

Walking Underwater

For Kim Stafford

There is this quietness that hangs over North America.
As if all the days were double-glazed against themselves.
It's uncanny. Tectonic. A kind of grief, a kind of pain
In waiting. Some sort of business unfinished. I feel it here
In the northwest, especially, though it stalked me in Toronto:
A slender quality of northern light, I guess, my southern
Self's unused to, transposed into a season of suppressed sound,
A penumbra of silence cast by too much history, too much
Ecstatic landscape, too many plot points resolved at gunpoint,
And it feels like my life's been lost here from the start.

I'm sorry: I'm talking out of my mood, which is jet-lagged
And dreaming heavily of what it used to think I loved.
There are plates subducting other plates on the mantle
Of my mind; there is disquiet and illness of ease. But look,
Out your windows the prayer flags have stopped
Praying, and moss deckles the edges of the oaks and firs,
Which hold out stoically inside the sweetest excuse for day-
Light I've ever seen. Come out with me, you say; let's wander
Up the river. Let's see what N'chi wana has to say about
The light... Which turns out to be a lot, and most of it profane—

The cock and the cunt, for instance, Neruda's entanglement
Of genitals, right there, gargantuan in basalt, and wrapped in Douglas
Fir on the south bank—and glorious. The robins along the Eagle
Creek drainage seemed convinced it was spring, but the cloud
That streamed downriver on the back of the teal-blue water
And the rising wind and the narrow road coming unstuck beneath
Our feet, were all busy putting winter back in place. And for two
Hours you schooled me in the art of walking underwater; for two
Hours we carried a bright conversation all the way to the falls
And back again in rain that fell like disappointment on my head.

If you're going to call a mountain range The Cascades, this is
What you're going to get—their very name on the map
A long walk in the rain. But it was worth it; it nearly always is:
The afternoon crying out the grief the continent had spent
All morning—all last century, so far as I can tell—trying not to
Confess. The watershed was a Japanese watercolour at risk
Of running off the canvas, the big water carrying its muted palette
Down to the sea and taking a good part of me with it. The gorge,
It turns out, is a green sermon left largely unsaid, and as we drove
Out of it, evening lay on the river like half the psalms I never knew.

Note: The Columbia River is known by many names to the people who live along it. To the Chinook of its lower reaches, it is known as “Wimahi”; the Kwak’waka-speaking peoples of the river’s middle reaches call the river “Nch’i-Wana”. Both “Wimahi” and “Nch’i-Wana” mean “the big water” or “the big river”.

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