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Basho, Specimens, The Work

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Three Poems

CAMPBELL MCGRATH

BASHO

*Coolness of the melons
flecked with mud
in the morning dew.*

What is the subject of this poem by Basho?
Melons, dew, farming, food, human existence
and its inextricable enmeshing with the cycles
of the seasons and of night and day?
What is the subject of Basho's haiku taken
collectively? The world or the observer,
that which is perceived or the act of perception?
Or the act of depiction? Or, complexly,
their interaction? Or, somehow: *language*?
The medium is both subject and object,
the medium is the message? Is this not akin
to saying that ice skating is all about ice?
But then, what else is ice skating about—
bodies in motion, escaping winter boredom?
What can it mean to call any image "objective"?
Of what would an utterly ego-less art consist
except silence? Does refusing to create negate
the self or condemn it to the gulag of the interior?
Where does the poetry voice go when it goes?
I don't know. I only hope it comes back.

Specimens

2 a.m: looking at photos of Neruda's house in Isla Negra after the troops got through with their vandalism, a bit half-hearted, really, as if even the Generalissimo's thugs were intimidated by the great man, the poet of the people. He loved perfect shells, rare specimens from the Maldives, Tahiti, the South China Sea, nothing like what we find here:

shark's eye worked down to the least inner whorl;

sensual architecture of a lightning whelk, postmodern staircase to and from nowhere;

elongated pearly sweep of a cream-colored conch, its sand-abraded chamber laid bare, apse of a ruined cathedral, view-hole to the wood-grain desk beyond—

the way a poem appears

first as a texture felt and understood by steady pressure of the mind, an alluvial Braille of oceanic gravity,

intuitive shape worn smooth by tidal revision.

The more I read Neruda the more I am drawn to him and the less I understand him as a person and a poet. How to reconcile his loyalty to the sacred memory of Lorca and Vallejo and Hikmet, with the abandonment of his newborn daughter, sickly and foredoomed, barely acknowledging, years later, notice of her death? Against the deep attention and clarity of the *Odes* the erotic conquistador vanity of the *Memoirs*; against his blood-scrawled passion for the Spanish Republic his self-exculpatory defense of Stalin's empire. Traveling the Soviet Union he exalts the grandeur of power lines above the ruined plains of Central Asia, the brotherhood of workers in failed collectives, the defense of freedom in kangaroo courts. *The church I like best is the hydroelectric plant...* Even his bodies are wrought of sentimental steel, mythologized to moonglow and honeysuckle blossoms, breasts of

the goddess candied and epic, strongmen squeezing eggplants to blood and purple pulp, eager products of the five-year plan. Neruda among the potassium miners and aluminum smelters, the farmers and fishermen, his voters, his readers, his lovers, his constituents, always the masses, always the People, always the gestural sweep of categorical imperatives, hortatory whirlpool in which individual destinies dissolve. The transformative magic of language is precisely its ability to reveal or to deny, to lay bare or dissemble, to unlock our shackles or participate in our enslavement. Against ideology

the testimony of the senses;

against the rhetoric of power the reproach of an image.

Stalin: *A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.*

Basho:

Very brief:

*gleam of blossoms in the treetops
on a moonless night.*

The Work

Swimming today, caught and spun in the breakers at the sand bar, flung and whirled underwater, pummeled in that grasp I recognize, suddenly, that this is the same visceral energy Van Gogh seeks to capture not only in "The Starry Night" but everywhere in the late work—mountains and clouds burning with vigilance, olive trees frenzied as Hiroshige's whirlpools—a frenzy which is neither histrionic nor hyperbolic but an attempt to depict the vital, shimmering plasma of existence. Which may be impossible. Like the lifeless sponges crumbled to dust beneath a flowering hedge. Like the fish out of water, iridescent star-rime draining from its eye, its brilliance fading back to three-dimensionality—what is that lost dimension if not time itself? How to reclaim it, portray it, or acknowledge, at least, its absence, how to depict existence outside of time, unfiltered, raw—like the feeling that arrives, if you are lucky, during the act of creation, of encroaching upon a state of timelessness, working oneself to the edge of the reaper's blade, prow of the ice breaker, the figurehead, ruby-eyed star-gazer glazed with sea foam, the relentlessly forward-looking labor of art, its sense of momentum, hurtling onward, almost capturing the smoke-trail of some immense and wondrous beast, a creature fleshed with power—the work, the work—the work is diamonds crushed to powder and atoms breaking their chains and galaxies born in robes of red hydrogen—the past is everywhere in our roiled wake, fluorescent monocells fading back to ink-black night, and the present is a figment, a riddle of physics, pure gesture, stroke and glide—only the future is real and we can write our way toward it, paint our way into it, create a path, steel chisel from which the marble leaps in glinting slivers—riding the neck of the beast, catching up, crashing through the underbrush, reaching a hand toward the hem of its garment, reaching out—there, there—almost—craning forward—there—almost, almost....