

holding the line

when I feel feverish
I take the full moon
and place it on my brow
like a flannel

it is so cool because it has just
been swimming in the sea

when I feel that my heart
is clapping out of time
I take it out and throw it
up among the stars

who know all there is to know
about holding the line

if I could land

as lightly as those birds
floating down to the mudflats
their shapes dark against the sky
and the silver floor of the sea
open to them again

if I could settle
like they do, sharp feet cool
in the wet sand, beak
busy preening, feeding,
exclaiming their belonging

under cover of darkness
the soul fingers its own restlessness

and the night is a stray feather
blown into moonlight, a small heart pounding,
the sting of salt on a wounded, scaly leg,
the cry of the first to rise
the cry of the last to land

and the one cry that does not ease
but folds the darkness into itself
and bears it till morning

tides

the incoming sea
bisects the harbour
with a line so straight,
so geometrical

I wish my heart
could make
such elegant metrics
of its floundering
muddy tides

vigil

someone is stretching me like a canvas,
like the skin of a slaughtered animal
left out to dry in the sun, like the high scraped
cry of a bird threaded out over the estuary,
drawn by the dragging tide

I am so thin the stars
can see right through me

and they do, they do,
they refuse to shield me
from their brightness,
from the lacerating
tenderness of their
barbed-wire
gaze

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after we said goodbye
I could feel you for days,
like a live fur coat
put on backwards,
my chest warm,
my back already
feeling the cold

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and what about that sky I saw,
the one so soft you could stroke it,

a dusky orange

like the feathery belly
of a grey bird
flying over
a smouldering sun

or like ash falling steadily
in the light of the flames
from the cracked, ancient drum

as the cryptic fire burns on and on
and the stern hills darken

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and when I walked out last night
it was cold, the coldest night this winter,
and when the stars asked me to join them
in the sting of their bareness, I let them
take me, and they carried me between them,
clusters of stars all along my body, and I arched
right back and pointed my toes and fingertips
and was as long as ever you could imagine,
and they did not let me go