

Dennis Haskell

Gelati alla Spiaggia

i.m. SD, GR and RH

We found it so bizarre, but still
loved it, as the brave photo I free
and hold and stare at proves:
Gustavo and Sheila, Rhonda and me

in overcoats, neck-scarved, upraised
gelati coloured in twos or threes, strolling
along the beach in our mid-winter
Rimini and Ricciole trip. Something

in Italian life encourages the bizarre.
Today down Via dei Chiari I walked
past your old door, number 5: beside
the bell still sit your names, uncorked

from you: "Downing/Riboldi". My finger
lingered in the air, as if to stem the
uncertainty, ring and make you appear,
yet I realise your names condemn me

as the only one of us alive, *solo io*.
C'è la vita, what could be more clear?
But what of what we are could be
sadder, more shaking, and more bizarre?

Grief

Like a whale
with an arbitrary tale
grief can have you
tossed off the sea
in an instant of wild spray
as salt-drenched as tears.

Like a cat with a ball
of string, grief
can string you along
and just when you think
you're all right
show you you're wrong.

Like a coin tossed
into the sun
grief can have you spin
not knowing which side
you'll land, head
or tail
but inevitably
on edge.

"Death shall have no dominion"
one poet wrote,
and another,
"Death, thou shalt die!"
Grief will tell you

one was a joke
and the other a lie:

Your emotions, your rationality, your ideas,
all are flimsy
faced with its seriousness, its
unimpeachable dramatic whimsy.

Plato's Error

Cabbage moths, white
like torn pieces of skin,
flit in and out of the garden beds
eating what vegetable
leaves they need.

Your skin, thinned out like paper,
itches constantly, and you scratch
like a dog with fleas.
It's the medicines they say.
Medicines designed not to cure
but to endure, to keep
the cancer at bay
a little longer. For five years
our lives have orbited illness
and for six months now
have been sucked
into its light-defiant
vacuum.
Your skin slumps on

the mannequin framework of your bones.

On the few occasions I hug you
I have to do so oh so gently
it barely feels like touch.

Misery attends us. Our friends
are frightened to call,
understandably. I must remind myself
that silence is a form of consideration.

Shadows slip through
slats in the outdoor chairs;
from an angle of sunshine
they look more real
than the chairs themselves
(Plato got it wrong)
as real as skin
fluttering, peeling its way
out of our lives.

Six Years

Outside, streetlights shine
like low slivers of moon
and people move
energetically about their lives.
For six years
we have slipped
into the black pit

of illness and death
again and again,
climbed out
with no suggestions of doubt
then slipped back
and climbed out
again and again.
You cry in the shower
at your wasted, hairless body,
your now small breasts
sagging like two
unanswerable questions,
and I listen beyond the door
helpless, useless.

It is exhausting.

Why you are tired
I know, poison
surging through your veins.
“Why am I so tired?”
I ask the air, frustrated,
then realise
always, coming and going
to doctors, chemists, hospitals,
arriving and leaving,
sifting through all the medicines to take,
all the things to do,
whatever I do, whatever I think,

a part of me
is already grieving.

Widower

"Widower". It's such an odd word
like something to do with threshing
or soaring: I caught this morning
morning's widower, stumbling down
wasted streets. It's against the odds:
women live longer than men,
wives than husbands. Everything about it
is wrong. Time with his clichéd scythe
has cut a vicious way.

And the words it sits with
have an odd ring, like
strangers in the house of our lives:
"ashes", "funeral", "loss", "death", "fire".
Can they ever exhaust their meanings,
fire of us and relax
their knuckle-laden fingers?

"Widower": this pathetic run
of weak, short syllables
says nothing about me
or everything, catching on
my every breath
the low, dark aftermath of death.

Dennis Haskell is the author of 6 collections of poetry, the most recent *Acts of Defiance: New and Selected Poems* (2010), and 13 volumes of literary scholarship and criticism. His *All the Time in the World* won the Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry in 2007. He was Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts and co-editor of *Westerly*. He is now Director of the Westerly Centre and Senior Honorary Research Fellow in English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia.

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