

Undertow

How enthralled we were, you and I,
while pearling rain patted out hours
until our wedding day, to see the whole grey city
bloom blue with clouds of longing, that rose,
like woodsmoke, from all the sooty chimneypots
and all the tinny radios, unspooling
into the thick grey sky, the melancholy voice
of that singer newly drowned.

They said his body was not yet found,
dragged down by the undertow. They said –
smiling and waving to his friends
he slipped nimble as a fish into the black backwash,
a rippling shadow unreeling there
between the reflected lights of tugs and riverboats
that flickered and was gone.

Our minds submerged him, marble-pale,
a sunken statue bejewelled with blue-fringed mussels.
How they haunted us, then, how they pulled at us,
those songs we never liked before,
drawing everything back into themselves
like the insatiable suck of the current,
like the last prophetic poems of a suicide;
as we, too, smiling and waving at our friends
entrusted ourselves to dangerous tides.

Seawrack washed up a hemisphere away, I left you
sleepily shipwrecked in a palm-curtained room
and padded down barefoot to the famous ocean shore.

So this is the Caribbean! I marvelled,
this surge of susurrous black, this spume of restless waves,
dissolving to white on a luminous shore
under an inky sky foamed with stars.
A line of black flags blotted the moon,
a row of tattered widows, a warning
dangerous currents – do not swim.

But the blood-warm water circled my feet
and the songs of the drowned dragged at me like waves
and I thought I understood the beauty of this ghostly night,
wading invulnerable in deep new joy.
I thought I understood my own happiness –
that in everything that seemed to me beautiful,
surged something wild and dangerous.

Elizabeth Stephens

Lovers' Leap

This is no place to be heartsick,
this luminous valley whose thin air glistens

radiant as tears. Waterfalls chill the air,
dripping echoes. Beneath golden-headed trees,

swan-necks bowed to the stepping-stoned stream,
we gaze at each other absently. Everything falls away,

mistily distant as lowlands.
Memories steam and pool at our feet.

These mountains have lured us to dangerous altitudes,
to this too-beautiful place where melancholy lovers come,

pockets stuffed with griefs worn smooth as river-stones,
to dive like birds to the valley floor below,

turn to root, become a flower
that bends and stoops over mountain pools

and weeps to gaze upon its own reflected image.

Elizabeth Stephens