

Five Poems

Gnomon

I.

You were there,
and yet you were not there.

Wherever you had been,
you were known by what was left.

It was last week,
but it might have been last year.

Shadows of arbors vitae lengthened
like Nosferatu fingers across the luxuriant lawn.

The sun was moving, or was it you
relative to it?

The angle of the afternoon
illuminated your discrete profile.

You were on the terrace, resting a hand
on the granite balustrade,

diaphanous white dress
flailing like a sylph in the summer wind.

Or rather, was it you
kohl-eyed, in black velvet, contraposto

against a pillar, staring out winter's window
into the failing light, waiting?

Dinner at eight-thirty,
theatre at eleven, or in the salon at seven

for amuse-bouches, aperitifs—
always the light shifting,

yet always the wait the same.

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II.

The house was full;
the house was empty.

Footsteps echoed down marble corridors,
artifacts of another age.

Were you the light moving
throughout the house,

or the shadow that followed?
That figure at the end

of the gallery of gilt mirrors,
turning the corner left

instead of right,
and upon following it into the garden

you became lost
among the immutable statuary—

was it yourself you saw,
or the memory of you?

As though glimpsing the back
of your own head in a mirror.

In the great hall,
the frieze along the cornice:

plaster grapes dangled down,
just out of reach.

A stone sage in a tunic
atop a plinth, posed, pointing

at the reflecting pool. And you, aside,
barefoot from traversing the gravel drive,

heels in one hand, cigarette in the other—
what was it in that dark opacity

inert eyes could penetrate
that yours as yet could not?

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III.

In your suite, in the mirror
above the chiffonier,

were you so sure
that it was you?

You looked again: an oil
of a snowy landscape.

You had fallen, or you were ill.
You were tired; you desired sleep.

You alit on eiderdown
in a long white night gown,

embalmed among photographs
strewn over you like autumn leaves.

The light had moved,
but you had since ceased moving:

shadows were indistinguishable
from shadows

as shadows spread
throughout the cold house,

around columns and corbels,
the mirrors, marble, the dusty paintings,

the silent staircase, the open windows,
the still night.

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Oubliez-Moi

My bloody hands clawed like a frenzied badger
at the cellar wall. My hot tongue searched for you

in its cold, indifferent stones. They tasted like saltpeter,
like you: impossible. Unnavigable, like the Loire,

and we ran aground on the shifting shoals of history.
But visions of that shimmering river

filled with afternoon sun the only light I had
for that year imprisoned in darkness;

cathedral bells in the village marked the days.
My heart was so green then. It knew nothing

of Maginot lines, punch cards; only your eyes,
blue, distant, unscalable glaciers of sadness.

My bicycle flew me on its wings to meet you.
Such beautiful pain as I surrendered repeatedly;

we were ablaze while the continent burned.
After they shot you, I couldn't stop screaming,

so they tried to forget me. When the war ended,
they set me free. If only you would be so kind.

Gerhardt. My dear heart. *Mon allié inderdit,
je vous en supplie: oubliez-moi. Oubliez-moi.*

Your memory deforms me. It molds me to its liking,
twists me around its red axis in the gray wind.

Why must something so alive take so long to die?
I open my armoire. It is filled with ashes.

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The Snow Crocus

Darkness is not death;

when, though, the shadows
of lichened menhirs lengthened
across the boreal plain,

and the cold

smoked-laced wind moaned plangently
through ossuaries of trees, saying
nigh is the end, prepare—

I disappeared, folding
back into the darkness of myself.

There is a difference
between what one thinks one needs

and what is essential. I, however, did not
have a choice: the decision

was made for me. Whatever it was
I was left with had to be my sustenance:

for some so fortunate, winter
is mere weeks, if at all;

mine has lasted years.

But in the liminal quiet, deep below
the snows, my burning
heart, though slowed,
still beat:

I slept with the pulse
of the earth. Unseen aquifers
slaked my dreams:

they told me secrets
I did not know that I knew;

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it was then in the dark
I could see.

While your notion of time
may not exist here, timing
is indeed still everything:

once, I burst from my slumber
too soon; the cold snap
of my impetuosity nearly killed me.

Such is the balance
I have had to intuit:

stay down too long, and risk never rising,
or succumb to impatience,
and wilt,

only to begin again.

And so it has been
that I have learned to move
with the subtle rhythms

of the life within
and around me.

Please don't misunderstand:
I was never hiding; just waiting,
like the sun,

which, after three days
in winter's whale belly,
decides the world

is able to bear
its brightness again.

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The Pact

I didn't have to sign it—it's not like I had a bouquet
of daisies pointed at my head or anything,
but the purple glowing clouds were gathering

above me in the darkening sky like bees
around a honeycomb, and besides,
I had come all this way,

and so had they, for that matter;
though I could not see them, I could feel them,
their soft feathers brushing against my gooseflesh,

or, more accurately, it was like standing
in the middle of a snowfall with your eyes closed
yet still you know the snow is falling.

Yeah, that's what they were like,
and they had come all this way to be here, too,
and I didn't want to disappoint them,

I didn't want to be a bad guest;
or was I a host? I didn't want to be a bad host,
either, if that's what it is that I was.

Then, all of the waves on all of the oceans
all at once stood still and laid down;
at this point, I felt I must.

I went to grab the quill, and looked at my hand,
but didn't recognize it as my own,
as when you catch a glimpse of yourself

in a closed-circuit camera monitor in the corner
of a convenience store; *I guess that's what the hand
of who I'm supposed to be looks like*, I thought.

And no music; where was the music?
The way I had imagined it, there would be music—
Satie, Debussy, Pachelbel's Canon in D,

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but no, just the wind,
the kind of wind that, while still warm,
has cooled slightly, and even smells differently,

reminding you that summer is almost over,
and that ahead lay much work to be done.
And then just my voice,

my soft, little voice,
echoing as though across a vast, empty amphitheatre,
saying, *Yes*.

When I came to,
I was standing in an oil-drum dirt alley,
surrounded by derelict two-story brick buildings,

plate glass windows cracked, smashed
and fallen in, and barren dirt lots
of sparse dead scrub, the cusp

of where what appeared to be the remains
of an old mining town met the desert,
like that one Russell Drysdale painting,

where there's no more ore, but tumbleweeds,
and where the last neon
flickers out into the dry night.

This is not where I ended, but it is where
I must begin: carrying all that I came here with,
walking down a dirt road into the darkness.

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Transfiguration in Marrakech

Across the tiles, silhouettes of palms
Shatter the frail blue night like bones.
Gaunt moon limps over decaying white domes,
And the stars, sleeping soundly in their tombs.
The house of memory has many rooms;
Its caretaker, I know them well.

Shards of porcelain vases of spent alms
Scattered like lines from unfinished poems
Among long shadows archways spell.
No shadow, though, to mark where you fell,
No footprints in the orange dunes,
Wind barely a whimper of psalms.

Light, elusive infidel,
Fleeing red walls to its other home.
Left to tend the garden of immortelles,
From my resinous blood their garlands bloom.
Your fountain echoes through the courtyard calm,
Erupting in my heart like soft bombs.