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"The Thin Glass Stems of Insertion," "To This"

Albert Goldbarth

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The Thin Glass Stems of Insertion

At SouperSalad, Dai is spending minutes bending judiciously over every porcelain canister — the swampy mushroom-barley soup, the crisply snowy wheels of jicama, the industrially smoothened pool of sour cream — applying a probing thermometer into the center of each and, as it duly registers, consulting a list of acceptable parameters the company provides the limited chill for a hillock of radishes... the body-cavity warmth to a pile of taco meat...

We do this twice a day, she says, and rolls her eyes in “irk-sign” at the nuisance, the unreasonable labor of it all, but of course I’m thinking: if only it were so very easy to determine the current state at the heart of most things! — to retrieve a sample capsule from the core of a marriage, checking for the first of the spidering pressure lines; or, on a larger level, to be able to lightly place one’s psychic feelers on the war zone, to prognosticate its total dead, its chances of a terrible satiation and then a healing. To predict my prostate’s future self, they needed to force a filament into the penis shaft and up, they needed to micro-slice their bloody petals out of that live meat... so no, I wouldn’t offer “easy” as the appropriate term. And anyway, “prognosis” is another word for “augury” — and that, the ancient tales never render free of drama. When Serapio, a prophet out of Egypt, foresaw that the emperor Caracalla’s life was nearly done, the emperor promptly threw him to a lion, as a liar. Even then, however, he wouldn’t recant what stars and the patterns in entrails had revealed to him as the truth.
With the stench of death on his face — the carnivore breath, that flag of old blood — he wouldn’t recant his vision. And “the lion would not eat him Serapio merely held out his hand and the beast became amicable.” A charming story. None the less, the emperor sent a gladiator down, who slew the seerer; and, as you’ve guessed, in just a little while Caracalla did die (an assassin’s knife). And yet, despite the dangers and the possible failures involved, it’s what we do, we humans. We take the pulse; we make the best-shot forecast. “Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises” (Samuel Butler). The mind is forever awhirr in this attempt at calculation: it may be the mind’s essential occupation. Someone tracking the traces of a sea-bed warming down in the Atlantic dark, in what looks like — to my amazed lay eye — an iron walnut. Someone working on a way to screen out human eggs with insufficient chromosomes: and so improve projections for successful in-vitro fertilizations. Or, more simply, someone sneaking a peek in the bottom bureau drawer of her tweener daughter: “you can never be too sure” these days, you need to chart the changing temperatures. And yet we bear scant empathy for the local meteorologist’s string of foul-ups. (“His career is under a cloud” was someone’s weak attempt at wit.) It’s true: his clear and clement summer was an orgy of tornadoes. His supposed rainy autumn was a dessicated planetscape of brush fires and of cracking mudflats. I remember: nothing went right. Winter came in, snowless but cold, in a bluff and efficient manner like a doctor who has to deliver the news.
To This

My friend X, who was sleeping with Y, who wanted Z, who was sleeping with no one but dreaming the hairs

and uric tang and heavenly tremolo voice of A…. This never halts; if it’s folded back in us like yolk

into dough, invisibly, the way it is in the nun or priest, it never halts, it drives us to distraction

and to progeny, to sonnets and to crack cocaine, it ticks — this species need to meld

and variegate and increase — in the smallest titrate portion of us forever. Even when the flying saucers

strike one night against our planet in the movie, and those huge "atomic ray" explosions fill our vision — even

then, the plot includes — the plot very forcibly makes room for — the woman and the man

in their dramatic pas de deux of exultation and jeopardy, effort and swoon and defeat

so far removed from the concerns of outer space invasion. Thus it was that Nikki and Benjamin exited

the movie theater, and underneath the discussion of rocket launcher special effects, they were covertly loving each other and hating each other and half-infatuated over someone else, out loud

and unstoppably. The Martians desire dominion over all the Earth. But then so do the genes,

that have brought us to this.