



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 walruses.
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.