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Poems

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Poems

Abstract
A FINE NIGHT IN THE CITY, TAKING DOWN CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS, POSITIONING, THE SEVENTH DECADE, SHE, AUTUMN IN CANADA

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A FINE NIGHT IN THE CITY

At midnight in the breathing dark
I walk through my house: it is
lit from beyond itself by the light
of the city, translucence of
moonlight, white stars asleep on
the harbour water. This is home,

I whisper, amazed; this is where
I live. If anything is mine it is this
vision, this luminous gift held out
to the unknowing dark. Last week
I was busy about the world’s airports
pursuing the traveller’s ridiculous
industry of survival, each moment
bursting with trifles like over-stuffed
luggage. In this stillness I neither

lift nor handle, I stand at the window,
weighing nothing, carrying nothing.
I breathe, and the light grows

within me. Home is where your life
holds you in its hand and, when
it is ready, puts you quietly down.

TAKING DOWN CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS

I was first in this room twenty years ago;
alone - I crouched over there on a bare floor
and leaned on the low window sill;

without knowing it, I was looking for signs -
the future. Any future, I wanted.
Time that would know how to pass, how to take on
one by one the difficult days
at the end put each one
carefully, steadfastly to rest.

A place too. A new place, where the death which had made
vagrants of us in our own house, and now followed us
everywhere, might sit down and speak at last
with a low-toned, trusting sorrow:

I looked out on this lumpy hillside garden,
the shifting sea, felt the October sun
strike coolly across the empty floor
and I made some kind of wordless affirmation
to weather and water, the harsh and tangled growth
of hillside plants. A small wind came up, I remember.

This Christmas children were here, perched on
the furniture, tacking up cardboard stars and trees,
reaching up to tie shiny things
to the tree’s bristled branches, its piney smell
fresh and sharp. This morning as I drag it over the floor
the smell still hangs within its spikey niches.

Always after celebration there are small griefs,
a coming down, the old apprehensions still waiting about unchanged. Yet I am glad to be here. We have
neither solved nor relieved our loss; rather
it has come with us,
we live in its constant knowledge. Each Christmas is now,
or the last one she spent with us,
or perhaps next year –

and hills are instructive: whatever grows here,
each green cell, each pinprick of sap,
knows in its very fibre that to live and breathe at all
is to act provisionally.

At the door I look out to pohutukawas
burgeoning all over the hillside,
their lavish blooms so lightly held
that even by tomorrow
those imperial crimson threads
will already have begun to blow away.
POSITIONING

In a rainy spring my house is often dark;
I stand at a window watching it drift past,
the grey and silver weather; closer in,
there's a box of curled impatiens flowers
holding up minute green saucers to the rain
on my bedraggled but luxuriant balcony.

Here is the action, of course I stand and stare.
It's beautiful, this expanse of growth and
seasons, nights and rainy days – and it is mine,
which is to say I am enclosed within it.
An imprisonment benign, magnificent, and no less
ruthless for being what I exactly chose.

Downhill, in the bus shelter at Courtenay Place,
the old man will be staring outwards too, his
ancient tweed unkempt, his yellow beard
tattered at the edges. He'll watch the rain,
its gentle remorseless wetting of his entrances
and exits – he who has so many, and so few.

His eyes are watery, blue-white, alight with
calculation, his wits continually at work
pursuing restless appetites – a roof, a drink,
a word. I shiver at his journeys in the rain
and frost, the thirst that drives him over gritty
asphalt, his only gardens City Council plots –

and turn back to my dim interior: it seems
that I, directing my wayward years towards
this privacy - and dryness in the rain - now have
what he must struggle for. Yet each of us
has chosen our servitude. Like rain, our
inward seasons drive, confine us, equally.
THE SEVENTH DECADE

I am not a battery hen
I am free range.
Distance opens around me
filled with the cloudy weather
of other peoples' lives.

Their sharp rain chills me too
of course, but they
do not know
of my nesting.
It is in the deep hillside

it changes
and draws me further and further
away. It is not
one place. It is unknown
even to me.

SHE

It's late, she's got time at last to sit still
with a cup of tea - or rosehip syrup perhaps,
or flower water, or a mud-and-parsnip-leaf

concoction left out by children now mercifully
asleep; her feet stir a coloured mosaic of
Lego pieces to find a place, and her eyes fall

on a blue hem still to be stitched, as she
fingers her way through more mystifying
fragments the day has left lying about,

unseen now but alive as a nest of spiders
(those fierce tears, the kicking, a fainting . . .)
She's tired, and beautiful in her tiredness,

not in the allowed way (a mother's such a servant
for decency's sake you say she's pretty), but
because pieces of the life she cares for remain

in her, on her, a crystalline magnetic collage,
reflecting not only children picking their noses and discovering God peering out of their belly-buttons, but the presence of the oldest goddess, her peasant spirit waiting still in this warm crumpled kitchen, with a capacious wisdom that daily connects danger and dirt with the songs of the stars — waiting, I say, for the homage long, long due from her race, and never sufficiently given.

AUTUMN IN CANADA

Naturally, it’s the fall — what else could it be, this loosening, letting go, these faint purposeful dry showers, the crushed mosaic under my feet? The fall. It passes through me with an airy rustle, as though I too relinquish a burden — all that earlier bursting out and youthful fullness, the imperceptible change to a more attenuated quality, a leaning or slackening, the occasional quick-smothered yawn that tells you (or would if you listened) that a seasonal wind will one day take from you what you have already long been losing. Beside me on the grass are hundreds of big dark birds: ‘Canada geese’ says an old woman on a bench, ‘they come every year.’ I stand close but they don’t care, sea birds awkward on land, yet not wild, carrying within their oddly asymmetrical bodies a map of the seasons they too know by watching for signs.