

LAWRENCE RUSS

Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks"

This diner, like a prow of garish light,
cleaves the sea-green shadows.
Inside, the one waiter halts in the glare, gripped
by that lean man's gaze.
And the man's companion, with her long red hair,
stares at a matchbox, hovers

in a memory. The waiter gapes. He wonders
why the hook of these strangers' noses, their
hooded eyes, their shoulders squared
as if by the pull of wings
are enough to call up regions of cliffs
and precarious darkness—why their silence

rasps like the screeching of hawks.
It could be this woman's a singer in dives.
She's weary of swooping for low notes, sick
of bows and bleak come-ons.
And this man, perhaps, is a salesman, accustomed
to distance, practiced at sighting

small chances from far away,
dull hungers stirring, where few else would.
Each knows how the day thins to paper, how soon
that paper yellows and cracks.
They perch here, their long fingers barely meeting,
speaking through touch alone,

two creatures strayed from a wordless place.
In his white cap and jacket, the waiter
shivers. But he hasn't learned when to be wary.
He pays too little attention to that other,
who hunches, lifting his glass,
his beefy back turned

dead center in the scene.

Why is his face kept secret, and why
does he seem so at ease in these too-bright quarters,
facing the blackened stores outside?

Does he own those buildings, their
half-drawn shades, their brick the color

of muddied blood? Vacant seats, like henchmen,
line his side of the counter. He's the kind
who draws a bead from in hiding,
who practices bringing
high things heavily down to earth. The kind
who deals in feathers, cheaply.

And across the street, a register sits
in the darkened window of a store.
As if, all night, the emptiness keeps shop.
As if each pays for his passage and his guise
on this glass ship, drifting through concrete straits
toward no end other than morning.

Floating with Dragons

Tonight, a snowstorm muffles

the lights from other houses.

Inside, a woman, first gray in her hair,
lies on a long leather couch. Biting her lip,
she begins to cry. She sees herself as cheerily dead
in the wedding picture wired to the wall,
the white gown tiered like a ziggurat of ice.
In the ashtray beside her, a cigarette

burns down, peeling off its own white skin.

She doesn't know why the memory of one man's
dark eyes troubled her for years:

The day she was ten, her father brought home
an immigrant boarder. Black moustache, thick brows.
She woke one summer morning, and found him
seated stiffly at the foot of her bed,
staring at her face.

Remembering those eyes, a wildness like storm-wind
swells in her chest. But at its center
is a circle of water, where men go round and round
in the doldrums, in their little boats:
a sadness that drowns the lamps,
that thinks the world owes it many shipwrecks.

Afraid to go back to her bedroom, she senses
some fierce thing loose in the house.
She's afraid of the bedroom door,
the shadows branching, restless, on the walls.
As hard grains tick on the window
like a clock of the wintry heart,
she picks up, puts down a pair of black gloves,

considers traveling far away.

She shifts her bare feet,
smoothes her brown hair.

And she stares at a Chinese lacquer box,
at its swirling reds and blacks, entranced
by its luster, its ancient designs—
drifting, like a cloud, ever further from love,

floating with scaly dragons.

Found Objects

A novice lawyer, I was sent
with a case full of papers
to the famous attorney.

In a tower with white
marble facing,
tens of stories above the ground,
he talked and talked on the phone
while I waited

on the far other side
of his burlled desk.
The man who represented judges
and churches, baseball players and banks

made his wishes known.
His voice would circle, lift, and glide,
then twist
and clench,
as he stirred, then savored
men's envy, men's hate.

But how had his regular features grown
so misshapen, so lumpish?
his cheeks and brows
unevenly swollen, his skin
dull and wrinkled,
or shiny and tight, by turns.
As though someone had beaten him
daily, for weeks.

Between us, the surface
of his huge desk swirled
with glazed, luxurious
reds and browns.

Meant to resemble a glamorous desert,
it was empty, except
for two lucite cubes
that faced the visitors' chairs:

In the one, an infant rattlesnake,
expertly stuffed,
reared up,
its shiny length coiled,
its head cocked back, its hollow
fangs extended.

In the other, a three-inch scorpion
reached out
with serrated pincers.
Its hinged black tail
arched over its back,
the needle tip pointing downward, as if
at any moment, it might

pierce its own armored head
with poison.

Intimate Voices

— for E. and M. Freier

I

When I first loved poetry, I was certain we both
were drawn to melancholy pleasures,
to birches, pale, and shabbily bandaged,
to alleys and battered doors.
And I held her white paper hands
in a ring of lamplight, late into the night.

At dusk, I rode buses with men exhausted
by a grimy air of bribes, combustion, burning whiskey;
with women, old scarves tied to their heads,
a perfume of ammonia, turpentine and dust
pressed in their graying hair.

After dark, my woman in lamplight wove
threads of their silence into her dress.

II

Tonight, years later, the moon has starved down
to its one white rib,
like a man I loved, who reflected light
but suddenly froze,
his heart seized in ice.

Grim things that no one expects come toward us:
walls of brick faces, coffins, hungry dolls,
dim shapes that follow you underwater.

Walking these streets, I hear
tower bells echo in the closed arcade.
Young women cross the square with quick steps,
eyeing the shadows to either side,
as tall glass buildings gleam
like blades in the dark.

Now I understand the child's fear
of marionettes: of waltzing sadly against our wills,
of stumbling, cracking
our heads together, no matter how gently
we try to embrace.

A foghorn's groan blows in from the lake.
The fountains, with their nervous sobbing,
say, *Be still*. The wind in its shredded coat says,
Stay warm. But skyscrapers rise
like the high false hopes
on which our years are spindled.
And the blind angel falls without seeing why.

III

So I need to hear intimate voices.
I need that poetry, that rhythm of mercy.
I need that woman I love
to see black smoke from factories at dusk
spreading like grief in the lowlands of heaven;
to hear the gray ocean
splash against the piers, the cold depths pleading
with the land for warmth.

I want to listen, late into the night,
as she strings her lamplit words
the way a woman knits,
until she sleeps,
for the child that her body
is dreaming toward light.

Morning

I've been having such
thin dreams lately—like the knives',
like slits in paper.

Waking exhausted, I see
bare elms on the lawn: cold
nails pounded in
to hold things in one piece,

or arrows that fell,
just missing the house.

Nocturne with Smoke

The El hurtles overhead, and a drunken singer
competes with its roar, cries out
against the relentless heart.

Even the wind, though it has no dead to bury,
is cold, and whistles to itself in this dark
where the neon sign of a pawnshop
flashes, "Loans For All Articles
Of Value." And always

*the smoke, from trashcans and chimneys, like a spy
in the secretive kingdoms of night.*

*Smoke like a gull that has lost
its sight and its way to the sea.*

A woman framed in a dark window shines
like an overturned car in the rain.

She is pretty, she sits
in a bar, in a blur.

Blouse half-unbuttoned, cigarette
slack on her lip, she fancies herself the heroine
of thick mascara ballads.

She still blames everything else.

She's a pirate on paper seas, believing
that all the maps have been rigged against her.

*Smoke like a night of driving down highways
with no other cars,
white lines on both sides
whizzing by, like wishes, like invisible
bullets of sleep.*

The man staring down from the bridge
thought he could will someone else to love.

He remembers standing at the kitchen
sink, after she'd gone;

angry, immobile in the roar
of the garbage disposal, eyes fixed
on the black rubber hole.

His hands gripped the counter's edge, cold
droplets formed on the backs of his hands.

And the fine spray continued

to fly up like gravel
from a car as it skids off the road.

*Smoke like intentions, like the prayers
of angels turned to stone in the graveyard.
Smoke like the sigh of fire making love
to the burnable world.*

And how many times have I told myself
“When I finish sorting
these boulders of boredom,” “When the silverware
stops crawling in the drawers. . . .”
How many times I’ve put on the mask
of con-man or morbid clown, hiding in the image
of a girl in a bar, or a man on a bridge
while the true face, with emerald eyes,
grows dim, the infant in the basket floats deeper
into rushes of fog and forgetting.

*Trying so hard to rise,
to braid a chain of smoke
toward one haloed moon or another,
though smoke is a puppet whose strings are pulled
by hidden stars,
and the moon is a plate
on the table of emptiness,*

*the opened parachute
of a man like me,
tied to a dream of falling.*

Prayers at the Broken Gate

In the outer hall, old men, with stiffened fingers,
strap onto their arms and foreheads
leather boxes filled with the sacred words.
They adjust their gear with care,
like spacemen absorbed in preparation
for unearthly voyaging.

Inside, the air is dense, the shul is dim.
Black skullcaps bob in the rising tide
of fervor, like buoys above a reef-lined shoal.
And soon it begins in earnest, the soul-drunken swaying,
the grumbling and moaning in a foreign tongue,
the pitching in muddy currents of time.
Eyes closed, their bodies tossing forward and back,
they bring into waking the broken speech
of dreamers—the pleas and confessions,
the cries of guilt and grating need.

But in all this crude counterpoint
only the cantor truly sings, as if to sing
were a terrible privilege. His high voice lifts
with the sorrows of unseen women crying
for the womanly Presence, the Shekinah.
He calls to her loudly, as into a sandstorm,
while the fringes of the worshippers' prayer shawls shake
as the soul does, at the gateway
to endless space.

In truth, it's the other world
that seems to grow more familiar,
while this one seems incredible, bizarre,
with its hacking of neighbors, its habitual lies.
Even the menorah, at times, reminds them
of the burnished, many-branched horns of the Beast.
Weird hunters with nets of prayer, clubs of grief,
again and again they beg,
to trap him at last in his lair.

Above them, stained glass windows dye the light,
because it isn't the light of day
that's wanted, but the light that wakes men

from a different sleep, that falls from the deeds
of those pictured by the glass: from Abraham,
carmine, raising his knife, strident with the cutting
of his heart's obedience;
from Ruth on her knees, who kisses the green
hem of a poor woman's dress; from Job
gazing upward, open-mouthed and quaking,
at roiling, unfathomable clouds of gold.

Expectant still, the old men peer
across the borders of their lives
at a promised, unpossessed land of redemption.
Like the dust motes around them, their souls
drift in and out of heaven's rays
while the ner tamid, the eternal light,
hangs from its chains of brass
in the small vault of darkness above their heads . . .

I see them rocking in that troubled chamber,
half-remembered, half-imagined.
They pray together, strangers in Egypts of their own,
some plagued by fat toads of pride,
and some by a black rain of bitterness—
believing, nonetheless, in more than legend,
believing in the evidence of unseen things.
Like yahrzeit candles that gutter through the night
of Death's anniversary, they burn
to believe even Death is an angel.
They work, in their flickering ways, to free
words of praise and the joyous white fire that flares
from the buried Root of this thorn-bush world.

The Bride of November

Toward evening, low banks of clouds
shift south. The gray-green river
slides downstream, stained with the oily
shadows of billboards, burdened
with tugboats and barges and trash.
And slow crowds of workers like retreating armies
troop back across the bridge.

“Flowers here! Fresh-cut flowers!”
A fat, old woman plants herself
at the western end of the bridge,
in a brown wool coat, white anklets falling down,
a cardboard box of carnations
at her feet. Their pink and white hems
fringed with dirt, the flowers droop
in wind-blown bunches.

“One dollar! Fresh and lovely! Flowers!”
As she takes each bill,
she grips the buyer’s fingers
and looks him straight in the eye,
demanding some watchword, some forgotten sign.

Her cheeks, her hands, are sallow and spotted.
And in her widened gaze:
bleached dog skulls, plague fear,
sodden boards bristling with nails.
They press out sharply, and then disappear.

Distressed, we blink, we think we pretend
to believe her claims
for pity’s sake,
for the sake of our own disillusion.
We buy her off, and walk away, hastily, dazed,
to the trains that will not wait,

uneasy as villagers who see in a dream
the hungry ghosts they’ve abandoned.

The Child

He had to learn the way a staircase
climbs without moving.
He knew the huge trees
talked together—not knowing particular
signs, but understanding
their hard, isolate trunks,
their high branches shaking before a rain.

And then, one autumn night, to walk out
beyond the people's voices,
the hide-and-seek and statues,
beyond the brick houses, into the field
where wind spins a dancer out of dead leaves,
where two cats chase moths through milkweed
and bracken, mingling with the black

scraping of crickets.
The half-moon rising behind him,
he sat down, shyly, in damp grass and thistles.
He took out his book of matches.
And he burned his hand in the field, to seal
his marriage to the several fires
that cannot be touched for long.

The Strength of Trees

Too many times, I've put my trust
in things the wind blew down.

In truth, the adamant trunk is frail.
It's the emptiness among the boughs,

by letting the furious storm
pass through,

that saves the tree from breaking.

Waiting

The rapt ocean searches for you every night.
Its waves rush quietly up the muddy
moon-streaked beach,
foaming as if churned by invisible fish
that turn and glide back
when they find you're not there.

In the forest, birches like women
unbelievably tall and thin,
their trunks white and cracked from the cold,
watch for you, absently swaying,
and pay no attention
to rough winds stroking their hair all night.

And I'm watching, waiting
for your face: blue shadow dreaming on stone,
bright sorcery of frost on a darkened pane—
or sunlight on water,
hummingbird light, like the soundless
ringing of a bell.

Like the desert,
you never give answers.
Like sand, you lift your wings
over the rocky places.

The Weights

In California, you feel
as if daylight will last forever.
But even there
red vines crawl over the door,
the tree's shadow lengthens on the lawn,
a stranger's arm reaching for the house.

I don't want to end
in the crystal paperweight,
locked in the dollhouse.

I'm the boy who wanted so much
to fly, not caring how,
vampire or comic-book hero.
And I ask that boy's forgiveness
for the stones of fear I chose to hide,
for the weights I carry.

**Stream Near the Saugatuck
Reservoir, Good Friday**

– *St. Matthew, 26: 52-53*

This is what drew me here,
this solitude
where sitting still is like floating.

Across the stream, beneath dark pines,
the cracked and moss-stained granite ledges
cool the air, the mind.
On fallen slabs,
pale ornaments and washes of lichen,
green and gold and white,
glow like ancient star-maps.

Calm spreads out in unseen clouds.
Motionless, I watch
a hundred waves form within each wave,
turning, each second,
to a hundred new waves,
each one swept up in the waltz
of chill water wedded
to edges of light.

‡ ‡

Struggling, the sunshine flares,
then fades, as I look down
to a deep, still pool.

There, what seemed to be stones on the bottom
begin to stir, to rise and fall:

The golden trout waver,
nosing into the current, or turning aside,
precious coins uncovered
as the high sun breaks out,
swelling their hazy cove with light,
opening a purse
of unspendable life.

‡ ‡

Above my head, twigs
of aspens quiver, like antennae
receiving a message.

Here, a hawk-current swoops over curbs,
tight waves turn somersaults,
and a stretch of rapids
jolts and splashes, swirls and churns.

Half-submerged, wet boulders
are gray-robed buddhas
sunk in meditation, unperturbed
as the cold world flashes in frenzy about them.
This noise is their spirits' steady roar,
a voice grown hoarse
with joyous shouting—
an elixir that draws off the sick man's poison,
sweeps clean the channel
through which delight shoots.

‡ ‡

Now the stream again pulls straight. The water
deepens. The current
grows stronger,
its black surface sleek with speed.

And the power that builds in solitude here
rushes to the sharp bend
and sudden drop, where the stream
explodes in spray and din, in the furious
bubbling white heart of water!

From the surge below,
a blown mist rises.
It cools my face like a breeze
from the wings of those hovering legions
which their Master, from love, would not allow
to save Him from the nails and cross.

It lifts, as tender music does
from the liquid mind of silence,
when notes played by mystery
brush the waters
and even the smallest stream begins
to rock a radiant darkness,

a fathomless cradle
for worlds to come.