

Taking You Home

for my mother (1938 – 2018)

The old quarter, Arco

In every square, a fountain or curved basin,
taps gushing forth blessings, water for the people,

water for locals, families, climbers, travellers,
at every shadowed corner, a tap ready

to turn, a fish waiting to pour sleek, silver drops
from its open mouth, dolphins porpoising to depths

where water is pure and cold, each drop a coin
silvering tongue and throat; twist it and water

slips, spills bullets of sweet liquid, memory-bursts
of you leaning, laughing at fountains and troughs

in medieval towns and old cities, where you
were immortal in sandals, sundress, smiling

at me; I drink and this mercurial element
gathers our past, your heart, and pours it into mine.

Cliffs, Arco

In places, the rock is polished to a sheen,
shining like glass catching the sun, gleaming

like the bolted belays that hang in chains
or necklaces of stainless steel.

Everything shines its holiness - rock, leaves, sky,
the olive grove's green mantle, thick trunks

turned cork-like, grass, long and lush
perfumed with wild herbs and flowers -

above the old town, its winding streets a narrow maze
of leaning walls, shuttered light, streets thinning

to shoulder-width where cool stone, marble troughs
and ornate gates offer shadow, susurrus of voice

and scent of peach and persimmon drifting
from hidden gardens, their depths of green

a cold cloth to the forehead, an anointment
like the shrines to Mary that grace each curve

of the road, her blue robes and kind eyes
her supplicant hands and flowers bright as fire

that light her feet, as if ready, always ready
to carry our burdens, further.

Chapelle, Notre Dame du Roc, Castellane

Your grandson and I, pilgrims climbing through warm air
and the jewellery of leaves, higher we move,

limbs humming with heat, feet negotiating rock
and at each shrine we stop to stare out at valleys,

the receding village, slowly leaving the world
behind, rising to this wild eyrie where the town

tumbles below, walls lost beneath roof tiles
that tilt like orange hats keeping the sun

at bay, and the dark door beckons, its cool centre
a mouth, a harbour, where we light slender candles;

above, Mary's altar blooms with leaves, wreaths, posies,
and we place Camargue shells, gathered en route, I kneel

and Ava Maria's gold spell pours through the room;
Mary knew we'd come, she has been waiting for you.

Latin Quarter, Paris

In the glass, its pale gleam is straw in the sun
or starlight reflected in river water

on a night like the last when the moon glowed,
it is cool in our mouths, and I watch you,

ears alive to conversations filling this room,
as you sip, bird instincts overtaken by desire,

driven by sound swirling and building as our
restaurant fills, rolling *rs*, exclamations

and emphases, this language you always loved,
and through the windows, light fades to lilac,

stone buildings like fields of lavender while
this room pulses orange with sound and warmth,

voices vehement with company, our wine
paler than the candles burning their heady flames,

casting shadows, the wine nearly gone, each
brief mouthful a memory of you, your mouth

mobile with new possibilities, shoulders shrugging
je ne sais pas as I reach for your hand,

the stone outside struck grey, the candles pooling
with melted wax; our table, my glass, empty.

Concert, Eglise Saint-Julien-Le-Pauvre, Paris

Seated, we are a motley group of old and young,
some, hands clasped in each other's, some, their own fingers

tightly latched - mine are interlocked with yours, I feel
their gentleness: child's breath. The pianist's fingers play

as if they will float, caress, regardless of who
is listening, the same odd flourish to finish.

Only at the end do they falter, a wrong note
vibrating in the air, held by the acoustics,

swelling then fading. He has the grace to smile,
to acknowledge the irony of perfect pitch,

his mastery humbling itself, humbling us all.
When he played Chopin's 'Valse en mi mineur' my neighbour

reached for her lover's hand, clutching his fingers as if
they could save her, or bless her, the benediction

of the music played in all of us, the stone walls,
this ground, consecrated for 1600 years.

When we leave, night coats the city, sky pearled with an
opalescent moon that turns Notre Dame luminous,

and by the Seine a young man with roller blades
and rasta plaits hitches rides on cars, clinging

to bumpers, gathering speed to accelerate
across the bridge and up the ramp, sending himself

hurtling like a pole vaulter over the bar, to fly
to the audience's ecstatic applause:

earth angel, sacred acrobat, and I let you go,
his wings sweeping you into endless night.