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THE IOWA SONNETS
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the iowa sonnets

Edwin, even you had a poem about the place:
lyricising squirrels, the river, sap, lovers,
the coming of the cold. Here you found grace,
after those decades spent writing against
the inward eye, erecting monuments of verse
in place of the sacred. But that's just angst.
We all have our regrets, and gods have died
before. One chap got his girlfriend knocked up,
another followed his to Poland, a third tried
first to empty and then refill his brimming cup
from the hollow well of escape. Heaven
is bare. No solace there not brought to it
by one of the saved. None would have forgiven
our blindness in the country of the spirit.

* *

Simon, Peter thanks you for his taste in wine,
while Mary brings me curry, my first
in this arid desert of cornfield and soya.
It's a city that must be loved like no other,
all these writers and scholars with their thirst
for a piece of peace to hide in, witness the decline
of the world from a safe distance. What's a protest
or two when you have tenure? Make the right
noises, and both sides compromise, rest
their case, while you stand alone in the spotlight.
Later I heard the bomb-factories were on double-shift
just an hour north from campus, as I took a lift
from Peter to his place. He spoke of you and how
you taught him the pleasures of a good Merlot.

* *

Su-Chen, the robins returned your benevolence;
the land you keep faith with, kept you twice,
still keeping your shadow in reverence,

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told me you were loved. Of course, I envied the ties
you formed here, so unlike we shallow visitors
who come after: the prim, the proud, the youngsters
who turn their noses up at farmhouse dirt. Open space,
with nothing to offer but itself, you took with grace,
knowing what a fistful of colours and a bit of earth
can do for weary hearts. I didn't hug a tree or dance
any sort of jig, I wrote as slowly as before, gave birth
to a new kind of impatience, then acceptance
because honestly, what else was there to do?
We laughed. We sang. We fell. We lived. We came to.

* *

Robert, snow is what you took from here?
I'd not have thought of it, looking at you
in your craggy, tropical digs. I fear
we've not had the full measure of you, hue
of your sentiment, the unseen gloss
beneath those years of stubborn hush.
This time the days were white with sun, lush
green of newfound bonds. New modes of loss.
By the time frost arrived we were done.
Ten weeks only to change a life or break
it sharply. Was this the sleeping? Did we wake
from some other slumber briefly, only to return
to its trivialities? Do you also feel this lack?
That all our roads can never lead us back?

* *

Kim Cheng, they still speak of Helena and you:
the days you folded, unfurled and now let fly
in the pages I brought there as gifts from silence.
Reserved, a little odd, even queer, but the blue
on your canvas is the same as this bell-jar sky,
this crucible for art and loss, called for a few months
home. I picture you shackled up at the Mayflower,
out of the thick of it, undistracted, drunk hour
after hour on images and in the giddy lock

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of soul to ordinary soul, how good the view. A flock
of your poems landed on my desk yesterday,
delivered their freight of calm light, remembered snow,
and questions: Where might she be today?
All the answers we cannot, dare not know.

* *

Is that a secret in your pocket, Siok,
or just a nod, a photograph, a sigh?
Oh the stories I have heard! Your look
of casual denial tells me all I
need to know: you were believer also
of this beautiful, brief illusion,
of the river's sleight-of-hand. But no,
there is nothing more to tell, no confusion
of our real lives with these few stolen seasons.
Perhaps we truly have our noble reasons;
perhaps we let them slide. But why not love;
which after all has nothing much to prove,
might serve to light a room, save some graces
for all who wait in the world's quiet places?

* *

I thought I ought to thank you for this chance
to peek behind the curtains, go backstage
to literary history, observe. The faux romance
of poetic wisdom. The stuff we cage
in words. How we're islanders in the final
analysis, liable to the simplest lure
of leg room, soul talk, privacy. Kirpal,
you promised nothing. I didn't, either.
We had a few drinks, late night confessions,
indulged the best and worst of our obsessions,
parted mostly friends. Trouble's when we try
to have it all and bring home our betrayals,
our discontent. Still, it wasn't all folly. I
did find, at least, my place in the stalls.

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