

## Figure in a Landscape

for Gerardo San Román and Miriam San Román Crowley

a meditation on *Paisatge amb figueres* (*Landscape with fig trees*), the work of the sculptor Andreu Maimó

*in memoriam R.C.S.R.*

The place-names are the names of Maimó's ceramics and paintings, and of farms on the island of Mallorca, where my sister lived for some years after leaving Madrid. I first came across Maimó's work in a catalogue a few months after my sister's death. Even on the page, his life-size ceramic evocations of fig trees have tremendous presence. I had always planned to give my sister a fig tree, but between my ordering it from the nursery and its arrival in Pollença she died.

### *Fig tree in S'Horta Vella*

An antique figure  
crouched in the old orchard  
her tough bark knuckled and fissured  
She has been standing there, how long?  
More than a hundred years  
many hundreds perhaps  
And carrying a great weight—  
—a hint of a raised arm, there  
where the shoulders would be  
and the invisible feet  
apart and braced

Lay it down, little sister  
Lay it down in the fig tree's shade  
and rest

### *Fig tree at Sa Galera*

Did you think you  
were a caryatid  
that you could uphold  
the temple of the family?  
You had such high  
hopes of putting up  
with it all, making light  
of the dark vault—  
our parents' house—  
but pain like a black knife  
gashed your side  
And when you  
fell into darkness  
the house tumbled  
down around you

*Fig tree at Son Sureda*

These lopped branches gape  
like mouths voicing  
their silent prophecies  
too late.  
Or the keening mouths of mourners.

How did we fail to guess  
that we would lose you  
remembering  
how more than once  
you were lost as a child?  
Sat on the fish-and-chip shop  
window-sill in Cawsand  
and told to wait,  
then forgotten.  
Left behind as a toddler  
lingering over the just-hatched chicks  
at the *Ideal Home*  
Lost to me at boarding-school  
when for the first time  
we stopped sharing a room

*Fig tree at Sa Clota*

Perhaps you were too small  
to remember her, our mother's  
cleaning-woman in Hornsea?  
How did she wring out a cloth  
manage a broom, the Hoover?  
I can still see that fist  
A knot of flesh and bone  
the industrial machine  
had sewn so well  
even the surgeons  
wouldn't unpick it  
Dense as a clot  
No fingers left  
A stump  
with only  
the memory  
of branches dancing

*Trunk of fig tree from Can Vent*

A cold wind blew  
through the house  
of an acrimonious marriage

Both sets of grandparents lived  
in the same town  
though hundreds of miles from us

Gerardo would say, some thirty years later,  
that we sisters were like two halves  
of the same coin

But one holiday they split us up  
wrenched us apart like this poor tree trunk  
leaving you, aged three, with our father's parents  
me with the kinder, poorer ones  
Indulged and cheerful, I didn't miss you,  
exactly, though it was lonely when I woke  
in the big bed. But you  
wept and pined night after night  
crying, not for our mother, but me  
'She said *I want my Amélie*,  
my grandmother told me afterwards  
chuckling to herself  
Now, when I think of this  
a cold wind blows  
And I call your name  
into the night

*Fig tree at Firella*

A mother and child of a tree.  
And because the tree grows slowly  
the new growth is smoother-skinned  
more tender, reaching out to touch  
the rough coat of the weeping mother.

Our father has carried the sick family dog  
into the vet's to be put down.  
We wait in the car and you are eight  
and I am ten and our mother's sobbing  
is more than we can bear.  
I sit stiff with hurt, but you lean forward  
finger her sleeve and whisper  
kind, practical words; how we'll go  
to the library, and she can change her books  
and start to feel better.

We are unprepared for what follows.  
It is not our mother who whirls round in her seat,  
this red-eyed, glaring witch's mask  
who screams at you and calls you wicked,  
hard, heartless. No. It is not our mother.  
It is some thoughtless, selfish child,  
and you are the mother.

But that day settled into its silence  
like a large stone around your roots,  
a clot in memory's artery  
that blocked all recollection of that day  
and all the years that went before.

*Fig tree at Son Estrany*

How strange you've grown  
little sister  
wired and taut as a trigger  
A rifle ready to fire

While our father  
lay on the ground at Bisley  
lip thickening from the rifle's recoil  
as he aimed at targets across the heather  
you and I wandered finding harebells  
behind the lines—flowers  
of an unearthly blue  
each one solitary  
on its wiry stem  
that trembled at the guns' uproar  
and rang so faintly  
only you and I could hear them

Back home we could keep  
the empty cartridges  
They stood on the shelf  
like a row of shining headless dolls

*Fig tree at Ses Carritxó*

Such wintry implications  
Like the old tree  
that grew on the north side  
of our garden in Marseille  
grey-skinned and sinuous  
whose figs were small and hard  
and fell to the ground  
for lack of sun  
before they ripened

Thursdays were *jours de congé*  
for girls of the Cour Bastide  
so we hid among the branches  
to watch the kids of the *école communale*  
at break the boys would chase  
long lines of girls  
their screams of joy  
(we knew we must never scream)  
a froth of petticoats  
that broke like surf  
on our silent wall

*Doves, fig tree and walls*

High walls, mute, shuttered windows:  
La Cour Bastide  
In the shady yard at break  
in the hubbub of strange language  
others chalked the grid of *la marelle*  
numbered the spaces 1, 2, 3  
then halfway *L'ENFER*  
then 4, 5, 6 to the dome at the end *LE CIEL*  
Aiming the stone  
we ventured our small attempts with  
*un...deux...cinq...six...*  
awkward as geese on bumpy ground  
we tried not to land in hell  
Throw by throw  
words, whole phrases  
crept from between the lines  
trembled like lizards in the cracks of walls  
then flew like the stone from our throats  
Sometimes our words drew smiles  
as kind as the fig tree  
in the box-hedged garden  
of Madame la Directrice  
*—A toi le tour! —A moi? —Oui, oui*  
*Lance ta pierre! Vas-y!*

But now you have thrown your stone  
far beyond these walls  
and I imagine it flying  
like one of Andreu's doves  
into that blue

*Fig leaves I*

Lobed and palmate  
glossy and pliant when young  
veined like our hands  
mapped with capillaries  
with life line and love line  
with what's done and what's to come  
The skin grows rough and mottled  
darkening, dotted with galls like liver-spots  
with pocks and clots and rings of rust  
fallen they stiffen like leather  
crackle underfoot, crumble in dust  
yet still retain the scent the whole tree has  
a musky pungency like no other

Even when burning  
the wood keeps its peculiar sweetness  
February, another fire, the smell of winter  
the mistral blowing out of a sky as blue  
as a glacier, freezing hands and faces  
Our father burned dead fig branches  
while we played in the old wash-house  
making those daft models in plaster-of-Paris—  
Snow White with dwarfs, Humpty-Dumpty—  
We learned how brittle our world was  
how fragile the things we make to love

*Fig tree bark*

that holds the shape of the tree  
green, still-living, with  
all your body's tender marks and creases  
your sad frown lines  
a hollow shape like our mother's  
dressmaker's dummy  
or like the bodice you wore  
as Princess Aurora  
in the Antwerp pantomime  
when your Principal Boy  
hacked his way  
through prickly cardboard  
to kiss you awake

We lived like Hansel and Gretel  
in a house with a thatched roof  
with geese in the orchard  
beside the Kapellen woods  
At night you'd wash your hair  
and wind it in bristly rollers  
then tie a jersey round your head  
When I crept to bed I'd find you  
lying on your back and gravely turbaned  
Once something about your stillness  
worried me so that I bent and kissed your cheek  
relieved to find you warm and breathing  
in your prickling head-dress

*Spring in Santanyí*

You named your daughter Miriam—  
wished-for child – rebellion – sea of bitterness  
Spring in Santanyí  
sees the tree re-awakening, sapling  
unfisting sun with green-gold hands  
risen from a pool of shade  
blue as Miriam's eyes  
Leaf-cases strew the ground  
like tired discs of confetti  
The girl stands and grows to summer  
fills her own space  
with her mother's musky fragrance

*Box of figs*

These fruits  
laid out like jewels  
glow like drops of blood  
like the babies you lost  
embryos in wrinkled sacs  
gilded with filigree  
purpling  
flawed  
and precious

*Fig tree at Binifarda*

Your needlework was a fig tree's autumn canopy—  
gold bedspreads with matching head-boards  
his-and-hers jerseys in auburn Fair Isle  
tawny mother-and-daughter outfits  
stitching the impossible  
web of life  
that death  
with one tug  
casually unravels

*Fig tree at Son Mesquida*

just look at you  
trying to do  
ten things at once  
twisting your branches  
so as to hold on  
juggling three  
jobs almost dropping  
your filofax your body  
strained wrenched  
denying  
denying it  
determined to do it  
all carry on  
smiling and  
weeping all at once

*Trunk of fig tree from Son Verro*

It lifts up two broken branches

You showed us round the time-share villas  
that you sold— commission only—for Marriotts  
You were leaning like this fig tree at Son Verro  
fingering the pleats in your skirt like this ridged bark  
flushed with your sales-pitch  
as though your sister, nephew, nephew's wife  
were genuine customers and Marriotts  
a different employer from the one  
who never gave you a bottle of water  
never mind lunch—their sprinklers feeding  
lush lawns while the island shrivels

Sales-person for Nutricare  
you forgot real food  
swallowed the company line  
along with the slimmers' pap  
peddling dreams to anxious wives  
You who made the best  
*pimientos del padrón, paella negra*  
*œufs à la neige*

For jobs like these you strained  
and withered to this bitter wood

*Trunk of fig tree from Ses Rossells*

This tree is a grey-faced woman  
who struggles to her feet, one arm  
a broken branch hanging useless  
The wild fire on the hill  
you have escaped for now  
but you are tinder-dry this summer  
Terracing lies tumbled around you

Earlier we stood in the gloom of the cave  
wondering why we had come  
Inside, the usual debris  
human excrement, tissues, rusting tins  
a goat's skeleton picked clean by ants  
blackened stones of a makeshift hearth  
To please our father, find his fabled cave  
we had scrambled over boulders  
cut ourselves on razor-grass  
and now your arm is broken  
Two daughters in their fifties  
still trying to prove  
they are as good as the sons he wanted

We should have followed Vassilissa's example  
borne the goat skull home  
and let the darkness in its sockets  
blaze our rage, burn down the house

*Fig tree at Ramonet Gros*

What is it you hear?  
Poised on one foot  
you're about to convene  
a residents' meeting  
clean the pool  
walk the dog  
cook for the parents, but  
something just off to the left  
tugs, and you lean  
distracted by this sound  
as by a strange  
beat in the car's engine  
a thudding in the ears  
Please do not listen  
Pay it no heed  
It is only the three o'clock wind  
the wind in the cypresses you hear

*Fig trees in front of Can Cabana*

their green skirts making tents of shade  
in a field of shimmering wheat. Surprised  
among it like creatures of another life—  
secret, mysterious, just glimpsed amid  
the daily plainness of grain—the pulsing pink  
of wild gladiolus and poppies' blood-red  
drinking deep of the fig trees' shade.

*Fig leaves II*

They have the exact colours of the ring  
I gave you for your twenty-first:  
moss-agate in a plain crown-  
setting in silver  
You never wore it  
After you died  
your daughter gave it to me  
the metal black and tarnished  
Blue-green veins like moss  
branching round a reddish flame  
a clot of rust  
that might have warned you  
what that chest pain meant

I wear it always  
and the wearing of it  
keeps it from tarnishing  
My hands are freckled now with age  
My gift to you  
my own memento mori

*Pollençan fig tree*

Standing on the bend before Can Xura  
the finest fig tree in La Font.  
Rustling a little as a moped passes  
dusty in summer yet drawing its water  
up from aquifers fed by rain  
falling on the Tramuntana,  
does it still bear fruit?

When our children were small  
there was always water at Easter time  
flowing in the Sant Jordi *torrent*;  
enough for children to dam  
with small rocks; a dazzle of water, enough  
for a pair of mallard and their brood  
to swim in below the little farm  
at the foot of the Vall de Ternelles.

Can Xura lies like an old dog in the sun  
beside the opening to the valley gorge  
blinking its *œil-de-bœuf* Moorish windows.  
In the big kitchen Moor and Christian  
took the oath that gives the house its name  
to keep the peace and share the water

No water flows now along the conduits  
the Arabs built on top of the walls.  
The iron gates to the valley  
are permanently locked to coaches  
of foreign walkers who once came every day.  
More swimming-pools drain the aquifers.  
The bed of the *torrent* is filling up  
with tyres and supermarket trolleys.

Only after a cloudburst does water flow  
in the Sant Jordi *torrent*. The fig orchards,  
the almond orchards are grubbed up. A dazzle  
of concrete hurts the eyes. The island grows dry.  
The island we knew is dead, and so are you.  
Does the sweetest fig tree in La Font  
still bear fruit?