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And then when the

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i.

Swallows are curving the stained weather
above worn-faced Caesars, who sweep marble arms through
the days and nights
beyond us. At the ruined Forum, the strada
ploughed by Mussolini for his own
idea of omnipresence.

Over unreal estates, CCTV fields of bitumen,
teenage low-grade irritants are squawking
3D cut-outs skateboarding across an expanse
of interesting wallpaper. Is this
the shape of us? Always stricken, homeless amid monuments,
shambling slowly as those who have travelled
such little distance
that everything seems ordinary.

(Rome, 2009)

ii.

A blind man
is rippling in shadow, calling what sounds like '*really*
it is, is it *really*', the dip and rise of mantra shaped like the cup
he shakes
across sunlight. In this border town morning of knockoff designer-wear
I am wondering at the invention
of the *petit bourgeoisie* and how, shopping last night
in a Monoprix full of tins
as a Warhol, I watched as locals wandered
the thresholds of an arriving world. Daybreak, and farmers
call 'dinar! Dinar! Dinar!' while just-killed meat fries
beside denim from China, a mosque built with Roman stones,
marrows from the fields, and the moment – blue with exhaust – splits
open with smiles.

(Gafsa, 2009)

iii.

In this Museum
of the Great Patriotic War, light slides off
the sharp corners of propaganda
and off the shelves of Party hardhead busts. Under flags, the patriots
of Victory Square
are lynch mobs leering in sepia.
At this outpost the President is forever, blinking airspace empty
as the synagogues, empty as the daylong drinking of old Soviets, windswept
as apartment blocks
howling concrete into the echelons. 'The situation,' exhales
a matryoshka, wearing a skirt short as an Autumn night in St Petersburg, 'is excellent.
We try
hard not to be numb.' Shadow fills the head of a cracked mirror behind her.
Dust motes float in sun.

(Minsk, 2007)

iv.

The river here is old vein under a skin
of afternoons. Orphan monks are pedalling
the horizon orange, beside the glimmer of machete and militia.
Factories paint the sky petrochemical. 'We keep thinking
we're a force, and keep meeting
forces stronger than ourselves', says the professor (retired).
'This is what a life is.' 84 years old, her mind
a blade trained on the grammars of dead language. 'Postmodernism
was an outrage!' she jokes, sputtering
the LANGUAGE poets use only one side of Saussure's thought/sound page
and then a finger shakes: 'be remembering . . . Solzhenitsyn tells us
ideology gives evildoing its long-sought justification'. Is memory a faith
or faithfulness? Under her sleeve, six fading numbers
won't ever fade enough.

(Vientiane, 2005)

v.

A population of marble people
is milling in Westminster Abbey, gabbling the tongues of history.
Someone's left a note, 'come Lorde Jesus, come
qvicklye', etched in stone before rushing into eternity.
Outside, crowds of DIY men
are crossing the creative commons like Mayan acolytes to a beheading
and the afternoon begins to fit nicely
as a straightjacket. In a garden of strange flowers I'm told, 'the peal
of stillness isn't anything human,' a friend wincing
from the other side of a teacup.
We are in a live-to-air soap opera and I've forgotten my lines. Again.
Inside my head there's the scratching of wings toward a pale rim of light.
Down the road
they're selling monkey hands for voodoo.

(London, 2007)

vi.

Under the alabaster saints, the louche
and the wolf-faced shelter from ice storm and scowl
for caffeine. This old town
scanned by empty-roomed eyes. Where are they all? The unsound
and non-hearing, the shrill-hearted
and too-loud, prefacers and professors, the unforgotten
and the not-remembered, those who read more than a third of *Purgatorio*,
the desperate and hopeful, prayerful and wilful, the certain-voiced
shouting down phones at those
who believe truly
in nothing at all . . . *where are they?* All we few see
are boatloads, shapes hurrying
ashore to the promise each back alley makes, where light
won't go and the rats in their slick bed down and look on.

(Genoa, 2009)