

A N D T H E N G O N E

R I C H A R D S K E L T O N

X Y L E M B O O K S 2 0 2 0



I



The fear of open spaces is unlike the fear of cities. Threat of distance over proximity. Restless, living movement of leaves and branches against the dull inertia of buildings, of architecture. But fear is fear, nonetheless.

\*

*Scene.* Road, fields, sky. North country, just south of the wall. Early morning, cold. A car, a woman. Alone.

\*

*Colours.* Grey-green, grey-brown, grey-blue. Her skin taking on each hue like a taint. Grey of the road and of the sky. A pathology.

\*

Her idling the car for warmth. A sickness in the stomach, or possibly hunger. She cannot tell. Isn't hunger a sickness, after all?

\*

Endless pallor, endless muteness, endless sullen resistance to meaning, endless egress of the world from itself.

\*

*Moods.* Bruised. Eyes looking away. Veiled suffering. Aching.

\*

And the road itself lifeless. Not a thick, thrumming vein, close to the heart, but something peripheral, thrombotic. Will it wither to nothing in those far low hills, out to the east?

\*

No onslaught of traffic here. No heavenly white noise of engine and friction. No joyous scream of life lived with sharpness.

\*

But the road's surface still rutted with use. Not from volume or frequency of traffic, but the inevitable slow degradation of time over time. Attrition, receding into the barren reaches of human forgetting.

\*

Life itself, almost from the very outset. Rubbing, wearing, thinning. Becoming translucent.

\*

And that attrition. That daily incessant working of friction and gravity, a mere feather stroke. A homologue of something far greater. The tender millennial violence of ice and water. Incomprehensible to human thought in its slow vastness. But the land knowing it, feeling it, remembering it. Unforgiving.

\*

*All that is, an injuring.* Gouge, shatter, scar, fracture.

\*



Her looking. Up and down the road's flatness. Outwash plain of her own suffering. This residual violence too vague, too distant, for her to apprehend. A fading, yellowing bruise on already jaundiced skin.

\*

And so the world somehow occulted. Wreathed. Opaque to her senses. Her blood sluggish. Her thoughts torpid.

\*

Wordless anonymity of the rural. Unreadable trees, hedgerows. Blank-seeming pages of fields. Everything known unto itself but revealing nothing.

\*

And vertical and horizontal and vertical and horizontal  
and vertical and horizontal and vertical and horizontal.

\*

Sameness becoming somehow both sedative and stim-  
ulant. Lulling and concussive. The road a line drawn  
between the two.

\*

*Evening.* A day somehow passed. The car radio's signal, dried to a thin stream of static, occasionally breaking into sudden torrents of noise. There is comfort in it, nonetheless, and she listens long into the night, curled in the back seat. Voices, humanity, contact. These things are yesterday's vestiges. Tell me again why I am here? Why am I doing this? The image of her mother's tearful face. Go back.

\*

*Day.* The car moving slowly along the road's narrow. She brings it to a stop at a junction. Habitually, she looks left and right, up and down, for traffic, for news. As if on cue the radio spasms into life. There are words but she cannot make them out.

\*

Her eyes framed in the rear-view mirror. See her.  
Something familial between you. There.

\*

The question of which way to go. Is this not the same  
road, splitting itself, riddling itself, offering the decep-  
tion of choice only to snatch it back, later? Maze of  
same-seeming green and grey. Deadened beauty of time  
endlessly spooling in these fields and ditches.

\*

And green and grey and green and grey and green and  
grey. Over and over.

\*

Watery call of a curlew in a far-off field. It is remote to her. She cannot resolve that glissandic song into an image of the known. To her it is the shrill, frightened cry of the lost. And yet, deep within the dark fields of her childhood, a bird answers, and its faint voice bubbles up into her consciousness. Fear is another form of knowing.

\*

*Curlew.* Curled beak of the meadow. Circle-bruise of vowels. Diminishing. Dissolving. And then gone.

\*

When a bruise fades, what if a mark remains somewhere else? A wound of the skinless skin. How many such bruises should we endure? The fields would tell her, if she would but listen.

\*

Each crossroad the same. A multiple of the first. A copy, an instance. Each a variation on the same basal question. She reads the weatherworn sign. Vague backcountry cuneiform, stippled with rust, lichen. Stranded palaeography of the north. And the arrows pointing the wrong way.

\*

She plays a child's game of choice with the fingers of one hand. But there is only one way to go. Only onwards. Only forwards. Only.

\*

And the straightness of the road. It moves something in her. An eddy in her waters.

\*

*Morning.* Mist. A new blankness. A new anodyne grey-ness. Forms unforming themselves. Road, fields, sky. Each implicated in the other. The world a narcotic memory of itself.

\*

*Colours.* All that is not mist bleached to blue-grey.

\*

She edges onwards. Barely out of first gear. High whine  
of the engine baffled by the encroaching haze.

\*

Distant hills gone. Perspective gone. Earth-flatness a  
second guess. Perforated theory of light and shade.  
Proximity everything. Memory reduced to a fine point.  
Are there even cities any more?

\*



Even though it is daylight, and there is no one else on the road, she fumbles on the dashboard for the fog lights.

\*

*Colours.* Incandescent yellow-white of the car's lights leaching away at the greyness.

\*

*Memory.* Drawn to the surface by the lights' heat. A day such as this. The backseat of a car, her parents in the front. Her looking over her father's shoulder at the brightly lit dashboard. His hands on the steering wheel, the left at seven, the right at five. Scent of leather and chocolate. Music on the radio. No. Her father singing. His voice.

\*

Her closing her eyes, her foot on the brake. The nearness of it. So close she can touch it. Him. A deep wave of anguish overcoming her. Palpitations in her throat. Pinpricks of sweat. Memory, have you hidden here, all this time, waiting for my return?

\*

When her heart settles she opens her eyes again, unprepared for what greets her.

\*

*This. Close on her face, dilating eyes. Something reflecting in them.*

\*

A stag. Standing before the car. Enveloped in the lights' corona. Seven tines on each of its antlers. The bright tapestry of its eyes an iridescence. The look of it so unreal and so beautiful it steals her breath. She is trembling.

\*

The deer momentarily turns its head, perpendicular. Exhales heavily. In the periphery of her vision other shapes, stepping into the light. Lithe doe bodies, emerging from the nothingness of mist and into her consciousness. Their eyes, all of them, glowing, as if their insides burn with the brightness of suns. The stag stands squarely before the car as the others press close. It stamps the ground with a foreleg. She still isn't breathing. This moment, held for an eternity.

\*

The stag stamps the ground again, speaks. A deep, guttural sound. Instinctively she reaches for the dashboard to turn off the fog lights.

\*

Her watching as the light of the deer's eyes fades. The dying of stars.

\*

The low, vibrating hum of the engine against the stillness of the deer. Moments pass like the wheeling of galaxies. She turns the key in the ignition and the car falters into silence.

\*

*Scene.* The blue-greyness of the car and the woman and the deer. This, the entirety of the world. Their forms softened, insubstantial as memory. Eventually the stag turns and walks slowly away, down the road, the others close by. Each of their forms contracting, dissipating, diminishing, until they are mere bruises on grey-white skin. And then gone.

\*

*Aftermath.* A violence to her senses, her mind. Gouge, shatter, scar, fracture.

\*

She sits, motionless, hands at the wheel. The left at seven, the right at five. Scent of leather and despair. She turns the radio on. Thin singing stream of static. Its voice.