

Burning the Heartwood

Also by Janet Sutherland:

Crossing Over

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Burning the Heartwood

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For Lesley and Joseph

H e a r t h

The hiss of flame before earth

Sometimes the ear listens
without thought

Unbuttoning the heart
we hear rain
from a wet coat
leaping and cracking
on stone

During long walks

During long walks
a small stone placed in one shoe
anchors the thoughts

Fragment 31

Opposite you he sits,
this man, equal with the gods,
listening to you –
your sweet speech

and your laughter. My heart
lurches when I look
at you, even briefly.
I cannot speak.

My tongue is stopped.
A sly flame runs
under my skin. I can
see nothing. My ears hum.

Sweat drenches me.
I tremble, bleached like
grass. I have come
closer, now, to death.

Cinnabar

He gave me cinnabar, in a small suitcase,
just before my ship sailed out of port.
In the first days when I dare not walk
on deck I would look at the red stain
on the soiled leather and remember his
hands. Each morning I checked the old
barometer for weather, *heel schoon*
it said and the sea was flat, silvered.
Progress was slow. Sailors called to me.
The captain looked away and would not speak.

Later, a swelling sea, *veranderlyk*, and a coastline
near enough to hear the breakers crashing
against rock. Birds on the cliff tops rising
and wheeling, falling as one, gone to nothing.
Sunsets were vermilion, madder lake.
The water, lapis lazuli and azurite. I could
not sleep. The stars reminded me of home.
A dress hung in my cabin waiting for landfall.
Lamplight drew a face upon its folds.
In the creaking of the timbers I heard voices.

One bone black night, I walked on deck,
a lead white moon dipped in and out. The sea
became the folded downs, a lighthouse flashing
endlessly. Near dawn there came a glimmer
on the waves, a glaze like mercury on glass.
Bestendig then, I took my suitcase out
and opened it, a fine red dust rose up
to darken on the surface of the sea.
Though I am emptied too, my alchemist
spent all the hidden gold he left in me.

Touching heartsease

my little pretty patch of wilderness
hung in the short term
between desire and passion
turgid with flowers –
broad iris buds
drift of forget
me nots
mazy with sleep
drawn deep across rain
falling soft
warm silent
in a deepening green

today no edges are visible
colour melts back
this is a veiny petal
place
warm laved under tree
before sun
wet with translucence

we wait here without memory
swimming and drowning
touching heartsease
and approaching
honesty

Another poem

those hands that plunge
loam caked to plant
and fish for white roots
in a lusty soil

have rummaged among maps
to find a route through
wrinkled terraces
indented coombes

you wait to find the sun
to touch
the folded valleys
with a careful thumb

summits and ridges
bound in miniature
your contours plotted
on the edge of spring

Cirrus in bed

I would put
cirrus or
cirrocumulus
to bed
to lay a hair-like filament
across your face

high up a banded linear event
perplexes thought
but wrapped in lace
you open up to touch it with your tongue

In the green and gold of the light

the woman under the tree is
showered with flowers falling
from above
they are paper purple hearts
in the field beyond lie crowns
abundant i enter your dream
quietly and later find myself
tilling the earth

Seed

we are making a path
collecting stones
flint and old buttons from a dead mans shirt

I have let seed fall
here, the tares and the foxgloves drift in
under cover of darkness

birds shit pips into the cracks, the thorns
of the blackberry
harden, tough

skinned stone breaks
and the buds open

Agnes

Agnes has planted her onions
in good time – thin green shoots rise
in rows. She works her shallow hoe
through rampant weeds in May.
In summer buttressed ranks seed blue
and blowsy globes. Still air
surrounds the pungent humid depths
where ants and woodlice journey
over cracking soil. The swelling domes,
the paper-covered monuments
she harvests slowly against winter.
The seasons fit seamlessly one against
the other; her sorrows have many layers.

The stringing of onions

I pushed them in the soil
and left them to grow

on midwinter nights
frost crackled the touch-papers

green tapers pierced spring
each one alone

rising. Minarets, a sky of them
silent, the hidden blue

waiting. On hot still days
tough hollow stems

buttressed the seed-heads
for snails with small intricate shells

to rest on.

Firework

Touch paper
and stand back

ushering kids beyond
the imaginary line
and handing out sparklers

had i forgotten
the fire coming out
as crystals of ice

staring at the diminishing line
tracing a name in joined-up writing
before

Revisions

She woke considering the evidence:
the brown dog was still howling
in the frozen yard. Since supertime
the stubble field, its bedded flint
and cold dark loam, had shrunk.
The wisp of snipe had gone
along with the fall of woodcock.
A cup of water by the bed
was porcelain not solid earthenware
and Spring had receded. It was snowing again.

The punctuation of her thought had changed
as had its metaphor. Field water
in thin, clouded sheets hung cold
across depressions in the rutted land,
and now the hill was not personified
she missed its female curve, the tender slope
that led to knotted copses, undergrowth,
and places she could visit on her own.
The dog was brown, her cup was porcelain,
her thought as delicate as ice.

Resented but adored, the howling dog
would be replaced. She loved the sag
of skin around his jaw, the piebald gum,
the touch of tartar on his canine teeth,
the rough feel of coarse hair along his shoulder
blades. But when his constant voice had gone
what alteration would she find to yard,
to house, and to herself who sheltered there
because the dog loved her? She woke
considering the evidence.

Blackbirds flying

white threadbare linen, hooks removed,
steeped, pounded, placed in vats
and raised in mesh to drain
then dry,
compressed

a winter sub-song heard from undergrowth

as iron gall, dark like a black bird's eye
flowed from the sharpened quill, gum
arabic prevented feathering

the warning call with flicking wings and tail

sometimes the sonnet put itself aside
for lists of births and deaths and marriages,
the cost of fish and ale and wheat for baking bread

a loud and pleasing warbling flutelike song

a cadence rising delicate might be
a broken arc of shell in greenish blue
another place to move to outside this

on the edges of dense woodland, a song post
as permanent as paper scratched with ink