

PETER SWANBORN

translations from the Dutch by John Irons

L. and number 6, F.

At the thought of his body,
naked, enjoying itself, I walk
across the quay and hear my mother:
Isn't there a bench here anywhere?

Dandelion seeds catch the eye,
a small boat athwart the waves. May I?
Please hold it, one, two, three,
the wind blows in her face.

His body is carved out of wood,
varnished in oil, no splinter
can be persuaded still.

Come, I say, let's go back. Take
her hand, grasp air, waves away.
Not quite yet, I'm so tired.

B.

The door opens, he stays behind it,
hides in a space that does not exist.
So thin, twenty kilos in two months
is quite something, what's left almost nothing.

His dressing-gown conceals with difficulty,
his trousers totter on poking bones,
a grin as a sign of the way it is,
each movement a cautious wonder.

Less than an hour later I have to run, scream,
down the quay, into the fire, kick, curse,
use hard whatever comes to hand.

Never will his way be my path, dissolved
into air, consumed in black-frozen soil.
See here my body. Take, don't let go.

B. and number 20, E.

At the sight of his body, thrashing
at tubes, fighting for breath, kicking
off his clothes: My socks too,
my shoes, take off my socks!

I looked on, powerless, what could I do,
could I do anything? Oxygen perhaps?
Someone'll soon be here, I said too softly,
it can pass, I hoped too hard.

And I did nothing, went on dreaming
about the great loss, earlier that evening
in the arse of E. unknown to me.

Out loud I had screamed: I'm dying!
But who was I to know? Oh,
illusion, it wasn't me speaking but him.

number 26, initials unknown

At the sight of his body, a flash
wrapped in a thick cloud of steam, like
an animal in an autumn wood, hunting
yet at the same time thirsting prey

My head's shot through with doubt.
Am I capable of catching? Do I see clearly
that most of all this deer wants to be desired
without itself having to desire?

I go back thirty years, fairground
with a hall of mirrors. Afraid, but
want to look. Full of myself, though

Hope for a father calling. I wait
and wait. Before I open my eyes
the cloud has closed itself.

B.

At the sight of his body, emaciated,
consumed by unmanageable sorrow
whose name's regret and meaner still
than all which comes from outside,

At the knowledge of his body, concealed
beneath flowers, shrouded in airy music
and fine words, from brothers and sons
– how hard it is to be honest, even now –

At the bearing of this body, heavier
than I'd ever imagined, my left shoulder
groaning a pain that came from some place else,

At the lowering of this body, look, look well,
I was overpowered by a terrifying void
that later, untold, turned out to be freedom.

L. and A.

At the sight of both their bodies
in full motion, but at right angles,
the one about to start, the other
sliding, crumbling, blowing about.

At the sight of their eyes, which only
see and feed each other, like electricity
that seeks a path and wants to earth
in a new body which cries out.

At the sight of this force that gives
and passes on, zest for living but also
the pain, unconscious, eighty years now

Redoubled, I think, this can't be otherwise.
This now is life, self-seeking fire that
carries, asks nothing of, just uses us.