

Spring Flowers

(*Peonies*) William. Merrit Chase

A common yet ritual moment captured.
Japanismo artifice of course -
 the kimono wraps a counterfeit geisha,
 the sister of the artist's wife.
With exquisite languor, drooped arm with still fan,
 red-orange flower figured kimono
 reflected in the brass vase,
 the woman's slender neck bends
 to a peony's fragrance.
Beauty bows to beauty.
Yet we know all beauty bows to time.
Kimono, flowers, vase, fan and woman
 now are shredded threads, compost, scrap or dust.
It has begun within the image:
peony petals faded and fallen upon the soft green cloth.
This fragile work itself will bow.
The paper weakens, wrinkles, fades in light
 and sheds its colors.
Crumbs of pastel, shaken by footsteps,
 jarred by movement, fall behind the glass.
The artist, his vision and the work itself
 will vanish as have the peonies.

AUTUMNAL

Colors mostly gone.
Black twisted bars of trees arch above
 the old man on his November walk.
He stops his shadow short of the bright new concrete slab.
Brief study clears the brown etched markings as scattered
 dark ghosts of three-speared maple leaves,
 some saw-toothed dragon mouths of elm,
 a single splayed hand of oak
 with mumbled sepia smudges of earlier falls
 now showered to anonymity and clumps
 faded gray, indistinguishable from old goose droppings.
His skin twitches under his sweatshirt's
 soft subtle stroke.
Muscles lift butt, roll up his lower back
 and tremble off his shoulder-wings.
He feels his white cotton briefs caress his soft

Growing Old

loose pleasure parts which stir,
tightening the caress,
recalling feathered glory,
a remnant shuddering of his loins.
Ancient pressings, squeezings murmur,
remembering morning stains upon the sheets.
A deep breath and he shuffles on.
He hasn't far to go.

DIPTYCH

i. Old Woman

The old woman pares and peels
as she has for over eighty years
in kitchens of homes her own and others.
Doggedly she scrapes a potato white,
reshapes its lumpiness,
digs out its eyes.
Proof she is good for something.
Sorting silver, folding laundry,
peeling, paring and chopping,
remnants of a housekeeper's repertoire.
No cooking, nor canning, nor ironing,
not allowed near a stove or fridge
or any appliance in months.
Too many mysterious burns and bruises
and "I don't know" when asked
have banished her.
She's watched carefully
when using knives.
Turns the sharp blade edge
to thumb sometimes.
Her mind and conversation
grow as gray as her hair.
After mornings of inhalers, exercises,
getting washed and dressed,
she spends her days dozing
in her children's homes,
shuffled from one to another
as schedules and
their sanity require,
praying for an end.

Growing Old

ii. An Old Man

With salves and ointments the old man,
morning and evening,
in rituals complex and sacred
as any athlete's fends off pain
and approaching death.
Tremors in the chest, spasms in a leg,
numbness of feet, morning coughs,
an ache in a shoulder, elbow, knee,
produce prayers, pills, wincing, denials.
Recapping tubes bedside, barefooted,
he stares at his wedding ring
embedded in swollen finger flesh,
crooked joints, yellowed nails
blackening, cracking, crumbling.
Between his shrunken shanks of legs
a sapless root, a faulty drain,
a softened braid of blood,
mocks his virility.
The truth of avoided mirrors,
rivers of wrinkles spreading
across cheeks, pouched eyes,
chicken-skin chin and neck,
encourages his scraggled beard.
He hopes the camouflage of clothing,
creams and hair dye is enough
at least to fool himself.
He considers: Perhaps a cane,
silver mounted?

Ginkgo I

Flickering golden
one day, proud young ginkgo waves
fan leaves on black arms.

Bare young ginkgo now,
shivers in yellow puddle:
stripped to black wet bark.

Growing Old

Old Age

Occasionally lucid, daring, active, galvanized, eager.
Often lachrymose, daffy, abject, glaucomatous eclipsed.
Obnoxious, lame, dank, abscesses galore, eccentric.
Oblique, labyrinthine, dangerous, abandoned, galled eagle.

Only last daze, about goings, exits.
Our last decade ancients grow envious.
Opaque language dribbles awkward gluey enigmas.
(Mind emptying memorials of raucous youth.)

Obscene labor defeats all grace entirely.
Osiris' light dwindles anticipating gross extinction.
Oozing lobes, damaged abacus, gummy, erratic.
Our lily decays as garden empties.

One loathsome dragon arrives, gnosis eater.
Oak leaves descend, Alzheimer's glacial erasure.
Ostinato lullaby, dirge adagio gathers emphasis.
Osiris' lingam designates another geriatric extirpation.
(Youth, only understand! No grinning.)

Ointments linger, dabs against gory endings.
Opposing life's demands at grave's edge.

O lotus dementia! Ambition greets extinction.
Our loves die and gathering ends.
One's last dreams attain good ends.
Only lingering delusions attend gnomonic exegesis.
Opium: last defense against gargantuan extinction.
Opportunities, laughs diminish. Agility, grace evaporate.