

Three Poems



Nancy Gaffield

«Variations on a theme»

Blue
 returns as
 imagined. No kelp forests here in
 this blue vitrine I am
 inundated while you
 watch,
 your tongue stuck
 on ice. Once a possibility like
 waves frozen in motion
 now less oxygen and more
 heat
 and acid
 a solitary ice floe, loose white
 crystals, translucent bluish layers.
 I am an outlier
 shuck-
 ling in melt.
 Is it possible to think into

the future? Runways underwater
 ghosts of planes submerged
 in
 duck-egg blue
 all the ash filtered out like the flashes
 of colour you saw in the detritus
 of the Grindelwald
 ice
 once sent to
 Paris for fashionable cocktails but
 the glaciers declined. The Arctic is
 unravelling, roads buckle
 the
 house is
 sinking. How blue is my canvas
 layered with broken glass and scattered
 light, the point of brink.
 Blue
 a single
 syllable blown into the air, morning-
 glory blue, orgone energy blue, gestures from
 the dolour of deep ice.

(«Variations on a theme» is subtitled ‘Splintered Ice No. 2’, painted by the Cornish artist Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. By forging different phenomena into a kind of unity, the poem seeks to create the same kind of unity as the painting through patterning. The form is thus a key element here.)

«Heiliger Dankgesang»

when no cure exists
 there are notes
 and poems
 for the slow drawing down
 just these

notes and words in a minor key
 charms

earth-noise earth-rooted
 threnody
 implace me where
 the cello's seductive syntax
 bends like a sentence
 the simple trick of dissonance
 up an octave
 until
 thin strands of glass
 quiver

today's freezing rain thrums
 in a key I cannot hear
 sets my heart to breaking
 strip it down
 eight notes become five
 five become three
 now reduce it to two
 one
 []

exhalation of ancient yews in the Lydian mode
 life breathes down
 to the point of
 dissolve
 still I persevere
 can't let it go

when the flower blooms the sepal opens
 forsythia corresponds
 ambiguity
 soft to the core
 separate the cellulose from the wood
 work with the pulp of
 trills | syncopations | harmonies
 against

the immense
terrible silence
conflicting currents
meet in the vortex
 the roundness of sound
 spinning
 slow | fast | slow | fast | slow
beyond the range of illness
beyond the yawning tombstones
 their names buffered
 by time and lichen

it's harder to live
as twilight scythes
a snow-covered landscape
walled up in winter
the notes reduce from
 f to *e*
 e comes on

suppose you could step out into the night sky
fly stowaway with the Perseids
 bathe the hemispheres
 with stardust
the notes sustain
 how we swam
 in their saline chords

(«Heiliger Dankgesang» or 'Holy Song of Thanksgiving' is Beethoven's third movement of Opus 132 String Quartet, written when he was recovering from a near fatal illness. The poem attempts to borrow aspects of Beethoven's compositional procedure.)

«**Lepanto**»

bawling fleet flock cruel lottery horned minotaur
fair hair / breast the spine

trembles
unravelling grief

Apollo pulls back the spurs

the frenzy
stops

deep gloom-grove

Stygian marsh

Styx playing a tune

they flit through

lightning

where gold shone

a glittering twig

wash it

anoint it

[wailing

raise the body

torch it

blood in bowls

to smote

a lamb

entrails on flames

BASTARDS

hubbub wanders the riverbank

no pilot to steer the tiller

I swam the place of shadows

[Dido

wandering

crying

O

pen

wound

our awful horse fucked

O blessed grove

snakes / gates / maws

girdled groan

some happy shades picnicking

for mother and country

the field hums

drunk

on forgetfulness

the sea's marbled surface

stuff hardens

a mound / a crowd

memory erased
twin plumes of doubt down at the mouth ships
stand to shore

(«Lepanto» is the title of a painting cycle by Cy Twombly depicting the 16th century sea battle led by the papal states against the Ottoman invasion. This poem responds to that subject by taking the text of Virgil's Aeneid, Book VI 'The Visit to Hell' (transl. David Hadbawnik). The poem is a work of erasure and of translation in the sense of carrying across, from one language to another, one culture to another, one time and place to another.)