

The Country Without a Post Office

... letters sent

To dearest him that lives alas! away.

—GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

1

Again I've returned to this country
where a minaret has been entombed.
Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps
in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His fingerprints cancel blank stamps
in that archive for letters with doomed
addresses, each house buried or empty.

Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see
us through them—see us frantically bury
houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,
caves in. The soldiers' light it, hone the flames,
burn our world to sudden papier-mâché

inlaid with gold, then ash. When the muezzin
died, the city was robbed of every Call.
The houses were swept about like leaves
for burning. Now every night we bury
our houses—and theirs, the ones left empty.

We are faithful. On their doors we hang wreaths.
More faithful each night fire again is a wall
and we look for the dark as it caves in.

2

"We're inside the fire, looking for the dark,"
one card lying on the street says. "I want
to be he who pours blood. To soak your hands.
Or I'll leave mine in the cold till the rain
is ink, and my fingers, at the edge of pain,
are seals all night to cancel the stamps."
The mad guide! The lost speak like this. They haunt
a country when it is ash. Phantom heart,

pray he's alive. I have returned in rain
to find him, to learn why he never wrote.
I've brought cash, a currency of paisleys
to buy the new stamps, rare already, blank,
no nation named on them. Without a lamp
I look for him in houses buried, empty—
He may be alive, opening doors of smoke,
breathing in the dark his ash-refrain:

"Everything is finished, nothing remains."
I must force silence to be a mirror
to see his voice again for directions.
Fire runs in waves. Should I cross that river?
Each post office is boarded up. Who will deliver
parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?
Only silence can now trace my letters
to him. Or in a dead office the dark panes.

3

"The entire map of the lost will be candled.
I'm keeper of the minaret since the muezzin died.
Come soon, I'm alive. There's almost a paisley
against the light, sometimes white, then black.
The glutinous wash is wet on its back
as it blossoms into autumn's final country —
Buy it, I issue it only once, at night.
Come before I'm killed, my voice canceled."

In this dark rain, be faithful, Phantom heart,
this is your pain. Feel it. You must feel it.
"Nothing will remain, everything's finished,"
I see his voice again: "This is a shrine
of words. You'll find your letters to me. And mine
to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished
envelopes." And I reach the minaret:
I'm inside the fire. I have found the dark.

This is your pain. You must feel it. Feel it,
Heart, be faithful to his mad refrain —
For he soaked the wicks of clay lamps,
lit them each night as he climbed these steps
to read messages scratched on planets.
His hands were seals to cancel the stamps.
This is an archive. I've found the remains
of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.

4

I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones,
and mine to him from whom no answers came.
I light lamps, send my answers, Calls to Prayer
to deaf worlds across continents. And my lament
is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
to this world whose end was near, always near.
My words go out in huge packages of rain,
go there, to addresses, across the oceans.

It's raining as I write this. I have no prayer.
It's just a shout, held in, it's Us! It's Us!
whose letters are cries that break like bodies
in prisons. Now each night in the minaret
I guide myself up the steps. Mad silhouette,
I throw paisleys to clouds. The lost are like this:
They bribe the air for dawn, this their dark purpose.
But there's no sun here. There is no sun here.

Then be pitiless you whom I could not save —
Send your cries to me, if only in this way:
I've found a prisoner's letters to a lover —
One begins: "These words may never reach you."
Another ends: "The skin dissolves in dew
without your touch." And I want to answer:
I want to live forever. What else can I say?
It rains as I write this. Mad heart, be brave.

(for James Merrill)