
Brian Edwards

WINTERING

There is still grass on the hillslope, brown wisps poking like pencil lines through the snow and bunching in crazy scribbles where the cover is thin. Moved by winter cold, a mad poet writes to keep a few ideas warm. Shadows shift with the dipping sun, tracing patterns of bare branches, those black and ruined choirs where birds once sang, and a lone hare limps beside hedgerows and the stream, travelling the length of a fenceline. On the rise, a stone church huddles as darkness falls, its windows closed in silence, and off in the valley a cottager's light comes on, and then another. Hunched into a notebook, lost in his conjurings and careless of the cold and darkness, the poet continues.

Hello, I say. Hello.
But there is no answer,
only the wind's sigh
along the stone wall
and noise of branches.

For this is the land of the dead. In the churchyard, gravestones gleam in fitful light, catching fire for a moment, as if in some fantastic reassertion of a spirit that never dies. No waste but continuation. Listen to the voices of the once dead. Listen, and let us hear what they say. Speak Geoffrey Morgan. Speak Elsie Aura. Albert Thomas too, and Catherine Ada and Morgan Watkin. And what does the child say? The tiny child, the one who died so young and never grows old? For this is the land of the dead. In the silence, we can hear them.

Hello, I say. Hello.
And wind whispers
in the she-oaks
and along the wall.

I see sunlight, brilliant sunlight,
and feel the warmth.
There are sounds of children
in the street.
Noise of cartwheels in gravel,
of water beneath the hull,
of people by the river.

And I see the young woman
at her easel,
the old woman in her garden,
and the man with the horse.
There are flowers too,
whole fields of flowers.

We need no voice from the dead to tell us this, the sceptic says. Ah, patience. You must be patient. What is there after death? he says. If they can, let them tell us where they are and what they know. Do they know only their own past? Or do they, like God, see into the mysteries of things? Do they know anything? What do they see? I hear this, as a cold wind crosses the stubble and rattles in the she-oaks. Moonlight gleams for an instant on the stones, on names fixed in marble, and the reverie slips like a black seal in black water. Huge waves rise over the churchyard, the wind is a torrent and time's past crashes like surf on rocks. Lifted in this surge, one's view shifts as voices come crowding in — they are barely distinguishable from noises of wind and water.

he says there is no change to be had
once all dues are paid, but for all that,
delight resides in small things; he says
that love counts, that we know what we
know too late to prevent dying and,
besides, immortality's
not all it's cracked up to be

she says that she has loved well,
despite stories to the contrary,
that nothing now can affect
her sense of beauty and value,
that against deserts of eternity
she stacked walls of moments

The boatman is waiting. Some say the trip's long though I suspect it's no more than an eye-blink from here to there. There is only one light in the tower; the rest is darkness. Images are lifting from the page, flying over lakes and valleys and mountains, gathering in small eddies of recognition, plunging on into the tumult. In his fury, his mind unsettled and his table bare, a poet continues.