on the governing of empires
Also by Alasdair Paterson

Poems for Douanier Rousseau
Hieronymous Bosch’s picture history
Terra Nova
Alps
Topiary
Brief Lives
on the governing of empires

ALASDAIR PATERSON

Shearsman Books
Exeter
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My grandfather left me 53 volumes on governing the empire. What an inheritance! So far I have read and destroyed 30, and can state that I am in a fair way to forgetting all he knew. Some day, I hope, my children will thank me.

—Constantine VIII, Emperor of Byzantium: *Letters*

Once upon a time, in a humdrum suburb you won’t have heard of, in a town that won’t ring any bells even if you’ve passed through once or twice, my mother and father did what came naturally and there was I—nothing special either, but clutching with radiant hope the usual birthday present, an obligation to sing the words of one song to the tune of another.

—‘Claudette’: *A Spy in the Rose Cabaret*
For my family
on heresy

stars come solitaries first
then a host like
pilgrims no crusaders

doth rock that bleached
all day in the sun
still isn’t white enough

do you prefer
the desert places or
the cities of the plain
I like best the view
of lights from up here

a breath of rosemary
perfection in the air
but the bridge is the devil’s
on optics

reading from the top
it’s down there they
broke the glass
burned the books
and their true believers
or reasonably similar
or just different

last lines are
the streets shone
then it was darker
on psyche

underneath all of it

fountains and roses
silk weave and moths
morgues birthing chambers
perfumed kisses dripping
clocks and tortures

under all the names
for the gods and their
mouths that can’t be parched
for fear of uncomfortable silences

under all of it
you’re into the vast
cisterns built for long siege
dim light on amber surfaces
slime and sleek byzantine carp
pillars from unseen to unseen
and round a corner
to stop you in your tracks
head of great medusa
on verbs

we’re picking their language over
like looters with a bolt of cloth
a thing of the finest weave
miraculous in shade and balance
though for purposes of siege warfare
surprisingly sub-optimal

to recap the highlights

we cracked the city
but we kept the shell
we fried the generals
but we hired the bowmen
we strung up the gaolers
but we hung onto the keys
we burned the readers
but we doused the librarians
we liquidated the banks
but we floated the accountants
we plundered the estates
but we planted out the gardeners

priests and philosophers
we kept them too as
a classic arena match-up
the stab of the imperative
the net of the conditional

we have not learned their language yet
we are learning their language now
we shall have learned their language soon
our command will be properly stiff
but our spies will be secretly fluent
our spies are almost fluent now
they have been writing almost secret reports
they report that we have changed the world
they confirm that the world continues to change
they beg to inform us that we are changing with the world
on forestry

catch your breath before
we go under the perpendiculars
grateful for even these
small bird anthems
rustle of misericord
until a dark door shuts

how many parishes
to the first window filled
with corn glow or shepherds
on reformation

ah sweet woods
it’s good
in spring you came
to heal our aching windows
with old glass greens

the fishponds ran wild
when our backs were turned
but today a moorhen
we thought
walked on the water
yes right before our eyes

make a note
so far it’s promising
on tragedy

out in the drenched unseen
was where the worst
usually came to the best
colonnades are what you think
but colonnades were just
the metrics and a long
echo till the building failed

by then the gods had shut up shop
slipped the search parties
bought gash papers laid low
reopened in the workshop zone
and there they took their long breaks
in the courtyard of chestnut flambeaux
or under a naked storeroom bulb
pointing the workclothes at
a chorus of death masks
and torsos pockmarked with the years
banging on about an upturn as if

nemesis meantime was no longer
the death of the past no
scarcely to be recognised in her
new uptown solo business set-up
focussed and going for volume
and hell if some customers
missed the personal touch
there was no denying
the groaning indexed shelves
those great marketplace stats