

Christopher MATTHEWS

POEMS

BERN, 1942

PRIVATE VIEW

Christ, and don't these bastards talk! Now the light's gone bone dry
the yard starves back to two dimensions, slate parched by a puddle
the colour of engine oil; this blinks in one corner
while another (can't blank the muted drivel of 'views'
loose behind me) hoards, in patience, its gruel of black leaves.

An inheritance. Also the quietly striving trees
that lure the grey-brooded eye away from the hum
of the show - some Klees - and launch it across a wide valley
-stick river, municipal buildings, then clambering villas -
till it founders blank at the sky, that wide disclaimer.

As if domed in a bell-jar. Here, the all-pensive man
-saw him how many years ago, but the mind takes pictures -
might have angled his naked head, and with thinking fingers
tried the weight and pain of this terrible still air.

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CATCHING UP*i*

The dispassion of that back,
setting the skull to scan high dusk-drab windows;
the ash stucco of each frontage,
badged with the worm-casts scuffed up from warm sand
on dead days with his sister
decades ago, when they coupled crime with boredom,
lust to sly fright;
when they cast the slow die for life
and sex always came foaming in, their own clockwork ocean.

A stage. They sprang beyond it.
Eventually one great fear gripped lapsing life
and their swoon found proper footing:
they lunged for their clothes, surged on, two comely youngsters
only slightly anaesthetised
and on fond, non-fondling terms. Though a bit cut out
of each still twitched
it would have been vile to notice
those limbless fractions clasping in the tide.

Half a lifetime, then his letter.
I'd had no idea through all our years of tones,
of terms, of glazing friendship
- never seen this town. And yet we'd been close as water.
Never met this sister. Now
life breaks blank out, but me stalking up dumb behind him
feels pantomime stuff;
legs braced, the huge head thrown back,
he looks mad, eyes nailed to the true north of one window.

ii

I've hit a funny place
this trip back to my dawns.
Some crust is breaking up.
I sense that there are things
opening up and out
inside me - things just starting,
the hum of cell division,
a region where each haulm
stands whole, disjunct, and true,
articulate as *Ob*,
deep kin with all the rest.

My just-pubescent sister
grows from the grey earth
squatting to pee - no drawers,
hoarse fingers plucking soil
gaily as she squirts,
squinting, non-committal.
Her look acknowledges
I lust, But that's for you.
Myself? It's a good piss.
She shivers and the stink
winds heavily about her.

Blank pane. But now a light
flicks on. The unshifting shine and
absence of all shadow
absence of all shadow
itself sets off the budding,
the crowding, a belly-scooping
delight. My lips are drawn
tight across my teeth,

await the unsteady Now,
hold back a wave of spit:
I taste, I am, this grimace.

So it's sheer embarrassment
when Mark shows up. I'd phoned
hinting and set a date,
says he, then scrawled a letter.
As we turn off for a talk
the light shies from the window.

KINDLY LIGHT

I've been rubbing away: it's a patch like the scuffing of plague
or the scab that caps a wrinkle;
I've tried various creams, no use - as when titties sag,
no change; or the first sharp wrinkle.

I know that women are wired to moan a bit
when they slide into autumn glories,
to wince wisdom from watching the fall of the earth-drawn tit:
What's Hell? - Time in the raw is.

But then 'women' is me, at the 5 a.m. of the world,
not lost, half happy - laughing;
relieved to find most of the blatant banners furled,
no sex left worth the staffing.

And saved? - the whole joys of a top-notch cup of tea,
pangs close as pot and kettle,
thrills not felt (when you feel them) blurred and wincingly,
struck off from the boyfriend's mettle,

but at home and sole and always - or as long
as the light lasts: happy eye!
I'll have yonks of that looking yet; grab, if I'm strong,
live bliss before I die.

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BOSTON, MASS.

MALE NURSE (PRIVATE)

The kid is walking into doors.

Again, he can breathe a rumba.

Last night he had such mild seizures
as if, light, he could not die.

I tell her the brain has fallen,
it's bits - some bright, some nowhere.
Sounds great when he chuckles about,
slight kid with a coke, a kink, a Rubik's cube.

"Don't tell me what I'm thinking,"
he says, then fouls himself
unknown. Solo. Changed him
and he hung on my neck like reason. Had no say.

The mom calls him her Charlie Conundrum
and trusts I'm the stooge to fix him.
Midnights I want mom's fanny that sweet much
I palm her kid's bursting brow.

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TERRAZZA

The light is fractious with coming storm.
He strides up fiercely to her table
toting a chalk-white cigarette
that frays into grey; lets drop a rumbling
greeting.

The scattered diners are tensed up for rain.

She returns her "Hi."
It is blank, ironed-out,
one perfect blue sky.

My dwarf coffee holds all she's hidden.

That eye-sized depth (*a ristretto*)
forms the dark core of thunderous boomings

but from the way they lean their heads together
over a guide-book, the two grey napes
have found ease in their dead-end seesaw,

so I sip to them. No real thunder.

THE SOMME

1916

There's grit in a faith, rude strength - but I'm too feeble
not to love my life, Christ perishing; not to clutch
this vanishing, maybe foolish; not to flinch from God's love.

And the blackness of our trench - can't shape it my pew,
dream the fetor incense, the smashed limbs *corpus Christi* -
Help me, I can't believe... But to die like a man,
that animal, man; but to lose my shining lady...
- It's here at the end the word, though fallen down
in blood, returns, a lost thing rent from home

but found where great rage has scoured man back to pilgrim.
The comely sound sweetened his quartered mouth:
"water," he moaned - I don't think I'd have touched him

except the word christened him and turned from muck
to man this Jack, this broken, dirtied baby,
a soul splashing in death's wet throat, all gape and gargle.

- Which is funny: his little fever shakes and shakes
and I'm sponging it (with filth): as in a mirror
the clay convulses right to the horizon.

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GA-GA

For me the enormous problem is this bubbling-up of feeling.
 I didn't *want* the rain-softened angel from a ceiling near his aunt's,
 nor his scorched eyes. There've been these months of dad's empty-lidded calm,
 a downfall one's own fall, down the line. It doesn't sort with gifts of plants

- each a true beauty - nor stupid men who think their right stems
from being human,
 just that. Frank has a right to break his slack heart over me?
 (if he *could*- that damp thing simply is not frangible)
 and so moons about like Jesus or - worse - comes on brotherly.

For a while now being round men has felt like shifting lumps of wood,
 they're so heavy, and I feel clumsy, having shucked the sex-war gestures.
 Not that I'm grace and lightning with the girls, but *there* I'm agnostic,
 absorbed, while the god of sex rears so toad-like, hulled of vestures,

an evil vision in dried glue. Dad's crash has gone numbly along
 with a general wearing-down of feelers tuned to life - we're not picking up
 quite the wide wave-band of the bored. He - put bleakly - *can't* be bothered,
 and I'm too happy, though I must hide this (if I'm nimble, slick enough,

small, sleepless...); but the tilted mirror with the bed-leg plunging through it, the
 annunciation a souped-up bike sprays - wild guy scouring our green lane -
 they make candor cry out in greeting, from a mouth burned bright with love,
 praise the loose dice-throw of a world flailed like fall's roof-whipping rain.
