

## Watermelon, the only word I have

(For JPM)

When they rang to say that you had died, it seemed like news  
from another country. It was as if we'd grown apart.  
I wasn't sure if I could come, over many seas, with only a straggling muse  
for company, from Egypt to Nazareth again, and find your hidden heart.

Death, like grammar, has its rules, and since you'd exercised  
correct usage all your life, you were not the one to flaunt his ways.  
And so: you're gone; I'm late. I should have organised  
my packing earlier, but I was busy fiddling with a phrase.

You taught me words, not just as meaning cut to sound,  
but as a dream, always inadequate, always precise, of being clarified,  
and, as if you'd met them yesterday, Caesar, Cicero, Catullus (you even  
found  
his naughty bits and wrote them on the board, pretending you were  
horrified).

You had me learn a poem once in French, 'Ainsi meurt, sans laisser de  
trace,  
le chant d'un oiseau dans le bois.' About the song of a bird  
dying in the wood. Your basic law of translation was: 'Don't leave an  
empty space.  
If you can't think of anything, write "watermelon".' Only once I took you  
at your word.

You found in languages the daily courtesy, wit and conversation  
that offer peace, but needed more: limping slightly to the left, in morning  
silence  
and worn soutane, you went to say your early Mass. It was the one  
translation  
that left you satisfied: eternal word, completely crucified and real presence.

You also sang. And once, it was your silver anniversary,  
you sang High Mass. I still can hear with what determined grace  
your Pater Noster climbed the curves, the cliffs of longing, catching mercy  
unprepared, persuading faith to show itself in beauty's flesh and face.

You loved the past, but didn't settle there in case you got too bored.  
You had to wait to fix the heart, the feet, but then you gave away your  
home  
and, handing up the future to the young, you started going forward,  
as if the places, by their very names, could give you life: Toulon,  
Lololima, Rome.

Now and then you sent a letter back, by traveller's post, you wasted  
nothing:  
somewhere in the margins could be found affection, afterthoughts and  
signature.  
You even sent a card from Lyons station, written, so you said, as you were  
sitting  
on your bags with pigeons perched like maniacs above, about to cover you  
in nature.

There'll be no letters back; 'no traveller returns'. You've left an empty  
space  
and watermelon, the only word I have, will never do. The final grace  
I ask for you is this: may heaven keep its windows open (even in winter).  
Catullus, you will, of course, remember, wrote a piece in which the speaker

says, 'Through many peoples, over many seas,  
I come dear brother, for these obsequies:  
I set these gifts beside your grave ...' And so I do. I lay  
across your still and settled tongue the words you taught: *Ave atque vale*.

*Noel Rowe*