

The New Criterion

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The Garden

by Don Paterson

I had been ninety years on Thera, and still felt like an incomer.

They were kind to me, though,
and like any other local in the town, when my time came, I met
with the curator of The Garden
so I could choose the shape of my long sleep. In The Garden, you
are fixed at that second of your life
you were happiest, and reside therein forever. I got the guided
tour. There was a lot of fishing. Family tableaux, holidays;
many nativities. One deathbed scene that had clearly given
someone especial delight.

Because their joy proves so fleeting, many chose 'a moment of
success' — prizewinnings, promotions, triumphs
in the Thera sports whose rules I never learned to follow. A few
scenes made me think he'd looked into my file,
but our lives are never as unique as we would have them. A man
giving a piano recital, his eyes closed,
bowed low before the keyboard as an altar; a young, naked
couple on a single bed, closed on each other like a scallop;
a hospital ward where a man stood open-mouthed, as the
newborn he'd thought a lost cause
began to draw his mother's milk.

He let me try a few, but most carried a seed of agitation I knew
would get to me in time. He did a fine job
of spinning up an unseasonably warm morning in Ullapool, and
stopped me there a while:
as my migraine had lifted and I listened to the river and the birds
in the early spring sunlight,

I knew I still had time to start again. But now the bench was
hard, and the birdsong too loud.
When he thawed me out, I said: *I know what I want. I remember
I'd been playing all afternoon
with my brother on the beach at Kinghorn—a small settlement of huts
by our Northern Sea—
and had run myself ragged. I was very hot, and lay down in the shadow
of a dune, in the cool damp sand.
I asked my brother to get his spade and turn the sand over me until
only my face was showing.
I felt my weariness drain into the ground, and the whole Earth bear me
up until I weighed nothing.*

At first the curator looked at me like I was from another planet,
then remembering I was, said:
*I admit, it's a curious one. But if that's what you desire, it will be my
honour to arrange it.*
So he dug a shallow trench in the black soil by the flowerbeds,
just my length, and I lay down in it;
and he stopped everything again, and gently filled the bed until
the earth covered my legs, my body and my face
and placed a sign nearby that I should not be disturbed.

—Don Paterson

Don Paterson lives in Edinburgh, Scotland. His most recent collection is *40 Sonnets* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

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