

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.

2

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 rot 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

3

'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

7

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.

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

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.'

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.