From POESIE BREVI

VI

San Gimignano

There is music among these towers of avarice and enmity.
By the stone well in the courtyard
    a flute flutters its utterance.
Under the arch, under frescoed saints
    a harpsichord trembles into life
and under spreading canvas
    of the festa dell’ unità
the folk group furiously
sets the feet of the contadini free.

1991

TWELVE ETUDES

(Somewhat after Chopin)

1/12

Looking at stars with a friend you must go a long, long way from the night light of towns.

You must leave behind glow of street lamps, the blood-drop of a railway signal’s denial;
You must drive country roads
past silos and granite rocks in waves,
down and across samphire lowlands;

Must put that ridge of ironstone
between you and the lights of man
till you come to a fork in the road.

Away from the telegraphic hum
of wires, a dead tree’s skeleton,
you can lean back, look on high.

Only your heart’s pulse alarms
the silence, as panoply of night
is spread before peering eyes.

Diamantine shawl of our galaxy
is balcony to this universe—
see Sirius, Aries and Crux of course.

And so, standing together, tourists
to stellar continents, blood subsides
and thoughts of worship subdue ecstasy.

And indeed reverence is right
for remembrance of this night
is like a handshake for the rest of life.
There is rich smell of dry wood freshly sawn or cut; when blood of the sapwood augments in furious spring time the scents of fresh raindrops on dry loam—another memory of home in distant desert places. Here the manna gum in great clear clusters sprang from trunk and bough, was gathered to taste, to endow in curious children’s jaws long afterwards its legacy. And song of attendant birds; wind’s breath too in trees. And no scent of death.

Lines of lament can haunt us even now. From distant discard of a rag doll or bear that played out its part in nursery incidents before the press of the world demanded we never suck a thumb again.
In the chalk dusted  
schoolrooms left behind  
a dog-eared work pad  
where perfected lines  
earned the coloured stamp  
of merit. Honour board  
of athletic prowess still  
records junior champ  
of the school, Grade VI.

Later, party dress  
worn for the first time  
with bra beneath; or  
perhaps a boy’s first  
proud pair of long pants;  
a first friendship ring;  
a red-ribboned high  
school diploma. Late  
lamented lines leading back.

4/12

Now streets seem full of avatars—  
gold-painted, bronzed or white-washed.  
They spring from hinged treasure chests,  
suddenly blow on a mouth organ, strum  
stringless guitars. Then chocolate-coated  
lovers embrace for aeons; shining silver
knights totally encased like the Tin Man
pose as if still presiding in castle corridors.
What does it tell us of our own reality? For
there they are in Times Square, Wilders Plads
or Piazza Garibaldi, Place de la Concorde;
in Plaza Mayor, Martin Place or Pall Mall,
begging for rewards— for here reality holds
no value any more. All avatars are maybe
latter-day Saint Peters or a Cerberus reborn—
gatekeepers to worlds well beyond ours
where Fate has no governance; where
genes know no spontaneous mutants;
where rather than standing still, time
has gone, gone completely away. Soon
we too will stream past without a blink.

5/12

When the moment of touching arrives
and capillaries bring up their reserves
like ships with living heat in chilling seas
moving torrid blood alongside to unfreeze
the loneliness of long voyages, the crews
come stumbling along grained decks, their jaws
agape and hot white smoke of human breath
keeping words warm across space, while beneath
them the narrow span of glittering waters waits.
This is touching? Collisions where skin grates
on skin? Exchange of danger—till storm subsides
and the separate sea passage of each ship rides
on again to the furthest reaches of the seas
perhaps. And memory of the touch recedes.

6/12

Nobody wants to be branded a bachelor,
score no more with the chicks in the bar-room,
tower over newlyweds, then have to fade.

Could bachelorhood be other than sad?
Cot in the nursery empty, the male line marred?
Too soon it’s over, so why have you stayed?
Look to your jeans, man, take to the track,
moan of maidenheads and leave your door ajar—
soul-mates are scarce as hen’s teeth they say.

Goils ain’t goils where the Mafia trims its sails,
women are women, backbone of a nation;
mother is a another doing it too tough,

though a good cigar’s no longer a smoke.
Fired by gratitude we resolved to buy for rouged
winner after winner among cheer leaders,
lime milkshakes and candies. Nor erred
trying to assert that victors lead the way,
while the world wields motherhood like a sword.

7/12

Follow the wind’s coursing:
it rises from the sea, disturbs
the spare dune grasses in passing,
then snakes its way by river’s run—
bays and sand spits and sheoak groves—
to the open waters of lakes, swamplands
and strewn alluvium of the Scarp.
What language is this which
the wind speaks? What has it
picked up over the ocean miles
from its family of gales and breezes?
I think it longs for ease
after countless centuries.
So much has rested on its shoulders.

This wind has borne gossamer
insects on threads, powder of
pollens disturbed, and has nudged
aloft the poised wings of the albatross.
From more distance still, gunpowder
smoke of battle, fumes of factories
and the stirred dust of workers’ towns
Over flatlands the hot morning
air can hoist a bunch of leaves
and paper a hundred meters aloft
in devilish vortex; or preen into
rage grassfires to take farms and towns
then explode mulga and mallee clumps
with ferocity of Ching Ming fireworks.

Somewhere in deserts inland
air begins to swing back in the heat.
Burning breeze in salmon gum
canopies blows ever brisker from
nor-east. Impatient as sirocco
it sweeps wheatlands and wandoo forest,
from granite monoliths to coastal lagoons.

Until, far out to sea, where passengers
in steamships used to sniff in the air
winged seeds and eucalyptus smell.
All night the easterlies pound
down valleys of stone fruits and vines,
slam doors and windows, disembowel
trash; till noontime sea breezes prevail.

For in the end the oceans tame the land,
continents face typhoons; cyclones in their
fury humiliate forests or cities; tsunamis
inundate the insolence of lowland dwellers.
Once winter storms leaned so hard on west coasts
that streams ran bankers through childhood days.
Until drenched we’d hunker down to wind chill.

8/12

No, Mr Vosznesensky,
that first frost is also the last
most often. Just as the antelope
paralysed by the lion’s crunching
bite drags itself that last short
journey of its allotted life;
so you convulse in sweating pain
wilder than you will know again.

My friends, what is this moment then?
It’s when you are gripped and forced
with unwilling eyes to regard
the instant of your summoning
by pain; that frosty road to death.

9/12

‘You make love my burden
and I cannot lift it now
with all my strength.’
So often Love is imperious, wilful fickle, as some great Khan become mesmerised by his own power.

Then he turns this way and that, hurls commands to quell imagined legions of assassins, whole hordes of scheming plotters of his phantasmed overthrow. Or lays waste a bemused tribe of petty advisers and officials simply because he knows he can.

‘How then can this be love?’ you ask, when accusations of faithlessness are followed by protestations of love, ardour and servitude.

These lunges of the old emperor toss you up and down like a small boat in the rapids of the Chang Jiang and make your head reel with the lurch of its swinging prow.

Is this how imperious Love becomes a burden to mortal lovers and robs them at last of strength to serve that god?
Tonight at dusk I saw a wild west-wind tearing at leaves of spindly trees, rolling clumps of dead grass past me in the street, wrapping paper wastes around standing weeds in vacant lots. Rain was on the way as your intercity bus droned down freeways and you read your book avidly. I, at last sheltered at home, heard the rain come in a cloudburst. Like that buried sentence you sent me. And like the dry earth eagerly I drank it up, and thanked you much.

I hate to be thought of using someone, she said. But still the worst words clamouring in my brain were: forget the loss forever. And I was insane. For sooner would I forget the moon will rise or set, all my life, however long or short. Sooner would the waves cease to break again and again on rocky shores. Sooner
would the wolves cease to howl in frozen wastes, or serpents cease to writhe and bite in all the hells of all the world’s holy writ; sooner would vampires drink all my blood, than I could forget forever cherished loss.

No, there is no way I can let go the light that showed me all my world was new, every landscape detail under the sun never could be the same again. Even the sun itself would have to go down red as blood and never shine again. And still before my eyes would be every single detail of that last hope of happiness of mine. Forever? No, never. Under the rubble of this palace I have pulled down I will search forever with blistered fingers until I find the broken body of love.

12/12

I’m off now, will tell you all about it if and when I get back. The parabola paused—this is the point of interference, the perfection of the secant’s cut-away.

I see a yellow dirt road—sandplain country hedged by hakea and heath that will blaze out with the next spring. Now it is waterless and the way leads on.
Beyond are threadbare pastures fenced;
and in the hollow a turning iron windmill.
So there is water to suck down there. Sheep
 come to a brackish trough. An eagle aloft.

It is good to get away in this metaphor
that exists for an hour, for a day, to embrace
the dreams of solitude, independence—far
from the slinging arrows of the fortunate.

At home there, among herd of loved ones
we are crowded into folded hours;
we fetch and tend in the home pens with
press of fleecy eyes and cloven hooves.

So away here, sand road running under
clouds, we travelled far off for a time;
stood upon rock domes or peered into
open gold mines. Then thunder and rain.

So at the furthest point where salt lakes
stretch out on either side of culverts
and roadsides over-arch with salmon gums,
we have to turn the car—to be back later.

2009