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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
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.