

## Brenda Riches / THE WALKING PLACE

Lately I thought: Love is dishwater.  
Then I saw the silver knife submerged  
and pulled on rubber gloves to lift the blade.  
Love-in-the-hole. Consumed. The dishes dealt with.  
A rinsed knife on a runnelled board.  
The sickle moon rotting outside.

I left the house to walk in saturated leaves,  
nothing to shuffle through.  
A cloud throttled the moon, spouting;  
not tears, more a descent of damp gladness for the night  
that would soon altogether be there.  
I kept walking because there was nothing to do  
but propel myself along the post-autumn street.

I wished the moon would come back. Didn't I need  
its slit to give direction to the dark sky?  
But rain insisted  
it would fall.

Such dark. My way through something  
I hadn't wished for, couldn't understand, yet knew  
for its actual leaves and rain and hard paving.  
Though the moon was apparently absent, it would appear  
when the clouds took off to a different sky.

My shoes, made of fabric not destined  
to weather such weather, quickly became soaked;  
my feet squelched.  
But my skull was an efficient umbrella.  
This was the hard part. My thoughts  
wanted moisture so they would cease to be  
the stunted growths that kept me back.  
Perhaps tears would do the trick.

Weeping refreshed my eyes. The shine  
on the bark of trees, their bruised and sticky  
leaves took on my grief.  
The rain thinned, finished, and the moon  
came back airy, filtering breath,  
barely attached to the sky.

I was leaving a sink, sinking in leaves, taking steps  
to put myself far from a meal weary to prepare  
away from careful hours invested in supper no one wanted  
and walking towards an emptiness I hoped  
the waxing moon would fill.

Trudging through the season before winter, I stumbled over a dead  
cat, grey, tattered, neck broken.  
A former life on the soggy ground.  
This corpse was once a movement against legs  
a plea to open the door, a thing that purred.  
Now it was something else to put behind me.

Death in the narrow street and the moon waiting to glare.  
In the meantime there was the street to be followed  
over pulpy leaves and between the high-walled gardens  
of houses with roofs so dark they blended with the sky.

To be blended with something so the knife  
and the malaise of a new moon would count for nothing  
was a desire that stretched like arms toward what  
should have stretched in return and held the gesture.  
But I was apart from the merging that night wrought.  
Outlined by a desire that had no counterpart  
in the mulchy night, I moved on.

The porch of a dark house. A place to huddle.  
A roof and three walls,  
the prospect of the street the fourth wall.  
I lay on my right side and entered  
a dream of barren ground and a bland sky.  
A pocket of cloud shrunk in upon itself,  
intensified to a black so deep it pained my head.  
I sensed a soundless cracking as of lightning,

but saw no light. The cloud vanished,  
to reappear elsewhere in the sky,  
shrunk in upon itself, intensified, cracked  
pain inside my head. The cloud vanished,  
reappeared, blackened, cracked upon its egg in my head.  
In the clear slime of the dream  
I witnessed a compounding of disasters  
and suffered the jolting of my brain.

I carried the dream's tightness  
into a porch sluiced with morning. The sun  
dripped onto the day, a garment hung, not wrung.  
I recognized the drenched leaves,  
the hesitancy of birdsong. I wanted an end  
to the space between me and the morning's answer  
whose question I had not yet posed.

The porch was rickety in the light  
the handrail coated with bird shit.  
Such marbleness. Chiselled excrement.  
Rubbed by sunlight to a mottled sheen.  
I passed it by and stepped down to resume my path.

Sleep had held me in a difficult position.  
There was pain between my shoulderblades as if  
a blunt knife had scored my back.  
I walked stiffly, slowly, the world enlivened.  
The body's weakness was a sign of life  
whose finitude made each item of the natural world  
the more dear to me.

This snail! Such a house to carry,  
so tender its glistening trail.  
Perhaps I should have felt nostalgia  
for the abandoned sink, the lost domesticity,  
but a dew-strung web caught between leaf and leaf  
took my mind from the astonishing snail.  
These were jewels. The frail geometry of my journey.  
Which led me to a riverbank.

Sunlight splintered the water.  
I wanted to carve words into this fluidity  
but my thoughts floated past.  
I couldn't trap them in the moment's crystal. An impulse  
welled up and broke,  
leaving nothing but uncontained air.

A swan. Its curving neck, purity,  
stark black on its face,  
sultry gold around its eyes,  
feathered glide of my yearning.  
Side by side with the swan  
he on his water, I on my ground.

There were buttercups on the bank,  
their yellow glimpses intermittent wisdom.  
Grassblades strident by glassy water, the swan  
both mirror and billow.

Silence was irrelevant to the violins in my mind.  
Their notes shuddered, strings touched by strung bows.  
I wanted soft fingers to play me.

At the curve in the river's course, the swan stopped.  
But I was nowhere near the end of anywhere.  
Noon was a way station  
to the moon's next phase.

Buzz went the violins, vibrant, disconsolate,  
the trees an orchestra with no conductor,  
random harmony played to the sky's empty audience.  
I applauded and a rook leaped from a branch,  
black flapping, smudging the vacant blue  
as if a stain was essential.  
This is absurd, I thought. This is revelation.

I seized the crow's way and followed a harsh path.  
Ants bit my ankles. I thought of the cat  
and resisted the impulse to wish it alive.  
Grass turned to gravel and the ants dropped off.  
Red freckles on white stone chips.  
Scurrying. Hidden.

Violent dusk, violet. The moon's claw emerging, ready to pinch,  
unable to scuttle. A crabby night.

Let's go, I said, and the moon tugged me.

The stars were barbs on an invisible wire. Gladdened  
by darkness, wide awake in its folds, I changed my suit.

Sorrow for motley. A fool under the larger moon.

Time for idiocy.

Such antics across the hours to a midnight

that hung a curtain to be drawn back

for dawn's gentle entrance.

But something shifted, and time was delayed.

An owl, winging? Bats' dark darting

to stymie the day's beginning?

Or did I want a malingering of hours to give me

a pinpoint, somewhere to pivot

as if it could all be turned around and around.

Where am I going? I asked the thickening moon.

Stars winked, pinpoints themselves.

Clusters to be stared at.

Again the shifting, this time of sound.

Gasp? Rasping of a saw.

A tree toppled, its limbs sinking.

The earth nudged from its axis.

The evidence of owls and bats blighting

the moon with shadow, the jarred collapsing

tree, harmony slipped sideways an inch,

conspired to infuse me with doubt.

I don't know, was the answer that settled my ground

to send flying creatures to the far side of the moon

where they could do no more damage.

No more damage, I decided and night

flapped open to let the day's grey horses come

galloping in, stream of nightmares slipping.

I must have frightened hours away  
with slow anger in sharp gravel, sludge  
at the bottom of stagnancy. I stood  
on the muddy edge of a pond and watched the prisoner  
weeds keep still as the sky descended, a lid to seal  
me into a dish.

But I had left one kitchen, and was damned  
if I'd be drawn into another.

I left my nightmare where it was and worked my way  
into a world I would have to understand  
with a new sense of echo.

Shimmer around the sun, vibrato of birds, flurrying  
wings, sense of quaking crosses casting  
shadows for stars to tumble into. Sense of wanting  
a star larger than the rest.  
Sense of careful stable.

Time to follow.

And eventually dance, slowly to be sure,  
nevertheless a jig, a lightness as if  
my soles were dry sponges, till my dancing  
became a waterlogged lifting of feet, an unwieldy bending  
of knees that would have been happier unyielding.  
Clumsy ecstasy.

A stone caught my eye, a pebble under  
the water causing a lilt of ripples,  
sunlight diving down, the stone a target  
for brightness, struck by crescendoes, nothing  
to hold, the stone and water  
elusive as light.

A weed slapping my hand reminded me it was time  
to move away from the forlorn  
drowned in their mistaken beds.

In substance of melancholy, the sky's grey eyes.

Hardened by hail, I trod the dead ground,  
tramped over tough fallow. Hobo on byegone  
wheat. Its seeds sucking at stubble.  
My spit rode the wind like a mind going. I walked  
in its grip, claspig a straw I caught  
when the maelstrom brought it my way.  
Cold swirl in the frozen storm.

A crossed stick stood over me,  
head lolling, rags gusting.  
A being I could speak to.  
My words swerved like crows on drafts of air,  
silent when they should have been loud.

The deaf scarecrow leaned over me, over his shadow  
that jumped at the whim of sun and cloud.  
I stretched out my hands to cup the hailstones  
which dwindled and stopped.

Under the scarecrow, I slept another night away.  
Under the constant sunlight, I craved constancy.  
Leaning against a stick and gazing at a field  
was no way to find it.  
The scarecrow swung around and pointed  
toward a wood.

Away from frozen straw and into suffering trees  
whose mystery blocked the sky.  
and dropped faint shadows over the undergrowth  
I fumbled through.

Sunlight on a patch of trunk, radiant birch bark.  
Time I leaned to consider my feet.

Wrinkled soles. Growing toenails.  
Hard heels. They kicked me  
into dreaming about a blank sun and a striped cat  
clawing a hammock strung between sunrays. Swaying me  
into the next day.

And snowflakes sliding. Not enough to settle. Enough  
to chill. To get me onto my feet.

I cupped my hands to beg mercy from  
the white bounty in my hands. It gave me strength  
to slam my fist against time that insisted  
on keeping its own pace.

Blood from my hands speckled the snow.  
The path was ill defined.

There they were, the broken branches, torn stumps,  
scraggy shrubs. Thorny thicket.  
After the wrestling came the ooze. Scarlet. Alive.  
Time grafting the skin of day and night.  
Was the snow a whiteness to splash the black sky,  
or grey flakes in daylight?

The downfall stopped and I reached  
the last tree, an oak, anomaly among birches.  
Beyond it was a wasteland of settled snow and unimpeded sky.  
A great expanse I had to cross.

No chance of sleep in that cold place. I plodded on.

In the boneyard of my brain, the soaked and shining  
dead collected, resurrected against my will, filled  
the space I wished would wall them out.  
Ghosts low moaning kept me alert under the prickly sky.  
I had no wish to resist sleep and yet the ghosts  
prodded me on along the wasted terrain.

My way became a dainty stepping  
between shadows and the strings that pulled them  
hither and thither, tangling  
my ankles with their frail grey.  
I walked toward a paling sky.

Shrouded by violins, I danced  
to the launching of another day.  
Their thin singing bound me homeward, for home  
was where I was going and not what I was leaving.



From the blond horizon, the sun rose,  
flooding the low sky with hissing,  
and the soaring of some bird,  
not lark nor angel, but a substance  
of sparrow that took on a phoenix blaze  
to light me across the desert.

My coarse habit softened to fresh cobwebs, silk  
of a slick and endless sea.

A rock, sudden on the beach, limpet strewn. I held on  
to its barnacled body while the white spray splashed me.  
I hung on for grim death, for blessed life, for  
the madness that beckoned.

I would have slept against the rock's wild wetness,  
but the jetsam of lives attracted my attention.  
Buttons, flashes in the curves of broken bottles,  
shoe laces, the skeletons of fish. Debris  
beached for some compassionate soul to heed.  
But I wanted to reach no one. The rock was mine,  
and so was the hardness.

Night brought a dusky moon, webbed with shyness,  
knowing spiders.

Flocks of crows blocked its light  
beseeching me to share their pandemonium,  
settling one by one on the sand around me.

A beak, pecking my knee.  
I snapped it in two.

Locked to my rock, I watched the moon's timid journey  
and felt a loosening  
as of boats unmoored.