

Sisyphus

This man Sisyphus, he has to push
his dense unthinkable rock
through bogs woods crops glittering
optical rivers and hoof-sucked holes,
as high as starlight as low as granite,
and every inch of it he feels
the vertical stress of the sky
draw trees narrow, wear water round
and the lithe, cold-blooded grasses
weighed so down they have to hang their tips like
cats' tails;
and it rains it blows but the mad delicate world
will not let will not let him out
and when he prays, he hears God passing with a
swish at this, a knock at that.

There is not a soft or feeling part,
the rock's heart is only another bone;
now he knows he will not get back home,

his whole outlook is a black rock;
like a foetus, undistractedly listening
to the clashing and whistling and tapping of another
world,
he has to endure his object,
he has to oppose his patience to his perceptions ...
and there is neither mouth
nor eye, there is not anything
so closed, so abstract as this rock
except innumerable other rocks
that lie down under the shady trees
or chafe slowly in the seas.

The secret is to walk evading nothing
through rain sleet darkness wind,
not to abandon the spirit of repetition:
there are the green and yellow trees, the dog,
the dark barrier of water,
there goes the thundercloud shaking its blue wolf's
head;
and the real effort is to stare

unreconciled at how the same things are,
but he is half aware he is
lost or at any rate straining
out of the earth into a lifted sphere
(dust in his hair, a dark blood thread from his ear)
and jumps at shapes, like on a country road,
in heavy boots, heading uphill in silence.

Once his wide-armed shadow
came at him kicking,
his monkey counterpart pinioned to the rock;
the two grappled and the rock
stopped dead, pushed between them in suspension
and it was fear, quivering motion
holding them there, like in the centre of a flower
the small anxiety that sets it open
and for an hour, all he could think was
caught in a state of shadow – this persistent
breathing pushing sound, this fear of falling,
fear of lucidity, of flight, of something
bending towards him, but he pushed he pushed

until the sun sank and the shadow slunk away.

'I woke early when the grass was still a standing
choir,

each green flower lifting a drop of water –
an hour of everything flashing out of darkness,

whole trees with their bones,

whole rivers with their kicks and throws,

there I walked lifting a drop of water;

I came to this cold field, the crowded
smoky-headed grasses singing of patience:

'Oh what does it matter?' they sang,

'longer and longer and all day

on one foot is the practice of grasses'

which raised in me a terrible cry of hope

and there I stood, waiting for the sun

to draw the water from my head ...'

But Sisyphus is confused; he has to think

one pain at a time, like an insect

imprisoned in a drop of water;

he tries again, he distorts his body to the task
and a back-pain passes slowly
low down in the spine – a fine red thread
that winds his hands and feet in the struggle of
movement;
and Sisyphus is a hump, Sisyphus is a stone
somewhere far away, feeling the sun
flitter to and fro with closed eyes,
unable to loiter, an unborn creature
seeking a womb, saying Sisyphus Sisyphus ...
and he stares forward but there's nothing there
and backward but he can't perceive it.

Danaides

Alice Oswald

Intermittently they stop
with plybome spines
and fingers rusted
open and hearing
their work pouring
through these holes
their minds swinging
side to side
and far away
their feet hollowed
out and gone
smooth with turning
they stare down
in a horrible fag-break
gloom at water's
cloning loops its
frays and flumes
and vacillations
and clings and rips
and cloops and
splashy cleats all
water's wilfull
unresistance
to its own
cascading condition
and
one by one
begin to lift
to lift it
like a Christ

(The Danaides murdered their husbands. When they died they had to carry water in a leaking jar as a punishment.)

This poem was specially commissioned by the BBC Poetry proms, which are broadcast during the interval of every Wednesday's Prom.