

## Grieving

Glen Downie

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# WORK POETRY / POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

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## Grieving

The door opens to light weak as watered sun  
She lowers herself as though wounded  
into a chair

She has written strange letters accusing  
the doctors the hospital *The man in the coffin*  
*was grim-faced My husband*  
*was gentle*

You listen helpless while she chases  
her conspiracy tale  
The ragged scrap story  
whirls round like a dust devil

and slams shut all possible doors  
till the room has collapsed  
suddenly silent and close as a breathless lung  
In her fear she is wearing  
the grim face her husband —  
No Never

Her husband was gentle  
and vanished impossibly  
cleansed of all shadow  
like a letter unwriting itself  
like a bed sheet unwrinkling

and you are a weak door  
she opens and closes again  
There is only this wounded light  
left to grieve for the body

### Reproduction in the Kingdom

Back at the office  
every form on my desk has reproduced  
slyly, like the secret agents of Xerox,  
Persian king of the twentieth century,  
who extends his dominion  
by the endless multiplication of edicts

Over the copier I lean  
like a modern Narcissus  
cloning myself in 8½ by 11.  
I am two-dimensional  
man. At the press of a button  
I can cancel  
I can cancel  
all special features

It's my job to paper over the cracks in the system  
to advance the cause of the duplicate universe  
which we're asked to inhabit  
gratefully  
gratefully  
in place of the torn original

### The Coming of Spring

From Port-of-Spain  
to the snow  
he has come to be burned  
clean with radiation,  
rescued by poisons.  
The hollows of his eyes  
are deep pools of faith.  
Chin whiskers  
like fine black grass  
sprout hopefully.

His words have a soft  
island music. *My country*  
he whispers  
*is a beautiful place*  
*so very beautiful.*  
They drain his blood  
for evidence. Under the microscope,  
an aerial photo of islands.  
Malignant invasion.

Against the white pillow  
 his dark gleaming skull  
 is sculpted  
 smooth,  
     imperceptibly  
 closer to final perfection.  
 Into his ears, the Walkman is chanting  
 Koran: *In the name of Allah*  
     *the compassionate,*  
     *the merciful. . . .*

### Living with Cancer

The new patient is appalled at the gallows  
 humour before the meeting starts.  
 Loose talk about death

has spooked him, driven him  
 to the edge

of our circle, where he whispers to his wife  
 about leaving early

Newly hired, I'm here to observe the human  
 chemistry, as the group administers a dose  
 of distilled experience.

Cancer is alive in the room, yet the laughing presence  
 of 10- and 12-year veterans  
 confounds the man's fear.

When I started work, someone issued me  
 a daybook. Religiously, I snip  
 a corner off each clean page

to be always in the present, to feel the edge  
 of the cut day against my thumb, and know I am right  
 where I belong.

Tomorrow, we will spread  
 out in a bigger building, my office  
 one cell in a growing cancer

clinic. Like the stranger tonight, I'm new  
 to this disease, but as a comfort  
 an old hand assures me  
 we will soon be  
 well acquainted.

### Chances Are

Remember how *I love you*  
sounded when my voice was all gravel and smoke?  
Rougher than a stretch of dirt road in summer. Soon  
it was less than a croak, just a dry  
whisper like dust settling after  
the car's gone by. I told you then  
*Tenderness is hard.*

Before they cut out the voice  
box, a pretty girl came by  
with a book of comforting  
words. It had sketches  
of a man and a woman embracing, and it said  
if you loved me before  
chances are you would love me  
again. Words, it seems, are just vibrating air

given pretty shape in a mouth. Perhaps I can learn  
to *burp I love you into your ear.* If not,  
I can buy a machine  
that vibrates love  
and rage and singing  
into one robotic monotone of loss

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