

Visiting Hour

by Norman McCaig

The hospital smell
combs my nostrils
as they go bobbing along
green and yellow corridors.

What seems a corpse 5
is trundled into a lift and vanishes
heavenward.

I will not feel, I will not
feel, until 10
I have to.

Nurses walk lightly, swiftly,
here and up and down and there,
their slender waists miraculously
carrying their burden 15
of so much pain, so
many deaths, their eyes
still clear after
so many farewells.

Ward 7. She lies
in a white cave of forgetfulness. 20
A withered hand
trembles on its stalk. Eyes move
behind eyelids too heavy
to raise. Into an arm wasted
of colour a glass fang is fixed, 25
not guzzling but giving.
And between her and me
distance shrinks till there is none left
but the distance of pain that neither she nor I
can cross. 30

She smiles a little at this
black figure in her white cave
who clumsily rises
in the round swimming waves of a bell
and dizzily goes off, growing fainter, 35
not smaller, leaving behind only
books that will not be read
and fruitless fruits.

Assisi

By Norman MacCaig

The dwarf with his hands on backwards Sat, slumped like a half-filled sack On tiny twisted legs from which Sawdust might run, Outside the three tiers of churches built In honour of St Francis, brother Of the poor, talker with birds, over whom He had the advantage Of not being dead yet.	1 5
A priest explained How clever it was of Giotto To make his frescoes tell stories That would reveal to the illiterate the goodness Of God and the suffering Of His son, I understood The explanation and The cleverness.	10 15
A rush of tourists, clucking contentedly, Fluttered after him as he scattered The grain of the word. It was they who had passed The ruined temple outside, whose eyes Wept pus, whose back was higher Than his head, whose lopsided mouth Said, <i>Grazie</i> in a voice as sweet As a child's when she speaks to her mother Or a bird's when it spoke To St. Francis.	20 25

Aunt Julia
By Norman MacCaig

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
I could not answer her —
I could not understand her.

She wore men's boots
when she wore any.
— I can see her strong foot,
stained with peat,
padding with the treadle of the spinning wheel
while her right hand drew yarn
marvelously out of the air.

Hers was the only house
where I've lain at night
in a box bed, listening to
crickets being friendly.

She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.
She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends.
She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of threepennybits
in a teapot.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave
at Luskentyre.
But I hear her still, welcoming me
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards
of peatscapes and lazybeds
and getting angry, getting angry
with so many questions
unanswered.

BASKING SHARK

By Norman MacCaig

To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me.
But not too often - though enough. I count as gain
That once I met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain,
That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.
He displaced more than water. He shoggled me
Centuries back - this decadent townee
Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree.
Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring
Is all the clearer. I saw me, in one fling,
Emerging from the slime of everything.
So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale
For twenty seconds while, sail after sail,
The tall fin slid away and then the tail.

Memorial
Norman MacCaig

Everywhere she dies. Everywhere I go she dies.
No sunrise, no city square, no lurking beautiful mountain
but has her death in it.
The silence of her dying sounds through
the carousel of language. It's a web
on which laughter stitches itself. How can my hand
clasp another's when between them
is that thick death, that intolerable distance?

She grieves for my grief. Dying, she tells me
that bird dives from the sun, that fish
leaps into it. No crocus is carved more gently
than the way her dying
shapes my mind. – But I hear, too,
the other words,
black words that make the sound
of soundlessness, that name the nowhere
she is continuously going into.

Ever since she died
she can't stop dying. She makes me
her elegy. I am a walking masterpiece,
a true fiction
of the ugliness of death.
I am her sad music.

SOUNDS OF THE DAY

Norman MacCaig

When a clatter came,
It was horses crossing the ford.
When the air creaked, it was
A lapwing seeing us off the premises
Of its private marsh. A snuffling puff
Ten yards from the boat was the tide blocking,
Unblocking a hole in a rock.
When the black drums rolled, it was water
Falling sixty feet into itself.

When the door
Scraped shut, it was the end
Of all the sounds there are.

You left me
Beside the quietest fire in the world.

I thought I was hurt in my pride only,
Forgetting that,
When you plunge your hand in freezing water,
You feel
A bangle of ice around your wrist
Before the whole hand goes numb.