

Derek Walcott

WHITE EGRETS

I

Plod of a hoof in blood-crusted earth.
Clatter of a rivulet over bleached stones.
Black bulls trampling the shade of cork trees,
wind in the high wheat whispering like surf
in Sicily or the opening pages of Cervantes.
Two storks on the bell tower in Alcalá.
The boring suffering of love that tires.
Though you change names and countries, España, Italia,
smell your hands, they reek of imagined crimes.
The cypresses suffer in silence, but the oaks, sometimes,
rustle their foliate lyres.

II

A train crosses the scorched plain in one sentence.
In the cork groves shadows rhyme with their sources.
No name except Andalusia would make sense
from the train window of horses and galloping horses.
Echoes and arches of Spain, the word *campagna*
you smuggled from Italy and its fields of sunflowers;
is there a tilde here for Anna or Anya?
Iris stipples the hot square in passing showers,
shadows pause in the sun's capework, ornate balconies rust,
the sunlight of olive oil slowly spreads in saucers
and loaves that are hard to break have a sacred crust.
Esperanza, cherished Esperanza!
Your lashes like black moths, like twigs your frail wrists,
your small, cynical mouth with its turned-down answer,
when it laughs, it is like a soft stanza
in a ballad by Lorca, your teeth are white stones
in a riverbed, I hear the snorting stallions
of Cordoba in heat, I hear my bones'
castanet, and a rattle of heels like machine guns.

III

Suppose I lived in this town, there would be a fountain,
the tower with two storks, I called them cranes,
and black-haired beauties passing; then again,
I wouldn't be living in a posh hotel. All of Spain's
heart is in this square, its side streets shot
and halved by the August sun. The bullring would be
closed until Sundays, heat
would scorch the park benches, and there would be a lot
of pigeons hopping on the cobbles with their pink feet.
I would sit there alone, an old poet
with white thoughts, and you, my *puta*, would be dead
and only half your name would be remembered
because by then you would have lost power
over my sleep, until all that remains
is the fountain's jet. Storks on the bell tower, or cranes.

IV

For the crackle and hiss of the word 'August,'
like a low bonfire on a beach, for the wriggling
of white masts in the marina on a Wednesday
after work, I would come back and forget the niggling
complaints of what the island lacks, how it is without
the certainties of cities, for a fisherman walking back
to this village with his jigging rod and a good catch
that blazes like rainbows when he shows it to you,
for the ember that goes out suddenly like a match
when the day and all that it brought is finished,
for the lights on the piers and for the first star
for whom my love of the island has never diminished
but will burn steadily when I am gone, wherever you are,
and for the lion's silhouette of Pigeon Island,
and your cat that presumes the posture of
a sphinx and for the long, empty sand
of your absence, for the word 'August,' like a moaning dove.

V

The chessmen are as quiet on their chessboard
as those life-sized terra-cotta warriors whose vows
to their emperor with bridle, shield and sword,
sworn by a chorus that has lost its voice,
echo in that astonishing excavation.
Each soldier was a vow, each gave his word
to die for his emperor, his cause, his nation,
but still to stand still, breathlessly erect
as his own effigy that silence will select
and station like a chessman on a board.
If vows were visible we would see ours,
the way these changeless chessmen stand in the light
vowing eternal fealty to a cause
whose queen you are, vigilant through the night,
and suffering silently from love's deep curse,
that not all the clamour of battle can set right,
only the chessmen's silence, while trees toss
on the lawn outside with the music that is Time's
and vows that die and harden in their loss,
while a sable blackbird twitters in the limes.

VI

This was my early war, the bellowing quarrels,
at the pitch of noon, of men moving cargoes
while gulls screeched their monotonous vowels
in complex curses without coming to blows;
muscular men swirling codfish barrels
and heaving rice bags, who had stunted nicknames,
who could, one-handed, hoist phenomenal rolls
of wire, hoist flapping galvanise with both arms
to pitch it into the hold while hooks and winches
swung nearby. At lunch they ate in the shade
of mountainous freight bound with knots and cinches,
ignoring the gulls with their boulders of bread.
Then one would be terribly injured, one lose a leg
to rum and diabetes. You would watch him shrink
into his nickname, not too proud to beg,
who would roar like a lorry revving in the prime of his drink.

VII

When light fell on the bushes around Soufrière,
it was orderly, it named what it fell on—
hog plum and zaboca, dasheen, tannia and melon,
and between the hills, the orange and vermilion
immortelles that marked the cocoa's boundaries.
We stopped there, driving in prolonged stupor
at perfection framing itself, like the light
that named the town walls of the Marque, the shore
of the nibbling Adriatic, that made me elate
as a windblown chicken hawk, or an eagle's emblem
over Aquila, or where a hidden, guttural brook
recited 'Piton Flore, Piton Flore,' cedar, cypress and elm
speak the one language, the wind, from a common book,
open at summer. I stopped and listened to them.

VIII

We were by the pool of a friend's house in St. Croix
and Joseph and I were talking; he stopped the talk,
on this visit I had hoped that he would enjoy,
to point out, with a gasp, not still or stalking
but fixed in the great fruit tree, a sight that shook him
'like something out of Bosch,' he said. The huge bird was
suddenly there, perhaps the same one that took him,
a sepulchral egret or heron; the unutterable word was
always with us, like Eumaeus, a third companion,
and what got him, who loved snow, what brought it on
was that the bird was such a deathly white.
Now when at noon or evening on the lawn
the egrets soar together in noiseless flight
or tack, like a regatta, the sea-green grass,
they are seraphic souls, as Joseph was.

IX

I hadn't seen them for half of the Christmas week,
the egrets, and no one told me why they had gone,
but they are back with the rain now, orange beak,
pink shanks and stabbing head, back on the lawn
where they used to be in the clear, limitless rain
of the Santa Cruz valley, which, when it falls, falls
steadily against the cedars till it mists the plain.
The egrets are the colour of waterfalls,
and of clouds. Some friends, the few I have left,
are dying, but the egrets stalk through the rain
as if nothing mortal can affect them, or they lift
like abrupt angels, sail, then settle again.
Sometimes the hills themselves disappear
like friends, slowly, but I am happier
that they can come back, like memory, like prayer.

X

All day I wish I was at Case-en-Bas,
passing incongruous cactus which grows in the north
in the chasm-deep ruts of the dry season
with the thunderous white horses that dissolve in froth,
and the bush that mimics them with white cotton
to the strengthening smell of kale from the bright
Atlantic, as the road-ruts level and you come upon
a view that dissolves into pure description,
a bay whose arc hints of the infinite
and Africa. The trade wind tirelessly frets
the water, combers are long and the swells heave
with weed that smells, a smell nearly rotten
but tolerable soon. Light hurls its nets
over the whitecaps and seagulls grieve
over some common but irreplaceable loss
while a high, disdainful frigate bird, a *ciseau*,
slides in the clouds then is lost with the forgotten
caravels, privateers and other frigates,
with the changing sails of the sky and a sea so
deep it has lost its memory of our hates.

XI

My climate now is the marsh, the leaden
silver water that secretes in reeds
or moves with a monody that happily might deaden
endeavour and envy and the waste of noble deeds
for reputation's sake, my frenzy is stasis,
like a shallop with a staved-in hull.
I fly like the slate heron to desolate places,
to the ribbed wreck that moss makes beautiful,
where the egret spreads its wings lest it should totter
on the aimed prow where crabs scrape for a perch,
all that vigour finished with which I sought a
richer life to this halfhearted search.
I am thinking of a specific site
that is Hunter's Cove, away from the road
and traffic, of a marsh in marsh-light
with charging dusk and the boom of a toad
in the reeds at the firefly-flecked night
and a heaven improbably swayed in mirroring water.

XII

The nausea of horror continued as he read
and wrote and read and wrote in the iron-railed
Spanish hotel with wrought-iron pergolas
in its inside courtyard, at how often he had failed
with women, in a bullfighting town, Merida,
its ruined amphitheatre ringed with silent olés
for the flourish of his thoughts, for the self-murder
of his pitiable jealousy. Time might deliver
him of his torment, Time that had gnawed at the stone and
eaten its heart. You, my dearest friend, Reader,
its river running through reeds and lights on the river
by the warp of a willow coiled like an ampersand.