

## In Memoriam

For John Forbes

A painting would have been the best way to get things over  
but my father's old Winsor & Newtons still sit in their tin box  
unused for three years except for when I painted  
a shoddy flamboyant number on our front door.  
They have hardened and cracked like introverted poets.

Coloured inks will soak through the best bond paper  
in a soft fuzz of amoebas, a sunset blur  
of fruit-coloured clouds, a weak ambiguous vision.  
I could never use chalk or charcoal.  
The poem must stalk on its own thin mantis legs.

We become, in any case, too attached to colour.  
Graphite and lignite, slate and marble  
that make cliff-faces, monuments, holes in the ground  
have a greater permanence in their crumbling way  
but aren't what we like to look at

or not in themselves. Ever since we learned about emblems  
and correspondences, we have mirrored ourselves in the sea  
and the rock; and the subtle shadowed faces  
of our friends and rivals, as the light changes, reflect  
the obliquities of our shadows, our syntax, our blood.

O'Hara, Berryman, Seferis, Pound  
have a lot in common. Not only are they all dead poets  
but they make up a metrically perfect line  
running on iambic sleepers to whatever personal  
ameliorations I think, for me, they're good for.

And that's the way the game goes. Reading the Saturday papers  
and the cultured magazines, I find my nightmares visited  
by a terrible vision of contemporaries writing elegies  
notebooked and rainslicked at the graveside  
or serial as Magritte's windows or Dunne's time

in a recession of identical rooms.

Whether there is particular grief in the deaths of poets is a question that much engages us,  
that we answer always in the affirmative,  
a priori, because it's very useful to us to do so.

Pale watercolour lovers in the pastel sun  
we can rape and chomp our friends' corpses at midnight,  
hunch and sidle in the morgue, our eyes

a tracery of red veins in the Gothick crypt, and the tourist maps show Transylvania's regular trains, its ordered roads.

Because it does come down to rape, this invasion of one's substance by that of another without connivance. And not the strongest or fiercest can fight it, but must lie back and open up to the slime and spawn.

Death and rebirth myths are made by poets, and no wonder: one Dransfield can feed dozens of us for a month, a Webb for years. And they're fair game, we can plead continuance, no poet ever died a poet: as the salt muck filled Shelley the empyrean gave way to the nibbling fish and the cold.

I should have hauled out the oils and tried to do a townscape after all, a grey square with stoas and colonnades toothed with eroding busts, their long shadows staining each other and the foreshortened watchers' death-watch beetle-scuttle across clattering bleached stone.

For the fan of letters opens and shuts and the wind blows errant zig-zags of light and night through the phrases, chops, remoulds, effaces. Theologians have always found dismembered cannibals tough. The whole thing becomes too tight, which is not at all

what's needed, whatever sensualists may say. Too like Zen archery, too painful somewhere around what used to be called the heart. The parataxis of time and light could have flowed around and through these dead and living poets and myself.

That would have been a pretty nonsense. Instead the flicker—flicker of a zoetrope. In this peepshow world all styles come down to punctuation. O Mayakovsky, Buckmaster, all of you, they're circumventing Euclid. They knew that parallel lines in curved space meet

eventually, somewhere: in the black hole between spaces, the full stop with no sentence on either side, between the moving magic-lantern slides. Not that you wouldn't have gone there yourselves willingly: where the blood pours out the dead come to the feast.