

Péter Závada***Mortar* (2015)****Mortar**

There is little doubt that all forms of limestone, including some of your bones, were once in solution in the sea, mother.

So said the illustrated magazine I read, sitting next to you at the hairdresser's, the dome of your dryer humming reassuringly. Natural processes gave you form, and little creatures helped secrete you. Rainwater, high in carbon dioxide, ate away at the earth's outer crust, it said, and I concluded that you'd been washed into the sea as a big wave of highly concentrated liquid. The humming of the dryer was like the murmur of the sea. Sometimes, there was so much limestone in the water it was deposited as lime mud. There's still quite a lot about, even deep underground. You've been building up all this time. Limestone is good for building with; whitewash is made from builder's lime. When you died, dad told them to make the house all white. Builder's lime is mostly limestone; calcium carbonate, by another name. You are made of little crystals of calcium, mother.

Heated to a thousand degrees centigrade, or thereabouts, you separate into carbon dioxide and calcium oxide. The carbon dioxide is your soul that passes, what remains is the solid calcium oxide; burnt lime.

Dad and I took your burned-up bones and your immolated blood and softly, softly as a pagan mason sacrificing to his mother earth, mixed you into our mortar to make it set; although you were there already.

Every brick we laid that day
 had
 fallen
 down
 by morning.

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But nothing

It is not grief, diffusing through me,
 but emptiness; and what the blind see
 isn't darkness, but nothing.
 But we can't imagine nothing,
 and in fact even a vacuum
 is never completely empty. Just think:
 for years they thought there was nothing
 around the moon but a vacuum

yet it, too, has
a thin, rare atmosphere. The lighter atoms
are blown away by the solar wind
but some of the heavier ones remain
near the surface.
In dreams, I look for you in the bustling street
but it's like searching the cosmos for signs of life.
What if you're one of those civilisations that
destroy themselves before we even know they exist?
But if we did meet, I would tell you
what's been on my mind:
that the night is nothing but the shadow that our planet casts on us
and that your memory is like
a thin atmosphere –
just substantial enough to suffocate in.

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Wreck in Lee (2017)

Space for time

(1)

There is a shore where it is now
a few minutes later. There, I already know
where this street leads, whose end I cannot see
from here.

It runs into an alleyway perpendicular to the sea
into which confused seagulls drift time and again
never more to find
their way back to the water.

On that shore, the houses, like sunflowers,
turn unnoticed, following the light,
and the darkness that descends all at once
re-christens the squares each night.

There, I already know that I am the incarnation
of hours, and there's no room
for the time that keeps piling up. What is still to come
crowds out what is passing.

(2)

I stand, always between two events.

I hold them apart, not letting them
collapse into each other.

My hand smooths against the wall of the future.
It closes, unsuspecting, around the cold handle
of the door I'm about to open.

Maybe it does know something
I don't even suspect.
It reaches all by itself where it has to,
every day outwitting death for me.

(3)

I do not end with my skin.
I cross my boundaries like
the sides of a trapezoid, I overflow
my perceptible banks.

The outside world touches my body,
seeps in at the pores. I watch
the disturbed undulation of your chest,
the mass of the moon draws
to itself the unsettled sea.

Then, only the obvious sky.
the solitude of a mast without a sail,
and the bushes, as they force the bay
into submission.

Words would pronounce us,
but we keep sticking in their throats.
Piling up on the breakers
of a stutter.

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Family Album

(1)

It's not the generosity, but the sense of proportion
you find surprising, the sun scattering its light
and shadows before you:
two kinds of seeds for the hungry birds.

Like an arrowhead, you're yanked out
of observation = you find yourself

amid the darkening murmur. The night takes one last
 deep breath, pulling away from the shore
 before overflowing.

(2)

Breakaway days, cast out of
 the continuity of our plans,
 in the blindspot of our foresight: such was August,
 the summer's singeing our fingertips.

You can hear the trees sobbing in the garden,
 their unmistakable counterpoint
 knocking on the windowpane: the bony fingers
 of departed grandparents =
 no one gave them keys when they changed the locks.

(3)

The shadow of the word is an imagined space,
 the shape of the floating
 blocking out the light.

Sentences
 flee the page
 like little black earwigs,
 chewing holes in the eardrums,
 nesting in the brain
 = their chorus never more to stop.

(4)

There's nothing for it but
 to move into this freefall
 and inhabit its
 accelerating floors.

We stripped off the plaster
 of hollow talk to find ourselves
 face to face with our forgotten selves
 walled into each other.

(5)

The sponges of our eyeballs = soak the view
 in colour and form:
 cut-out shapes where the things should be.
 Like stickers into an album =
 what'll you paste in them?

(6)

Where's your disabled brother?
On the patio? Who left him out there
in the rain?
No one thought to bring him in
he just sits there, rain falling
in his mouth, like a fountain,
birds drinking from it.

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Caring (2021)

The Visit

These words, too, we have now threshed
the treasured fibrous wheat of thought
and what was left, at the end of that,
rotted anyway
as it does every winter.

You can feel the warmth of
the stables-cum-summer kitchen in your bones
but who knows who's cooking here, the soup is cold,
and you were far too liberal with the salt
and tallow.

The leaves of the trees have gone black:
ruined teeth in the snowstorm's mouth.
And the branches of our disquiet are too thick and dark
to let anything we could call consolation
shine through them.

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Our Lady's Dragons

We learned tiles from the animals:
what integument is like as ceiling,
moulting as plaster
peeling off the walls.

And the point where you can't tell

where the cladding begins and the scales end.
That sometimes a window left open
is just a rare form of skin breathing.

And the rule that within every gothic
stone dragon broken off a façade
there quivers, years later, the clang
of the abandoned church bell.

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Portakabins

The routine of portakabins, metal fences
has dissolved into the disinfectant white of waiting rooms,
contoured reception desks, hospital-green sofas.
Habit has been replaced by a sort of determined
stubbornness, though as plans go, I would hardly call it
daring.

It was clear: if I carelessly give way to what
by its very nature crops up as temptation,
then a single rash decision can bring with it
a whole caravan of consequences.

I was hard-headed, at long last, determined, I knew
that if I grabbed that door handle and pushed down,
the room would explode into the darkness:
I step out, and immediately start gaining mass,
drawn towards the geometric centre of the forest,
memorable cracks radiating out, “branchstill”
the nakedness of noise.

Only I can be the hero of my poem
and this upside-down glass
on the chipboard table: furrowed alienness.
Or that layer of dust on the tomato, the
brownish, overripe spots of the peach
as they spread out in rings, like saltmarks
the bright green burgeoning mould.

Caring is what I do every day,
and that has nothing to do with
exhaustion, but the wood still remains stubborn
even as it readies to my hand.
Through the spade I see the ore,
the cathedral the quarry, and there's a wound

on the site of all creation.

I'm full up with the city, I long
to be back in a purer surfeit
where the wood is a kindly wastefulness, and rambling
is time frittered without guilt.

But instead, an end-of-summer feast, and orchids
a starry carpet of fluorescent plankton
on the front of the laser-wrapped basilica,
and product samples in the magazines, smart carbon alloys,
but what is most convincing in its purposiveness
are the geraniums and gentian, as history, like
a Baroque allegory, sprouting out of the ruins.

The slow decay of the copse is a chance
that I pass up, but it isn't only mine.
What I mark out in space: a swollen knot
my associations accrete. The heart of memory
suddenly collapses, the valley coils up around me.

Look, the marshalled markers of spring,
the obedient expanding circles of the wind, in the middle
a smaller central part surrounded by flowers.
Their smoothness stretched tight upon them, their roughness
pricking stubbornly out, the communicating vessels of the stalks,
the truth of the petals taking the place of the bud, now.

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Requiem for Steve Irwin

(1)

Lagoons turn into coastal lakes.
Salt water, over time, turns fresh.
The future of a dominant species
emerges from the vegetation.

When you set off in the Range Rover for Lakefield
National Park, you leave behind
the dry season = drought has dried
the riverbed into a desert of cracks.

But the mangrove swamps still give off
the homely smell of putrefaction.
A teeming variety among the branches,

a rich taxonomy of families,
nascent spawn care
in the nests.

A fanboat carves a path
through the sweltering anaerobic heat,
the hum of its propeller scattering
herons and darters
from among the aerial roots.

(2)

An isolated area. From the roots of the ferns
there's a view of evolution.
Those that found shelter in the mud and brackish water
have grown lungs
with which to blame you
for the dams, the draining of the swamps.

It's your fault. The mudskippers
still remember the massacre of the native-born,
their place taken by colonies of prisoners.
And the descendants of these former convicts
turn back the dinghies, even close to shore,
of the fleeing.

(3)

It's your fault. The mouth of the ravine
still echoes the screams of the murdered.
It tells of the Golden Age of Creation, when
formless space was delineated, resolving into material objects.
Things took form, damselfish were born,
and birds of paradise.

(4)

Every man is terrifying.
You'd rather be an anteater
in a catshark's dream.
You'd shed your white, middle-class skin,
hardening shame into reptilian scales.
You'd assume the outer covering of
a tortured region.

Oh, for some blond naturalists
to trap you 'mid ropes
quite near some holidaymaker's paradise.
Your empathy would acclimatise,
like the temperature of blood,

to the cold puddles; and time,
like the blood's circulation, would be reversible.

(5)

Shadows are the body's harbingers.
The vertical slit of the pupil floats
darkly in the flat, elongated construct of the skull:
an inert log in the eutrophic water.
Blind terror of dawn.

The vertebrae of a spine appear in the water
like a scattered archipelago.
A habitat shrinking into an individual,
a slimy mise en abyme.

But you're not one of them.
You will never know the
phenomenology of a tick.
The escape routes of guilt
lead you back into the body.

Those that walked in the footsteps
of the prehistoric reptiles left their own traces,
so that birds may now drink
the water gathered there.
Darwin, Comte, and Spencer have drawn you into
the one-way street of phylogenesis.

(6)

But the mangrove swamps refuse to leave.
Barely audible splashes in the depths:
crabs scuttling in their muddy holes,
as the riverbank clings to the shrubs
so as not to be swept away by the waves.
Only a fraction of continuity reaches you as,
over millennia, dry land
gains ground upon the waters.

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The Motion of the Moray Eel (2023)

A History of Wickedness / Redrawing the Map of the Known World

The tower was the father I never had.
Its topmost turrets are washed by maritime hegemony.
Like a frowning profile, I know
the Moorish balconies by their protrusions.

Little is known about my youth.
I studied mathematics and navigation as the times demanded.
An extension of my index finger,
auxiliary lines set off for the shores of
an appropriated spice trade.

On the twentieth of November a shoal of names
flared up and blazed across expectation.
As we rounded the Cape of Good Hope
under the Portuguese flag, the Leonids
were staining the horizon turquoise.

What's a pension, an estate, a set of spurs,
when you can name a river in Mozambique after copper?
What are four hundred women and children burnt to ash,
when you can hoist to the yardarm
a new, more lucrative era?

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A History of Wickedness / The Tour

The majolica swan is a letdown. Though it's true
that in the story, a bird tows the hero's boat to shore,
in the wake of two lost wars this is not perhaps
the most effective myth to encourage
the flowering of a dominion's symbols.

The creature selected is of key importance: it may be
embroidered in gold on red silk, onto chair covers and bedspreads;
centuries later its impact may be decisive, as much on
the takings of cheese shops and dairy-farms
as on ski-lift traffic in the Southern Alps.

The tour begins here. The website did not limit
the time spent in each room, but here we're being
fobbed off with an audio-guide. The bed's strangling tendrils,
the tapestry's oppressive detail, you can almost feel
the gothic getting under our skin.

If we could choose between awe and slaughter,

we ought to banish war to paintings.
If, though, it's between our mother and the woods,
whichever has less sympathy should be the one to raise us.

This is the Singers' Hall, behind it the kitchen
complete with built-in stove and a special basin
for fish. Let's skip the gift-shop, and exit
the ill-conceived symbol before sundown.

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A History of Wickedness / C₁₇H₂₁NO₄

1.

In April 1505, as Spanish cruelty was soaking
into the ground on the Inca coca plantations.
the coca bush, with its characteristic velvety swishing,
marched into Europe.

You're telling me this, your fingers embracing the bottle's
cool neck, and the bottle in turn the black, ribbed taste:
a double encirclement.

A pact, I'm telling you, between the market and tradition,
and just look at the privileges that came along with it!
The name stayed, but the active agent was left in the past,
dropped from the list of ingredients early in the century.

Now all we speculate about is the proportion of sugars
in the Eastern European versions:
how they adjust this to the local political climate,
the prevailing meteorological conditions.

2.

It took time for Amerigo Vespucci to notice the
the Peruvian silver miners' unusual staying power.
By then, they'd been paying their taxes to the Spanish
with the bright green leaves for ages.

You say what was internal strife in the mother country
was stifling calm in the colonies.
So, I'm Abraham Cowley, trustworthy,
discreet secretary to the King of England,
and I'm just composing the first written record
of the coca bush in verse form:

‘O, Western Africa, Mexico, Columbia!
 You can cut the diversity in your jungles with a knife,
 and the evergreens tower twenty to thirty feet high!
 Produce for us your longish, egg-shaped leaves,
 Your golden, red-veined flowers!
 Put out for us your clustering, five-follicled fruits!
 O, mallow-flowered order, O pantropical taxon, O!’

3.

You’re picking at the label resignedly, the twirly
 Spencerian script, the white ribbon on a red disc.
 We’ll never know what secret ingredients were held
 in the secure vaults of the Sun Trust Bank. If they contained
 tears of Corsican prickly pear, sweat of fire salamander.

What is the patching up of a recipe torn in half
 between two company directors prone to taking offence?
 What is it, if not the loveliest token of the meeting of
 two minds? Meanwhile, the spicy black scent of the cola nut
 lingers in the air, weaving its way through the centuries.

4.

The glimmering liquid reflects sleepless Freud
 wandering at night through almost every
 ward of the Allgemeines Krankenhaus, while
 morphinism, migraines and impotence lose, for now,
 their battle with benzoylecgonine methyl ester.

Next, a group of ’56 emigrants, clambering excitedly
 off the ship at Camp Kilmer. Lining up at the port’s
 only cola vending machine.

And now, before our eyes, the star-shaped freeways are smudged
 strips of brightness in the watered-down Atlanta night.
 Crows between dark furrows in the fields, somewhere
 near the bottling plant at Dunaharaszti.

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Pendulum Motion / The octopus as a word infiltrates the language as ocean...

The octopus as a word infiltrates the language as ocean,
 filling the space left by the outflowing water; language claims
 the octopus, opening up a new market for it in its symbolic
 system. We all know the ocean is a precondition
 for the octopus, the incompressibility of water for the muscled

swimming bag; the animal's backwards pumping
 pushes against the medium's resistance. It was made how it is
 by environmental factors, much like the way leather gloves are stretched
 by long use or the astute shoemaker's business strategy formed
 by the conditions of the footwear market. When all's told
 the octopus, too, is a commodity: Nature's mischievous answer
 to incompressible water within the ocean's complex trading of goods.
 But we mustn't consider one variable alone; if, let's say,
 the price goes up, demand will drop. We must keep track of
 the complex interplay of numerous factors, the frenzied dance
 of graphs and equations, which resembles most closely the flailing
 tentacles of an octopus. The immutability of the medium therefore
 requires constant adaptation, much like when the living glockenspiel
 of the octopus embryo's protoplasm attunes itself to the waves.

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[More recent poems](#)
 (2023-)

Inverse Ice-Crack

Veins of ice in a soap bubble
 congealing below freezing
 as they spread in our mind's eye:
 the leaf of a fan palm, hoar-frost-white.
 But how would reality respond to all this?

Perhaps it's that literature has always been the medium
 of cloud-castles, and not knowledge-creation?
 Or, if it was, science simply used it to tell its own stories?
 Language, after all, is a place is step out into
 in order to marry things to ideas.

The cinema was crammed to bursting;
 the screen like a pale hand held up in the air.
 The young female poet spoke to the much older,
 multiple-award-winning writer, respectfully
 and anxiously, revealing flashes of her own narcissism
 tempered with self-irony. And the motifs of the book
 in question were echoed in the ornamentation of the hall's dome.

The moral? Art is not obliged to follow the example
 of reality. What, in that case, would be the point of imagination?
 The inverse ice-crack, when the wafer-thin shards
 close into one contiguous sheet of ice.

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The currency of the plain

I know it's a lot. Even with the lower rate of tax and the market price cap factored in. Dina's eyelashes, like centipedes. You only have to pay for the drive shaft, but that'll be plenty.

The fall in population numbers is due to declining biodiversity, mechanisation, artificial fertilisers, insecticides. But Patrick's Audi still belched out smoke down by the ditch, a clicking, grinding noise filtering from the steering wheel — twisted all the way round — from somewhere beneath the drive shaft boot on the viscous differential coupling: water or dirt must have gotten where the oil should be.

Chestnut-red back, dark spots to the wing, the head and tail tending to ash. Magnified by ten through the front of a 42mm lens, the stable currency of the plain, in exchange for the watching, the time devoted.

But the pointed beak and the needle-sharp claws were gone by the time the rescue truck arrived. We got home, and it grew dark like a bite. Lay the table. We will have forgotten something. A stubborn vividness has covered the leaves.

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The dogs of Chernobyl

A new dictionary every day, install of a new database, over-write, a conscientious author must consider the shortage of paper, the ozone gas emissions during printing, though books are hardly the reason they're chopping down the Rainforest.

Satellites last year alone reported a loss of 28%, the main causes being: the spread of agriculture, illegal logging and mineral extraction, infrastructure projects. Global capitalism has not overcome the class war, only turned it into a climate catastrophe.

Ah but our captain with his fifty horse!

Back then he thought a bit and switched from song to codex.
They even had the phraseology of flowers, those poems,
but that made them no kinder on the ecosystem.

And really, graphomaniacs should rap,
Or then there's the e-reader: it won't survive an impromptu
forest fire, it's true, but still the cloud's a digitised caricature
of the auto-da-fe. You still can't write the code for a Benjamin or Borges,
no matter how many hyperlinks you use.
Compared to that, the mind is the Library of Babel.

And the image of the tree really does blot out the tree,
the map will soon cover the city.
And we are like the dogs of Chernobyl:
making puppy-eyes with evolutionary intent.

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