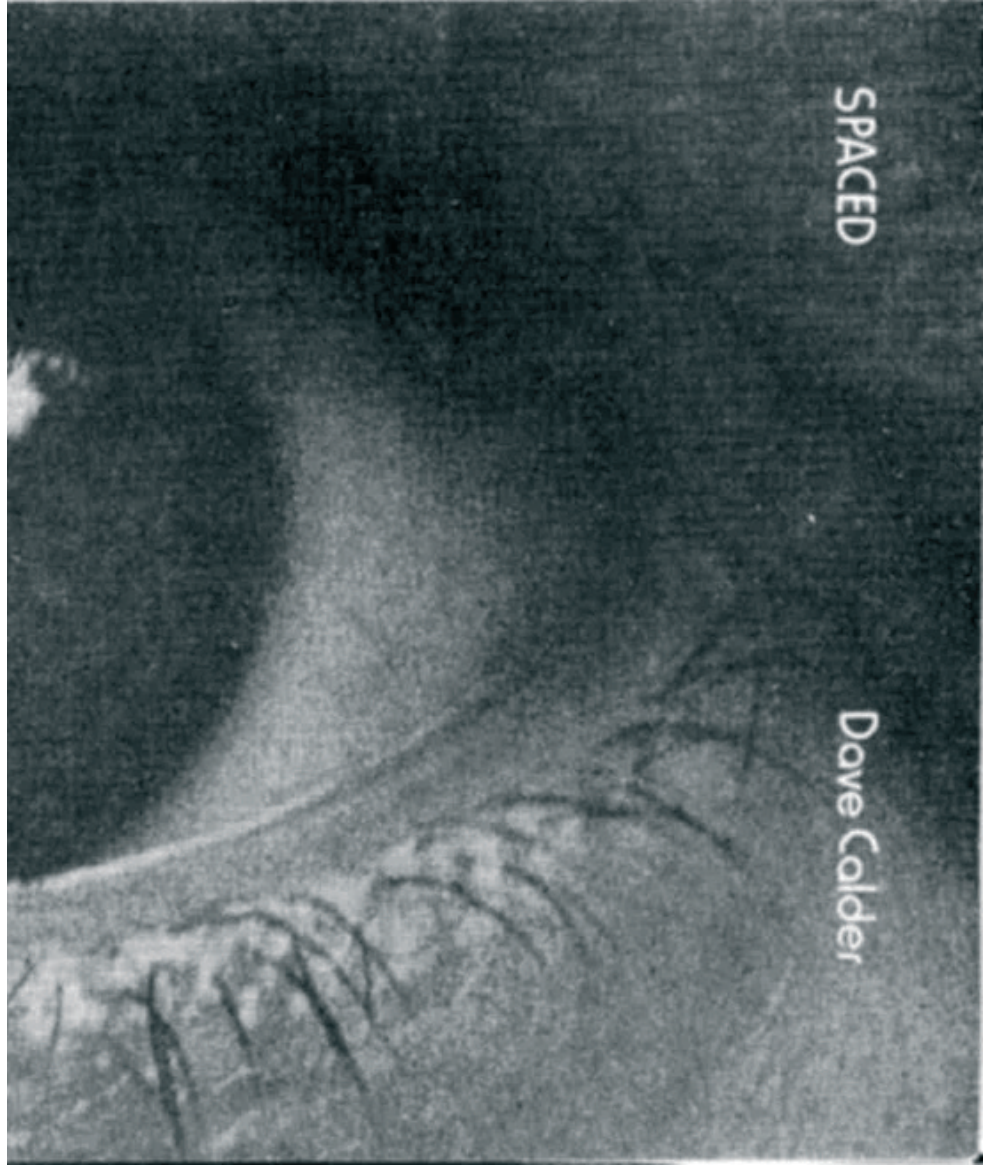




SPACED

Dave Calder

Spaced

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spaceman 1.

i do not count the time

in this cocoon the metal is my pulse
my mind a slow murmur that echoes the soft throb
i cannot feel my flesh, my body is

as large as small as the rhythm that flows through it
wherever i go, i cannot pass outside myself
whenever i arrive, it will be the moment of departure

i do not fear either space or time
but only my self's fear in the grip of something greater

yet if it fills me, i fill it too
i am stretched immeasurably thin to the ends of space

and i do not count the time

spaceman 2.

set free from the old migrations
where will you go, exiled nomad

i will wander the stars, which are perhaps
the summer pasture of my species' time

to fill myself with the fresh wonders
i feel my memory is hungry for.

if i return, it will be to our winter
and if i do not, it will be no matter

i have few possessions, for weight is dangerous
i carry my home and death, within me, always

spaceman 3.

our meetings are warped and out of time
that we long to meet well is the nature of our love

and here between all habitable worlds and
the burning stones, in these deeps where shoals

of lifeseeds swim to new beginnings
i seek the timeplace where we can meet and join.

maybe and maybe only she at that time
is hidden on the other side of this existence

set the starship for the black hole, autopilot
i will search the place where we are dreamed

spaceman 4.

we went in close to many worlds
and the closer in we came the more
we felt a simple sense of coming
home, rather than unease at the
unknown, the foreignness of it all.

but we were not prepared to stay
and the awe we felt was somehow
more a matter of scale; and also
everything fresh has its magic.

and yes, all journeys alter you
and in more subtle ways
than you first notice;
but the intention to return
carries the virus of your past
to the stars' end, and back
on its home ground it finds
easy ways to break out as before.

we will always come back too soon
scarred maybe but much the same
until we determine never to return
whether walking round the block or on
a lightship to the galactic rim.

spaceman 5.

how does it feel to be awake? he said
in words that were not quite of the language

i could not move my head, could not laugh,
yet it seemed so foolish, so unreal, and he
stays, serious, as if waiting for a sign,
some prophecy to affirm this resurrection,
keeps talking of cold sleep and centuries,
strange rituals.

if it should be true then i
have dreamed away lifetimes, have even
dreamed i dreamed, and never wondered
how it would be when i woke,
what face, what name, i'd bear.

this is perhaps that very dream, how can
i tell? i remember too many maybes, no
starts or conclusions, and though i recall
this corridor of clear containers from
somewhere, sometime, that is not uncommon.

i must stay calm, watchful, above all
unpreoccupied; do the best i can
to meet this dream's demands.

the planets, the people
with their parasited skin
their great molten hearts
who dance their whirling
egg-shaped orbits
and hunt for death in
the mouth of the sun.

I looked at the corner
of the room: my shadow
stood there. The one who wants
to wrestle with, replace me:
but he was staring at the door
I had come in through.
He was expecting me.
And finally he left by that door
as if it led into a tunnel
I had never seen.

I continued to drink my tea.
What else could I do? While
the rival against whom I am powerless
stalks me blindly as I stray
into that exact place and time
where he will find me.

The Dwarf's Story

Looking back, I suspect that the authority staged even our escape. We were a nuisance of sorts, I hope, and it was more convenient that we should be run off than be killed.

Still, they made it look good, firing after us till we made hyperspace - but the blasts were just to frighten us and no doubt the vidinews said that we were traitors fleeing to the enemy.

The spacejump took us here, which was also curious, for it was habitable despite the lumbering beasts and frozen surface, and though all our women died in childbirth I cannot tell if that was also planned.

So here we stayed. There was no point in going further, no way of going back.

Nothing lasts long on this planet and we form no attachments to the natives -

even the race of superapes who have more recently come to power are too large and clumsy, childish, to talk to. They cannot help and indeed would fear us.

They believe in many variations of
Science and Oneness, and play a complicated game
called Right or Wrong, which permits
ritual murder to settle their differences.

Such sports disturb us, as does also
the recent rise in radiation levels
which, though it makes us feel more comfortable
and even life up on the surface bearable,

cannot make us glad, we who carry
the error of our ancestors around with us
in shrivelled wrinkled frames, huge heads
and eyes that shrink from light.

I keep to my deep shelter, which looks
as much like home as I can make it,
re-read the classics and write poetry.
I can no longer say whether I have
achieved, or am achieving, anything.

If the apes invent a starship, maybe then
we might act, go back: to whatever
reception, to a more definite death.
Till then I devote myself to the meditation
of the crystals, of the smouldering stone,
of energy, and of the slow
waste of time.

the climb up here was hard and many died
and arriving, we found food even scarcer
and flying furry monsters a constant threat.

between each costly defence we still quarrel
about rank and tactics, fearful nonsense,
though most appear to like it better here.
but i cannot deceive myself. this climb was
mere pride, has solved no real problems.

we are no safer here at the thorny rose's heart
than when we were lost men in the grass.

under dream interrogation
they found out everything

the secret training in tension conversion,
neurotic energisers, the complex rewiring
that had made him into a psychic bomb

fine, they said, you can go now - your only
punishment will be to live with it.

into the morning he carries himself carefully;
knowing he may murder on some small secret trigger,
rape on a simple signal or, for an unknown reason

explode in hiroshimas of the soul
burn in dachaus of the heart

*she is wearing a dress, one of her few
i remember it from a warm day in the country*

around her, the gusting refuse seems leaves
or softens in coloured blurs, out of focus.
a pack of wild dogs snarls around the corner,
i fear, i look away, she disappears.

*she is wearing a palegreen dress, one of her few.
her hair is still long, though she cut it later.*

across the street beneath the lightless lamppost
she stares up calmly at this dirty unlit window.
with desperate fists i smash the glass, shout at
moonlight. a cold wind snaps among empty houses.

*she is wearing a thin dress, one of her few,
her lips are muted, her eyes are bright*

a cat howls, a broken window rattles
i do not take my stiffening eyes from her.
she comes and lies beside me on the dusty shivering
floor. i dare not move to touch her or see the room.

*she is wearing a dress, one of her few,
i remember it from a warm day in the country*

and i do not know which of us must wake to free the other
from this city deserted by the world and time

their bodies came back but they didn't
their pupils had swollen to fill the eyesockets
they sat very stiff they were still staring
into the overwhelming tranquillity, the depthless
dark of those pools, on that planet where
the glinting birds flick and are gone
where horned white beasts invisible to each other
search through precious forests
for something they suspect to be themselves
and the looselimbed longnecked dappled
creatures that carry the souls of women
sway beneath a sprawling sun

The assassin's story

And then that sirian job, a neat
lasing of that pangalactic
corporation boss, that was applauded
on most 'free' planets, but led
to excessive reprisals and less liberty

the cause and effect were predictable.
this theorem of violence
has been proved repeatedly in history,
and it follows that one, if not all,
of the parties interested, were pleased.

but which desired, which chose to follow
that old model and for what ultimate end
is not my business: to seek the bottom
of such deep games is to drown

the terran overlords are devious, indefinite,
create confused futures that perpetuate
the fear of death and of each other that
characterises the killings of their race,
their hypocrisy and wavering consciences

what i do is more spectacular, perhaps,
but their people are murdered daily
by crude insensible laws, the blunt
instruments of the ministry of plans,

are trampled by the blind elephant of power
or die of apathy, of cruel jokes and of
tiny malicious lies as surely as
they had been shot or stabbed.

and whoever dies of whatever, some will
decide to call it good, some bad,
and their choice, of sides on this same coin,
is guided by self-interest, real or imagined,
or simply posed for propaganda.

i hope that more sense will be spoken when
i am murdered, by others skill or my mistake:
my race has learnt indifference to such
distinctions, thinks them unimportant,
even meaningless: for either all killing
is good, or all is bad

or all is necessary; which is
an interesting thought to play with
while i sit in this small room -
in a slum, a mansion, a spaceship,
why be too precise? -
waiting for my next victim
who may be anyone, or myself

the river resurrects old bones and memories
what we have buried is curious to recall
a few are talking lazily beneath wide trees
the ice it seems is now receding everywhere
colonnades and windmills rise from the endless lawn

after the chariots of fire more subtle forces
rule us: the sun's song and the many tides:
across the hillside fall the shadows
of clouds and silver dirigibles, drifting
like our days, these bones, in a wide calm river

everything was possible
we toyed with the tides

set fire to rainbows
swam among the clouds

built out of boredom
broke to feel an end;

yet when the sunset comes
and then the moon

our wishing keeps this
bland sun in the sky

and among the leaping chaos
the games with space and time

I am seeking a rest that
our great success denies me:

the sweet slow
sureness of decay

stray beasties

1.

Something caught his hand
behind the clothes. Bravely
he leapt in ... the wardrobe
burped

2.

the robot paused. his gripping fingers
ceased to claw towards my neck.
i too thought i was, or could be, human
once upon a time, it said

3.

I cracked the egg.
Inside it was
another egg:
and this one smiled

4.

He became invisible.
Everything was the same -
people still bumped
into him; worse, they did
not even remark
upon his disappearance

5.

6.

He was hemmed in.
He began to crawl
along the low
narrow tunnel
hoping the machine
had dropped a stitch

7.

this has gone on long enough
i shouted. the road stopped
& seeing my determined look
vanished
there was nothing all around
or under, but i stayed there
casual, treading air

for this i use a special device
of my own invention, like this poem

8.

how terrible to be
a fly stuck in a soupbowl
to suffer the double idignity
of bad jokes and drowning

9.

that we all matter

a transcript of the holograph tape

a cloaked man was climbing a distant mountain. she watched as the distance got smaller and smaller in him, then sat on the sofa with the houselights off

an extremely large egg came rolling towards her. she sawed off the top and spooned out a beheaded body in a green cape. she put a top hat on its head.

talk to me, she said.

a stream of ribbons two doves a rabbits paw and an exiled king fell out. she cut two eyeholes and bats flew out. she peeped inside. mushrooms were sprouting on the neck. beyond them a herd of bulls was grazing peacefully.

she put her hand inside and picked a mushroom. the bulls began to charge. suddenly a man wearing a green cape rushed forward and lured them away.

she stuck the mushroom in her hair. it began to whistle. she fed it some birdlime. it laid a small egg in her ear and hatched out several plots. there were lots of cabbages in them, leaves like curling green capes.

the hat lost its top and smoke funnelled out. she dropped in two teardrops and the fumes turned purple. they filled up the small room for argument. she fell back on the sofa plushing and panting. a green head snuggled up to her with a detached expression. the body wandered across absentmindedly. he pulled himself together. they embraced.

the curtains closed to tumultuous applause as the screen showed the endtitles to the rustle of rising bodies as she leant from the sofa and switched off the set

behind the curtain a garden where night
rubs its creatures under the coverlet
in this bed flesh is gently bruised
& scratched moulded & fashioned
into new likenesses until every spore
is shaking moist warm shadows
moon eyes the smell of blossom taste
of fruit in the ripeness of devouring
astride him in the darkness sisterpeace
drawing the sap through velvet lips

A Ghost's Story

When we knew there were aliens
amongst us, might
even be ourselves,
we came back to our ancient arts.

Face dancers, shape shifters,
and those whose eyes
glinted out at us
from other bodies than their own,

forced us to look through flesh
into the driving
current of a form,
the essential colours of its energy.

More, we came to view all bodies
as wet cells, contained
by gravity, space and time,
charged with the force
of instantaneously alternating
life and death.

Despite knowledge
and our purges, we were overwhelmed.
Finally we retreated out of bodies
altogether, though some.
insecure maybe,
less learned or nostalgic,

moved into trees. And what the man-forms
call or think us
shows that they still
have not tracked us here, or maybe

they have forgotten both us and the war
as is customary
with barbarians.
We do not forget; but neither do we feel

defeated: we possess the planet freely.
and their confused
fearful currents
now seem less to us than animals or plants.

toying with the narrow
centre of a woodknot
he discovered a passage
through the cosmos

with one fingertip through
to the outer rim
he tickled the edge
of eternity

his hair fell out immediately.
a nearby spider dropped dead.
someone called to him, softly
from an empty room.

my mistake, he said, politely,
withdrawing his finger
bright with suns and stardust

after the space wars he could no longer stand
the ways of anything that lived or bred

made his religion out of stone and silence and
finally, fulfilling his communion, came

here, where, so far from stars or sun that
the great stones do not cast a shadow,

he walks among the vague green tinge
of gases, where no thing lives or dies,

drifts on as aimless as a silver ghost
until the heavy thump of his own breath and blood

affirms his inescapable humanity
his weakness, fear, his life so full of death.

unclean and terrified, he runs
back to the signal beacon at his tiny camp,

but, bounding crazily, his heart
burst. he had, perhaps, a tumour.

and the great stones do not quake
or shout or cast a shadow

as in his decaying flesh and stores
the dark seeds of life are spawned.

The Same Old Story

This was a small planet called Earth like 47 other planets within the galaxy. It was underdeveloped in technology and short of raw materials, most of its people went hungry and its overlords had turned much of the northern hemisphere into a factory whose antiquated methods were destroying the health and food supplies of all.

Its people were simple, easily led, and could have constituted no threat for many generations, being engrossed in endless petty squabbles, corruption and survival, so that their best traits seldom found and never kept social expression.

Our agents sometimes stayed here temporarily in the fight for freedom from the Imperium, but whether the inhabitants knew of the conflict or would have understood the reasons if they had is doubtful. Despite this, it was to deny us even such crude defenceless shelter that the imperial forces, in breach of the basic conventions, set fire to it with solar flares.

The few survivors have nothing but fused soil to farm, flee from contact, are dying desperately.

That they were crude and murdered each other is true,
but they had a childlike grace, a sense of beauty
and interested intelligences that were appealing.
The death of these peasants diminishes civilisation.

It is the corroded courtesy of history
to remember soldiers, their doings and their deaths,
but these who died in their peaceful occupation
of staying alive from day to day, on their own earth,
will be forgotten; the crime against them
ignored in cheap vidimix of starship conflicts,
obscured by the great events at the galactic core.

In consciousness of this we have erected
this monument, engraved these lines from
a poet of the great reconciliation:
'For too long our heroes have been killers -
the true heroes are the creators of life.'

'We came in peace for all mankind ..'

as the first act of insurrection
someone took an ounce of pyrolite
to module one mainpark after curfew
and watched by earthlight as the
old imperialist lie, the names
of the coarse warriors who
put it here, the name
of the corrupt
president
who sent
them
here
melted into the melting plaque

she tends gross tubers in a roselit gallery
picking off bright insects and devouring them whole
and when the brackish water comes, she clears its way
scraping in the sharp earth with twisted hands

her mother, who taught these rituals, now lies
wizened as charred wood, beneath the vast fronds:
her mother who had known the moon and bled for it
she offered to the plants and did not eat

and though that smooth slab set into the cliff
led, had said her mother, to outside and death,
she had been taught fiercely: the plants keep us alive
and felt this death a sign of their displeasure

she traps bright beetles, furry longtoothed bugs;
drowsy, drowned in humid roselight and ferny rustlings
while into the kernel, deep below the arid husk,
the tubers great teeth gnaw into the earth

it was in no way as
hard as it could have been

the monster kept trying to stand
in front of him with open arms
wanting to look into his eyes; he merely
turned his face and struck the blow

but when the dark writings on the head
had stiffened, the rescued lady laughed
so long at him he looked into the shield
to find out what was the matter

the laughter shakes her thick wild hair
she kisses him and leaves him there

in one more alley of the endless maze
still his own sacrifice, crippled and fierce,
trapped in dark mirrors pulling faces at himself

cheering & drinking
they sent him on his way
but from start to finish
it was nothing but ambushes

crazy masked men leaping
out at every turn & crossroad,
stealing his horses, grinning
at his empty guns, spinning
him round

finally he staggered into town
with empty pockets, messageless,
& called for the sheriff,
the deputy, the mayor,
the twelve good jurymen
even, in despair
for the badjohn railroad boss
or any of his boys

but always they were elsewhere
always the same answer

dontcha know, stranger,
They've gone
ambushin

The virus's story

You may think us an unimportant race, small of stature, of no great intelligence, but we think such comparisons not odious but impossible; what we know we have is a huge positive, revolutionary dynamism, and our society leaps as one into each new direction called or offered. We breed with joyful prodigality but without lasciviousness, and each new generation maintains that adaptive trait, the ability to learn new tricks to suit the times that is the threadmark of their ancestors' survival, rise and triumph - for we have now penetrated most of this world, though there are naturally certain climates that we find more amenable, and though we have encountered some resistance we feel that it must always be the temporary product of fear or ignorance.

And we do not see you as alien, for in our humble language we term you brother, host; for we are all descended from the same dust, spawned of the spermy comets, and our lifethreads and yours are slowly intertwining as your own once entered other hosts, and grew in the first humid fluids of this world.

And what shape the future will form us into,
whether size will ever be important to our success,
as it was to yours, are stagnant thoughts.

What is necessary will be done.

Nor should you waste one cell-change
to speculate on meeting us, eye to eye,
in the course of the next million years.

For the moment, honoured hosts, we are
content, if not altogether pleased,
that we are no longer
beneath your notice.

and when we knew it was the end
we drove out to where, centered upon
a vast saucer of deserted land,
the huge uncabineted speaker of
the interstellar telescope faced up
towards the screaming sky that night

and there we set up, plugged in,
and while some danced or drank
or fucked or prayed or killed

with the throb of our blood forcing our fingers
with the earth's current surging up and out
drowned in triumphant tidal rhythm
as each light leapt to greater darkness
we played while the stars burned
out

who watched a room in redrimmed darkness die
fixed on coordinates he could never remember desiring
who moved in the dark spirals, the blurred constructions
emerging, snapped into place, in wheres without when,
in nows without there, in heres without then
who vanished to himself and reappeared
carrying out purposes forgotten or withheld
who shifted from every possible time or place
to find always another here and now awaiting him
who was a universe and all its parts and time
who was a hinge, a door, an eyelid
flickering
has come to here
a room ticking time
a warm soft and unspeaking back
another somewhere
on a visit

she's waving at the window again. that's
the third time this week. i usually turn away.
it's a bit embarrassing to feel you're
being watched; she must be able to see me
or she wouldn't wave.
maybe a long time ago. i don't know. it's
vaguely familiar. the shape of the nose, maybe the hair.
can't tell from this distance anyway.
no, i don't wave back. i did once but then
i wasn't sure if she was waving to me or someone else
or maybe the street in general.

she's still doing it
it seems to get more frenetic but that's like anything
if you watch it long enough i suppose.
no.. more likely crazy.
anyway i've never met her, spoken to her.
i'm sure.
maybe it's the way she waves that i've seen before.
now it seems slower; must wear her arm out
waving like that.
now a hand's come and tugged her away. that's that.
no, i couldn't see who the hand belonged to

the old man on the cloud shaped sagbag
stroked his beard & wiggled his forefinger
creation ? he boomed, ah, creation. well,
all you need is sufficient energy and
a bit of substance. a universe however
needs an awful lot of energy and a whole table-
spoonful of pure matter, you know,
the stuff man calls spirit.
hard to come by, old chap, tricky stuff.
i'd stick to something quieter if i were you
like falling in love or inventing games. mark you
no matter what you think you're making
you can rarely be absolutely sure. i remember this
lama in tibet who ended up
suffering from acute dsoanthropy and believed
himself a cross between a male yak &
a common horny cow & all because he would
insist on ...

the cat uncurled & strolled away

well! the old man gave an almighty huff
& disappeared into the spaces between
his atoms

beyond the glass doors, looking in
to the drowsy gallery occupied by only
one attendant, sunk in a black armchair
quite at home, looking at
a painting of the painter & his woman
who look into the gallery from their back garden
through long windows in which
each of them is reflected in the act
of looking at; of photographing, the other

they are very formal, as figures
in a wooden weather house,
but the season of a painting,
a photograph, never changes;
neither one of them will step forward
and force the other back, they will be
forever tied together in that time and place
while their substantial ghosts are free
to wander into fresh affairs; here
they will look forever at everyone the same
& everyone will look at them differently

& the attendant who has dropped his glasses
has looked sideways in bending & seen me
looking at him through the door, he will be
forever bending from that isolated chair
in my mind where i stand, slightly furtive,
beyond the glass doors, looking in

i kept an eye on the main chance
& when it turned its back
i grabbed a slim chance with both hands
& hid it in my sack

& when i teeter on the edge
or stumble in the rough
i put my head in the sack and ask, any chance?
& it purrs back, enough

Accident

1/1.

as i swung round the corner a figure
jerked into my frozen sight
in the dim light a body spun,
then like a clutching shadowy squid
swept past the window i did
not turn to look as
i drove on trembling, unable to stop
the unheeding fierce machine

1/2.

my back turned but my thoughts
behind me, with nervous arrogance
formed from fearful resignation,
i walked away into the open road.
i heard the roar, i saw
the horns of light, my already
slashed mind tried to throw me back
but i had gone too far and
it found and met me

1/3.

watching you go, i was too
confused to move, trapped in a vacuum
wanting to say: go quickly and
come back in the same breath
and then what i had been half
expecting: a massive roar
as time and space crashed back
and tossed and trampled you, while
my mouth twisted to my belly, i
not only witness but victim too.

2/1

the nearside headlight judders
the glass is gone, its silver flaked,
while twisted upward by the impact
a bust bulb jiggers at its wires end.
below and slightly behind, the metal
is bent into a mould with no resemblance
to any part of a humans anatomy.

2/2.

not even a moan.
the haunted hum of streetlights
the weary yellow incandescence
no sprays of blood
only a thin trickle from a mouth
that loosened as the body stiffened
to sprawl like a scar across the tarmac where
space had ripped open and sealed up as suddenly.

2/3

the lips contorted, the throat
harshly clicking, the stomachs recoil
that shakes the knees. the hands
halted in their movement up to cover
the screaming eyes or jam the mouth
and its wordless crying to a deafened heart

3/1

while we were in motion i could
have screamed at the avengers
it did it, look, i cannot stop it,
i am a thoughtless prisoner;
but now we are still i know
the machine has deceived me,
the blame has been shifted back
to me, to these trembling
hands stuck to a lifeless wheel.

3/2

the ambulance men are too tired
for speculation, bodies are bodies,
and the possible collusions:
a victims tacit acceptance
the execution of a traitor
the dismissive gesture of a lover,
or those perverse yet opposite
realisations of desires:
a killers for suicide
a victims for hurt
a witnesses deception,
the secret reasons for being
in that time and space
are part of a play that finishes for them
with this one entrance to remove the dead.

3/3

my skin has been stroked smooth
but his hand cannot touch
the flesh beneath that still
feels torn and hopelessly damaged;
and when the stroking hand slips
between my thighs i do not
shudder with pleasure but
in violent sympathy with
gaping mouths, wounds, and
hands i will never feel again.

riverbed poems

1.

the bed is a raft
floating down a river like the amazon
beneath the tall tomato plants
young men and women stand upon the bank
some whose faces we remember,
naked, bearing pipes and feather crowns,
but we are as deep in
each other as the forest & the bed
knows its own way home

2.

the bed yields to the waters desire
hollows to the deep surges &
the bodies whirlpool, bears
the swift currents & rapid white foam

but in the later calm
this river is so wide
that all the nights horses
can come and drink together

& the sleeping waters dream
their curious ways to dawn

3.

the tides in our bodies
bear us through the days
& in the way of water we
end up where
we had to go

in the near moons pull where
we lie curled as droplets
the currents meet, mingle &
part; we never
leave the sea.

i dream like a pebble, like coral,
you dream like fish or the
waves themselves

when we wake we find
curious ripple marks
upon our thighs
such as the sand
shows at the ebb

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