

JENDI REITER

Closing Time

In the dark city's gleaming freezers
of office buildings, shut computers cool in rows like ice cubes.
Women working late suddenly pass by empty doorways
and see their lit reflection haunting the black windows,
hovering over the pool of neon-stippled night
like a bat hunting its silver prey.
A woman lays the phone receiver in its cradle,
slick black baby, still with its umbilical cord.
A man is trying to reach her, but all they can use
to communicate are shrill bells and blinking lights,
a clown's mating ritual. Everyone goes down eventually.
On the ferries and trains, the professional men
go home to their square gardens and wives,
dreaming of a Sunday when an unfamiliar bird
will flicker like desire's white televised thighs
across the lawn in an afternoon haze golden as beer,
waiting for some ordinary sin to set them free.

Chuang Tzu's Dream

All this morning I dreamed I was awake
and then awoke to find I'd been sleeping,
time and again. The world we know
is a butterfly's dream
yet Nature squanders millions of golden wings
in a single tempest.

And in another dark dream,
I was searching for a book of deeds
in an official hall
near demolition—such a place
as taunts me with a familiarity
just beyond reach, like the knowledge
of how to awaken when I know I'm dreaming—
but only moths spiraled upwards
from each cast-off chest.
I could not read them, and yet I knew
their tissue-paper wings
bore all that could be written
away into the opaque air.

Ah, in the vacuum of space
the earth is suspended
like an audience's disbelief.
To any eyes out there it might appear
to rest on nothing, to descend from nothing
but a dark infinity
curved like the rare arc of a well-lived life.
Yet, like an insomniac's eyes,
this curve cannot stay closed:
the boundaries of space perhaps forever
fly faster and faster apart
from its unknown center.
A cloud of butterfly planets
flung forth by Nature
into perishing ice, flame or forest.
We struggle in a dream uncompleted
and wake, we imagine,
only because some greater mind
(at least for now) sustains the world's illusion.

A Myth

Before the dam was built our people slept under the water
and worshipped the dark bird-shadows of boat hulls
which passed overhead, seen through the ripples of distance.
Our crops were the weeds and growths that trailed like tears
out of the sunken skulls of fish.

We scarcely noticed the water
weighing on our chests like a stone:
how do you notice a burden that has never been lifted?
Speech went nowhere, a breath released into the thick silence
that bathed us and sealed us in.

To communicate, we handed each other objects
dropped down from boats—a spoon for kindness,
a chronometer for death—
the phrases the gods had set for us.

After the dam was built we lay naked on our dry beds.
It was so light we could not rest.

We had to believe that an element we could not see
was now our own. The shadows we'd learned to worship
streamed from every object. Some of us bowed down
to birds whose shadows flickered across the grass,
some to waving clotheslines' shadowy flags,
and some to clouds that passed over the whole scene,
dimming our other gods
to nothingness for a moment.

The weight of water being lifted from our chests,
we learned the terror of aspiration, as balloons
soaring, knowing they may burst.

And our words carried through the new spaces
almost more than we could bear—released like us
to travel, to die at unimagined distances.

1-800-DIVORCE

The black silhouettes turn away from each other,
mouths tight, two heads in profile bowed
in resignation or temper or despair
(impossible to tell because featureless, like silence)
or simply impatience, wanting quickly and cheaply
to get the job done, as the lawyer's advertisement promises:
Call 1-800-DIVORCE.

On the subway seat below
a plump Hasidic man, young yet old, sways
with the cars' forward motion.
He is stolid and pale,
his eyes rimmed with tired shadows
like purple bruises.
Last night he dreamed again of endless walls
with bricks missing, gaps he must fill.
Oh, he will never be able
to gather them all, and someday those eyes
will at last peer through into his own.
He wipes his damp face with a cloth
from his dark suit pocket. Black and white
as the silhouettes trapped in their square.
Next to him, by the doors,
a swarthy man with a red bandanna
stands erect with legs apart,
sleeveless shirt straining across his muscular breast.
He doesn't have to swagger, he just stands still
and lets everything that hits him come to realize
that he lasts like a furnace that outlasts
the house fallen down around it.
But it can't be transported and the place
where it could be used is gone.
Across from the lawyer's glossy sign sits a woman,
fat and faded, with exotic cheekbones.
Her face at rest settles into a frown like a mountain
of rocks reshaped by an avalanche:
it seems afterwards they have always been there.
People who don't understand mountains
think that someone is to blame,
that a cry or gasp sets off the crash.
She wishes they would understand
it wasn't anyone's presence or absence that mattered.

The figures on the sign are tucked away
in a monochrome corner
while the letters blare red and yellow,
hucksters of an easy future
where a vanity phone number
makes it simple to remember how to forget.
Meanwhile the train stops and starts
past Bleecker, Canal, Chambers Street
where the courthouses are,
and overhead on Lafayette
a young Chinese man buys a hot dog for a woman
while the pigeons wait for the crumbs.

