An Artist Speaks to His Model

Judith Beveridge

What can I ask of your lips
that they haven’t already given
my colourless signature; of your
hands other than to shade
your eyes as the sun burnishes
the windows, then carries on
to the grey porticos of the square.
I see pigeons on the gold-lit roof
of the Cathedral of St Christopher,
and as I stir my brush about
my palette — scarlet is what
I pray for; scarlet that flows under
a vanquished bridge; that lives
with finches in the tops of trees
because, desire, you said,
should always live on the wing.
As I hold my brush, your skin
is a breaking wound. I could
mend it with all the things
I know I’ll one day lose, but
now I imagine you’re only one
red façade away from my slender
stairwell, lindens and chestnuts
dropping their blossoms onto
the street. Elise, I know you live
by endless esplanades, by fierce
pigments, by the rich gilt with
which you shine your dreams
into the colour of absent things,
but we belong to rooms, Elise,
whose heat prompts curtains
to blow, and the skin to seek
communion with the blue-black
night. Sometimes I don’t know
what is memory, what dream.
Last night through the slant beat
of the rain, I thought I saw you
leaning against an eased arch,
a vertigo of colour sweeping
your face. Elise, my heart is
placed before the marble steps
I would have you reach, but
I know nothing can capture you.
Perhaps only the muted leaf
the wind takes. I search all
the shades the wind might bruise
you with, days in these bitten-out
streets. Impossible to get your
lips to resemble fate. Soon,
the pine limbs will corrugate
my yard, the load of needles
shake loose, and the finches
peck at seed dropped by women
whose hands — dark, serene —
tend an earth whose lilacs are close.
Elise, around your shoulders
I’ll paint blood. Around your
breasts an emergency of leaves.
I’m waiting for the light to be
cornered on the sill. I’m waiting
for your voice to short out my
heart along the quickly burning
length of St Christopher’s spire.
Already an unthankful moon
has climbed opposite the sun.