

## The Cemetery by the Sea

*after Paul Valery (1871-1945): "Le Cimetière Marin"*

*"My soul, do not strive for immortality, but make the most of what is practicable"* **Pindar, Pythian Odes III.**

This peaceful roof, its tombs in long buckled lines...  
As noon performs its daily alchemy,  
doves flicker up from stones through tall blue pines.  
And I am here. All this now glows for me:  
the sea, the sea, once more transformed by fire;  
a moment's calm, beyond small wants, desire.

What pure work of graceful light now roams  
the vastness of the sea. Its darts consume  
detail: scattered diamonds gleam in foam  
as the dark abyss is slowly tipped by sun.  
Time scintillates and suddenly it seems  
knowledge descends like a lucid dream.

Unchanging treasure, shrine to wise Minerva,  
great rock of calm and visible reserve.  
Below that eye, proud water, somnolent, ample;  
power, asleep beneath its veil of fire.  
My silence grows within this simple temple,  
its pinnacle of gold, its ancient spire.

Temple of time, its sum a simple sigh.  
I climb the heights where distance blunts the gaze  
– the way, up here, the sea surrounds the eye  
where broadcast seeds of light now dull to haze,  
an offering as sea shifts blue to green  
that casts disdain on what is merely seen.

And just as eaten fruit melts into taste  
where tongue finds solid form has left no trace,  
so absence may be transformed into delight.  
I breathe the smoke I shall become, the light,  
while sky now sings its song consumed by fire,  
echoing the restless murmuring shore.

Beneath that light-charged sky, look how I change!  
After so much pride, so much that's strange,  
so full of sloth, yet full of new-born power,  
I give myself up to this brilliant space.  
On the houses of the dead, I see my shadow pass  
– how ephemeral and frail the body's hour.  
I'll have my soul exposed to solstice torches,

to bear the solar justice of the light.  
Your pitilessly shining weapons pierce and scorch;  
I return your honours, all the highest grade.  
You glow with pride, but to reflect that bright  
midday implies a half of mournful shade.

For me alone, within myself, unbent,  
I see, beside the heart, the poem's source  
between the emptiness and pure event,  
awaiting the presage of an inner grandeur:  
a dark and bitter echoing well –a hole,  
a void forever ringing in the soul.

Do you know, fake captive of the leaves,  
this bone-filled ground? What knotted brow conceived  
this greedy gulf devouring the railing's bars?  
The mysteries we screen behind closed eyes?  
The pull of indolence, the will's demise?  
The spark evoking all those loved and lost?

Holy enclosure filled with abstract fire,  
an earthly fragment offered up to light,  
in thrall to these perversely solid pyres  
– torches of gold or stone; dark poplar flames –  
where so much marble trembles over shade,  
the faithful sea asleep where your body's laid.

Once here, the future lies in idleness.  
The insect scratches at the bone-dry soil.  
This world's burned up, fugitive, turned to air,  
into I know not what austere essence.  
Life is vast and drunk on its own absence:  
its bitterness is sweet; the mind is clear.

The dead lie easy, hidden in this soil  
which warms and dries their unsolved mystery.  
Up there, midday: the motionless noon-time boils,  
imagined into self-sufficiency,  
the regal head that bears the perfect crown.  
I am within you; each secret change my own.

You have only me to hold your fears.  
Repentance, doubts, constraints, my servile mind,  
I see the same flaws in your vaunted diamond.  
At night, so heavy with statuary and marble,  
right down in the roots of trees, a shadowy people  
declares itself for you, and all your kind.

They have melted into a dense absence.  
Red clay has drunk them dry, drained every sense;

their gift of life had fled into the flowers.  
Where are their turns of phrase, these distant dead?  
Their singular arts, their souls, long praised by peers?  
The grubs now thread their way where once were tears.

The shrill and tickled girls with piercing cries:  
their teeth, their moist eyelids, their flashing eyes;  
the blood which throbs within those bee-stung lips;  
the fingers which defend those hidden favours.  
Soft skin, soft breasts – oh how we burned with lust –  
return to earth. All flesh is grass. Is dust.

And you, great soul, are you waiting for a dream  
with colours true to life, which never lies?  
– One made for eyes of flesh by wave and gold?  
Will you still sing when you are thinnest air?  
Those dreams, like life, are fleeting, soon grow old.  
And even holy patience also dies.

This immortality of black and gold,  
hideous consoler wreathed with laurel  
who makes of grinning death a mother's breast  
– a pretty fiction and a pious ruse.  
Who does not know, and who would not refuse  
its mocking laughter, that empty skull's old jest?

You lie so deep, my fathers, your abandoned heads  
accustomed to the weight of earth in spades,  
the ground we limp upon, unsure, infirm.  
The gnawing truth, the irrefutable worm  
is not for you who sleep beneath the slab.  
Its peace lives on in me and never fades.

Is it love, perhaps? Self-hatred buried deep?  
What secret tooth could lie as close as his now seems?  
He may go by any name or none,  
no matter, he sees and wishes, touches, dreams.  
My flesh is to his taste, he haunts my sleep.  
My constant shadow, through me he still lives on.

O Zeno with your Zen-like paradox,  
you pierce me perversely with your logic's arrow  
– the one that flies but never leaves the bow:  
think Schrödinger's cat, in the limbo of its box,  
undead; Achilles slowed to a tortoise-shadow.  
Uncertainty: the principle we'll never know.

Enough! Get up, confront this coming age.  
Break, my body, from out your pensive cage  
and fill your lungs, drink in that vital wind,

harness its salty power, fresh from the sea.  
I breathe in deep. My soul returns. Fresh-skinned,  
I run into the waves. Reborn. Leap free.

Go crashing those ecstatic roiling peaks  
with panther skin, like some heroic Greek,  
my tunic full of the sun's repeated disk  
– drunk on my own blue flesh, that thrilling risk  
the wild beast knows, unawed by death or violence,  
in a tumult of spray eloquent as silence.

The wind is rising. It's time to seize my life.  
The burly air is rifling through my book,  
bullies nervous pages, shoos reading off.  
Break waves! Fly pages! Feel elements in joyful strife.  
Waves burst, explode in light and spray from the rocks.  
Sails nod the tide, bob white where they peck like doves.