

Contrapuntal

I

I had wanted to set down something
about my childhood.
Many words, perhaps.
But the meanings of the words
I did not fully understand.

Far too soon, I outgrew
my childhood. What lay behind me
was civilised enough.
It could not be termed a wreckage.
There was a sea,
but the absence of any waves
belied its pure plasticity.

Sky and water. The elements jousting
within my head. There is no other way
to describe it.

II

Or there *is* another way.
My mother took both my hands
in hers and would not let go.
She had failed at giving birth.
Afterwards, there was an extra scar
in the cemetery. Clouds tore apart
what was left of the summer.

What I am describing, therefore,
is someone else's childhood.
My twin stood on the brink
between soul and flesh, speaking
over and over in the same high tone
so that the human ear could not hear.

The fact that I could hear it
was disconcerting.
Our house faced the Indian Ocean.
On the calmest nights, I could sense
the waves blistering the rocks.
The lighthouse offered mercy.
It was the only one in operation.

III

It took an operation to un-twin us.
We were that close to being born.
That day a moth, dark as mud,
burnt itself in the lamp. It could be smelled
from the adjoining room.
An iguana pulsated on the ceiling.

Next day, a hawk stalled in the sky,
but the meaning of this is randomly
assigned. The grey birds in our skulls
never entirely sleep. We live
on the forefront of possibility.
We hold it in our mouths like a kiss.

IV

My mother paints with watercolours.
They are tiny paintings, but the water
is endless. Soon she, too, will be lifted
by the current, the vast drift of her clothing
staining the page. Soon, too,
there will be one further figure
in the painting. She swirls
the brush in the glass jar. Now the hue
is that of putty. This is not the colour
of imagination.

V

My own death I did not fear.
It had been rehearsed
moments before my birth
in the singularity of fate.
From the far shore
my twin had stumbled out,
dazzled, for a time, by the eroding sun.
That was the shortest day of the year.
And then it was the longest.

Years later, I took to swimming naked,
wrestling with the fiercest currents.
This is not a metaphor.

I was no longer a child.
We moved to another home.
Inside the house
there was nothing to fear.
Outside I saw my twin.
The field, capped in green,

lapped at her heels.
My mother had painted her in.
She was abstracted in vivid colours.

Could this have been done in a single sitting?
What is necessary, my mother explained,
is patience.
The jar of water in the sunshine
like a beacon of light.

VI

It was the shortest day
of the longest year and I am still here.
I have used up the child that played
all day inside my head.

The beach aligns itself in proximity
to the sea and its vast silences.
The noise is where the sea ends
and I begin. My mother took both my hands
in hers and would not let go.

But this is a picture,
after all. It is backlit
so that my shadow runs before me.
It knows the way better than I.
I can only lose it by turning round,
retreating. *Don't go*, my mother said.
But by then it would be too late.

VII

A brushstroke marks the beginning.
Everything was formless and void.
Water was on the face of the earth.
The ocean had no sound.
The face of the deep was beautiful.

Then there were the forty days
and forty nights. Formless and void
and no horizon. Not even a flag on a beach
to let one know where it was safe
for swimming.
I admit that I did not sleep very well
after that.

VIII

My sister is moving away from me now,
or perhaps it is that the living
are drawing closer. Waterborne.
Seaborne. Moss in the scullery.
Everything has turned for the worse,
the unmendable rain
which could not be painted.
If I had written
that could not be pain
would everything be alright?
But I could not write it down,
either then, or at any other time.
After all, I was only human.

IX

My vision is no longer good.
It is as though I have shared
my eyesight with another.
They say *love is blind*, or
blinded by the light.
The sun is escaping off the sea
in enormous white ribbons.
I could see everything
except what was closest
to my heart.

X

Not a riddle:
We are at our most promising
when we cannot fully be discerned.

XI

Statement: I did not want to be alone.
Winter was approaching,
so spindly as to seem ascetic.
Knee-length socks and skimpy jerseys.
The earth pulled away
beneath my feet and I stood
on summer ground once more.
Then the earth disappeared
so that I could not run any faster.
Not running, but flying.

XII

The smell of fresh paint
and my mother smiling as she contemplates
the empty page. It is both turbulent and tamed.
Not even she can express it, she whose belly
is a humming hive of love.

XVI

And so we'd been united by chance,
and then we'd been separated.
A wave separates itself from the seabed
and the breakers barrel towards the shore.
It is here the picture freezes.

XVII

It was the longest day of the year
and the elements jousted
inside my head.

The single jar of water in the sunshine
like a beacon of light.