

NOT ELEGY, BUT EROS

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Ubi Sunt

1.

In airport terminals, at bus stops,
in the subway, in passing cars,
on city streets and thoroughfares,
in darkened theaters, in restaurants,
in supermarkets and shopping malls,
you look and look, always on alert.
The commuters stepping off a bus,
the train just leaving the platform,
the closing doors of an elevator,
the footsteps turning the corner—
you search, you seek, you wonder.
Where are they now, whose ghosts
you *almost* see before the lights dim,
the doors close, the train departs?
Where are they now, who regaled
each other with the day's trivia
at dinner each night, and you listened,
not inclined to speak, the better
to absorb the music of their speech?
Where are they now, that most
unexceptional, unhallowed pair
whose ordinary sacraments
were all the blessing you required?
*They are gone into a world of light,
beyond the years, beyond the wind and rain.*

2.

In the early hours of the final day,
you opened your eyes once more,
now blank, unblinking, unseeing.
Was it a final look at the world,
a farewell? Or were you looking
to another, altogether elsewhere?
For almost an hour, you gazed
into the darkness—or was it light
that you saw, if such things are true?
When you were done, your eyes
closed once more, and stayed closed.

3.

When you touched her that morning,
the cold that had crept into her limbs
told you it was time. You went home,
closed and locked the bedroom door,
and for the first time in sixty years
of manly reserve, you fell to your knees
and surrendered to your despair.
When you were done, you got up,
went back to the hospital that was
so familiar from long acquaintance,
to pay the bills, fill out the forms,
and do whatever had to be done.

4.

I looked for you in London this year,
this fabled city a thousand years old,
the city in which I was conceived.
You had waited for me for years,
but I was dawdling somewhere—
clambering up the hills, collecting
the shiny red seeds of sandalwood,
or making garlands of jasmine
freshly fallen after a night of rain
—not in a great hurry to be born.
I was remiss, and you gave up.
Then I arrived at the wrong time,
inconveniently, with you in school.
Was it something in the water?
Or perhaps the time was right
and I was ready, finally, to face
the brilliant and barbarous light.
I walk along the restive streets, scan
the crowds fermenting in the squares,
and wonder what streets you strolled
together when you were young,
in love, a lovely pair. I look for you
in the bright blooming of umbrellas
bobbing gently through the drizzle,
hoping to find, if not what I seek,
at least something that might suffice.

“The sample is shining”

It's the first-ever sample of metallic hydrogen on Earth, so when you're looking at it, you're looking at something that's never existed before. —Isaac Silvera, Harvard University

In the universe of possibility, something new:
hydrogen cooled to cryogenic temperatures

and crushed into metal under pressure
greater than at the earth's core. The postdoc

called the professor. “The sample is shining,”
he said. Yes, there it was, gleaming, trapped

in its diamond vise, minute and microscopic,
the holy grail of high-pressure physics.

But we understand the poetry in the physics,
do we not? Extreme temperature and pressure.

A change in state. To transform, to transmute
the known facts into the new and unknown.

We follow the grail of our own device,
one we vaguely understand, hoping that

something will be found, something shining,
however small, or transient, or tentative.

At the Heidelberg Castle

for Afsana

Sacked, burned, bombed, struck
by lightning not once but twice,
the red sandstone ruins still stand
stoical above the cobblestone town.

You rattle off the trivia you learned
as a tour guide: the triumphal arch
the prince built overnight; the footprint
of the errant knight who leapt

from high window down to terrace,
his amorous errand undiscovered;
the gunpowder turret that split in two,
sundered but not leveled, not even

by dynamite. I imagine that rending,
the severance it survived, disfigured
but dignified in its ragged genuflection
despite the weather-blackened wall

and the tendriled, moss-encroached,
lichen-crusting years: a heterotopia
of grief I only begin to understand.
I'm sorry, I say. Back on the funicular,

we descend once more the stations
of remorse, back to the busy streets
of the old town below. *Schloss*. Why
does it sound so like loss, like loss.

Ode to the Slow Life

Called sluggish cognitive tempo, the condition is said to be characterized by lethargy, daydreaming and slow mental processing.

—*New York Times*, 11 April 2014

Praise be to slowness, sloth and indolence!
To the lax, late, leisurely and languorous,
to idlers and whilers dilatory and dolorous.

To dallying lads and their dawdling lasses,
to maids who tarry when they should marry,
to vegetable love and thousand-year caresses.

To the beggar, bum, and deadbeat hobo,
the moony romantic and dopey adolescent
and long-haired peaced-out beatnik boho.

To lazy Sundays and languid afternoons
of dreamy divagations and useless fiddle
with meddlesome words that ruse and riddle.

To lean and loaf on the summer grass,
to listen long and hard to the faintest air,
to stitch and unstitch the hours that pass

stretched out listless by brooks at noontide
where nothing happens but something abides.