

# Selected Poems by Morag Harris

1954-2000

## If I were to die tomorrow

If I were to die tomorrow  
I would say  
The things that have mattered most  
Were, seeing you  
In this way

Most, the memories of us in our youth  
Flood my sight  
Of late, how you danced when you walked  
Your pocketed hands  
And your auburn curls

Down in front, and those deep dark auburn  
Eyes' sweet gaze.  
How very much has changed.  
I recall, your room, our books, your ample  
Bed, haunting music you played  
As we lulled to sleep –

Each other's arms. Friends out and in – all day-  
Then evening – alight in a circle –  
Paul warming his violin  
And the Brahms violin concerto  
Blazing out in the night.

Then us. Us alone. How much  
Since those notes in the air  
Fingered the oak – by the stars – to the lake –  
To the grass beyond – still on –  
Till where

You batted and fielded.  
And I in a haze,  
Discursing of Plato and various  
Other entirely unknowable lives,  
Began the long, long wait I would pass  
Love, missing your auburn eyes.

*August 21st, 1999*

## **Interior decorating**

I place myself in this room.  
I think – these violets there – the long mirror  
Laced with daisies, blue, yellow, pink,  
Beaten in metal by the Dome in Firenze

To airy thinness. Then enamelled. Put the usual faces  
In their usual poses. I confess, my weariness.  
The girls' bright eyes, their beautiful lines,  
Pale luminous skin, blond chestnut curls.

My boy's elusive over-sweetness,  
When now in his age I'd rather see  
Traces of the man he ought to be.  
I confess, much is not right, and I'm weary.

In these years  
How many rooms I have changed  
Been pushed and pulled  
And cannot see

Which is the room for me.  
I thought it mattered.  
That this – perhaps – at last would be final  
Everything in place, daddy's portrait  
Happy in his boat

Out at sea  
My adamant mother, bearing it  
Radiant, for love of him,

My sister and I, like dogs and cats  
In a scrap, fifty, and no better yet.  
What a childish dream, world peace.  
I think of death, and I laugh.

And I realise, the trappings of all these rooms  
Have made no difference, but wedges in our souls.  
Love, I return to you – in my heart –  
And know the inviolability of our room.

Whatever. Wherever it is.

*12th September 1999*

## **Approaching her death**

As I lay loving, I watch the wall  
I imagine you must have seen  
As you crossed over, as you did a child  
The burn, stepping – one – two – three –  
The gurgles round the stones that take your feet's  
Weight, as now I bear this man I love in this same place

And practice dying. Soon twelve years will have passed.  
Who could have said, the last time that I crossed your room  
Hopeless, that midnight, and in the darkness you called 'Bab',  
That here we would re-unite, to man and woman grown  
Whose infancy you tended, as you tended roses  
That through these self-same curtains, from your gardens,  
Still blaze out on us, dying, as we love?

*17th October 1999*

## The vow in autumn

It's autumn, and when the pain of your distance touches me  
Across the miles, and I know that between  
Us, and the ripple of your delicate fingertips'  
Touch, as you slip from my thigh to my throat, and my whole

Being translates to your eyes,  
Like some infinitesimal infinite spot, gathering force, sweet,  
In the way, there's the seas and the stars.  
When I know, down the wires of the telephone

I cannot reach, and I cannot say  
One word, or make one sign, of remonstrance on  
The monstrous abysses, plateaux, ridges, glaciers and years that  
stand in our way,  
I imagine, then, like some migratory bird

Returning, up through the kings of Italy's  
Region, where all the names are French–Welsh –  
Over Hannibal's Alps and his elephants,  
Invade the clockmaker from Geneva's air space,

Forget Marseilles, Aix and Provence,  
Arles, Avignon and the wide mosquitoed Rhone,  
Up the Saone alley, over Loire and Cher, Sancerre  
Veaugues, Bourges, Tours, Orleans, Rheims, and never more Nevers,

Not that tyrant's Versailles, and all his slave-built fountains  
Ridiculously beautiful, in his face, even so,  
Nor Paris, no, Neuilly, Bois de Boulogne, Montmartre,  
And all those other stops on the metro, Tuileries, Jeu de Paume,

The Louvre that I could never quite separate,  
For a trick of the sound, from the idea of toilette,  
And her Venus di Milo, sans ankles, sans arms, sans face  
Had nothing, I thought, on the voluptuously developed Morag's Venus

Who was complete. Still. In night's violet, best, provocative Pigalle  
My sister drew the line at, would not savour,  
So there too, I had to go it alone. What a flavour.  
No. They were the haunts of my youth,

My father's hand, typical gifts of grace,  
His wont. His trust. His faith. Yes. Returning, I think and am ashamed  
At the resistance I put up to the simplicity  
Of my straightforward, easy, deep love for that man

I failed to show right. Stupidity, or impotence, or both. Heartbreak.  
I am over the waters, the cinque ports we sailed.  
To the left – Poole, Dorset –  
The Tempest we saw on Brownsea island –

A semicircle of trees, the backdrop Ariel threaded  
Back and forth to the glade, where Prospero and Caliban  
Vied which was more, and Miranda just stood, amazed.  
O brave old world, rediscovered.

Past Turner's Hill where I grew up, or delayed,  
In my mother's wake,  
And their exile from Scotia, that land of the dark,  
Left a mark on my, as it was in their, heart,

I come over another infinitesimal spot,  
London, the Blitz where my mother's sisters went under,  
One came out fighting, one appalled forever,  
To beat it mummy and daddy made love

And in Spring Street, Paddington, I tumbled out, head first  
To wander Sussex Gardens – a child – a princess.  
They gave me this chance, and oh indeed  
I have not stopped wondering yet.

Am I Odysseus or Penelope? Half-way, I am no princess  
Still less a queen, but have been  
More a kind of warrior, in love, again and again,  
And never able to rest, or let rest.

And so it is, now, I slip diagonal-wise  
Just a little – to the north, a touch north-west –  
Still some hours away from the ocean's portals,  
And recalling my father's, sweet, I learn your grace.

Let us say 'it is not too late.'  
For the sake of the play; even so be it.  
When it is, again: 'It is not too late.' No trick  
Of our fragility or of Fate's, no telephone wire's breach of lips'

Truth, deny  
I set down this,  
For as autumn calls in two thousand years,  
By my hand, it is writ.

*29th October – 1st November 1999*

## AND

- how long is an hour in the dark – or a week ... I'm afraid to waste the light ... for writing these words –

We die, rich with lovers and tribes, with tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have entered – and swum up – like rivers, and fears we have hidden in, like this wretched cave.

I want all this marked on my body, where the real country is. Not the boundaries drawn on maps, the names of powerful men.

I know you will return and you will take me out into the palace of winds –

But that is all I ever really wanted – to walk in such a place with you – with friends – to enter without maps –

The lamp has gone out I am writing in darkness –

*(Michael Ondaatje, liberal approximation)*

I am expecting the resurrection of the dead.  
Before my eyes, I have the picture of a woman  
Looking into the deep. On her head a wide-brimmed hat  
And a white flower, exalting it.

By her side, on the waters, her child  
She doesn't seem to see, but looking down  
All the frame's attention and the energy of the whole wide  
World seems directed by her gaze

At that mystery, she fathoms  
Child by her side. It's the child's stare takes me in.  
Impenetrable, expectant, questioning.  
Compared, how small our bodies seem.

*21st November 1999*

### **The talking shawl**

I caught you tonight without words.  
So unlike you, so like you  
'American –' you said, and you stopped  
As at an abyss

Over borders, you swayed, then you spoke –  
You had lost  
Words – quite banal ones – you said.  
Annoyed. Bemused. Curious.

You seemed on Eternity's edge.  
In my childish heart, a cord tightened.  
My shoulders crossed by a shawl from Tibet  
You gave me of late

Candid – white –  
Against the cold  
Where once you gave me swords to cross.  
I think none other like it exists.

*[not dated]*

## The wound in the garden

We had a talk in the garden  
You and I. Besieged by green flushing –  
It was hard. Summer –

Crescendo lilting and hushing,  
Elms, oaks, horse-chestnut trees,  
Rhododendron and azalea skies

The gravel barred by hollyhocks, man-high,  
Riding their way, intrepid, self-seminated.  
Long, long ago

I you said  
Stopped loving you. Or gave up, was the word?  
Either way, the wound was small, but a brush

This time, a drop, on my unclosed thigh. Still  
Today I thread the hollyhocks, yellow, red  
Unbending, shifting to the wind,

Shivering the cold, celebrating the sun  
I return where in your thirty years' or so  
Characteristic pose

You sit, still, a Pharaoh to my eyes,  
Digesting the world with thought and books,  
Where other people's

Thought is.  
You and I. In summer.  
In Gethsemane.

*Simsbury, Oxford, 26-27 November 1999*



## A Winter's Tale

*adapted from poems by Morag Harris written 1978-80  
for the wedding of her daughter Giuliana, December 2013*

Have you ever been alone  
On a dark cold night  
And wondered if next time  
Love would come right.

Light the candle  
Cup the flame  
Time goes treading,  
Who's to blame?

Gradually the ice thaws  
On the window pane.  
Maybe next time, sometime round,  
We'll catch the steps Time tapped  
Before the candle goes out.

Love is not made  
Of nervousness  
Has need of space  
To take  
Deep breath in,  
Roots feel below, along, between  
Our myths  
Of busy world and time,  
Absorbing parts  
To make identity;  
Is slow, courageous  
Self-discovery  
In grateful lovers'  
Intimacy.

For love is not made  
without gratefulness.  
Love needs pain  
To know its food in  
This bright box of  
Sacred things  
Given us girls and boys  
In motley colouring,  
Who then  
Still fools of timelessness  
Not knowing Time  
Treated the lot  
As they were toys.

But we come gradual into our own -  
Discovering, as from balloon's new height  
This little O,  
Approaching lower  
Our world of love  
Perspective gains,  
Minute patchwork  
Shows its intaglio.

A thread of many colours,  
Spinning gyres,  
The green of jealousy, the blue  
Of faith, red of desire,  
Let them in woman and man  
Make rhyme, convergence find.

So here's a landscape  
Raw and lonely,  
Path to bleak house  
At first sight,  
But take a walk on  
Toward the light -

Here the hearth and here the feast  
For invited guests' wel-coming,  
And here the door that Time  
Holds open for their tread,  
A new beginning.

Gradual we come into our own,  
The colours spinning in life's thread  
A bracelet round the bone,  
The candle burning  
Bright epithalamion,  
The marriage song  
That lets the warm love in,  
In celebration.