

TWO POEMS

BY HARRY CLIFTON

Dag Hammarskjold¹

You will never be good enough, Dag Hammarskjold –
From across the years, from another life,
I hear your Lutheran father, ageless and cold,
Condemning you to the world, without a wife
To distract you, in the white nights
When consciousness rules, and a midnight sun makes bright
Your Stockholm office, and life must never extend
Beyond the arctic circle of your professional friends.

The years go by, the city now is New York –
And there I see you, above the United Nations
On your cold podium, priest and clerk
About whom the ethical forces multiply,
And babels of simultaneous translation
In space that conscience clears, while the wish to die
Prepares, already, the sacrifice you foretold –
You will never be good enough, Dag Hammarskjold.

Your table is empty, the dinner guests have gone –
Your bachelor suite, too classical for the blues,
Has only a chattering monkey on a chain
To keep you from loneliness.... Why not telephone
Korean fruitsellers, streetgirls below in the rain,
To visit you in your pain? Or must you refuse,
With all New York around you, women and gold
For a voice that screams in your sleep, and can't be controlled?

You will never be good enough, Dag Hammarskjold –
Exhausted man, I read in your book of changes
Gethsemanes of sleepless transit lounges
In the small hours, the missions that failed
And left behind them average evil and good
In the holding centres, innocent phials of blood
Being stacked like bullets, under refrigeration –
Awaiting their hour, like massacre or salvation

1 Harry Clifton, *The Liberal Cage* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery, 1988): 30-31. Reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher.

No one controls.... So fly home to your father
As long as you live, immaculately attired
For the state of grace you desired
Under alien skies, in a different weather
Than ours which radio silence disconnects
And plunges you out of, there when you least expect:
Relax, enjoy that journey, be consoled –
You will never be good enough, Dag Hammarskjold.

Crossing Sweden

1

There it is, the cold interior
Older than history... Time, you might say,
Arrested, on an eighth day

Of Creation – the silences of churches,
The bibles shut forever.
After Apocalypse, pine and birch

Eternally on the move
To claim it back, an earth betrayed
By Lutheran spires, hipped roofs.

Eros the love-child frozen out –
A shaggy horse by the water-butt
Eating its heart out, stamping its hooves...

Grant me a death-wish. Drop me here
To rot in the Varmland. Spare me the train
Through Sweden and the years.

2

'...Hallsberg, as the nothing name suggests,
Is a place of transit. Here, the traveller waits
Between trains, and the assembled ghosts

A million strong, a hundred years old,
Thread themselves through the needle's eye
Of New World passage – souls, to be bought and sold

In the cornfields of Iowa, the studios of Burbank,
London's slums, the deepsea ooze
Of Greenland, where the blind Titanic sank....

An airbridge of glass is hovering over the lines
And the frostbound trains are still.
Do you hesitate forever, diseased in will,

As the miracle happens? They are passing through
To Canada, Argentina, the chances of a lifetime,
As you yourself must do...'

3

Insistently, a foreign tongue
I can only interpret as Song
Comes over the air, as the train roars on.

Even as it speaks
Ice breaks, and fast-flowing rivers
Take over, the dazzle of lakes,

The shutter-speed of sun through trees
As the mind clicks into gear
And the eyes unfreeze.

A windfarm's slow propeller
Threshes cloudy skies –
I wonder who lives out there, who dies,

And see my own reflection
Rushing past, to the greater world
Of Stockholm Central, Gothenburg,

As the changes are announced
In that Scandinavian, singsong tone
I recognise, now, as my own.

It wants to be helpful, to be kind.
Abroad in the north country
Of my own mind,

I hear it – any tongue will do –
Interpreting the hinterland,
Hurling me through.