Twenty Questions

after Donald Justice

Is it constant in your land?
Does it rain constantly?
Are you a real character?
Have you ever got your hands dirty?
Is your passport current?
Are we closely related?
Do you honestly believe what you’re saying?
Would you like to see the menu?
When did you last examine a scruple?
Have you ever forgotten your lines in public?

When were you last in the Holy Land?
Where is it precisely?
Are you a forerunner?
Have you ever been truly sorry?
Are you Cancer?
Do you worry about the future of the novel?
Have you found those binoculars?
Who watered the pitch in 1958?
Have you ever rhapsodised?
Would you mind completing a short survey?
I
Moments ago, back from the library
and the noisy, populous park
(that shrill of infantocracies),
I was entering our building when
a magpie swooped – taut dart of surprise.
Day too blithe for amour-propre,
I grinned at the bird, but it was sharp,
implacable, bobbing on the wall like
a boxer in a ring. He would do it again,
and next time he would aim closer
(that much I knew) –
no veering taunt this time.
Well, I was beyond cavilling,
too full of the poem that Donald Justice
had absently enjoined me to pen,
the poem that might lead somewhere
or fail to ascend. Four flights up,
our terrace doors open to summer,
you were playing an Impromptu
by Schubert (very carefully),
arpeggios audible on the street,
if the street cared to attend.
I stood there listening,
mindful of the magpie
and his fierce, nesting, arrowy urge.
The Victoria Markets

Storm over the old mart,
shut these two hours.
Slick on bitumen
reflects eruptive cloud.
After editorial frays
I go out for late beer,
admire the frenzied workers.
It is like a military operation,
our vegetable Dunkirk.
Having come from White Horse
or Point Nepean
(‘into the centre from the source’),
they put away their wares
until someone wants:
‘Cheap today, lady, cheap today!’
mere echoes of their taunts.
Forklift trucks flit
from stall to store,
bearers of a wilted spring.
Prawns shimmy on old bones
and gulls will have their say.
By the ring-road,
near an old gas stove
in Federation colours, a boy
practises sharp manoeuvres
on a bandaged skateboard.
Magical Thinking

He won’t be in the garden on your return

The weather may be fine,
the chairs set out,
tomatoes and all ripening in the sun,
memories of this or that –
innocence, a porcupine

but he won’t be in the garden on your return

Delude yourself as you wish,
say reason is triumphal
as a clinical test,
forget the bromide
in the calculus –

for he won’t be in the garden on your return
One day before the decimal age
the grim little incinerator
near the entrance to our school –
usually joyless, unvisited,
something to be pelted
in boydom’s sportive games
or sheltered behind when ardour
was a mystery and hiddenmost –
suddenly gave up its buried bullion,
shone with what it had concealed,
and all the class, acting on a rumour
and newly wise to lucre,
grubbed among the ash-heap,
dug and dug and dug all morning,
gouging shilling after sordid pence,
until we were sated and stilled,
until we went back to our Derwents
and our maps and our explorers,
pockets filled with smuttings of the gods.
Late Autograph

How many years since we last met?
Fifteen? Twenty? Too long, anyway.
I spotted you amid the snake of country cousins,
stooped aunts queuing for my autograph.
Slightly awkward you were, but patient,
not throwing your weight around
(not as you once did, magisterially),
standing in line for your first autograph –
you who had autographed the world,
so patiently, never condescending,
always that grin for needful youth
looking up at you, imploring you.
To have been so consumed by the world –
what did the devourers leave?

Finally,
a stubborn ancient of the family,
keen to reminisce about my boyhood,
edged away and it was your turn.
(What did I care about boyhood except you were there?) I stood, shook your hand –
felt the old current move through me,
an athlete’s massivity. How long since we’d first seen each other? Twenty-five?
Thirty? You were a soldier then, drafted:
short back and sides to complicate your Florentine physique. Hardly any weight since, and the woeful moustache you affected in your thirties was gone,
banished by a third wife, or fourth?
(Not that I’m counting.) So we talked,
tentative at first. You pointed out your son, tall as you, good-looking, a shy simulacrum. Then I condoled with you about your loss. There are no words, you said, stopping me. I hoped we communicated across the ages, the stack of books awaiting defilement. A memoir? you asked, conscious of the restive queue, the brief entitlement. I pictured you opening it, discovering me, reading certain passages, certain intimacies. But how to inscribe your copy? The cynosure of every eye, I wanted to say, but instead wrote something fond and anodyne. I had done so several times already, confronted with idols from my youth (recalling a wound on this one’s flank, lean waist, brute thigh, a corded arm), but this time the inscription was paltry.

And then, transcending those wraiths of reality, you were standing in front of me again brazen amid the horde of admirers – naked, panting, grazed down one side, towel over your shoulder, teasing me, calling me nicknames, sweet, aromatic.