle from one of my unattached ribs  
from the twelfth ribcage raw. The needle's eye being vast

and infinitely dilating. I would tread light though it  
as if through the lumen of my arteries,  
as if through a gateway to new dimensions.

## Cubism

Giovanni had mined Les Collines de l'Artois for two years,  
and was now ready to wash down the dust of his teens,  
as rain washed the streets under that ugly, new Eiffel Tower.

In a bistro he heard himself order two glasses of red,  
one for his throat and one for a man, who like him  
spoke French as Frenchmen don't—unless they have a cold.

After they couldn't count the empty glasses, no matter what language,  
they made their way to his new friend's place, no, 13 Rue Ravignan,  
4th floor, 2nd door left after the steep stairs, and mind your head.

I don't know what the two discussed. Giovanni probably talked  
about the pit, how even the largest mountain can be reduced  
to briquettes, how each coal cube has the mountain's grotesque face.

Being a miner he knew all about cubism, because that's what he saw  
when he walked the underground galleries with his lantern.  
He could see a flickering mosaic of memories and rock.

The two men were kept awake by the biting blue winter  
which Pablo painted for a living. He filled the stove with coal,  
ripped a page from his sketch book and lit the fire.

That night they were both cold until a magenta sun rose  
in Pablo's mind which ended the Blue Period. Years later  
Picasso would remember the tunnels of my grandfather's teens.

## Finding Myself in a Pair of Fisheyes

I arrive on the desperate island in the late afternoon.  
Shadows are so long they have lost a sense of balance.

The guidebook advises a visit to the twenty-two churches  
built next to each other for comfort and I read

that the alters were carved from bone of unknown origin.  
The last ferry to the mainland has already departed.

The waiter serves me a dozen grilled sardines. The recipe:  
divorced from water, remarried by fire. I bless them

with lemon, seek out their skeletons, and throw salt  
over my shoulder. Later, in the only guesthouse in town,

I haggle with the landlady. Her French sounds fake.  
Taking a step at a time, she shows me upstairs.

The room is lopsided but clean. I'm spellbound by five  
flower paintings that adorn the square, furnished corridor.

Identical still lifes in hospital green and blood red  
on a clashing ground. I stay up all night, comparing them

maybe to find the answer to all questions concerning  
the personal. I tiptoe barefoot as if not to disturb

what lies behind those dying tulips: tulips so vivid  
and as wide awake as church-bells on a Sunday morning.

## The Language of the North Wind

I owe you the eloquent language of the north wind  
which blew me where without vision I would not have gone.  
I froze to the spot in the forest of shapeless afterthoughts  
while you, Dreamer of the Absurd, painted memory relics.  
First I grew inwards like a bad toe nail to keep you company  
as you were afraid pigments would evaporate like dew.

In that arctic night when you refused to go through the garden gate,  
anger made me rob your ambitions and as they carried my initials  
I ate them. They made me grow the other way until I saw grass  
on the skyline. You said stars were motionless snowflakes,  
winter could never end. When I squinted I saw it was not so—  
stars could add up to something larger than night, a Last Supper

on a bed of sky. You said, talk of dawn would crumble the paint  
and stretched your favorite childhood tablecloth with the image  
of your mother and proceeded to paint me on the other side.  
That's when I defrosted my feet, drew perfect circles in the air  
the shape of distant planets I didn't know I wanted to visit  
then learned the north wind's language and spoke it aloud.

## Naming Clouds

*For Luke Howard (1772–1864), of Tottenham, Namer of Clouds*

In this corner of my life, happiness comes like a Chinese takeaway.  
I take up the hobby of collecting clouds, crowd them into my afternoon,  
measure them for volume and catalogue them. It is almost a tradition  
since the namer of clouds lived in this neighbourhood.

The spiders take over each corner, weave webs with the consistency  
of clouds in which my thoughts get caught like winged things.  
They are arrested by sticky threads, thin and temporal as hope.

I stick to business and weigh the humid constructions in the sky  
by means of scales from the judgement hall. Scales with which the heart  
ultimately must be weighed against the body. When night falls,  
I suspend judgement about empty or full hearts, kiss each cloud goodnight  
and wait and wait for dawn to fill the corners of my eyes.

# Walnut

*A Manifesto*

The walnut is the wardrobe, can't you see;  
not in, on or under the wardrobe,  
the wardrobe is not an apple  
(Cox, Granny Smith, Bramley or French Delicious),  
partly because I do not wish to discuss apples openly  
due to their core.

Also the wardrobe is not a cherry, pear or pine cone,  
not an acorn, fig or almond.  
It is not obvious but essential that the walnut  
is not a chest of drawers, a chair or table,  
stool or kitchen cupboard,  
at least not in this particular case.

Take this walnut,  
I trust you  
not to crack it, to know there is a centre:  
a soft, dark, earthy flesh, not sweet but true.

Open it if you must satisfy your hunger, it is waiting  
but don't forget, that in there sleeps a tree  
casting shadows on hot summer days.

The wardrobe is the walnut.  
I don't just hold the camera and take a photo  
because I refer to something that might not be visible  
even though I invite you into the picture.

Let's go deeper into the woods,  
let's dare to name the shadows  
by shaping the mouth to call them,  
so there won't be a way back  
as there is no mending a cracked nut shell.

We can all take a small bite and make some truth ring  
(an authentic sound).

This truth is so clear even the ears of corn can hear it,  
not like the formal sound of church bells:  
heavy and noisy to wake the dead  
but like a temporal melody,  
like the pure sound of bluebells  
moved by a warm breeze.

When I say: the walnut is a wardrobe,  
it might not be true for you.  
After all authenticity leans against the tough wall of the nut  
having a cigarette break and somehow fails to be helpful,  
maybe because it is corruptible.

I am open to interpretations as long as they feed me  
but not cheap burgers and fries, they just exercise the jaw,  
yawning empty words.

It is not my intention to put a message in a milk,  
Coke or wine bottle in the hope someone, someday might read it,  
(even God on judgement day),  
simply because they might not speak my language  
or refuse to discuss the unseen without consulting their lawyer.

If I did send a message, I would address the formless,  
maybe the formless in everyone of us,  
having fixed a meaning in words  
and not bothered to enclose a stamped addressed envelope.

The formless has endless forms and they reflect the shape  
my soul makes when it reflects the world.  
A soul that can't avoid insisting on the world as an anvil  
on which it gains its shape.

Shall I name the walnut and the wardrobe  
with my mother's mother tongue  
or with my first language which is the second language I learned  
or shall I call it walnut the way you call it but with my accent?  
What difference would it make to both of us?

I know a walnut is only a walnut, nothing but a walnut  
and a wardrobe is only a wardrobe, nothing but a wardrobe  
but what matters, what is forgotten is how they relate to each other,  
and what also is forgotten is how we (you and me in our own ways)  
relate to the walnut and the wardrobe  
(to the unseen in the walnut and the wardrobe)

and yet  
I keep the key to this wardrobe  
(that is a walnut that is a wardrobe).  
The key to it is this manufactured moment.

The wardrobe's doors are like wings which open  
to a room beyond a room  
and the wardrobe's mirror always holds  
the image of the person opening it.

In this instance I speak of my wardrobe  
full of garments that tell my story  
with every moth damaged jumper,  
with every silk scarf, and each shoe  
(left and right in their own way)  
telling of places I have been,  
and each sleeveless dress  
tells of the marks the sun might have left on my skin.

And equally so, I can't look at a walnut  
without remembering my uncle's tanned face,  
my uncle who grows walnuts in his garden.

If I was to explain,  
I would start with the way the foxglove doesn't fit anyone or anything.  
The inside of the foxglove fits perfectly into its outside.  
I only name it and so relate it  
to the walnut tree that now casts a shadow on it.

## The Unknown

From my mother I inherited a path paved with gallbladder stones,  
wide as childbearing hips, twice as long as impatience.

From my father's side I inherited stories he told with his eyes.  
Stories of death that no one mentioned, deep as afterthought,

he might have heard them like whispers from a war prisoner bed.  
Mother would say thoughts were like boats, they need an anchor.

Nobody in our family could navigate an afterthought but it shook  
our imagination like seasickness until we were green under our rosy cheeks.

In his sleep his eyelids flickered as if a factory was constructing nightmares  
daylight didn't want to know about. Now I choose my path with care.

## Omission

He was christened Fortunato; fortunate to be born alive  
and into peaceful times after the poppies wilted in the corn.  
Fortunate for reasons his mother knew, who sensed  
his lifeline to be longer than that of his school mates.  
On sepia photos his chubby face carries his name with a glow  
and his smile spills each letter with an unbound thrill.

Names are charms and that of my father protected him  
through a new World War when still bloodier poppies bloomed.  
He saw them flower in clusters when he was deported  
across Germany to Danzig, on to prisoner camps in Poland.  
Poppies flourished on battlefields and along railway lines  
like a wide gapping stigmata on the palm of Europe.

Thousands lost life, limbs or loved ones but he was spared.  
My father was lucky to be among the witnesses but luck  
had a sour aftertaste as his name had become a mock of facts.  
He shed syllables until it sounded like another adjective  
until it stated a true account. He signed his new name as Nato,  
which means 'born', to simply declare himself among the living.

## The Tear Percolator

From the kitchen window I could see the locomotive  
rip through the swollen and inflamed backdrop.  
I was kneeling on a stool almost as tall as myself,  
leaning right out into the open, late summer air,  
resting my head like a Raphael angel.

Indoors the espresso hissed, spitting black drops.  
Steam blurred the vision, questions always drowned  
in suppressed air . . .

My father wore a thin coat of lead under his skin.  
He cried on occasions, percolated tears from behind  
the retina. The crying gene was built in like an oil pump,  
responsible for cooling his worn system.

Our grey Sunday outings: the news agent's by the station.  
The factory ground on the way back was full of  
ship-engine-embryos and train-skeletons.  
I looked at his cloudy face, a taste of metal on my tongue.

## The Old Man and the Mountain

The old man lived on top of the mountain  
and the mountain lived on top of him.  
He was a warrior, a cynic, a martyr,  
imprisoned by the swastika yet survived.

The old man, my father, was from then on alone,  
was as scarred as the mountains and as distant.  
He turned my childhood into a silent waiting room  
from which my bravest doll was exiled.

Every evening he disappeared into his world  
to water his cross with unwatered wine.  
Thorns blossomed in the back room of his mind.  
Eating the daily bread of resentment was the way.

Speaking German was banned from our home,  
so as children we whispered it in the dark.  
He had never worn brown shirts, yet they tied him,  
timeless time ago when he became a prisoner.

So many painful thoughts pushed into oblivion  
by the sound of snoring cathedrals  
in the name of those who have not felt nor touched  
that invisible mountain handed out by history.

Twice the earth was dug over to mark the season's change:  
first the harsh ground of the fields, then the grave.  
Endless winter melted suddenly, flowing into rivers.  
I went and planted potatoes on top of the mountain.

## Happy Marriage

Auntie Holly looked at me with her bottled-up eyes  
like two circles of mushrooms in a forest.  
Eyes that made me forget the words of the song  
we sang on Christmas day. I used to make a wish  
when I lit the candles on the evergreen tree.

She knitted jumpers for my uncle, big enough for giants,  
lovely, warm and cosy for cold winter days and nights.  
Soft as moss and loyal green they were,  
without dreams, without edges, without compromise,  
nothing fancy, nothing out of the ordinary.

He was a woodcutter by trade, nothing vague.  
Dead leaves stuck to his boots, even Sundays.  
His voice was loud, no hidden messages.  
Always talking about the same things,  
unfortunately never for the last time.

I wondered how they had met, Aunt Holly and him.  
I knew she always wanted children,  
as many as there are trees in the forest.  
What had she ever seen in him but a child?  
On Epiphany they put away tinsel and tree.

More than just a thread had vanished. After that  
everything dulled like wine stains on the carpet.

## Ponte Della Sera

*For M. T.*

I felt sorry for her. Not that I knew my aunt well.  
Neither of us made the effort, me being a child  
didn't help. People rumoured about her miscarriages  
no one could keep count but I imagined  
she carried them in her handbag which one time  
I am sure I heard rattle or was it a cry?

Not sure what she saw in the mountain stream  
clutching her handbag by the Roman viaduct.  
Maybe she saw her children's faces in the water  
blood red with evening, and reached for them  
in the water, icy with death or wanted to cross  
the bridge's reflection, flickering like nerves  
leading to the other side of the evening.

Was the real viaduct made of maroon pills,  
a bridge she had crossed every day for years  
until it collapsed? Maybe each day, each face  
was a stone in her shoe, a brick in her bridge  
which naturally lead to the bank of the evening.

We don't talk about her much but at times remark,  
how short and cruel days are in March, and feel  
we know, anguish to be older than the viaduct  
and that, at the end of the day, it is not viable  
to guess the weight and content of a handbag.