



Absences

Anthony Stephens

1. *The Night is Broken*

The night is broken
but not yet by starlight.
No voice, mine, utters
the conjuration.
No shape, yours, rises
from white earth-fires.

Broken by a whisper:
'gone to god now?'

That night not stay whole,
unseeing what is light
in this break in my hand,
split in the time that wants
handling as a child.

So white fires continue
past the field where the sun
has gone to god now,
and the horse went chafing
on its bit, gone to god now.
But certain fires continue
round the sea-rock
where the black snake grinds
flour for those who deserve it.
Ghosts have no hand in the baking



but certain fires continue.
The night is broken:
not by a ripe moon, or scream
from where fires continue.
But no voice, mine, invites
you, never rising from flames,
to be what we know
and only together.

There were other nights,
but they've all gone to god now,
unbroken, full of voices.
Only no voice, mine, breaks
this night and invites
you, never rimmed against
white fires, to be only
what the blood can never
claim as loot:
ourselves, who
will never go to god now,
not taste the snake's flour.

I break this dark
that we may be in starlight,
when the world sleeps
in its warm negation.
This is night and night's other:
the parade of darkneses
pushing themselves in front
of the lens – crows otherwise, lost
in hired black suits in the
cortege of recently dead
feelings. Solve me this:
there is one darkness alive,
and one dead,



one that is true
when it is taken from us.

If it was taken, it's
gone to god now;
but I break
this night to
contradict night's other, invite
you past where limbs lose
their weight, the blind
journeys start – invite
you alone
and yourself
into starlight.

2. *The Land*

The land high above rivers,
above the ochre plain, under mauve
rock heads against the
sheet of blue – then ash-yellow cloth, rucked
where the dry streams run;
the day-moon, impartial
above the saw-toothed ridge that
cuts wordless heaven.

Paths through the green,
past springing bushes
to the cleft where earth-water
lies in August; on the trails
we can walk three hours alone
till clouds wipe clean
the blue slate, overwritten
with bird-calls and our words.
Above the river where we might



sit down and weep,
remembering Auschwitz and what
no blood can wash from words.
Though sunsets are blood's theatre,
no one requires a dark
song from us in this strange
land, not a song
of ashes or Zion.

So we, hand in hand
to the shining windows,
have no need
to hang our voices in thick
green willows. No one wants
a harp-song of Auschwitz,
or Zion. Just that we should
speak to each other in love, past
ochre cliffs, down
sword-grass paths, calmly as if
words had never bled, or severed parts
or bodies never hung in willows;
as if there were no metal plaques
where synagogues had stood,
not far from graffiti, still saying:
Truth might make, makes you,
made you, will make you,
has made you, will
have made you
free?

Et abduxerunt nos: Hymnum cantate nobis de canticis Zion.

I have been here alone before
thinking of you. No one
forced me, but I sang darkness:



*Encima de las corrientes
Que en Babilonia hallaba,
Alli me sente llaranda,
Alli la tierra regaba.
Accordandome de ti ..*

Will you not make
the clear songs true,
and the prisoner
of the bled words free?

3. *Who Sees?*

A cat playing with its shadow
knows itself unseen.

If we walk together through the million-
eyed town, what will the eyes say?

'There go Adam and Eve buying apples!'
will they say?

If we walk through the polished-stone gorge
what will unknowing
marsupial eyes say?

If I were to
'make me a willow cabin at your gate
and call upon my soul within the house',
what would the neighbours say?

If they saw me.

Eyes of envy have invision, seeing



only their own world
reversed and edible.

In it there are feelings that live on the tongue,
when the throat forgot them.

In them move accusations at home in the tastes,
native to spittle.

When eyes widen with envy, denied things have faces
and wings to go quicker.

You see them taste the air, smirk at its flavour
thinking we are in it.

And certain their tongues will be living,
when all their faces

are blinked back to patches on concrete.

Their tongues ramble on, long after their eyes
close up like mussels.

They'll perform the play of tongues together.

In the play there live stories, but we
never have to taste them, never be trapped
in superstition, make Anangke out of white mice.

For who has seen us: two cats playing with
their shadows?

No one has seen us: all the eyes have devoured themselves,
and the tongues, geckos' tails,
have been snapped up by foraging birds
that call in the silence, just stirred
by our coming footsteps.

4. *Absence*

Sois sage, o ma Douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille ..

The night's still thick before
my windows, backing them



to mirrors that drain colours
in their depths: the world where
we may speak as partners, grief and I;
where her hand covers
this my writing hand from past
my shoulder, so that her pale face
darkens to the grey of paper far
back in the mirror. But she writes with me,
as if she knew of you and wanted you
here, were not just my dark-imaged
grief at the weeks between, years
that come welling up in the black mirror – a
spring in a cave. Yes, drink,
my grief and quieten down: we'll write.

The upper mirror shows the blue
of dawn behind black leaves; but in the lower
pane my grief still perches on the desk. Her hair
is darker than the loss itself
that feeds on all the colours. The first birds
irritate her with little, pointless calls.

Ma douleur, donne-moi la main; viens par ici, loin d'eux ..

We'll write ourselves into the mirror's depth,
turn left just by that faded
patch of red. We'll leave the stage, enter the wings,
invisible in black cloth walls, immune to
chances and birds' voices; we will share
our feelings out and make pretence
they're yours as well as mine. The stage is empty.

Entends ma chère, entends la douce Nuit qui marche.





Her footsteps could be yours, my grief; they're dulled
by these cloth galleries of stifling black
that emerge in night's
other: just beginning. All the birds
are silent now as you are,
listening to the steps
so like your own, as if another mirror
that held no light at all, only sound,
reflected them at you each time you moved.

If we plunge in there, we lose even
these black echoes. There'll be no words
ever after. Foetal in night's other
we'd wait a thousand years till any
womb quickened with us, curled like twins
to selves against the other.

Night's other may well walk
those thousand years, keeping
our time suspended in her silent glass.

Should we go back? Even
the lower pane is half transparent
now, half filled with foliage, half
with the last life of broken-edged reflections.

This is the time your absence
works in me like poison,
makes my grief cry out once
and then vanish from among the dying
mirror's shapes into my eyes.

She'll be reborn the next midnight,
wake me up early, offer me her hand and walk





into the mirror like a queen on stage – in the twelfth act
of some tragedy no one turned off.

She'll be reborn until your hand writes mine.

5. .. *den Sternen ausgeteilt. Wie drängen sie.*

Strewn out among
light's needle-points;
in the coldest air
the scent of shrubs freezes.

Only looking upward, parted
into a hundred pieces by the
light, is there an ordeal greater
than bearing wounds in daylight.

Other the solitudes of night and day.
Of night there's the warm one, rejected
because so inviting: night's other journey
into comfort or monsters, but the

walk in starlight takes resistance,
patience; even our hands freeze,
embracing. And above us the pressure
of light throws random stigmata

at our bodies, faces. Marked together,
but not identically, we'll re-enter the shell
of warm yellow, reason its spiral, leaving
our moon-shadows pinned

by a thousand rents to frost-white
grass or frozen dust. But to endure





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cold the unshielded heaven
is to tie our souls together

with silver chain. The stars sing nothing
of garlands and torches, nothing
of purple-cloaked Eros
making his royal progress down. They

just fling the silver points of affirmation
through eyes into the hearts
that leap, and our hands clench tight,
walking to yellow warmth together.

For, branded by starlight
but still unvarying,
our resilience is the pledge
of new days in the land.

