

The Service

A Life of the Virgin Mary

I

In God's house
I stood
in the temple
my body

to be sown
like a field
in furrows
of earth.

In God's house
I bent
asking
the ground

tasting
the acrid
sweepings
of slaughter.

Shall I
be opened
by this
grace

received
and greeted
with
a kiss?

Jerusalem
reaps
a harvest
of rue

counts
the signs
for new
arrivals

scans
billboards
above
houses.

On the steps
of the city
a blind man
watches.

F/or certain
cause
to leave
this post

he marks
the fields
ploughed
and sown.

To God's house
I brought her
temple
to temple

a nubile
line
drawing
eyes.

For God's house
I reared her
the temple's
consent

a servant
with hair
wrapped
in cloth.

Run
to God's house
the vaulted
estate.

I am
emptied
of weight
and sweetness.

II

For this
my trousseau
they send
twelve rods

from which
I kiss
the one
that flowers.

Twelve rods
for the years
and lines
of blood.

Come
take this
sign
of love

lead me
down
to the place
by the sea

make me
the mother
of the many
I was shown.

The fountain
took me
wellspring
and envoy

with cold
water
brought
to bed.

It tinkled
playing
a caper
of sound

unwrapping
the cloth
to fold
and fall.

The light
quicken
I rose
and grew

stepping
on shards
of broken
pitchers.

Apple
without star
her fruit
is seed-less.

Bending
doubled
we saw her
kneel

tell them
she has lain
in daylight
with the dirt.

We saw her
rise
smash
the jars

water
mixing
earth
and clay.

Tell them
she sings
laughing
destroying.

III

I watch
the flower
bloom
and seed

petal
by leaf
for a green
fruit.

I hear
events
like mine
uncanny

I rise
and mount
the aging
ass

the sun
beating
down
the road.

Cousin
wait
he stops
and slows.

In God's house
the old man
does not
believe

this favour
that comes
without
receipt.

Counts
the days
for words
to loosen

this grace
that comes
to wreck
and ravage.

On the steps
the blind man
cocks
an ear

listens
for a high
pitch
and tenor.

Stop
feel
the kick
and yield

cousin
the two
still
inside

running
like horses
down
a track

they trade
head-starts
grow
and shrink.

Stop
feel
my life
laboured

for the sake
of yours
the younger
one.

IV

They
have gone
to the house
of bread

left
the nephew
to guard
the shop.

Outside
he sits
and draws
in sawdust

circles
lines
sceptres
orbs

a crown
and cloak
spear
and sword.

How will
they reckon
that
prognosis?

Cousin
I lay
crouched
saw water

and blood
parting
my body
saw him

twist free
a warm
weight
at my side.

In the lean-to
I slept
in recompense
for grace.

Am I
restored
made myself
again?

I am
disgorged
of the sweet
weight.

In cities
glory
travels faster
than truth

in streets
stories
increase
details

because
here
things need
mending.

Small things
like sheep-pens
big things
like kingdoms.

On roads
traders
pick
at scars

selling
swapping
giving
without mercy.

V

Carried
to God's house
scourge
to temple

seedless
apple
without
star.

The first
wound
cut
with care

first
and last
scoring
of oaths.

His black eyes
bulge
the mouth
howls.

On the steps
the blind man
rises
to stand.

Jerusalem
is broken
rent
by a cry

a name
peeling
behind
billboards.

On the steps
the blind man
fumbles
and sings

for field
and fruit
the streets
of Jerusalem.

Let him
assume
the sweet
weight

regardless
grace
that wrecks
to save.

Received
by God's house
destruction
by temple.

Go
tie the birds
lover's nest
with a string.

They wait
with silver
to redeem
his rights

to settle
accounts
now
in advance.

Go
tell them
the name
I heard

the name
that suckles
my aching
breasts.

VI

For this
our sake
the streets
are quiet

the house
of bread
disgorged
emptied

and Rachel
mourns
her reaching
child.

For this
our sake
black eyes
accuse.

Come
hide us
keep us
out of sight

lead us
to flee
this requisite
affair.

The sands
retrace
pathways
stories

how once
lead out
lead in
we grew

how once
straying
fleeing
we shrank.

The desert
rears him
he crawls
and walks

running
to doors
of rural
shrines

I lift him
to the heads
of foreign
gods.

There goes
Rachel
large
again

how quickly
restored
by another
comfort.

The city
is sated
Jerusalem
rebuilds

the temple
gleams
the steps
shine.

Each day
knives cut
a small
piece

wearing
the steel
bit by bit
to the bone.

VII

Mother, why
build nests
so near
to heaven?

In God's house
birds
weave
through rafters

pigeons
in niches
rustling
their feathers

a cooing
that jumbles
the muttered
prayers.

Mother,
to whom
do they speak
and sing?

The birds
do not stop
their swooping
to listen.

In God's house
he sits
the temple's
teacher

speaking
and cocking
his ear
for answers.

Three days
living
on butcher's
offcuts

he stays
and hides
leaves us
walking.

Come, turn
the beasts
again
to Jerusalem

to the gates
and steps
of polished
stone.

Mother, why
build
like men
not birds?

At night
the house
was cold
and dark

the moon
playing
behind
the clouds.

Mother
why
did you rush
ahead?

I told them
our home
is beyond
the vaults

I told them
your stories
as if
they were mine.

VIII

Behind
a veil
she sits
and smiles

her hand
tied
to another's
wrist.

I would
touch
that knot
and bless it

borrow
some
of its life
for mine

this mother
who bears
the stone
with the flesh

who laughs
and loves
and pours
her vintage.

Where is
my vagabond
dazzling
the crowd?

Scans
and flicks
his eyes
away

turning
one thing
into
another

a knack
he picked up
in foreign
places.

Always late
but still
surrounded
by chatter

always
some new
story
to tell.

Turning
he speaks
like blades
his words

turn
and leave
the breath
short.

Do you
force me
to act
is this

magic
a play
do you
not see?

Run
my son
and mask
your face

there are
so many
others
to choose.

IX

To the place
of skulls
I ran
and saw

that point
where death
is not
ashamed.

In the place
of skulls
I stood
below

watched
the body
buckle
and bend.

He is
disgorged
of water
and blood

it spilled
and made
the earth
a clay.

The city
watches
holds
her breath

counts
the cries
and mans
her gates.

On half-built
sites
awaiting
orders

tarpaulin
flaps
in a strong
breeze.

The steps
of Jerusalem
are emptied
and quiet

its pigeons
and soldiers
asleep
in the streets.

Mother
look
I found you
another

son better
than I
a temper
less short.

Like blades
his words
turn
and speak.

But what
am I
without
his weight

forced
to walk
into
a lightness

forced
to leave
his body
behind?

X

Where is
my son?
He crawls
walks

trips
tries
a straight
line

staggers
falls
laughs
in the dirt.

Where is
my son?
Faint
fluttering

quicken
leap
of my
consent

talking
pointing
black eyes
on mine.

They come
in groups
of two
or three

all told
(but one)
they stand
and sing

for the heap
of rags
a widow
breathing

grey
and lined
face
to the wall.

They fade
and slump
and cease
and snore

resting
on a smaller
heap
of rags.

There
he turns
and speaks
leaves

the breath
short
the life
shorter.

Mother
why
did you stay
behind?

I went
ahead
to another
house

ribbed
vaults
without
roof

tell them
it was
just
as you said.

XI

In God's house
I stand
my body
a temple

closed
to the seed
like a sated
furrow.

In God's house
I rise
touching
the vaults

my fingers
brushing
a ribbed
arch.

I am
resolved
ravaged
by strength

every inch
of skin
covered
in kisses.

The city
above
decks
her streets

prepares
her guards
for this
arrival.

Sceptres
and orbs
a crown
of stars

nightly
glinting
ghosts
of peace

signs
above
the broken
lands.

Her arms
a gesture
sketched
embrace.

To God's house
I bring
the temple's
living

my arms
an open
frame
of love.

For God's house
they pray
assent
of the temple

hair tied
and hidden
wrapped
in cloth.

Run
depose
the guards
steal back

the sweet
weight
of your
consent.