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Two Poems

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The World

"It's a world full of people waiting for you to fuck up."
My father said that in 1959, twisting the throttle, one hand on the suicide shift. When the phone rang in the kitchen, my mother's voice was like water spinning down the drain. We drove to a warehouse where men in white worked all night to deliver him to death, but he did not die. He became a voice, a wind that blows through my calm thoughts, telling me again that the world waits for you to fuck up, to splatter yourself against a bridge or ride over a guardrail on a mountain road. They'll watch. They'll pick you up, scrape you up, load you into a white van. They'll turn on their lights as if this were something to celebrate. They'll make a party of your demise. They'll run a photo of your mangled legs, the half that's left of the motorcycle that got you there. They'll welcome you to their heaven of statistics, talk to your wife on the news. Some two-bit cop or official
will come on all slicked-up
to tell how stupid you were
to ride without a helmet, as if
the small amount of living we do
in that dark place we call the brain
was something worth protecting.
Listen to what I'm saying.
I come home from eight hours
of picking things up and putting them
back down. I don't go home
to read Russian novels. I don't
play chess with the wife. I ride
to the tavern and drink shots and beers;
I take my bike out on Route Eight,
.crack that throttle so wide
my wrist aches. There's something
about speed. It's as if you could
catch up with time, like
if you went fast enough
you couldn't be caught,
couldn't be seen. Last night,
past midnight, I felt the tires
flatten against pavement, heard
that silence when everything begins
to glitter, cleansed of sound, cleansed
of the crank and thrust of words
that keep telling it in your ear—
there are limits to what you can do,
as if your body would flake into light,
as if you'd dissolve in the wind,
string out behind like the rap
of the engine, as if your eyes
would press back in your heads and see
pain, something pure, more real than this
city of excuses we ride through.
The Arena of Civilization

after Mark Tobey

In Tobey’s “Arena of Civilization,”
men and women lounge and work
in a four-tier building beneath a dome
already invaded by chaos—lines
etched by the imagination or god,
lines like birds scattering,
fever thoughts, the word repeated
and repeated until emptied of meaning.

In every room of our lives
a man or woman languishes, or several
conspire around a small table.
New plans for raising the dome?
The hieroglyphs of purpose remain
indecipherable. Without a god or
some final goal, what is human striving?

Are these the four tiers
of the brain? Civilization the dream,
the form that follows man? Or are these
great men and women not lounging
or conspiring, but sharing wine,
comforting each other while the dome
collapses and chaos rushes in?
There is no telling. The petals
of our thoughts unfold, but
in that scarlet, no answer.

In the falcon’s stoop or the merest sigh,
no balm. Our lives are a web
of small purposes, the stunned rhetoric
of business: “fast bucks,”
“futures,” “investments.”

Today I envied Milton his god,
the sure touch of his line, the pure
righteousness of each syllable
creeping heavenward. Or John Donne
in his colloquie, his thought
“immediate as the odor of a rose.”
In Tobey's "Arena of Civilization"
we live in a small, public building
like clerks unmoved by the brimstone sky.

Think of Monet, his bourgeois weekends,
boats drawn to the dock, fattened by shadow,
young lovers gazing out
as they had to at the waters,
currents of thin color
pooling in the shade of willows.

Is such intelligence a happy accident?
Is this the pleasure of death, of life ending in the pastel present?
Does civilization rise defiant
towards the shock of whatever hovers Platonic behind the sky? Or downward,
trenched deeper against whatever may be true?

I think of Millet's
weed pullers, how each peasant
was pure, some focused swatch of sadness oblivious under the pale sky. How
as a woman leaned to earth she knew nothing but the single gesture required. Required, as a chant requires a gesture of voice—a falling
in pitch that is neither note nor breath—to end. As the guitar loses its notes in its own black throat; as a thrush will swallow its song until it seems the bird is made of sound.

Like a carpenter who is a poet, who is a poet before he is a man, as if he could speak himself alive. "Man dwells poetically," wrote Hölderlin, and Heidegger agreed, who could breathe not a note from his tired lungs.

Like my brother, seven years gone, who had no purpose but mine:
to achieve some small perfection—the shift from third to fourth,
the front wheel lifted; the exact taunt
to quicken a room into life;
or the switchback leaned to the edge of traction,
the kickstand sparking like a meteor.
No god. Perhaps. Or, if so, a god
who understands wonder, who leans
each corner with us, marvelling
at the sudden grace of his creations, how
even he was not expecting such beauty:
porpoises curving silver from the waves,
the gymnast whirling over the pommels,
the artist taking a knife to the canvas
to carve an ochre room, a man standing
calmly at its edge while a colorful,
abstract violence batters through the outside walls.