

THE OLD WORLD



Greg Chaimov

So Sweet A Lament, That The Winds
Might Have Stopped To Listen

Pork Chops: So Versatile—So Confusing.
The headline greets him across the table.
His heart, by turns, laughs and cries. He's reading
Ariosto again. The long battle
at the gates of Paris has just ended.
Between Montmartre and Montlhery,
two young Saracen soldiers search the dead
for their fallen liege, their plan to bury
him as God commands. In a few short lines,
they, too, will die—cut down by a Christian
patrol. He'd like her to hear why he finds
this passage so moving, why the young sons
of a fictional Moor matter so much,
but he can't bring himself to interrupt.

Under the Great Calabash Tree

After Pablo Neruda's *Dead Gallop*

Like the antique clock my brother presented
one birthday that's blurred with all the rest:
You spin the tiny knob backwards to head
the hands toward the path of time's advance. Best
to believe it's like the orchard cut back
to foster a better crop, or the freeze
the backyard cherries need before their black
and yellow fruit can drop. How else to conceive
of the loss of one so dear, to survive
in the silence that follows like hands
pressed against the ears? To begin a life
again after reason returns and grants
the chance to recover the years you've tossed
into proverbial winds—years thought lost.

Sacrum Commercium

The legacy of human exchange:
In a barren sea, alien isopods,
flushed with ballast from passing ships, invade
the estuaries, floating until caught
in the gills of the mud-dwelling shrimp
who will serve as their hosts. The order
of devastation will be evident
only when bass and merganser
litter the sands we like to walk.
Then, we'll remember how the cycle starts,
how failure comes to gnaw deep in the gut:
it burrows in when we open our hearts
in a chance exchange, a smile that leaves us flushed
and aching for a chance to touch.

Torch Song

I'm reading *The Bird Frau* as starlings,
lured by the summer's last plums,
cyclone down to the concrete walk
to spatter like fat on the grill
of the southern bistro next door
from which the cook's music—all salt pork
and sassafras—colors the street,
brushes on cymbals that mimic the voice
of a woman, words too distant to be discrete.
I revel in this serendipity
until I remember why I'm here
in this cumulus twilight in late July:
I'm looking for a girl who's hunting up
a forty-dollar acetylene rush—
and I'm listening more than looking
because I'll know her only by her song.

A Poet Named Northern Island

“The world’s most famous dissident poet”
sits on a riser, eating a cookie.
The timid few who enter late will sit
far from the stage—as if this were Shunyi
and his dissidence were a contagion.

Later, he will rail against the epithet,
blaming American propaganda:
A poet is a poet, he protests,
then offers lines that feature tea, the sea
his father’s death, a city where *bird roads*
define the sky.

The price of honesty:
His life in the language in which he wrote.
The most difficult lesson in this new
land? His learning to live in solitude.

The Ascent of Man

A thick-ankled girl of nineteen conveyed
by underground train. The kerchief she wrings
flames green in the bright strobing light. She's made
the decision to beg forgiveness, confessing
her sins to the wife whose spouse broke his vows
in her bed. Why? We won't know. A modern
poet tells no stories. For Pound,
the crowd of Metro platform passengers
suggested *petals on a wet, black bough*. Pleasing,
but no more. We learn nothing of morals,
of heroes, the cost of Achilles' craving
Chryseis. It's a blame we must share: we'll
all choose kaleidoscope views to an errand
whose sense only the ancients commanded.

Conversation by the Neva

“Only the midwife, God, and you,” confesses
the dancer to the Russian duke—the father
who learns, to his surprise, that he misses
the stillborn boy, this son of whom he’d heard
not a word in the thirty Julys
since that night outside the Tuileries
when duke and dancer raveled knitted lives.
He can’t be sure whether to believe—she’s
still the same coquette she always seemed;
her story could be bait for ancient sturgeon.
After supper, hounds dreaming at his feet,
he’ll ponder his wanting the little one
he couldn’t have known—and not the old love
who recalls for him the youth that he was.

Book Tour

The jacket's photograph stares back,
but it's the title that arrests: *Cobalt
Miles of Sky*. When you recite the line
to your mind's ear, you know it's Cummings
that you hear. A quick search confirms:
He'd been writing about a Paris scene—
a scene you remember from your time together,
she and you, and you wonder—
wonder at night and when days are like night—
whether she picked the line
because of a memory of you,
or at least thought a little of you,
for it's been years since you've more
than seen her striding across the campus green
in a skirt too short for a woman her age,
which is, you know, exactly why she wears it.

Fever

Put into words the hollow ache
that precedes the tears you have to stop
before they reveal how much she takes
of the very essence of the air, hot
from your lips to hers, as if she were
some form of succubus, drawing life
from the passion she inspires, yours for her,
you with hope of nothing in return, wife
or no wife making no difference
to a heart's pumping its chambers dry
to fill the void that grows with her silence,
her sighs, and those ambivalent eyes
that make you believe this ache at your pit
is the feeling for which you were meant to live.

The Face

You see, God blessed me with a memory
for faces. I'm spared those awkward moments
over plates of sourdough and brie
when she reminds you of the time you'd met
two months before—which is why I'm mystified
by my inability to place the face
across the row of seats. The deep brown eyes,
the cheeks that make her look as if escaped
from some painting by Vermeer. And those bangs . . .
This is not a face a man should forget.
I can picture her standing on a stage
like the clever poet from Massachusetts
I should be enjoying, but can't because
I'm stuck on who to me this angel was.

West Salem, Ohio

They're beginning to gather, but on the street.
They're afraid of showing what? Want?
That they could've bought when buying cheap
might've kept this farm from bellying up?
Perhaps it's shame from hearing: "If the kids
want anything, they're going to have to bid."
The small items will be the first to go,
arranged by type (tools, lights) along the border
of the yard, then the sofa's quilted pillows.
Next the chairs, the furniture and fixtures
that take at least two men to move. Brown hands
bind white tags with white string: the asking
prices. Black markers brand the pieces planned
for minimum bids. They're beginning to gather,
these neighbors who refuse to meet each others' eyes.

DEDICATION

To Toni and Doug

NOTE

*So Sweet A Lament, That The Winds Might
Have Stopped To Listen*

The poem's title is from a translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The first line of the poem is a headline from the Living section of *The Oregonian* newspaper.

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