

Nordic

Continent, city, country, society:

the choice is never wide and never free.

*And here, or there... No. Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?*

(from 'Questions of Travel', Elizabeth Bishop)

Remembering Tigerstaden in the Lion City

“A 4.5 meter long bronze tiger... is one of the first things that meets a tourist arriving at Oslo Central Station.”

– from *VisitOslo: The Official Travel Guide to Oslo*

“The English name of Singapore is derived from the Malay word Singapura (lit. Lion City)... Lions probably never lived there; the beast seen by Sang Nila Utama, who founded and named ancient Singapore, was most likely a tiger.”

– from *Wikipedia: Singapore*

Walking around Oslo

near the central train station,

you claimed

that every city

harbours lions and tigers,

leopards, bears:

stone monuments

to the wild within.

I remember this,

sitting by a marble lion

at Ann Siang Hill,
my menagerie

snarling and pacing
on the faded five-foot-way.

Nordic

These days, reading is Nordic.

You seek out white space,

sound each slow word,

taste the resonance

within and between.

It's the closest you get

to ice-blue skies,

listening pines,

watchful waters.

It wasn't always this way.

Time was, when reading

was equatorial. But now,

life gives heat enough.

You need not

plunge through a book,

slash its pages,

open a vein

with the edges of words,

to know the blood-rush,
beating sun,

scent of frangipani,
and all the cicadas, crying.

Tørrfisk

Racks and racks of them, like grey bats embalmed
in leathery wings, suspended in the sun.

Dried cod. The Norwegians call it *tørrfisk*.

Gaunt, grimacing, these dead fish hang in bunches
from weathered trellises, wait for harvest:

lips tight against daggered teeth, eyes like craters

on a barren moonscape. All around, half-light

washes over dandelions, gravel paths,

lapping waters – hovers on the threshold

of something unspoken. It beckons you

to follow. But always, you are pulled back

to these desiccated vineyards standing

between road and mountain: such ugliness,

blotting the view with raw necessity.

Hovedøya

(i.m. the young people who lost their lives at Utøya, Norway, 22 July 2011)

The ferry arrives – a quick crossing
safe to the rough jetty;
the seawall a grey guardian.

Overhead, a seagull shrieks defiant
where clouds fringe a belt of blue.

I come here, hoping to find

what people hope to find on islands.

Wind quickens, flings hair across my face;
gravel grumbles underfoot.

This is Norway in miniature, shrunk
for the weekend tourist –
a hillock for mountains, a grove for forests,

some dirty sand where coast should be.

In a field beyond abbey ruins,
headscarved women tend a fire, and men's shouts

answer a football's echoing thuds.

Where pathway cleaves to beach,
laughter rings out at precise intervals

under a fluttering rainbow flag,
while inside abbey walls,
grass is splattered with daisies.

*

All is green here – youth an invisible fire
smouldering in summer light,
a whole future promised in each blade of grass.

See – a mother and child
rest on the wall, heads haloed by sun.
An easy icon, but still,

I will not disdain it:
let me hold this moment, clasp it
warm in remembrance,

let it speak what comfort it can speak –
for time here lives on past its present,
and the words we murmur

so easily now to God
may be called on and needed,
on another island,

in another kind of silence,
after another kind of fire.

Second Skin

There is no bad weather, only bad clothing.

Cotton, linen, denim, don't travel far
in this place; even Gore-Tex wears thin
with time. To live here, you need a second skin:

waterproof as the first, stretchable
like a spandex catsuit you wrestle
in and out of, to allow the flex and heave
of northern life its honest, proper room.

Light-absorbent, photosynthetic,
your new skin succeeds where artists fail:
captures light, soaks it in, makes of it
an equilibrium of warmth

taken and given. It is porous, breathes deep
these Arctic winds that scour the lungs
till all within is clean as ice. Wear it.

Soon, it'll cleave to you, clinging as static

fizzes through your bones, charges your marrow
with unseen fire. You know, soon enough,
it will be hard to take off: you may never
take it off, take it off, take it off.