Elegies

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Also by Harry Guest

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Elegies

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SAMPLER
The First Elegy

The area was overgrown. Brambles and fireweed had to be uprooted before a boundary was agreed upon and the last pale driven in next to the first. Sometimes the acreage is complete before pen touches paper, at others the map only remains itself and the final shading contradicts the outline made at the start, for example a grey summer’s day and on the lake hardly waves only the slightest folding over of water on water with nothing reflected though the hills enclosing it were purple and on three sides trees came down to the shore. Adults were elsewhere. We skimmed stones or sat round in the gritty boat-house. What furniture I remember appears scoured and cheap. There was a gramophone playing swing. Unheard mosquitoes stung our bare legs. Today we stroll beneath lime-trees in another garden that does not belong to us. At that time we could not have known each other even though in a sense sharing the same time-zone, privation, absence of sunlight, for war had removed our fathers. The faces are unlabelled, those melodies possess only a period texture. I cannot recall who owned the property nor where we went later. There was a small rocky island but no boat and I couldn’t swim in those days. The dramatis personae were children on their own for an afternoon and you and I increasingly find ourselves left behind as they run over stubble
where the last swallows flash or enter gloomy chambers in some ruined castle where the lintels are too low for our foreheads. But a chipped stone egg on my desk admonishes me for change emerges from the air and colours the thinnest depictions of the past. Late June there. Few flowers – the one rhododendron flecked with unclenched scarlet shows by its listlessness it has fulfilled a yearly duty. The blinds are half drawn though only on one far field where the hay has been cut sunlight, slanting, picks out yellow among the green. Knowledge of being alive at a given moment – given if not taken - has details of heat and shrubbery absorbing the past tense before we exclude them. On the ground floor, there in the room forming the corner, two oil-paintings, each about the size of a postcard, display these illusions: one, a path through a wood in spring, the other, a slow stream broadening into pools under brown foliage. Both show what was needed though neither comments on anything here since the brush-strokes limit the scene not for the viewer only but for the dead painter himself. The way they’ve been hung would imply that it’s the second picture that holds autumn replacing April. It could though be the other way around. Take a day, any day, says the old fortune-teller. It may be one that rises with indifference to the surface, flicks the merest hint of a red fin, gold scales, one among others, but at that time you sat and read or went upstairs in a house that has since been destroyed. You showed me the place, now asphalt, near the church we were married in.
A copper beech spreads over this wall
and the dead elms show stark amid all the green.
When you were ascending that stair you saw
floor-boards stained dark, a carpeted edge of landing,
no foreshadow of a wind with dust and fumes
blowing across a sunken highway or its intrusion
years later into our talk. You stepped into space
going perhaps from one high room to another
and the crunch of gravel is cancelled under
our shoes as we leave this path for the lawn
but where I wonder will the two of us be when this
is remembered together or separately. The sun by now
has closed the last of the distant hay-fields though one
shaft of light sinks through green water in the estuary.
The open sea is concealed by the long shoulder
of the foreland. In theory you can walk round any lake.