

Warning Light

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(Waiting Room Notes during Auto Repair)

Whether on my side or back
with a half-height or full pillow
the warning light in my shoulder
fires at the lightest touch.

It glows in the dark before sunrise
and flickers as I roll out of bed.

I dress with caution,
open the back door with care,
and turn each page of the morning paper
with a newborn caress.

But regardless if I sit, stand, rush or stroll,
it pulses down my triceps,
across my elbow and into my wrist.

I'm scheduled for annual maintenance
but might need some tweaking sooner.

I hope it's just a bit of misalignment
or will respond to a quick lube.

I'm attached to the original equipment
and would rather not have to install
even the best replacement parts.

First Ladies at Ruby Lee's

The first ladies stay there all night.

Their skin glistens red near the Exit sign,
and their eyes lock on the lead singer
as if taking vows.

“You are mine, and I am yours.
Take me now. Take me please.”

The floor crowds with dancers,
but they hold their turf.

One hip-swags and leans
into a shoulder shimmy,
then back in a syncopated pause.

The other bounces
in search of each rhythm
that her feet never find.

The decades pass in familiar choruses,
as we rock in our seats
and lip-read comments.

Swirls of energy devour our waitress,
and Sports Center replays populate the screens.

Hands shoot to Love Shack thumps,
as dancers twirl, jump and swim.

But when others drop, wet and exhausted,
the first ladies refuse to sit.

“He’s got to see what’s in this dress,
and I’ve got plenty of time.”

Touring

We step off the bus
lugging the Ten Commandments
and the accumulated weight
of western civilization's struggle with brotherly love
tucked in our back pack
next to another plastic bottle
of cool, filtered, spring water.

Our Lowe, REI, and Merrell boots
provide arch support for our modern egos
and protect our feet from the dust, stones and debris
still lingering from Pol Pot's house cleaning.

Far beyond the moat,
backlit across the skyline of harsh mid-morning glare
lays the silent silhouette of Angkor Wat,
small, black, symmetrical lotus bulbs cut free from the jungle
to provide power for a tourist economy
annually outpacing last year's records.

Shaven, saffron draped, Buddhist monks
move wordlessly in the shadow of a neighboring pagoda
while we make electronic records of ornate stupas

then pause at the southern entrance for a group photo
before joining the flow of sweltering gawkers
walking the surrounding corridors

where thousands of patient artisans
chiseled stone reminders of the painful damnations
born of infidelity.

The actors wear different masks –
snakes, dragons, phoenixes and turtles,
farmers, fishermen, servants and soldiers –
but the plot is as common as yesterday's Times.

Our shirts cling and sweat oozes across our cheeks,
but our air-conditioned bus is nearby,
and we can wash before lunch.

La Cuisine Novel

Tonight's menu is freshly printed
on crisp ivory paper with a bit of weave,
and our waiter, Jackson, is pleased to be serving us
and will return in a moment to answer all of our questions
and get our drink orders.

The view from our seats by the window
stretches for miles across the Appalachians –
ridge lines and forest faces falling into hidden valleys,
mounds that say, "another, another, another"
and invite our imaginations to reach and roam.

And when Jackson returns,
we learn not only about his favorites,
but also the Italian village where Hunter, our chef,
honeymooned with his wife, Jewel.

Each dish is complex beyond belief,
but Jackson can walk us through each sauce
and around every chop, swirl, dip and dollop
that he describes as if watching an inner movie
that never fully projects on our screens.

And every dish triggers another story –
how Hunter experimented with Peruvian peppers,
butchering today's whole hog,
the ice cream sandwiches Jackson's mother awarded
so she could sleep when he and his brother rose early,
the punishing rainstorm last fall
when he first tasted Jewel's escargots.

The room rebounds with stories and laughter.
Glasses are raised. Silver is replaced.

We wait and wonder if our meal
will live up to the press.

Pre-Concert Rituals

The tree frog orchestra tunes up slowly.

They refuse to play in the lingering twilight
and concede the stage to barking dogs, passing cars,
the birds' ongoing conversations,
and a whistler baiting a hook for another try.

A distant ambulance wails its mission
and sings a fading aria in the wings,
but the tree frogs sit silently

and wait for the light to dim
and the breeze to take a seat
before they get going.