

THE PICTORIAL HISTORY OF POLAND

Present, absent; glorious, ruined;
at some point we simply stop rebuilding.
What of it, that nervous splendor which shreds
its own delicate fingertips, the greenhouse
flower cut down by assassins at the ball?
Who doesn't send her own heart sailing out
across the floor, half in love with the splinter
and smash it makes when it falls short?

I throw my neck back: spinning chandeliers,
revolving gilded ceiling going in fourteen directions
at once although I haven't even tasted the champagne.
I sing, all in love with the sound of my own voice,
recreating, fabricating, breaking empty glass.
I sing, barrage the truth with verbiage,
raise big numb dirigibles to float over the city,
plumpness tethered, little windows black below.

Inside those darkened squares we huddle,
listen for the long delighted squeal of bombs
cut short, death falling through the air.
We count our breaths, we wait for silence.
I half-remember, half-imagine, hearts of lovers
beating through silk crinolines and weskits,
all laughter elegant in a frivolous world,
all fingers delicate, whether thin or plump.

I serve you a bowl of chilled sweets. You bow,
heels clicking softly on the terrazzo floor,
lips warm and gentle on my hand. Defiantly
I scaffold and trestle staggering memory
through the blasts of tracer fire; I recompose
freshly decorated versions of our stories,
I shore up the flagging brightness. No,
I will not permit one angel to fall from the air.

Permit me to straighten your incorporeal cravat.
You smile politely, you remind me that you
no longer exist. *Rubbish*, I am saying roundly
when I start from sleep. The sky outside
flashes orange against the rooftops, simulating
hell, reeking with sulphurous eternity. I breathe in
something burnt and sticky. The timbers shudder.
Can you not see this is the front, my present-absent lover?

THE PICTORIAL HISTORY OF POLAND, page 2

The poet once tried to explain to our class why
(as far as he was concerned) only the Polish
were permitted blank verse. Almost angrily
he drew a house. A pile of rubble. A house. Rubble.
Again. Again. Chalk dust rose to powder his elbows.
That is why, boys and girls, that is why.
Glorious, ruined; dazzling, ravished; devastated.
At some point, we simply stop rebuilding.