

Ciaran Carson

**FOR ALL
WE KNOW**



Gallery Books

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Second Time Round

Ce n'est pas comme le pain de Paris. There's no stretch in it,
you said. It was our anniversary, whether first or last.

It's the matter of the texture. Elasticity.
The crust should crackle when you break the *baton*. Then you
pull

the crumb apart to make skeins full of holes. I was grappling
with your language over the wreck of the dining table.

The maitre d' was looking at us in a funny way
as if he caught the drift I sought between the lines you spoke.

For one word never came across as just itself, but you
would put it over as insinuating something else.

Then slowly, slowly we would draw in on one another
until everything was implicated like wool spooled

from my yawning hands as you wound the yarn into a ball.
For how many seasons have we circled round each other

like this? Was it because you came from there and I from here?
That said, before we were a gleam in someone else's eye?

Behind the screen of reasons, how much further back we go.
La nuit s'approche, you said, and then I saw the parish church

below the Alps of those three words, and snow falling, a bell
tolling as their farewells dimmed into the gathering dusk.

Our two candles were guttering by now. We climbed the stair
and found ourselves spadeagled on the patchwork double quilt

following the dips and gradients of the staggered repeats
four widow aunts had stitched into it fifty years before

the last war, one of them your ancestor. So they told you
as you told me that day in Paris we two first ventured

under it, into the future we would make together
there and then, the bread you bought that morning not yet broken.

Hotel del Mar

Sound of waves without. You were abroad and ignorant in
the tongue you heard whispering from a dinner table more

than one remove away from you, two pairs of lips closing
in on one another in the flickering candlelight —

murmuring of sweet nothings, you surmised, since it was Greek
to you. Waves on the beach. Did we two, you wondered, ever

come across like that? Some lonely traveller to overhear
words not understood, a shadow on the periphery?

Whatever window opened then, moonlight shivered on you,
the gold crushed velvet curtains stirred in the breeze off the sea.

The couple spoke more boldly now, as if you were not there.
So you told it that I might fathom the deep of its sound,

we two seas foundering into one another over
the neck of a peninsula, making it an island.

On the Contrary

It's because we were brought up to lead double lives, you said.
You were lying next to me, both of us verging on sleep.

We always had to withhold ourselves from the other side,
guarding our tongues lest we answer to their outspoken laws.

And so we lost ourselves in the dark forest of language
believing in nothing which might not be governed by touch

or taste, the apple bursting indescribably with juice
against the roof of the mouth, or the clean cold smell of skin.

As our promise was never to be betrayed by our words
so we became our own shadowy police watching us,

as loaded the long goods train clanks slowly towards Dublin,
we hear the shriek in the night from across the trip-wired fields,

as the searchlight trawls across the bedroom window you turn
towards me speechlessly and we look into each other's eyes.

Second Time Round

La nuit s'approche et mon village s'endort là-bas
silencieux . . . You were singing me that song again,

and I was trying to remember where I'd heard it last.
I could see the little church under the Alps at nightfall,

and snow falling beyond the casement window where you sat
with a vase of blue flowers on the table beside you.

Night was approaching the parlour as it did the village
in the words of the song. The world beyond the glass was
blurred.

But you had gone elsewhere, back to when I first heard it sung.
It would have been in Paris all of thirty years ago.

It was dusk. *L'heure bleue*, you said, the hour of assignations.
Do you remember how the dim gongs of an Angelus

came booming in from the fog, just as I came to the end?
Echoing the bell in the song? you said. The stroke of six.

It must be that time of the year when it gets dark early,
and I am learning to drive on the wrong side of the road

in your Renault 5 Alpine. I shift the unfamiliar
gears. You should pretend to be me, you say, picture yourself

in my shoes, whereon I begin to imagine the rest,
the *broderie anglaise* bodice and the blue pencil skirt

and the black stockings. I'm wearing one of your vintage hats.
I'm beginning to like this role, I say, as I change up

and find myself on a boulevard which is deserted,
silent save for the swish of our tyres and windscreen wipers.

If I'm you, who are you? I say, whereupon you reply
with a smile I have to take my eyes off the road to catch

when a man looms into the windscreen in a split second,
rain pouring from his glistening black ulster and black helmet.

Hotel del Mar

You're lying on top of the quilt in a pane of moonlight.
You've opened the window for the pale voile curtains to stir

in the breeze off the white horses foundering on the shore.
You're thinking of me in a city an ocean away,

reverberations bringing to mind the helicopter
which might hover at my roof as it does on a column

of noise. You can see me lying in our shuttered bedroom.
You think I must be thinking of you, and then of the sound

of the waves. I could be you staring at the blue ceiling
dappled by wavering waves in which — like Leonardo

hearing every possible babble in a peal of bells —
I hear the syllables of your name repeated, Nina,

until the helicopter withdraws its barrage of noise,
the waves receding to a murmur as we fall asleep.