

Letter to a Distant Friend

A sack of coffee freshly roasted,
socked away among a couple of loaves,
and on the stove a pan
ready for steaming milk;

not much else,
a bit of cheese, some drops of oil.

But to have this, the potential
for another few contented hours,
I'm beginning to understand
why you kept your things so closely guarded,

and why you lingered so
in the delight of preparation,

how folding socks was no chore
and tea could be made
only with your full attention,

how much you expressed
in the deliberate pauses we took for granted
as an excuse to smoke.

"I want to write...because I love making things,"
you admitted once, pausing to light another one
as we awaited the craft of your storytelling.

Forgive me for bumming smokes
and for asking:

Where is it?
What have you made?

At your leisure, when you are ready,
make me a poem of peach pie
or Hong Kong girls walking arm-in-arm
on a warm harbor night.

And after some reflection I will fix coffee,
taking in the full measure
with all deliberate haste.

Just Now

Just now, after a day spent
retouching scarred decades
of scuff marks on a hardwood floor,

after a day spent repairing generations
of gouges inflicted on sturdy joists and beams
once hoisted on strong, nineteenth-century backs,

admiring, all the while, the legacy
of sound masonry and stately molding
wrought by precise and careful handiwork;

just now, taking a break
on a late afternoon in early summer,

I look out through the plate glass
of this centuries-old storefront
and witness the rarest and finest of showers:

a sun-dappled burst from nowhere
against a backdrop of robin-egg
blue and rose-colored sky.

Every age perfects its own handiwork
and leaves a masterpiece of flint, obsidian, stone
bronze, iron, marble
plutonium or silicon.

Nevertheless,
so much sudden, wanton, cruel
maddening beauty abounds,
that each generation runs out of time
before it can really even
begin to describe

a sun-dappled burst from nowhere
or the first blush of a maiden's cheek.

Burn and Linger

I won't want any of this to be about me, per se.
In the beginning I'll want to just disappear
into another continent, into another culture,
to submerge myself into centuries of tradition
like fleets of ancestral fishermen crossing a treacherous reef.

But after a while, I suppose I'll also want to burn,
at least a little.

I'll want to smolder
like paper money stoked for the comfort of my ancestors,
like a waking god hoisted on the shoulders of my acolytes,
and to flow through the scene
like the smoke of joss sticks drifting from a temple,
like a flaming boat built solely for the burning.

And of course, after all is said and done,
I'll want to linger.

I'll want to remain like the scent of lemongrass
after you have walked a moonlit trail,
the shy water buffalo calf trailing after,
but not like the bone clattering of bamboo
announcing its exaggerated growth.

I'll long to awaken
on the temple steps at dawn,
with something plucked and desired
in hand.

A plum, perhaps
- delicious, dark and cool to the touch -
or something else that burns
and lingers through a ripe
and darkening age.

The Eclipse

The early evening light leaves the room discreetly
as if a second skin is expected to arrive,
and a periodic rustling of air
slips through the beige curtain
to pass over the prone, naked body
like the inspired breath of lips.

When darkness finally settles in,
the ice in a glass has melted
and the liquid is warm as blood
where a ring has formed
on the dark, solid wood of the night table,
on which grows a faint scent like ferns
in the loam of the forest floor.

For a boundless, solitary moment the body,
at perfect equipoise, without hunger or desire,
grows womblike within the desolate confines
of its hairless planes and slackening breath.

But before the darkness can even pass
there begin the first, faint, telltale stirrings
of the spirit, a desire to anthropomorphize
the motives of light and air
and a need to outlast and exhaust
the perfect moment,

a self-awareness provoked
perhaps, by the proximity
of blood and ferns,
a primal awakening inspired
and informed by
terror.

Animal Planet

While we bow our heads to the ground
and our hearts seek meaning among the stars,
wild creatures assert their presence
in the here and now
and the just here and gone.

Unknowable in the way one speaks
of the alien and other-worldly,
the title to their kingdom is forged
in their absolute
manifestation of the flesh.

If this seems ironic and abstract,
then so be it.

For irony and abstraction
are our great gifts –
not to the world, but to ourselves –
invented for our survival.

And we, of course, are the real aliens;
Each a world unto one's own,
orbiting a sun of its own devising.