

The Pilot House

poems

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to Jill and Makaiya

After Reading

I put down the book thinking
how purity is a curse, how it
puts us off the human
for whom it better fits
to turn away from the shore
in favor of the garbage and the grief.
I remember standing in the nave of St. Peter's
looking at the smooth, dead body of Christ
held in Mary's arms and secretly admiring
the madman whose hammer
chipped the same marble that made
Michaelangelo such a monster.

Patience

He knew the chorus and later,
learned the other dances.
Large ships no longer outside his life
looked set free, their reflections
as majestic as their bodies. He knew
that lapping and the beach smell,
the water coming ashore as seabirds
waited, spending their brief lives
in patient attending. *Pazienza*, said the sign
as he entered the library, handing
the librarian a slip of paper
for a poet so long dead that stars
were different when he looked up,
that his language died, waiting for the new stars.

Lincoln

Hanging from the tip of Lincoln's nose,
Cary Grant had one second of the sensation
that draws the swallows to a height
where they no longer have that wing-skate
propulsion through layers but glide
like their distant cousins, the buzzards,
stirring the sky between cloud and corpse.
As perspectives go, it's hard to argue
with circle and sweep, and at intervals
they let go a steely peep, the way a nickel
dropped from the Empire State Building
hits the pavement harmlessly between
taxis: one in use; the other going uptown
beyond the river, into the private streets.

The Gulf

Back in the day you could lie in bed
until the sun had punched through
the low, graphite cloud cover and been
well on the way to its own personal best
and still get a day's work done. Tragedy
went with indolence; loss was all-providing.
You could stand in front of the Easter
Island slab of an ATM and get meaning.
You could toast the air, never worrying
whether a beloved could occupy the same space.
That was the morning, when the river
decided to give itself up to the gulf.
When the riverboat hand, eyeing
the swells, called up to the wheelhouse,
saying, "Cap, are you seeing this?"

He Wondered about the Women

He wondered about the women,
and it seemed to him the past
was like a well in a child's dream.
How was it they managed to keep falling
never to land, never to be stopped,
only getting smaller and smaller?
He was lying on the floor curled up,
his hands holding on to his kneecaps.
“Raise first the knee,” the instructor said,
“then the foot higher than the knee.
What does the head do, relative
to the hip?” Peering through
his legs he noticed the instructor
had gone unshaven for several days.
Then everything was quiet, as though
the floor had revealed what it really was—
a wall fallen many years ago
when the people gave up its defense
in order to become just another city.

Holbein

Flat light like this forgives the garden
given over to riot. There was my father
waving his arms and whistling *Tales
from the Vienna Woods*. There was my mother
reduced to a bird, propped on her deathbed,
glaring in anger at all who appeared
within her ken. And my brother
the day I moaned my sourest woes
riding in his car, and his ample solicitude
and silence. A light like this one
that turned all to mugshots, as if implying
a story—Holbein's face, Van Gogh's boots—
before the ground tilted and offered
its old face to the new dusk.