

BUTTERFLY LANDING ON A PAINTING BY BRIDGET RILEY

The soul is a fugitive and wanderer, driven by the decrees and laws of gods.
Plutarch, *De exilio*

I SWALLOWTAIL

Suppose you're walking on a cliff-top
Back where you used to live, in Greece.
The island where your friend Kay,
On a round-the-clock line of oxygen, grew up.
There's nothing to be done. You've flown to see her
Twice. You'll go again.
Unstoppable cicadas, hot-resin smell
Of pines. The sweat — you've forgotten how it rivulets
Between the breasts, how wet is constant.
Sea. Cream-turquoise halogen, or luminous green silk
Spread out below to archipelagos
Of rocks and nibbled inlets. Islands, islands: milk
Opalescent shivers and frills at every edge.

Suppose a stripy butterfly, black-white
Albino tartan, large as a hand, appears stage right
As you're walking up the road to a brandy-snap
Red beach, to find your daughter and her friend
In snorkels, Factor Twenty-Five, and Aqua Babe Sarongs.
You stop, for this unfolded scrap
Of animate origami
Haunting orange clods of earth
Below the olives. Eyelash antennae;
Proboscis, siphoning honey you can't see:
It settles by you like an omen, zebra wings outspread
On a tiny, dusty, pink-yellow flowerhead.
Some vetch your mother would know the Latin
Name) at the empty road's pale edge.

Imagine this has been a terrible year for death,
Loss, all-gone-wrongs. The bull-waves' neuron glitter
Leaps the cliff. Swallows on a clef
Of italic phone wire dab their next
Month's leaving-song over noon sky's indigo razzle.
A pop request you sang with Nikos years ago
Bellies from 'Antigone Hotel' pool stereo.

I zoe, i zoe san chelidoni,
Fevgi ap to cheili mou. 'Life like a breath,
Like a swallow, is leaving, is fleeing, my lips.'
Suppose your dad had taught you ancient Greek, T
The key to all of this. Blue sea. Friends.
The sparkling, stupidly gorgeous islands.
Even the daughter. Songs.

Suppose you're looking for a way to remember him well.
He could only be what he was. His gift was black OK,
But made you want to learn, find new things, tell
About them. With his bride's relations adept in
Botany, or ornithology, he got up for her
A knowledge they didn't have: lepidoptera.
This specimen has popped into the olive grove for him.
He loved, by teaching what he loved, and he loved
Greece. Ruins, moths of the psyche, language, myth.
Those are the things in him that led you here.
Back-tracking twenty years, you remember seeing him off
At Athens Airport. How his eyes behind their glasses
(The irises' circumference, like yours, darker than the rest)
Had filled, amazingly, with tears.

II RAIN

A sudden squall of rain in the piazza. It's 1960. Venice.
The dark girl, knocking back Camparis with her lover
(Old enough to be her dad; the centre of everything she is),
Has won a prize. She's twenty-nine, all go,
And flirting with Hard Edge
Abstractionism. He thinks she's difficult, and young.
They're splitting up. She doesn't know.
Together, they've explored the Futurists.
They tried to visit Gino Severini,
Futurism's founder, but he won't be seen, he's
Ill. Now she's drawing on the table, arguing.
'Shapes that flow
Through space destroy the world as you and I
Perceive it.' But her voice is shrill.
He's playing teacher, lecturing on
The inner life of colour. She's saying, too
Loud and wrong, somehow,

That losing certainty of line could change
Things for a painter, rearrange him, set him free
(She still says 'he'), 'or whisk
Him off to places he never dreamed he'd see.'

You can hear how young — you want to fold her in
Your arms, make her slow down —
But you love the flinging out: the risk.
More Camparis. He forgives
The arguing for now; until they're home.
What she's really up to
Is watching how rain turns

All this Renaissance paving — midnight geometry
Of star and parallelogram, black granite set
milkstone from the cold Carrara ridge —
To a swirl of snake-skin
Runnels. Chaos physics.

In herself, only half-aware, she's marvelling
How a thing that seemed so certain

Can in a flash, a moment, fall to bits. She's no idea
This will change the way we see.
Rain stops — the flagstones dry — that pristine, seven-
Point clarity comes back. But her eyes have taken in
How pattern, safe curtain
Of the given world, can buckle, go
Molten on you, disappear.

Afterwards, she'll see it everywhere, a witchy spell
On pell-mell dying leaves
Or zebra crossings over Russell Square,
And sloping glass of a Ford Popular's rear window
Where it slippingly reflects
The dark-pale-dark of bedrooms in Imperial Hotel.
It'll stay with her, unnoticed, when he's left.

III. KISS

He's gone. She can't believe it, can't go on.
She's going to give up painting. So she paints
Her final canvas, total-turn-off

Black. One long
Obsidian goodbye.

A charcoal-burner's Smirnoff,
The mirror of Loch Ness
Reflecting the monster back to its own eye.

But something's wrong. Those mad
Black-body particles don't sing
Her story of despair, the steel and

Garnet spindle
Of the storm.

This black has everything its own sweet way,
Where's the I'd-like-to-kill-you
Conflict? Try once more, but this time add

A curve to all that straight. And opposition —
White. She paints black first. A grindstone belly
Hammering a smaller shape

Beneath a snake
Of in-betweening light.

'I feel like this. I hope that you do, too,
Black crater. Screw you. Kiss.'

And sees a voodoo flicker, where two worlds nearly touch
And miss. That flash, where white
Lets black get close, that dagger of not-quite contact,
Catspaw panic, quiver on the wheat

Field before thunder —
There. That's it.

That's her own self, in paint,
Splitting what she was from what she is.
As if everything that separates, unites.

IV SHIFT

Leaving rage behind,
 She's found herself painting
Movement. Painting beyond
 The frequency where retinas respond,
Painting black-white isotopes
 Of Colbalt 57. Painting REM in action, climax heaven.
As if a cart-load of leucistic leopards
 Had colonized her heart,
She's painting optical-illusion cracks
 In how we view the universe.
Out in, up down, lose win.

Suppose my butterfly
 With innocent smashed-eggshell wings,
Should flicker in on all these canvases
 Called things like *Fission, Blaze, Uneasy Centre, Drift*.
How would it feel, a cut-out paper ghost weighed down
 By schizophrenic molecules; these stark,
Electric, black-white shifts
 Of noticing and soul I'm asking it
To stand for — what my dad thought and did,
 And what I thought of him? At home
In just that instability and rift.

V SEND-OFF

So all this liminal
 Black and white
 Was saying goodbye
To him? I'm doing it with you
 Beside me, a hundred miles away
But listening in. Not on the mobiles —
 Neither of us has a clue
 About a 'Roaming' menu. Rays
Showering tumours in the brain
 Are no good here. I'm on Kay's

Island (still Kay's island), laid
Like Homer's shield
On the misty sea. You're in
A renovated tower from 'Maltese Holidays'.
But over these salty, sweaty, blue-feather miles, I feel
Your heart beat, almost touch
The breastbone that upset
You, age eleven,
When your dad came home with Johnson's Chest
Expander. A steel-spring Waterloo. Your Armageddon.
Four settings: you couldn't manage more Than one.
The thing snapped shut
And guillotined blue pyjama buttons
Pinging them across the floor.
You gave up. Now you say
There's a hollow in your chest
You could hold a party in.
Seems fine to me. From my
Current bearings in the Mediterranean,
I Thank Christ for the whole thing.

*

When summer's over, you'll surprise
Me with a ring
You're buying, now, among
The pizza-parlours and boutiques
Of Valletta's cassia-scented blond backstreets.
Baltic amber, set in silver, just the goldspray
Green-beneath-the-skin
Of this Ionian, slubbed-
Silk sea. You'll give it to me
Looking in my eyes
As anxiously —
Did something bad get in
There, while you were away? —
As a wolf recovering
Its cub.

*

It's not deserved,
 This joining that began
 On red-as-Gauguin Devon earth
And waltzes on
 Through jungle, quicksand, desert.

Balloons that found their moorings in
 Each other, a whole new nebula
 In heaven
You'd never think
 They *could* have found, those two;

Relief
 At hearing each other's voice
 As ludicrous and final as the 'Ah!'
Ham actors do
 On radio, when they drink.

*

Because of all you've given, and keep giving — wild
 As Tibetan tigers on the Wheel of Life,
 Gentle as ten-pence pieces under the pillow
Swapped at night
 For the milk-tooth of a sleeping child, and bright

As the Greek word *aiolos*, which means
 Goldflash, wind-skimmer, quickbeam
 And flicker-light,
Hot-surface radiant, moccasin-sheeny, blazoned
 And skew-curve with white-gleam — I can say

That was his soul I met out there, in the dazzle
 Of Lixouri Bay.
 Hanging,
A moment, over ice-cream wrappers,
 Baby bindweed, take-away

Grease-tissue from kebabs,
 And Loutraki-water empties
 Glittering half-hidden
In a ditch by the stony kerb.
 Then open wings above the sea

To the hard-earned phosphorous burn
Of a Greek horizon. Free now, forgiven,
Out from under Athena's olive tree.
Looking for more to give, his way,
And more to learn.

