

For the heart is a coal, growing colder



Five Songs on Poems by Keith Douglas
for Contralto and Piano



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Keith Douglas (1920–1944) was one of the most talented British poets of the twentieth century, and an astute chronicler of the Second World War. He was killed in Normandy three days after D-Day. Some of Douglas’s best known poems directly reflect his experiences on the battlefield, but the poems selected for this piece are more focused on the spaces around it—of waiting, of attempting to find pleasure, love, and hope in its wake, and of the increasing burdens of guilt, trauma, and grief.

The poems are set in chronological order. The first two were written on Douglas’s first campaign, in Egypt: “Mersa” is named after a town on the coast which had been the site of a battle months before Douglas’s arrival; “Cairo Jag” documents life in the capital, which had become home to military and diplomatic personnel from numerous Allied countries—living in a parallel reality to the locals.

The last three were written in England before his posting to Normandy. Douglas was working on a more expansive project titled “Bête Noire,” which was unfinished; this fragment describes some of Douglas’s struggle with the titular beast, which he called “so amorphous and powerful. . . no use sacrificing to him, he takes what he wants.” “To Kristin Yingcheng Olga Milena” and “On a Return from Egypt” were Douglas’s last completed poems: the former is addressed to four women Douglas had been entangled with; the latter is an elegy to lost friends, and to Douglas himself, who had—accurately—predicted his own demise.

Texts

I. MERSA

This blue halfcircle of sea
moving transparently
on sand as pale as salt
was Cleopatra's hotel:

here is a guesthouse built
and broken utterly, since.
An amorous modern prince
lived in this scoured shell.

Now from the skeletal town
the cherry skinned soldiers stroll down
to undress to idle on the white beach.
Up there, the immensely long road goes by

to Tripoli: the wind and dust reach
the secrets of the whole
poor town whose masks would still
deceive a passer-by;

faces with sightless doors
for eyes, with cracks like tears
oozing at corners. A dead tank alone
leans where the gossips stood.

I see my feet like stones
underwater. The logical little fish
converge and nip the flesh
imagining I am one of the dead.

(after October 1942)

2. CAIRO JAG

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake,
a pasty Syrian with a few words of English
or the Turk who says she is a princess—she
dances
apparently by levitation? Or Marcelle,
Parisienne
always preoccupied with her dull dead lover:
she has all the photographs and his letters

tied in a bundle and stamped *Décédé* in mauve ink.

All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep stench and the sour smells, the sour cries do not disturb their application to slumber all day, scattered on the pavement like rags afflicted with fatalism and hashish. The women offering their children brown-paper breasts dry and twisted, elongated like the skull, Holbein's signature. But this stained white town

is something in accordance with mundane conventions—

Marcelle drops her Gallic airs and tragedy suddenly shrieks in Arabic about the fare with the cabman, links herself so with the somnambulists and legless beggars: it is all one, all as you have heard.

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world the vegetation is of iron dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery the metal brambles have no flowers or berries and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine the dead themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions clinging to the ground, a man with no head has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

(February 1943)

3. *From the BÊTE NOIRE fragments*

If at times my eyes are lenses through which the brain explores constellations of feeling my ears yielding like swinging doors admit princes to the corridors into the mind, do not envy me. I have a beast on my back

(February–March 1944)

4. TO KRISTIN YINGCHENG OLGA MILENA

Women of four countries the four phials full of essences of green England, legendary China, cold Europe, Arabic Spain, a finer four poisons for the subtle senses than any in medieval inventories.

Here I give back perforce the sweet wine to the grape give the dark plant its juices what every creature uses by natural law will seep back to the natural source.

(March 1944)

5. ON A RETURN FROM EGYPT

To stand here in the wings of Europe disheartened, I have come away from the sick land where in the sun lay the gentle sloe-eyed murderers of themselves, exquisites under a curse; here to exercise my depleted fury.

For the heart is a coal, growing colder when jewelled cerulean seas change into grey rocks, grey water-fringe, sea and sky altering like a cloth till colour and sheen are gone both: cold is an opiate of the soldier.

And all my endeavours are unlucky explorers come back, abandoning the expedition; the specimens, the lilies of ambition still spring in their climate, still unpicked: but time, time is all I lacked to find them, as the great collectors before me.

The next month, then, is a window and with a crash I'll split the glass. Behind it stands one I must kiss, person of love or death, a person or a wraith, I fear what I shall find.

(March–April 1944)

For the heart is a coal, growing colder

Five songs on poems by Keith Douglas

For Jess Dandy, with admiration & friendship

I. Mersa

$\text{♩} = 72$

mp *mf* *mp*

This blue half - cir - cle of sea

7

mo - ving trans - pa - rent - ly on sand pale as

12 *mf* *rit.* *mp* *pp*

salt was Cle - o - pa - tra's ho - tel:

16 **A tempo** (♩ = 72)

p here is a guest - house built and bro - ken ut - ter - ly, *mp*

19 since. An a - mo - rous mod - ern prince lived in this scoured shell. *pp*

23 *p* Now from the ske - le - tal town the cher - ry skinned sol *mp*

28 *p* - diers stroll down to un - dress to id - le on the white beach. *mp* Up *p*

32 *mf* *p*

there, the im - mense - - ly long road goes by to

36 *pp* *una corda*

Tri-po-li: the wind and dust reach the sec - rets of the

depress silently *pp* *una corda*

8vb
Sos. Ped.

40

whole poor town whose masks would still de-ceive a pas - ser - by;

44 *mp* *f*

fa - ces with sight - - less doors

mp *tre corde* *mf*

48 *p* *mf p* *mf* *p*

— for eyes, — with — cracks — like — tears — oo

52 *mp* *p* *mf* *p*

- zing from cor - ners. A — dead — tank — a-lone leans

56 *pp* *p*

— where the gos - sips stood. — I

60 *mf* *p*

see my feet like stones — un - der - wa - ter.

64

The lo - gi - cal lit - tle fish con -

68

verge and nip the flesh i - ma - gi - ning I

72

am one of the dead.

76

II. Cairo Jag

$\text{♩} = 92$ *f*

Shall I _____ get drunk or cut my - self a piece of cake,

86 *mp* *mf*

a pa-sty Sy-ri-an with a few words of Eng-lish or the

91 *mp*

Turk who says she is a prin-cess— she dan - ces ap-par-ent-ly

95 *f* *mp*

by le - vi - ta - tion? Or Mar - cel - le, Pa-

99

f *p*

ri - si - en - ne al - ways pre - oc - cu - pied - with her — dull —

105

Poco meno mosso (♩ = 84)

112

f *p*

— dead — lo - ver: she — has — all — the

118

mp *poco accel.*

pho - to-graphs and his let - ters — tied in a bun - dle — and stamped Dé - ce - dé

Tempo 1 (♩ = 92)

123

mf

in mauve ink. All this takes place in a stink of jas - min.

128

Meno mosso (♩ = 76)

pp

But there are the streets de - di - ca - ted to

133

sleep sten - ches and the sour smells, the sour cries do not dis - turb

140

*mp**p*

their ap - pli - ca - tion to slum - ber all day, scat - tered on the

145

mp

pave-ment like rags af - flic-ted with fa - ta - li - sm and hash - ish.

mp

151

p

The wo - men of - fer - ring their chil - dren brown - pa - per breasts dry

p

156

poco rit. *A tempo* (♩ = 76)

___ and twis - ted, ___ e - lon - ga - ted like the skull, Hol - bein's sig - na - ture. ___ But

mp

162

rit.

___ this stained white ___ town ___ is some - thing ___ in ac - cord ance ___ with mun - dane

Tempo 1 (♩ = 92)

167

f

— con-ven-tions— Mar-cel-le drops her Gal-lic airs and tra-

171

mf

- ge-dy sud-den-ly shrieks in A-ra-bic a-bout the fare with the cab-man,

175

mp *p*

links her-self so with the som-nam-bu-lists and

180

p

leg-less beg-gars: it is all one, as you have heard.

187 **Meno mosso** (♩ = 66)

pp

But by a day's tra-vel-ling you reach a new

pppp

192

world the ve - ge - ta - tion is of ir -

Sos.
Ped.

8vb

196

- on dead tanks, gun

ppp

p

199

bar-rels split like ce-le-ry the me - tal bram-bles

mp

p

pp

203

have no flo - wers or ber - ries and there are all sorts of ma - nure,

209

you can i - ma - gine the dead them - selves, their boots,

Sos.
Ped.

214

clothes and pos - sess - ions cling - ing to the ground,

219

a man with no head has a pack - et of choc - 'late

224 *mp* *p*

and a sou - ve - nir of Tri - po - li.

(8)

229 $\text{♩} = 56$ *pp*

III. Bête Noire [Fragment]

234 $\text{♩} = 80$ *p*

If at times

237 *mf* *p*

my eyes are len - ses

240

through which the brain ex - plores

This system contains measures 240, 241, and 242. The vocal line starts with a quarter rest in measure 240, followed by a quarter note G4 in measure 241, and a half note G4 in measure 242. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes with frequent grace notes.

243

con - stel - la - tions of feel - ing

mf *p*

This system contains measures 243, 244, and 245. The vocal line begins with a half note G4 in measure 243, followed by a quarter note A4 in measure 244, and a half note G4 in measure 245. The piano accompaniment continues with its intricate rhythmic texture.

246

my ears

mp

This system contains measures 246, 247, and 248. The vocal line has a whole rest in measure 246, a quarter note G4 in measure 247, and a half note G4 in measure 248. The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in measure 248.

249

yield - ing like swing - ing doors

f

This system contains measures 249, 250, and 251. The vocal line starts with a quarter note G4 in measure 249, followed by a quarter note A4 in measure 250, and a half note G4 in measure 251. The piano accompaniment includes a triplet of eighth notes in measure 250.

252 *mp*

ad - mit prin - ces — to the cor - ri - dors — in -

255 *mf* *mp*

to the mind, — do — not en - vy me.

258 *Poco meno mosso* ($\text{♩} = 72$) *p*

I — have a beast

262 *mp*

on my back —

IV. To Kristin Yingcheng Olga Milena

♩ = 50
poco accel.

mp *p* (♩ = 52) *mp*

Wo men ___ of_ four coun-tries the four ___ phials full_ of_ es

depress
silently

p

(♩) *8^{vb}*
Sos. Ped.

271

(♩ = 54) *p* (♩ = 56)

- sen-ces of green Eng-land, le- gen-da-ry ___ Chi-na, cold Eu - rope,

ppp

p

276

(♩ = 58) *p* *mp* *p*

A-ra - bic Spain, a ___ fi - ner four poi - sons for the sub - tle sen - ses

ppp

p

281

(♩ = 60) *p* (♩ = 62) non vib. *ppp*

than a - ny ___ in med-ie-val in - ven-to-ries.. Here ___

p

ppp *8^{vb}*

(♩ = 64)

-----> con vib.

287 *f* *mp* *mf* (♩ = 67)

I give back per - force the sweet wine to the grape

pp *p* *pp*

292 *mp* (♩ = 69) *p* (♩ = 72) *mp*

give the dark plant its jui - ces_ what ev - ery crea-ture u - ses

297 (♩ = 74) *p*

_ by na - tu - ral_ law will seep back_ to_

301 (♩ = 76) *pp* *flautando* (♩ = 78) *rit.*

_ the na - tu - ral_ source_

ppp

V. On a Return from Egypt

♩ = 92

To stand here in the wings of

Eu-rope dis-heart-ened, I have come a-way from the

sick land where in the sun lay the gen-tle

sloe-eyed murderers of them-selves, ex-qui-sites

329

6:5

un - der a curse; here to ex - er - cise my

333

p

de - ple - ted fu - ry.

p *pp*

337 Poco meno mosso (♩ = 88)

p

For the heart

pp *p*

339

poco rit. A tempo

mp

is a coal, grow -

mp

poco rit.

341 *mf* *p*

- ing cold - - er when

A tempo

343 *mf* *p*

jewelled ce - ru - - le - an seas

345 *mf* *p*

change in - to

347

grey rocks, grey wa -

349

- ter - fringe, sea and sky

mp *ppp*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 349 and 350. The vocal line starts with a triplet of eighth notes on 'ter - fringe,' followed by a quarter rest, then a half note on 'sea' and a quarter note on 'and' with a slur over them, and finally a quarter note on 'sky'. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand, with the right hand playing chords. Dynamic markings *mp* and *ppp* are indicated with a hairpin crescendo.

351

al - ter - ing like a cloth

mp *ppp*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 351 and 352. The vocal line begins with a quarter rest, followed by a half note on 'al - ter - ing' with a slur, then a quarter rest, and finally a quarter note on 'like' and a quarter note on 'a' with a slur over them, and a quarter note on 'cloth'. The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern. Dynamic markings *mp* and *ppp* are shown with a hairpin crescendo.

353

till col - our and sheen are gone both:

mp *ppp*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 353 and 354. The vocal line starts with a quarter note on 'till', followed by a half note on 'col - our' with a slur, a quarter note on 'and', a half note on 'sheen' with a slur, a quarter note on 'are', a half note on 'gone' with a slur, and a quarter note on 'both:'. The piano accompaniment remains consistent. Dynamic markings *mp* and *ppp* are indicated with a hairpin crescendo.

355

cold is an o - pi - ate

mp *ppp*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 355 and 356. The vocal line begins with a quarter rest, followed by a half note on 'cold' with a slur, a quarter rest, a quarter note on 'is', a quarter note on 'an' with a slur, a quarter note on 'o - pi - ate' with a slur, and a quarter note on 'ate'. The piano accompaniment continues with the eighth-note pattern. Dynamic markings *mp* and *ppp* are shown with a hairpin crescendo.

357

of the sol - dier. And *f*

360

all my en - dea - vours are un - luck - y ex - plor - ers come back, a - *mp*

364

ban - don - ing the ex - ped - i - tion; the spe - ci - mens, the

368

li - lies of am - bi - tion still spring in their cli - mate, still unpicked: *f* *mp*

372

But time_____ time is all I lacked to___ find_ them, as___ the

una corda p

mp

377

great col - lect - ors_____ be - fore___ me..

381

The next month, then, is a win - dow and with a___ crash

p *mf*

tre corde p

385

I'll split_ the glass._____ Be - hind it_____

p *pp*

388 *mp* *p*

stands one I must kiss,

390 *mp*

per - son of love or death a per -

393 *p* *pp*

son or a wraith, I fear what I shall

397

find.

ffff