

A Shroud in Turin

There was a man, they say, in Cairo
Left his face burnt in a cloth;
Not the sort of cross you'd make in biro
Or the tale you'd leave in students' mouths

But his face – two eyes, a nose, some sort of pursed lip.
How can you tell what a man kissed
From the bits that burned frayed linen crisp?
But they see him, those who believe,

Say they feel him in those prints
Left by a man in the shroud in a tomb
And found near Turin in a skiff.
But who he was who can be sure,

What he said we barely know –
But he wiped his mouth on a cloth one Passover night
And two thousand years on
The crumbs stick in the snow.

Healing on Sabbath

It isn't meant to be any kind of labour.

Light just makes its way - Out of me

And the healing

Comes with no disclaimer.

Did you make a paste?

I didn't make a paste.

When I did that it wasn't Saturday.

Did you draw in sand?

I didn't draw in sand.

That was the adulteress.

They don't stone to death on the Sabbath.

Do they pay you?

Are you kidding me? They don't put in the kitty for the sermon

Let alone the healing.

Did you squeeze lemon on the fish?

There was no salmon consumed at this kiddush.

Why do they report you desecrated the Sabbath?

I have some students who pluck corn and eat it.

You can't teach all your students.

The best you can hope is to help them to cope

With the truth

When it trashes their preconceptions.

And to leave them a note

They can sing

When all your creditors

Come to arrange drawing and quartering.

And a little path

To walk along

When you are past caring.

Fishers of Men

He said to throw our nets and rods
The other side of the boat –
A little guy, only yay high
Walking on the surf like he could float.

He looked like his feet were the water
Or something beneath held him up –
Like he was a son of the plaster
A flicking paint piece from the stars.

So somebody let him walk on water
That God first painted on the sand.
He said we should throw our nets over,
I said, 'What've we got left now?'

The fish, I mean it was high season
But we hadn't caught diddly squat
In a month – I figured with his toes feelin'
The water he'd know what was what.

But the deck was on fire with them,
There was more fish than we could stand.
The deck was washed with fins and scales,
More than you'd raise with any man.

We looked at him walk away,
Kicking the tide like it was sand.
'Where are you teaching?' I called after him.
'You'll hear about it,' he laughed.

So we put down or nets and ran.

The water closed over our heads like a storm.

We never saw such fish again

Not even when we went for bigger game.

Den of Thieves

So we're doing a day's trade, you know how it goes –
This one comes to buy a sheep, that to buy a goat.
This one thinks he'll make things right with Him if he just burns a dove.
But now and then somebody comes
without enough to buy what's in their heart.
Or what a sheep costs way up there in Galilee is not what you thought
You get down here into the smoke in the shade of the Temple door.
So we're lending and we're trading and we're taking sureties for gold
When all-of-a-sudden I hear a wing take flight across the hall.
Somebody in an argument – too much asked for some ewe?
Somebody want to charge a Grote for a penny-worth of mutton for stew?
But no, it's an evangelist with some new-fangled idea.
Something about his father's house, calls this a den of thieves.
Then he turns a table over, counting stones fall like rain.
You could buy the Temple and its night order for the gold he sheds on the ground.
Then he's gone and old men pick up again what he's thrown.
One by one the lenders of alms to men come back for their weights to score sin.
It isn't humanitarian rescue efforts we're in
But if we didn't lend them gold- how would they go make right their pain?
Never saw him again, that crank, though they say he gets around.
What can he have at the end of a talk when the plate comes through the crowd?
Do his followers pay for the pleasure of hearing him growl?
Or it is more of a dual-carriageway system to take them to the One above?
I keep counting my weights though one of them never stopped rolling that noon.
Maybe it's the weight of a soul. I get by with the weight for a sin.

The Blessing Before Bread

People ask me about that man, and what he said
Though I've countersigned countless hangings, drawn and quarterings,
Countless limbs torn from limbs,
They want to know about that one -
Crucifixion, a Roman killing -
Though not one authorised by Rome,
A local affair with international backing.
So I tell them, I was present,
I was the ranking legate, officer in command,
Ensured the warrant was indelicate –
There was no way out of doing him in.
But the local authorities wanted it –
He had trod on too many toes –
There are thieves and rapists, road bandits,
This one had opened his mouth
Just that one time too many.
Did he say something about truth?
If I had a sesterce for every prisoner who wants facts reviewed.
He said the sun hurt his bare head.
I told him it would be bare not much longer.
What they put around his beard is not something I was asked for counter signature.
I just said that local tastes
Required you wash before breaking bread.
As they were the perfect hosts, I would join them in what they said.
And they took him. He smiled like
I was what he had known I'd be.
I barely remember to tell the truth
But his eyes have rarely left me
Since that noise began only a few days

After that washing, I dried my hands
It seems and suddenly there was roaring
Like many caverns underneath the sea
Awake suddenly with foam.
Nobody heard what I said
But everyone knew I'd said it.
While I was only what he'd asked
A sympathetic ear before he got to be
What he wanted to be since the beginning.
A man on a hill all alone
With just the roar of the ocean in his grin.

Convictions

Do not despair, one thief was saved. Do not presume, one thief was hanged

-Samuel Beckett

When they called his name
From the rostrum
To ask who to pardon
I could not believe the shame,
That passed through my bare torso.
The other one
Who stood to the side
Showing no interest
Who'd always claimed innocence,
Lent no hint of credence
To anything said in the middle distance,
When he prayed, when he listened
When he asked what was on my conscience
And said a word or two to let me drift off.
He didn't care if we lived or died, that other one
But this one did. Never lived down
The shame I felt when I walked while he stayed
With that thief. The rest was just a shamble.
A word in the night between two convicts.
Two people passing the hours
With no way of knowing
What dawn would allow
When the lock on the door would collaborate.

Gethsemane

It's a nice garden, whatever they may tell you.
No nicer bit of grass left in Jerusalem.
I tend this bed. I plant that hedge.
I clean up when the pilgrims leave their marjoram.
It's not that there's nobody else quite cares
It's just nobody else does vegetables.
I was the one put lemon saplings there.
It's me prunes the flowers in the vestibule.
Why he was there I do not know.
Another bum/casualty after an all night do.
You know the sort. They come and brew
All manner of junk on the camp stove.
Come morning there's always one
When I come to unlock the chain.
A lost boy. A girl undone. An old man or a crone enraged.
But this one was just a man.
Too old to party but too young to be out of promises.
A man with no offering in his hand
Just muttering something about his lost students.
'Where have they gone?' I said.
'I think they had a better offer.'
'Bright boy like you?' I said, 'Never.'
'They know not to follow a falling star.'
I gave him a blanket. I couldn't help it.
I swore long ago I wouldn't help another junkie.
But when he looked up at me
His eyes were like an old movie
The frames run fast and snapped
So all you saw was light.

It's like looking into the lens
Of a movie projector
Gold was pouring out
But there was not a sound.
The piano player had gone to ground.
Nobody but this kid with no credit card
And nobody to pay for tea
At the little stall outside the gate.
I gave him two sugars and a slice of toast.
I said I would live if I gave up the job.
I said, 'What can I do except dig the ground?'
He looked so tired, I said I would try.
He thanked me. Then police came.
I still have no idea what the charge was.
Only he held his hands out like a lamb
For the plastic handcuffs.
He looked at me as they led him away.
I mouthed, 'I'll try.' No promises.
They never lit a fire again in that fire pit.
I've no idea what these kids think. Savages.
I planted perennials there the other day.
If he comes back, he'll know I did my bit.
There's not a day goes by that I don't think about
What he said, when I'll give up, go search for a bit
Of something you can put between two beds
That lasts more than a night
And doesn't go with the first frost
Something you can't cut with callipers.

Caiaphas

I do not know that I absolve sins anymore.
The people come and cry. They offer rams. But when they go
Do they feel justified by what I've done?
When I come out the holiest of all
Do they sing, or repeat a song?
Where does the sacrifice belong
If the sinner doesn't know they're wrong?
They want a character to disinter
Their new ways from old law.
They want a minister to see Rome
As the scourge, not banister
We hold onto so as not to fall
As we ascend to what used to be still.
I am the link to what remains
Of what we know of His will.
Take these entrails
And we know nothing
Just what one man says God told him on a windy hill.
God tells me everything.
God tells me every ram just what its sin
Is worth, what it relieves.
Does that change anything?
God cannot change the law.
He just takes rams out of my hand
And if they do not feel the change
What then? What will this man do
When they cry and call down Rome?
What will he do when the Temple
Is not enough to keep them pure?

Will he know every kidney, every stone?
No. God knows. And He knows what I atone.
I do not know that I absolve sins anymore.
But this I know: God waits to be fed rams.
And when they do not give me rams
I fear what they will do alone
When they no longer offer sheep
To still the crying in their wool.
Only the blood they spill
When they no longer bring
Their first born to my door.
When will this madness end?
Attend, for there is nothing but the law
And who will spill the blood.
The animal is just a sinecure –
We know who we are
Now bring me the breastplate of twelve stones
And take that one
To where he can become one with his star.

Remember You Are Loved

'Remember you are loved,' she says to the boy after his bath.

'I remember I'm loved,' he says

'Do you remember? I thought you said *I don't remember.*'

'I remember I'm loved,' he says

And stretches out both his arms,

Falls naked back on the bed,

She throws the shroud

Filled with Canadian duck feathers over his bare chest.

He disappears in a cloud

Of lightly chequered spots.

Nobody hears the mailed boots

Or the house catching alight,

Nobody hears applause

Or calls for his crowned head

Only the steam from the bath

Rises leaving a face in the pane

Crying where tears trickled down

The face of the child in the bed

Smiling like nothing could go wrong

Nothing ever shift in his head.

The Baptist

Come to a blank pool
And make many ripples.
What you see at first is a fool
In the end you'll see dirt
Where the end of all your words
Is a bed for another sleeping thistle.
Tell me you know what He said
And I'll tell you the desert is full of his animals.
Every-one a kite, every-one a lion
But not a single one the one
Can bring the snow down.
That one can name his price.
That one is worth knowing.
But you – throw the dice.
I'll be long gone before your word
Is law in this ruin.