

The Linguistics of Light

LISA DART was born in Cornwall, but grew up in Orpington, Kent in England. After working for both the Open University and the University of Sussex for many years, she combines writing poetry with her commitment to gifted children as Head of Curriculum Enhancement at St Bede's School. Her chapbook was published by Tall Lighthouse in 2005 and she was one of the four winners for the USA Grolier Prize 2004. Many of her poems have appeared in British poetry magazines. She has recently completed a doctorate in poetry and philosophy at the University of Sussex.

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LISA DART



CAMBRIDGE

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Only where there is language is there a world. Without the retaining word, the whole of things, the 'world' sinks into darkness, together with the 'I' . . .

— HEIDEGGER

Derek Jarman's Garden, Dungeness

*Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains call on us?*

—JOHN DONNE

We drive through a burnt October,
trees turning, sun in almost mist.
You give directions, more from the landscape
than our atlas *where*, you said, *nothing*
that really gives us bearing exists.

Prospect Cottage—stones set
in a scarcity of green, driftwood stumps
framed by concrete waste.
A wind lifts without reverence
remnants of rusted wires, knotted ropes,
sorrel, corrugated kale leaves—
none of the flowers
from the glossed book there that day—
just the shuttered-down, closed-off,
bleached emptiness; the winter
of the place . . .

where we started out,
stunted debris, Donne's unanswered rhetoric,
the horizon too near, the thunder imminent,
the two of us skimming stones,
a flat sea longing to be lit.

First Naming

In the calling mellow notes of the first bird

Eve heard love, softness, open air, saw her own white body.

Dove! she said. *Bringer of peace.* Jubilant, the bird

opened its throat wider, raised wings soared into the bright sky
triumphant. Suddenly Eve, too, felt free.

How easy that had been.

But at the dark, glossy feathers of the next bird

Eve paused, alive with other desires: ones she could not name,
black as the night sky, held tight inside like a fist.

The dark bird hovered, craving its name.

Belying terror, Eve casually opened her hand—
the fist inside—cried, *Raven!*

Eden

I've gone back to the place
where thought begins :
the rhubarb patch, white blossom,
a child's green swing

swaying. Something intangible is there,
a first word perhaps
like a seed, tooth-caught
then freed, to be negated

by other words. Ones that name
the garden of plenitude :
soil, sun, nettle, dock-leaf,
feather, dandelion, buttercup

and profligate Queen Ann's lace.
But a word or thing slips
subtly, between pine-cones,
chestnuts, the fruit red

for harvesting: darker than unease,
or blood, further back than memory—
belly slithers to a bough,
fang-sharp settles in the apple tree.

Postcard to my Brother

for Mike

Hotter than England, I scrawl on this postcard
a local scene (not one that makes me think of you)
to send to America where you live now: a house—stark,
white—squats against sea and sky in photographic blue.

Nearby an old goat languishes on a frayed rope ;
rolled nets jut from trees in hillside olive groves,
all sun-still. I hardly recall Preston Sands or you,
goose-pimpled in a towel, reading Sherlock Holmes,

nor us smacked hard by stampeding waves,
as wind lashes stinging spray and sand
into our foolhardy faces while the red flag flies.
I've forgotten childhood, holidays in England.

Then today, unexpectedly, the sun scarcely breaks
through cloud: the sea is a furrowed English grey,
wind drives the waves ; salt pangs the air. Now
you're here. Not in America, nor all those years away.

The Quietest Hour

Sounds like clichés
lull us into a slumber of security
like the shutter bang on a hot afternoon
or your breath at siesta time—
an unconscious rhythm
of whispered tenderness.

And even in that quietest hour
an incipient breeze hisses
at sun-idled poplars,
a dog yelps on the heat's perimeter,
a motorbike thrums on the track
between us and the sea.

Then far away but seeming near,
a drowse of voices, shush of waves
and the cicada's insistent see-sawing
could be today or years ago
at other resorts, on other trips
blurring, or so we like to think,
all unspoken distances.

Here, a man who walked out alone,
the sky white hot dangerous,
split our sleep one sultry afternoon,
a single gunshot
for the scream of it.

Arkansas Spring

for my mother

Miles from home

I look out of a first floor room

to write of birds,

whippoorwill, blue jay, robin, cardinal

but am drawn instead by the home-grown pull
of other things: white blossom petals

translucent in sudden rain.

Or flaring yellow forsythia.

And I remember you, years ago,

kneeling at a lawn's edge,

a golden tentacle

in your hand—

from any garden we had left behind

to lessen the leaving and the distance—

and you planting there

spring's bright filament.

Mother,

our worlds collide
through the slip and glide of time:
I'll remember the steep hump of the orchard,
its sporadic trees, more wasteland than fruit,
corn stubble, spearmint, sun-burn
and a boy I knew, his shouts cool and long,
across the park's disappearing green,
an arc of pallid sky, moments before the light died.

You'll remember Dr Scott's surgery:
high-backed chairs, incurably hard, bandages,
sniffs, coughs, the anaesthesia of magazines
and the voice of the boy's father, *I'll pay anything . . .*
anything . . . heard by everyone in the waiting room
unrestrained by the implacable fact of a door.

Now we coincide when you remark,
all these years on, *Mr Wilkes lost his wife to cancer,*
a nice woman . . . and I recall you mopping my head
when I was ill, then one day cramming a suitcase
to leave and not return, and how their son,
that boy I liked, didn't cry, but bleached his hair,
ran off from school. And how summer light
still haunts and hollows the evening sky.

The Sabbath

Because yesterday the cold dulled our road
I was sure it would snow and I longed
for an infinity of flakes, so I could write
of that new white on bushes, trees,
slope of roofs, a brightness,
cleansing my whole life, like baptism—

and because today the sun is a hazed gold,
(there was no snow) its warmth
eases us into almost summer,
images come:
the garden in late June, a dove, its tail fanned,
passion flowers opening, you with a watering can . . .

and because it is actually still winter,
the earth dry, and you're here
sitting at the table with a coffee, writing
in my journal is awkward,
as I wonder about words—
how they alter perception
or do I mean imagination?
my thoughts adrift, until suddenly I believe
a word is intercessory, like a shaman,
a priest at prayer, not an essence;
so with black ink on a page
clean for transformation,
I shape a lettered sacrament—
water, sunlit air.

Sunday School

A child's picture:
Jesus in an English Garden.

His cloak, a celestial blue,
leads from hunched shoulders

to the scribbled lines
for the tormented darkness

of a darker sky. Blood as sweat
streams to heaven, red

as drowsing poppies
through a half-remembered dream.

All the doubt we have in truth
betrayed by the blown back black

of dawn, and the naïve faith
we've found in naming

scrawled with an uncertain hand:
lavender, geraniums, a lawn of unripe plums.

The Word

Once upon a time—

The Word

Not aromatic lily.

Not spectre dove.

Not angelic light.

Not scourged flesh.

The Word.

Not redemptive love.

Not white crucifixion.

Not deified blood.

Not bright raiment.

The Word.

In the beginning—

Nascent.

Guttural.

Incandescent.

Annunciation

*Zachariah is visited by an angel who says,
though both he and his wife are old, they will have a child*

— LUKE 1 (5-63)

Nine mute months
pass in disbelief.
Zachariah stares, nightly, at the sky—

ordinary portent of God. No aurora
borealis of angel, gold, tower of radiance,
harbinger of birth

or other glad tidings. Unlike that time
at the temple where he, prostrate skeptic
in priest's robes, insists:

But I am old . . . Amid light, wings,
prophecy, the angel speaks: *Behold
thou shalt be dumb,
until that day these things shall be performed.*

He has not uttered since. His hand
ineffable, articulates
the final swelling of her belly—
Elisabeth's time imminent—
until Zachariah

cradles, bloody moment born, a son.
Scrawls a name. Stammers. Cries out
to a starry wilderness—

the stars echo *John . . . John . . . John . . .*

Salome Holding the Head of Saint John the Baptist

Painting by Bernardo Luini 1520

You could not understand how time-bright the stars were.
Or how a painting would one day depict the moment
you would gag and turn your face away.

What did you know about men? About desire?
Death? Anything? *You'll be rewarded for it.*
Ask whatever you wish. And so you dance

to arouse a king. After, without a second's glance at him,
you tongue the words. Unkissed lips
request for your mother the prophet:

John the Baptist. Who has entered your dream.
Abandoned, you caress his beard and slip
your fingers lower to the vulnerability of skin.

Unyielding, still a girl, under a mother's sway,
the quixotic pull of dance, ignition of the stars,
you demand again that never dreamt-of-thing.

Now in the picture you turn your eyes away.
There is no starlight here. Only a man's head.
His blood drips like paint. In time, congeals.

Dead Fox

I don't know now where we'd gone
but everywhere cars parked
nose to tail, and the yellow light
from aluminium framed windows
in the fish-and-chip shop,
now closed, still shone.

All that metallic glint,
even the nearest tree —
a shellac sheen in streetlights,
where someone had driven on
leaving a fox,
urban though it was, blood
damp on the tarmac
to be pulped, *strikes me*
you said, *as obscene*.

But if I'm honest, —
while you dragged it
to the kerb's double yellow lines —
the starless sky, hardly black —
I didn't think about a fox
left dead by some motorist.

I merely stopped myself staring
at the red redness of its blood.