

*“There is no survey to prove it, but it is likely that the majority of people who have wept over twentieth century paintings have done so in front of Rothko.”*  
*James Elkins in Pictures and Tears, 2004.*

## **The Heart is an Only Child**

With your shirt sleeves rolled up you look ready for work.  
You could be barrowing spuds,  
gathering windfall apples or cutting wood.  
You could be tamping in posts to support the elaborate life of tomato vines  
or the rampant ambition of beans.  
But I’ve seen doctors roll their sleeves too,  
the patient’s life expectancy still intact  
before they learn the scientific name for their ills -  
before the pain kicks in,  
before life is pared back incrementally  
like phases of the moon.

But today you have your painting cap on as well as rolled sleeves,  
so, your work is not in the garden but the studio,  
the gathering in not of apples but of yourself.  
Now you are painting in red, like Mr Rothko  
but you hope your pigments are less fugitive.  
You have been visited every day for a week by a Raven, you say,  
who appears to be keeping an appointment  
or perhaps is a spokesman for black,  
but you are a colourist.

When I ask where the painting will hang  
you sidestep by saying the walls need whitewashing first.  
You will move a bookcase out of the way,  
shift some Chinese bowls and a small bronze Buddha.  
You’ll park it somewhere it can be seen as you approach the studio from outside  
the gaze lifting as though to meet familiar eyes.

Then you tell me that you had left home early  
to leave the family resemblances behind  
but in my opinion they found you easily enough.  
That way you have of glancing down before you begin speaking,  
a good head for figures and hats,  
a sweet tooth  
and sweetness of temper,  
fallen arches,  
cancer.

The scans show what seems like heavy weather,  
you know it first as a pain in your side.  
You are not curious about the disease,  
only intrigued by your body's transparency –  
the exact placement of the organs and their accompanying clouds.  
You point out that the heart is an only child –  
the lungs and kidneys arranged in pigeon pairs.  
Backlit the bones look spare and chalky  
it's hard to believe in them enough for a cure.

Your house is still full of dreams when you walk out  
but you leave instructions:  
you say not to begin with goodbye,  
you say to hang the painting where you will,  
to count your blessings, even if they come as birds,

But you don't say what to do with the tears –  
a year's worth of weeping at least.  
In front of your picture  
I begin by breathing them out as sighs.