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Mark Rothko: Three Paintings, Woodland Spring

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Two Poems

ALICIA OSTRIKER

Mark Rothko: Three Paintings

"Tragedy, ecstasy,
Doom." What the man said.
What the man meant: dredged
From the ocean floor, the colors resonant
Not to your eyes but against your breastbone,
Like tribal drum-tones slipping through a jungle
On a normal rainy day, savage and peaceful,

Between two villages, or like a ship's engine
Booming inaudibly while you observe
The phosphorescence, the slaps
The ocean gives to your vibrating hull,
Gulls falling away as you leave the shore
To enter the house of the sky.
Later you turn your blanketed body

Over again as you travel
Forward through lustrous water and moonlight.
The drowned tumble
Endlessly in their bags,
Wind blows ceaselessly
Eastward above the surface,

Remote from any earth where buildings stand.

Woodland Spring

To speak of mushrooms
Requires a thin pen.

A fated morning, they step through sand,
Slip through loam, the clumsy fists

Of oak-roots or beech-roots miss them.
Insolent and shy as young musicians,

Their gaze grazes their toe,
They'll never look you in the eye.

Is it modesty, is it melody?
What do they think, what are they hiding?

What bridal pout could be so self-absorbed?
What advertisement so winningly smooth?

To distinguish a plump truth from a luscious lie
When both say *taste me*, that's our cunning study.

To collect mushrooms
Requires a basket and an expert friend.

Purity? In the pan
They melt away, like masses of brides.

And in the forest, too,
Even the evil ones melt in a night of rain.