

## TWO POEMS



*Les Murray*

### THE YEAR OF THE KILN PORTRAITS

I came in from planting more trees.  
I was sweating, and flopped down aslant  
on the sofa. You and Clare were sitting  
at the lunch table, singing as you do  
in harmony even I hear as beautiful,  
mezzo soprano and soprano,  
for anything Arno. You winked at me  
and, liquescent as my face was,  
I must have looked like the year  
you painted all our portraits, lovingly,  
exquisitely, on ceramic tiles  
in undrying oil, just one  
or at most two colours at a time  
and carried them braced oblique, wet,  
in plastic ice-cream boxes to town.  
It was encaustic painting,  
ancient Rome's photography, that gets  
developed in successive kiln firings  
till it lives, time-freed, transposed  
in behind a once-blank glaze.  
Afterwards, you did some figured tiles  
for our patchwork chimney, then stopped.  
In art, you have serious gifts. But it's  
crazy: you're not driven. Not obsessive.

### THE WARM RAIN

Against the darker trees or an open car shed  
is where we first see rain, on a cumulous day,  
a subtle slant locating the light in air  
in front of a Forties still of tubs and bike-frames.

Next sign, the dust that was white pepper bared  
starts pitting and re-knotting into peppercorns.  
It stops being a raceway of rocket smoke behind cars,  
it sidles off foliage, darkens to a lustre. The roof  
of the bush barely leaks yet, but paper slows right down.

Hurrying parcels pearl but don't now split  
crossing the carparks. People clap things in odd salute  
to the side of their heads, yell wit, dance on their doubles.  
The sunny parallels, when opposite the light, have a flung look  
like falling seed. They mass, and develop a shore sound;  
fixtures get cancelled, the muckiest shovels rack up.

The highway whizzes, and lorries put spin on vapour;  
soon puddles hit at speed will arch over you like a slammed sea.  
I love it all, I agree with it. At nightfall, the cause  
of the whole thing revolves, in white and tints, on TV  
like the Crab nebula; it brandishes palm trees like mops,  
its borders swell over the continent, they compress the other  
nations of the weather. Fruit bumps lawn, and every country dam

brews under bubbles, milky temperas sombering to oils.  
Grass rains upwards; the crêpe-myrtle tree heels, sopping crimson,  
needing to be shaken like the kilt of a large man.  
Hills run, air and paddocks are swollen. Eaves dribble like jaws  
and coolness is a silent film, starring green and mirrors.  
Tiny firetail finches, quiet in our climber rose, agree to it  
like early humans. Cattle agree harder, hunched out in the clouds.  
From here, the ocean may pump up and up and explode  
around the lighthouses in gigantic cloak sleeves, the whole book  
of foam slide and fritter, disclosing a pen shaft. Paratroops

of salt water may land in dock streets, skinless balloons  
be flat out to queue down every drain, and the wind race  
thousands of flags. Or we may be just chirpings, damped  
under calm high cornfields of pour, with butter clearings

that spread and resume glare, hiding the warm rain  
back inside our clothes, as mauve trees scab to cream  
and grey trees strip bright salmon, with loden patches.