



PART  
ONE



## As If

somewhere on the  
tidal earth, the traffic  
gone, arrives an hour  
when, a cat persistent and  
plaintive at the door,

you stumble out of  
bed to let her in  
and, as she brushes  
your ankles in a cool  
wave of night-scented air,

hear a bird on a scarcely  
discernible branch  
of a high ash  
by the road begin to try  
out his pair of songstruck

lungs – tentative,  
explorative – as if  
any god worth his salt  
would create  
music before light

## Chauvet

don't look for any pictures of everyday life  
chiselled or smudged on limestone and spared by water  
that drips from our own time into death's private cave  
no portraits, no self-portraits no ice-chewed landscapes  
or charts of the night domesticating the stars  
no hint of Neanderthals

nothing a painter  
could have heard or seen in a conifer valley  
except the spirit bodies who would give their flesh  
to a loving spear

and become these agile shapes  
populating a rockface as if rough torches  
and crafty fingers had summoned them onto walls  
to watch the humans, to watch ourselves: musk oxen  
bison pursued by a pride of maneless lions  
rhinos hornlocked in battle a cave bear scenting  
a cowed hyena mammoths with no conception  
their future will stop

this cornucopia  
a silent archive a gallery of desire  
its beloved images feared, worshipped, slaughtered  
fallen out of mind driven beyond memory  
unbreathing and unmoving

but for the horses  
still whinnying now  
and the blood-coloured handprints

## Labrador

A gravel road to the sea.  
A raw wind. The end of a world.

A pile of scanty earth heaped with rocks.

Under the pile, just off the road, the skeleton  
of a boy buried face down, a flat  
stone across his lower back,  
and to give him hope on his journey  
a walrus tusk, reddened pebbles, a flute  
sculpted from a bird's bone  
and the toggled point of a harpoon.

A deserted beach, the morning after rain,  
sliced by a stream through the sand.

Fragments of a warship near a lighthouse  
the colour of ice beyond  
a village of seven.

Seven thousand  
years ago, who wrapped his body  
in bark and animal skins  
and placed his head toward the falling sun?  
Who lit the fires beside him and cooked food?

No bowheads offshore. No walrus.  
No smoke curling over the valley.  
The end of a world. A raw wind.

A sandpiper's tracks along the shore.

## Birth

You know who's waiting nearby.  
Night's cloak and a pale horse.  
The glint of a sharpened sickle. The crackle  
of bone without flesh. We try  
anything, everything to elude  
his gaze.

Strange if we never  
recall his long-lost twin, his favourite  
enemy, his silent partner. Did we  
glimpse her when the dark sky  
opened? Did we notice her sure touch  
on that earbreaking rush  
down to light and the gulped hiss  
of air?

Does nobody remember her?  
An after-image on a retina.  
The dream that comforts a patient gasping  
in a pink-walled room, wired  
and tubed, clamped in place, lips like  
hard sand, to the tick  
of machines:

A red-haired dancer  
in a green dress, her hands outstretched  
to the sun. Or a Rift Valley Eve.  
Or a smiling child looking up from  
a game of shells and stepping over  
the bare floor of a brushwood  
hut where rice is boiling  
to hold a curtain wide, saying

*Don't*

*worry. Don't be afraid.*

## Forget Me Not

Before the sea grew, the elders say,  
there were villages and farms edging out from  
what's now the shore, and the seals who turn  
whiskered heads in the air to watch  
people on the kelp-entangled rocks can dive  
among houses where the fish slip through doorways  
or hide in jumbles of fallen slate.

And once, before the sea grew, a boy who lived  
in such a village came running home to show  
his mother a pair of eggs he found by a wall,  
eggs the colour of forget-me-nots, as cool  
to his touch as a shadowed stone on a hill  
that welcomes, even now, the flight of larks and hawks  
and sunlight unhampered by water.

"Don't worry," she told him, "they were never meant  
to hatch." But he cradled them, one in each hand,  
up a rough path overlooking the bay  
and lodged them in a swirl of hazel. That morning  
the village quivered in a dry breeze  
that quickened the passage of small boats and no-one,  
the elders say, imagined the future.