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Writing Sample
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Includes "from Entries on Light," "Mammont," and "Mahout."

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Today's grey light
is of
light withheld but
softly
shyly like a sheltered
girl's.

It's a
light in gentle
motion
like a young girl sitting
splaying her skirts

her listening smiles
around her.
When
barefoot
she disappears
momentarily to another

sky
gleams like glassware
we can hear not see
we
contract but air
expanded

into a memory
she has thrown
behind her.
And in the memory is
light
and lightness.

*

from Entries on Light
Scales are evenly weighed, inside outside. Light is evenly poised - blur to the gold glare to the blue – it's twilight. In two minds.

Who can read by a lamp, focus land's outline? But blue soon sinks and gold rises. Who can stay the balance if light can't?

*

Streetlamps threw battlements of shadow on a lawn, somewhere a travelling clock ticked; rockplants hung faceted with lurid orange raindrops
dustbin lids gleamed under gutter-pipes and eaves.

But given the minerality of shorelife, rain's afterlife it seemed with a moon in the sky tide going out - and wave coming in on wave - a miracle
that the one should draw
    the other, as though
gavity were more to do
    with weightlessness than weight.

* 

An Iranian professor I know asked me
    the first time we met, as he'd asked so many
students: Saheb-del - how would you say in English
    Saheb-del, can you translate it? And each time
he pronounced the words his fingers tolled the air
    like a bell, a benediction. Years have passed.

Saheb means master, owner, companion; del
    means heart. Heart's companion, keeper?
Heart's host? And in those years I've asked
    friends who in turn have asked friends
who know Urdu, Farsi, and no one has come up with
    the English for Saheb-del. Is it a name
for the very thing that won't translate? And why
    don't I remember having heard it said?
They say it of people who are hospitable, 'godly',
    I'd say it of the professor himself. Trust him
to keep asking, us to keep failing, and if we can't recall
    its tone, tenor, with what word shall we keep faith?

* 

I've always grown
    in other people's shade.
Not for shelter
    in solidity, neither they
being spreading oak or beech nor I
    some shrinking violet

but when a face upturned
    towards frail light, a voice
that interweaves between
    dark leaves a space for
flower, path for thorn, catch something
    of light's reach and axiom
then lower on the stem
my edges breathe, droop
through dust re-invents desire
not for gloss but growth
from this common soil, that upward
thrust from lateral roots
to a realm
wholly natural, and radical.
When a face, a voice
like new leaves on a vane
promise turn by turn
a view, on a spiralling belt
towards that light, then
being roused I know
while upholding the crown
in whose shade I too
throw shadow, I draw
a freight of light in tow.

* ...

...Human beings must be
taught to love
silence and darkness.

But in silence comes
the seepage of
a gas fire's breath
in darkness the pink
of a child's
mosquito net - it seems
their very presence
is that love
for how else can we invoke
after-worlds without
voice, light
but through things that
breathe and move, obey
an absence
that is deified because

absence is unbearable
    unless, in a residue
of breath and light

we bear the agony
    of presence, and do
call this bearing, loving?

* 

Nothing can ruin the evening -
    car doors slammed, voices raised
in the last of the light, voices
    without owners. And that's
a difference between art and nature -
    art transforming - voices, traffic
tawdriness - but in a gathering-in
    an almost selfish motion; nature
extending outwards as the shore its arms
    night its stars, an open invitation.

The palace of a ship at night
    blinking stars like cursors;
those disembodied voices from
    who knows which shore, drunk –
why note them, fail them?
    Torn between life and art, why is one
without the other like a shore without its sea
    night without its stars, why am I
- still beautiful - so unable to contain
    the ugliness, my own, in either?

* 

It's the eye of longing
    that I tire of
the eye of fantasy
    lost in the grey horizons.

Having neither the heart
    nor talent for
invention, why should I
- no child of mist -

be party to this cold
imagination, its cloak
and hood, smuggled goods
its faery in the dingle?

Where are my sunlight's
givens? Near the sun
and far from folk
an albino child, skin clean
as silver, hair white as
snow, under the Simorgh's
eye as she flies
over the Alborz Mountains

years later will hear her cry:
... behold my might,
*For I have cherished thee beneath my plumes
And brought thee up among my little ones*

before she ferries him home
gives him a feather to light
as a signal
in times of trouble.

But this is my borrowed plumage
language, more strange to me
than this foster-tongue, this English
fairy godmother.

*

To be so dependent on sunlight
- small desires on the lookout
like feathers snagged on slates -
is to be, in a climate
doomed to cloud, its changing mind
a paler version of the story:
he whose glory flew away from him
three times in the shape of a bird
whose wingspan was so great that rain
could never fall but when faith
at last deserted him and falsehood
What is he looking for
the great white sun
throwing the force of his search
like torchlight onto the sea?
What he looks for
will be present
only as long as his looking;
what he fails to find
absent
to the precise extent
of his brightness
blinding himself by reflection
while the passerby takes in
a high sun, a broken
and a peninsula of violet
the translation between.
It's darkness
the white sun looks for
the one thing
by the light of his eyes
he'll never see; one thing
the brighter, further
he throws his rays
the more recedes: it's
his shadow that he looks for
and will never know
if it is God or self, friend or foe
if it follows or precedes.

*
of God, being so ashamed at his own
beauty, his own
unutterable perfection, the peacock
broke out in a sweat.
    From the sweat of his nose, God created
the Angels.
    From the sweat of his face, the Throne, Footstool
Tablet of Forms, the Pen
    the heavens and what is in them.
From breast and back
    the Visited House, prophets, holy sites, etc.

From the sweat of his two feet
    God created, from east to west, the earth.
The sea is
    glistening peacock sweat.
Tarmac too.
    From sweat of the peacock's feet of pearl
comes my window view.
    Perhaps I am formed from a trembling
drop on his ankle.
    Cypress, sunflower, bicycle wheels
grass dried in heat
    to the colour of wheat, all, all are
peacock water, peacock dew
    shame and beauty, salt and light
God's peacock
    in his consciousness, walks over.

*

Too much light is tiresome.
    Knowing this, today's
keeps its counsel. Tight-lipped
    the sky has closed its door
against the sea which
    like an aimless child
spreadeagles on its bed. The day
    is set aside for function.

Every shrub, roof, windowsill
    broods on its own
injunctions. Even birds on errands
    forget to play on thermals
winging it straight across the sky
as though time and light
were the same thing, same task
and every bird and bush accountable.

*

Light's sharpening
  knives of water.
I long for the coolness
  of a room downstairs.
White grapes. A morning
cigarette. To take
umbrage behind hessian
  blow on a glass
of tea, sugarlump held
  between my teeth, taste
how bitterness
  too quickly sweetens.

Light's packed its water
  of knives in drawer
upon drawer of
  darkness. Where sea's
banded in shadow. Laid
  smaller silvers
out in the calm: glimmer
  of tines, crests
salvers and scoops, flatware
  embossed on handles.
And that downstairs room
  never to have, never to hold

the way Proust says
  on meeting with colons
that inviolate pause
  when a gathering falls silent
before it intones
  has brought him, while
reading, the scent of a rose
  which has never evaporated
though centuries old, there it comes
  with its teas and spoons
luminous fridge, against the light
  bowed silhouettes of people.
I've stored all the light
I need. Stored it
in the dark jars of my body.
Light's in its phase
of falling. Souring, sweetening.
Boring us with its constancy
polishing, straightening. Light's
like a grandmother tiring
pushing a strand of hair behind
her ear, knees aching, sighing.
No one looks up, the sky's too bright.
Four boys on seaweed ledges.

We look at the sea instead or
inward to reservoirs
four-handled jars, fats and oils
seven-herb pickle, smoked fish, spice
down to the cold slabs of our stores
under bone and cartilage.

(1997)

Re-printed in *Selected Poems* (London: Carcanet, 2000)
from: *The Inwardness of Elephants (a sequence)*

Mammont

Long before the mammoth there was *mammont*, an enormous creature with feet resembling a bear's.

In Estonian, *maa* and *mutt* mean 'earth' and 'mole' and indeed *mammont* lived underground, ate mud and sometimes on subterranean walks poked its head above ground only to duck back down for it found sunlight hurtful, so hurtful it perished in the open air. Elephants still hate the glare.

But in moonlight they spray themselves with water and discreetly, under its fountain, mate.

Are you the year's last sun then, husband? Snow in your hair? It's a long time since we've spoken.

Once, long ago, at the mouth of the Lena river, a mammoth was found with an eye and brain still intact after isatis, wolverines, foxes had fed on it and skinned, the remains were sent to St. Petersburg where they fuelled endless debate. The body, however mutilated, records what the mind forgets.

*
Mahout

We trust each our own elephant
till our own elephant kills us.
The attendants holding the silk umbrellas,

the one who plies the fan
of peacock feathers, the man
with the flyswatter of yaktailes.

You cannot cheat on the amount of oil
poured in the lamps for an elephant
will always honour the pace of the ritual.

Nor is the elephant's love less manifest.
He will insert his trunk, like a hand,
inside your garments and caress your breast.

He will follow, with his mate,
the undulations in B minor of *Iphigenia in Tauris*
or, on solo bassoon, *Oh, my Tender Musette.*

And the cow will stroke him with her long
and flexible member before bringing
it back upon herself, pressing its finger

first in her mouth, then in his ear.
While over their transports, whistling fire,
the harmony of two human voices

falls like summer rain.
Meat that walks like a mountain
among giant flowers, huge nettles and lobelia.

Child, don't be afraid.
The circle of nine precious stones
is never absent from his forehead.

1 I have drawn and collaged material for this sequence from *The Life and Lore of the Elephant* by Robert Delort (Thames & Hudson, 1992).

From *The Chine* (London: Carcanet, 2002)