

The Mind Smiles

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Realization

You speak of connecting the dots
and I think of bible school pictures:
Jesus and disciples emerging
from lines connecting numerals,
not complex enough to satisfy
young thirst for many numbers.
When you trace the Arab links
to Spain and then to South America,
I see too many lines, something
like maps in airline magazines
showing all the flights at once,
tying the world into a neat box.
For me, realization is a flower,
unfolding slowly as sepals bend,
gracing the unfamiliar with what
I already know, pulling together
the gist of history with the taste
of poetry, pilaf, and maybe
baklava. For me, Turkey was
a major revelation: in the wake
of hordes overrunning India
and the Balkans too, I found
shalwars, pulao, and čevapi,
a connection I had not known
before, not in the deep down
core of understanding; but I
know now, pieces coalesced
like glass in a kaleidoscope
to a bright blossom of light.

The Great Debate

In the Narragansett, it is said
that eighteenth century men
could not define the quahog,
debating in the state senate,
whether clam was vegetable,
mineral or animal, despite
the fact that on their tables
it was food worth favoring.
Vegetable, perhaps, because
it seemed to grow on ocean floor
but could be dislodged with
difficulty, like some plants
rooted to the shore. Mineral?
only if the thing inside expired
so shells opened themselves
to the wash of the waves,
losing color in salt light.
Animal, yes, the truth of it,
like ourselves, but simpler
in design. Did it think?
debate, define, decide?
Perhaps not, but worth claiming
kinship because it has a heart.

Trial by Fire

Sifting ashes twice in one day
we sought out twisted treasures,
blackened bits of academic lives.

Like archaeologists, we probed
the sculptor's barn, swept away
one windy night--studio, tools,
antique cars, a life's work.
He lovingly named each piece,
finding solace in familiarity:
rasps with lost handles,
tempered steel gone brittle,
racks of C-clamps plunged
together through a gutted floor.
Worse, the charred woods:
grotesque black laminates,
so solid every one survived.
Transmuted, fourteen bronzes
turned molten drops; above,
intact, on a metal shelf:
a can of turpentine,

Recounting relics over lunch,
we ate, still stunned, then pulled on
blackened boots for a second round.

The historian's attic, ravaged,
its hosed contents scattered
on the lawn, a frozen mass.
Sleepwalkers, we stumbled
to and fro in the cold
bearing burned linens,
scorched snowsuits,
towels that never matched.
A stone house is meant to last --
but put a heater in its guts,
there's trouble; when it blew
went rarities of the Civil War,
Lincoln torched beyond repair.
What's this odd metal plate
by the kerosene cone, stinking
of plastic? Call it a computer,
now a vaporized brain.

Wary all winter, awaiting the third,
we swept our chimney when spring came,
then pondered augury and runes.

Robins in the Snow

They look so forlorn drinking
at the pool where the sump pump
drains, the only unfrozen water
in the neighborhood, mecca for
thirsty squirrels and dry-beaked birds.
Snow slanting down heaps higher
banks and yards already foot-deep
in weeks-old white stuff,
though it's March and longer days
should melt and shave the drifts.
It's surely been a long winter
for all of us, stoically
donning long underwear
against the cold, shoveling
the same walks again, then again,
buying endless bags of seed
to feed sparrows and finches.
But robins don't eat seeds
and every worm around lies deep
in frozen ground, suspended
still in wintry animation.
Dull from cold and lacking food,
robins cluster in the snow
daring to suspect or even fear
that spring may not come
at all this year as promised.

Seoul Station

We came upon them first sitting
in straight rows, singing hymns.
pretending to an upright life.
A plain clothes nun stood in front
leading prayers. Looking back
through the station passageway,
I saw one woman, the rest men
all homeless, sharing loss.

Later that night they slept
without covering or even mat;
trickles of sour urine ran
from every comatose form.
It could have been New York
or Paris, but it was Seoul
the city of neat and clean,
sleek buildings looking on.

What brought them to this place?
Why the downward spindrift,
beer, rice wine and drugs?
Always a station, that place
of coming and going, where
travelers offer hope of handouts,
the station, where everyone
has a dream of moving on.