

Getting to Know the General

Splotches of green fingerpaint on Tuscan brown,
a background iridescent with fine detail
in which each dewdrop stares back thoughtfully
from its idealised position on the leaf
till two small girls wipe it all out in glee.
An exercise in metrics takes you back
to portraits of heroes in the whitewashed schoolroom
and a language you couldn't yet quite understand.
Getting to know the general is an exercise
in stretching characters beyond their limits
obliquely to edge past time that lies in wait
in the alley of cypresses that aren't the past
of anyone but you, and seem to know it.
He wasn't on the posters, and his handwriting
took seventeen months just to decipher.
Time carries bowls of glue and wicked fish-hooks
laid out in the semblance of an alphabet,
a script like wind-swirls in sand or the pattern of frogs
criss-crossing the pond under the smudge of algae
when a football in the rain drenches them in fear.
Time looks like a big-character poster
merging into a gnarled sandstone wall
and warning of wicker men and man-traps
past the next turning, just over the hill,
the only place the road leads to.
Or in the dim waiting-room they punch tickets,
rip open suitcases full of old papers,
tell fortunes with balls of string.

By the roadside there are rocks with eyes
and lizards' tails flicking in the long grass
and a tattered page out of Ouspensky.
The brigands with their silver guns pour through the passes,
melons and lemons ripen in the sun,
the fishing boats come back empty day after day.
The general has a word with you
in a little-known northern dialect. The next uncut page
trembles in a fever of pathetic fallacy
and opens impossibly upon a folksong
about mermaids and riders in rose-green cloaks.
In the past the fig trees wear the walls down,
the towns unbuild themselves to bedrock,
usurers haggle in the village square.
On the curving road to the abbey you realise
your map is of another country, and the famous frescoes
are tipped-in plates in primary colours
in a book too heavy to take with you on the journey.
In the waiting-room they serve the ghost of coffee,

your passport and ticket are lost in a different story
and the singers lose the thread and start again.
Brilliantly coloured birds buck the wind
and across the green valley sheep spell out
stinging reviews of *The Structure of Complex Words*.
Making no sense, the visa bursts into flower,
then crawls off the page on scores of furry legs.

In the past the dust-motes in the corners of your eyes
spread out flat into a stained chart of islands,
a plumb-line, a leather pouch, a well.
The sun broods around the windows,
in the slate silence a rattle of beads,
the click of a flick-knife or a leaf falling
into the well of noon disturb the surface,
then sink into a matting of fragmentary texts.
Your time runs out halfway through learning
Old Church Slavonic, a cure for the common cold
and the tactics of bribery. Birdsong hurts.
In the past they keep rewriting the rulebook.
The general's hunched up in shadow at a desk
behind strings of onions and barrels of salt cod,
spelling out simple words. He thanks you politely
for your beautiful gifts, and paints you
a foursquare house in beechwoods, labelled 'house',
and a knife called 'money'. Then he goes to sleep.

They keep bits of the past in a box in Leningrad
in a room washed with green light
where engineers' mandibles click in chorus
and a thin hum seeps out from a bubble of black glass.
There are no cats in this poem, but if there were
they'd be the scrawny cats of nostalgia
living on breadcrumbs filtered through the screen of trees.
You try reading Auden. Why does he write in Pushtu?
You cut out a string of little dancing men
and try to cheat the customs officers
with bunches of purple grapes, and tattered chapbooks
full of lies about Alexander the Great.
The cypresses float on the horizon
at midnight above the ruined theatre
where piles of obsolete silver coins gleam in the moonlight.
You try to find the right page in the phrasebook
but all you get is 'Booking a Hotel'.
You fish up something from the well,
fish-belly white, with scarlet maggots,
gift-wrap it, learn another language,
you try giving the archivists baksheesh.
As you patch up a broken syllable
you see that while you've been at work
the crones have jumped the queue. In the waiting-room

a trapdoor slides open, canvas flaps, a gust of wind
slaps open a sackful of dust. In the next room
the general is picking jonquils. The doors are all nailed shut.