



Portrait

Jackson McCarthy

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Prelude

Funerals happen.
You walk past one
and call it a Tuesday

afternoon; the sun
comes down. This
is how it happens.

Adam

I met my first man on a bleak street.
Chaos like night surrounded us, dark
but possible, semipermeable. I had been
walking a long while; I had lost the use

of my voice, of my life. He had lost
something, too. Less than — more like
a picture of a man, shirtless, ripped
from a magazine, he stood, pouring oil

into the engine of a car. The canister, plucked,
appeared in empty air — a bright plastic gash
opened at his will. Well, I too could be mean,
possessive, obsessed with my own thinness —

for a crowd had gathered like black water
to hear these: my innermost thoughts.

Mahuika as a boy

He turns his face away from mine;
a can of cold drink

on a cold night. We sit
in the quiet of waiting,

waiting for takeaways,
salt crystals forming

in the night's every crevice
like evaporated sweat beads:

skin anywhere you look for it.
His lips close in

on the lip of the can.
I cannot be with;

I cannot be without.
Even in sleep's black wealth,

even in a dream, red with frost —
your mouth,

your lips, your nose,
your hands, aflame, covering them.

Santa Monica

Those days, days as opposed
to nights,

I made pacts with myself,
my best subject.

There were other times, too,

hotels in Santa Monica
I called your name in — empty
towers of rooms.

Years later, somebody with a name
like Toby or Brad
would ask me
if I was ever a child. Baby,

I was a sandcastle then.
I was told the dead left signs.

Programme note

Thrown out, trashed, sloshed
after a night out at the ballet
or the opera — I was okay with that.

Doctors and lawyers of the world,
shrug off your dress coats!
Toe the levers of your bathroom bins!
Historians have a name for things
like me: *ephemera*. Like *ephebe*
I will accrue power with loss;
my fleeting youth will be the taste
of a small but important minority.

Among the more recent, dignified
garbage — yesterweek's flowers,
the bones of an apple — I will last.
But ah, I can hear those mortals
quietly laughing or making love in the other room.

Music

Whenever I am away from it for a little while
I start to resent it —

even now, in the clouds,
with the clouds
coming down as fog
in a season I thought was summer.

Or even in summer,
with the yellow tufts of grass
strewn behind the mower
like beautiful boys' hair
or a million coffee cups
discarded on the street.

The only thing I hate
more than playing music
is writing,
which doesn't bode well for this poem
or for you;

for when contemplating your body's variousness
moving in white t-shirts,
I am struck by the words,
not the thing.

And I look at you
and think of phrases like
The sudden nudity of clothes
and how it is a joy to watch you sitting in them.

I feel my life is full
of little cruelties like this
that I can't tell anyone about;

that there's always a distant cliffside
called Death
and somebody saying *No* on it,
refusing life;

that there are always those
fabricates of memory
that lacerate the present
with reminder of the past —

the flu that lives in the body
and fills up the jeans
and seeps out the nose.

Yet,
at sunset,
when I walk city streets
and streetlights come on
and there's a tuft of yellow grass
somewhere in the distance,
I think for a moment
it might be your head of hair
rising to meet me.

My worsening near-sightedness
indulges the worst
kind of trickery,
the optometrically explainable kind
that makes a mirage of your face
in the faces I meet
and I close my eyes every time
to a smile's afterimage,
which vanishes slowly
as smoke from a chimney.

Like the heavy way you breathe, asleep,
as if the trees weren't dripping
with post-rain exhaustion already.

These are tremendous distances
and we won't survive this life.

I know this,
I know.