The Blood Aquarium

On one walk he 'gave' to me each tree we passed, with the reservation that I was not to cut it down or do anything to it, or prevent the previous owners from doing anything to it: with those reservations it was henceforth mine.

—Norman Malcolm, Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir

They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself; there is a back-stretched connection, as in the bow and the lyre.

—Herakleitos

1

Pan Apolek's scarf whirls the horizon inward, he brittle and void inside its tightening belt.

The wet sky's writhing flings scurf among the branches, mist banners over churned soil.

The blind man's fingers caress an accordion like a skull.

Palette and paint flow into the mountain, the mountain flows through the painter.

Toppling from high cliffs, he falls into himself, and is eaten: a starting point.

Han-shan: 'The Cold Mountain'.

Sandalwood night smokes through liquid pines, stars dissolve in water to a whitish powder.

The skin if heated can be broken with a blunt knife; inside will be found small galaxies drifting flat against the eyes listen they can be either stapled or glued together calm a place of calmness

the infested body
is brittle as old paper
or is
smells yellow as sandalwood,
nebulae rotate in grains across the cornea,
grit into words:

stars are serrated are bright heavy teeth the skin can be broken can be cracked

keeping still says the I Ching keeping his back still so that he no longer feels his body he goes into the courtyard and does not see his people. No blame.

Keeping still is the mountain (swansneck night inhales the brain fading to gnarled negative

in the lightroom of smoke leaf fingered night

inhales and flows) I was born, says the defunct Aztec, on the mountain. No one becomes a mountain no one turns himself into a mountain

the mountain crumbles

'There is no riddle' / moon flute moon bone ice bone

Sentences coil out of a flux of blindworms, arc out of flow to freeze flow into words' envenomed husk.

To extract cubes place tray under warm water, then even a blunt knife will do.

4

The tension of the erect bowstring pertains to silence that of the senses to Cold Mountain's tigers.

Light rilling into the eyes unnoticed skitters down the brain in mossdark shadows; raddled in the guts of a fanged wanting rivers beat at tunnels, things drinking into these words burst torrents against the skin, rainbows in froth spattering seep to pagination

or the archer's hand

slips, or relaxes.

5

Nolan once tipped up a Riverina landscape to see if its lakes would drip to the warehouse floor. Paddling and lapping, we consider fountains, how, if they came together, each pair of drops would meet and leap apart: salto, and a third sphere dancing unseen between the others. Peddling topologies of doubt, damp fingers touch fountain and lip,

draw over a voluptuary tongue the graph of curves immeasurably lost: though the tall-thighed typists whinny and click still across the pavements we prick over coffee to light's gay acupuncture, plot our own drowning under the equivocal benedictions of the sun.

6

Han-shan: 'The Cold Mountain'.
Pascal squats here, muttering for a duster,
and Evariste Galois bursts in the cold red dawn
and becomes an inkblot;

scanning we may, yes, plot the tangents of night

And in the thirtieth century before Christ
Fu Hsi invents the binary system;
shamans and rancid lamas
festoon their greasy scalps with the bones of thought
and waggle their heads at the moon and the snow.
The Sixty-Four Diagrams
invoke Maitreya, the Buddha who is to come.

Keeping still is the mountain, but there are modes of stillness, as the flight of eagles silver against soaring thunder or the fall from high places when the mountain drops.

Along the slippery ledges of the body one sometimes finds abandoned middens in old caves and scrapings, where only fragile ferns or moss offer a foothold; fall into a dream of green twilight forests where every leaf is known in love and name.

the mountain crumbles

Flux is a nounless language. Thinking 'it moons', 'it saffrons', words caper down the nerves to burst in aureoles at the fingertips.

Lights out and the room swims.

Angler fish, Roman candle, immortal crepuscular verb.

8

The track there veers through the fir cones, balances on the sharp edge of morning, skirts the streams frozen into fingers and snow filtering through pine needles' gauze. The aquarium floats in cool green air etching its images hard against glass walls. Bulbous shapes fishing night's abysses trail points of light, drift across dreams, bend out of shape and burst as the pressure ebbs: nonchalant sneak thief, I saunter across the walkways, amble past the tanks where light creaks and siphon it off into my font. The fishtails whip and curl against the sun. Flattening, they excite the cracking of night's last pale porcelain. Dawn's knife hacks at the sky's belly reddening cloudruns through the tanks; the guts bubble through the blood aquarium. Plate glass flows into filigrees of pine, oxygen tubes squirm bleeding across carmine snow.

Clocks, newspapers,

fish and attendants, peanut wrappers become rubber and liquid, stifle. Concrete plugs the senses, forces the mouth open, sears the palate, rasps at the back of the eyeballs; the tide rises. Spiralling currents lash at pine-trunks. Past Santorini and Krakatoa the whiskered hermits paddle by, sulphurous, on mushrooms. The observer gobbles blood and ink, stone, scarlet stone, rubies and porphyry, red stone for images and typeface grinding runes in a blind language. On a stained scrap written the smell of some inevitable jasmine flower buried in dawn?

9

Vogelfrei: a merry-go-round with claws.

An expression has meaning only in the stream of life (so Wittgenstein)

when with the Galway foxhounds he would ride and fling himself along the pentachord of whistling's orbit. The kite of his silence hangs through a hole in the air, aspiring to the condition of music. Hunted carrion bird, backyard abortionist, scalpelling liquid droppings from the brain, sculpting the stasis of the photographed sonata. His eyes are washed pebbles.

Set apart end of this talking: not Bercilak or a black gale, crunch of snapping sea-rocks, rather a multiple exposure. First sheathed copper cuirass and greaves a spidering figure of black iron hulks moonskinned in mantis posture, blowtorching the brain: the ritual suicide of a foreign race. The mountain grasses have sap like milk or semen, they wave around rotting helmets on the rock slabs, beaten by the sun's brass shield. Scavenging children gather tissues gone liquid in small cooking pots. Green poet soup: 'Something he ate that disagreed with him.' Conosco i segni dell' antica fiamma.

11

Walking home one night, under a streetlamp, I came upon a man without a nose.

What struck me, at the time, as sad was that I was reminded of Gogol: so, I thought, even your compassion stinks of libraries.

His eyes were quite gentle and puzzled as he just stood there and I walked on nervously, although nothing had happened. But what if his nose had just dropped off a moment before, and he was cradling it in his handkerchief uncertain whether to call the police or the doctor, or whether to trust a passing stranger?

Perhaps as I looked at him, if I'd stayed, his ears would have plopped into the gutter, his toes skittered and bounced playfully across the damp street, and, in short, all of him come unstuck.

What if all that was left, hovering at eye level as he fell apart, was a piece of notepaper with something written on it in a foreign language? And I went away without trying to read it because the alley cats were munching his eyeballs?

12

Rain slices the night, moonstalks lick around wet leaves. Whales and sea-snakes drift through the branches, striping the shadows with cold colour. The sky chipped bone over woods' rustling.

Squatting in a black clearing flecked on the foothills someone is trying to light a match.

'All in the not done,

all in the diffidence that faltered.'

Conversely,

there's being in a bone-coloured room in a white house at the convergence of several roads with images of a kind of desperation that may not even be one's own; perhaps typing, unawares, the uncreating word.

Or eaten from the inside by all the manic net of the senses trawled or the gangster mind spraying slugs and acid.

I wonder if the statistician's fortunate ape after the last page of the First Folio knew itself as more than punctuation emphasising inaudible harmonies, intonations of a forgotten speech.

Had Easter Island an epic poem?

14

Green and gold, a girdle scarfs the sky's edge around porcelain enamelled green to purple glittering with reflected forests. Lying in the middle of the jewelled world Gwalchmai, sun-hawk, dreams of pterodactyls that stew in the mud mulching livid gobbets in gaunt beaks.

In his golden halo flapping through citrus groves, backward where the swamp creeps up on him along the shadows grapnelling his taildown's sweep and rush with trellises of baobab and magnolia and giant ferns squatting in the sunlight, o mud bubbles finely where the swift curve of his wingtips brushes over air glaze into slate with a toothed screech.

15

Early morning on the Cold Mountain; fog skeins the frosted grass and the archaeologists are scrambling up the cliff-face with tape-measures and little hammers.

Eyes blearing through salt mist they gavotte upwards, tapping each other's heads or sketching their own eyes on ruled notepaper. Someone cracks a cloudbank: sand ruffle by basalt seas: the mountain slides, twitching.

The peak flops over,

the stone archaeopteryx sunning itself under a transparent umbrella is betrayed by a toothy grin in a toothpaste earthquake. Click and buzz, the fossickers pop off;

and the knight in the enker grene whiderwardeso-ever he wolde.

The shield with its endless knot clumps down and squashes the lot.

Curtained in claret hessian my window is usually open. I tend to wake up late, and sometimes people throw peaches or grapefruit through the window. When the pubs close swollen faces pass like leprous asteroids. They'd knock on the window if it were closed; air, I've found, is the best obstacle. Air makes thick, rich glass: at some point in the house light filtered through our many curtains meets unseen in a dance of colours; so, turned in lamplight, we live in an old bottle. Just before dawn one glimpses the cellarmen: little knots of cut glass statues huddling and whispering in the dusty wind, tinkling in vans' headlights in these concentric, faded vaults in the stomach of the mountain we fell in to. When it drizzles pepsin the lady down the road clutches her grey hair, scuttling between the garbage can and her carnations. But, floating under a blood-coloured light bulb, we mull into punch the rendered tissues of our keepers, toast glass in glasses shot with streaks of red. I think of hawks snapping in the invisible sky

with a frightened mutation of pity.

the mountain crumbles

keeping still is the mountain a peaceful place among trees it is a place of

peace

a tree place, among trees

a place of terror

no one

becomes a mountain

almost

18

Tonight the air is delicate like those tremulous aquatints in the better Victorian chronicles of travel. One would expect it to lisp. 'I think I would look better,' it might say, 'in basic black.' And in the night's night we swing on the clapper of a black bell, tolling impossible polyphonies of burnished fish into the squittering plasma that surrounds us. We're played on a xylophone of coral. Until deferential morning sidles up: 'The sort of place I had in mind' (coughing discreetly) 'is not unlike that depicted on a packet of Alpine; the colours are more or less right and "fresh filtration" conveys, I feel, something of the appropriate idea.'

The Celestial Stag
according to Jorge Luis Borges
inhabits deep tunnels in Manchuria.
It is so named
because of its ambition
to rise to the surface
and the sky,

upon doing which it turns immediately into a foul odour. This is recounted in a volume entitled *The Book of Imaginary Beings*.

20

'The colour transmitted is always complementary to the one reflected.'

'Green and gold come together in a dancing instant of white light. All the air grained with pollen, the flowers translucent, moss whispering through my fingers, the moon arching like a stroked kitten as in the peace of this small room from which I can see neither moon nor flowers I stroke violet petals of air; the fuzz bees left covers my eyelids. Hair incandescent with a sprinkling of meteors some time I could feel over my naked feet the stir and rustle of the dancing water that is more than water, in the cool silver stream that weaves in separate strands its thin music on a fragile mountain

hidden in jasmine-scented clouds. Hidden in a point of light, the mountain where the rivers were written by Corelli.'

21

Shut down shop, hang the willow-pattern, cage its bouncing monks with rough slats. Put your head on a potter's wheel, spin life backwards in clay rivulets, sink into fine china. Grass grows pale blue, the colour of baptism: shuffle the hill people, strung on a stalk: press them into the clay as the wheel whirls faster, until all the figures coalesce at the consistency of a cooked eye; this is what is known as the science of optics. Roll them into a ball, turn round in a circle looking at the horizon. And I became quite dizzy with turning, looking for just the slightest indentation in the sky's perfect hemisphere. Only a bird hung silent above me, too far to distinguish colour or kind. There are holes ripped in the paper plain, already my ankles have gone through the surface. I'd like to see, while I have time, where that bird has got to: but everything has become a funnel and only a scream curves down from the place high above where the bird is drowning in the purity of the air that shapes it. A needle pokes through the top of the sky, the conical sky, the sky shaped like the inside of a mountain.

And a little old Chinese leaps worriedly out of his plate, and with his palsied hands tears up pieces of paper, chews them, spits up the pulp, frantically building up small heaps covered with tigers. He falls through. No, there he is, so high one can hardly see him, vanishing into the funnel's mouth. The boys are waiting round the corner; time to shut down for the day.

22

And the quarry, pinned in a sapless tussock, feels itself shredding around the arrowhead, nerves twisting from the sharp intimacy of steel. With the bowstring's twang and release, the archer flows over the abrading ground into the victim's eye. Clasped together they watch the sun go dim.

On the Zeeland shore a whale rots, waiting for Dürer. Saffron shrouds the foaming cliffs, golden bells underneath await their cracking; and every twig of the dour trees near the snowline turns into a flute, rolling the sun along until he splashes drunken among the islands.

My curtain has stepped aside. In the street are the throb of trucks, and children running, and what I think are sparrows pecking around the hubcaps. No offence taken, none intended: a brightly coloured interval in air why should I punctuate air's own provenance?

The spray of winefalls patters against the fish tanks in a clearing where wooden statues genuflect although dazzled by white light from the broken glass. Around their rooted feet sift sheets of paper, drenched and illegible. Someone has tacked up: 'Danger. The fish have escaped from the blood aquarium.'

23

The statues in the Parthenon used to be painted. Painter and painting move from jewelled ikons to sketches in wash and pen. Brushing myself in I try, still, not to tear the paper; eating oneself is unseemly and all these words have teeth like hungry rivers.