

GATE C 22

At gate C 22 in the Portland airport
a man in a broad-band leather hat kissed
a woman arriving from Orange County.
They kissed and kissed and kissed. Long after
the other passengers clicked the handles of their carry-ons
and wheeled briskly toward short-term parking,
the couple stood there, arms wrapped around each other
like satin ribbons tying up a gift. And kissing.
Like she'd just staggered off the boat at Ellis Island,
like she'd been released at last from ICU, snapped
out of a coma, survived bone cancer, made it down
from Annapurna in only the clothes she was wearing.

Neither of them was young. His beard was gray.
She carried a few extra pounds you could imagine
her saying she had to lose. But they kissed lavish
kisses like the ocean in the early morning,
the way it gathers and swells, sucking
each rock under, swallowing it
again and again. We were all watching—
the passengers waiting for the delayed flight
to San Jose, the stewardesses, the pilots,
the aproned woman icing Cinnabons, the guy
selling sunglasses. We couldn't look away. We could
taste the kisses, crushed in our mouths.

But the best part was his face. When he drew back
and looked at her, his smile soft with wonder, almost
as though he were a mother still open from giving birth,
like your mother must have looked at you, no matter
what happened after—if she beat you, or left you, or
you're lonely now—you once lay there, the vernix
not yet wiped off and someone gazing at you
like you were the first sunrise seen from the earth.
The whole wing of the airport hushed,
each of us trying to slip into that woman's middle-aged body,
her plaid bermuda shorts, sleeveless blouse, little gold
hoop earrings, glasses—all of us, tilting our heads up.

GOD AND THE G-SPOT

*"He didn't want to believe. He wanted to know."
—Ann Druyan, Carl Sagan's wife, on
why he didn't believe in God*

I want to know too. Belief and disbelief
are a pair of tourists standing on swollen feet
in the Prado—I don't like it.
I do.— before the Picasso.

Or the tattoo artist with a silver stud
in her full red executive lips,
who, as she inked in the indigo blue, said,
I think the G-spot's one of those myths
men use to make us feel inferior.

God, the G-spot, falling in love. The earth round
and spinning, the galaxies speeding
in the glib flow of the Hubble expansion.
I'm an East Coast Jew. We all have our opinions.


But it was in the cabin at La Selva Beach
where I gave her the thirty tiny red glass hearts
I'd taken back from my husband when I left.
He'd never believed in them. She, though, scooped
them up like water, let them drip through her fingers
like someone who has so much she can afford to waste.

That's the day she reached inside me
for something I didn't think I had.
And like pulling a fat shining trout from the river
she pulled the river out of me. That's
the way I want to know God.

ASKING DIRECTIONS IN PARIS

Où est le Boulevard Saint Michel?
You pronounce the question carefully.
And when the native stops,
shifting her small sack of groceries,
lifting her manicured hand,
you feel a flicker of accomplishment.
But beyond that, all clarity
dissolves, for the woman
in the expensive shoes
and suit exactly the soft gray
of clouds above the cathedral, does not say
to the right, to the left, straight ahead,
phrases you memorized from tapes
as you drove around your home town
or mumbled into a pocket Berlitz on the plane,
but relays something wholly unintelligible,
some version of: On the corner
he is a shop of jewels in a fountain
when the hotel arrives on short feet.
You listen hard, nodding,
as though your pleasant
disposition, your willingness
to go wherever she tells you,
will make her next words pop up
from this ocean of sound, somewhat
the way a dog hears its name
and the coveted syllable walk.
If you're brave enough, or very nervous,
you may even admit you don't understand.
And though evening's coming on and
her family's waiting, her husband lighting
another Gauloise, the children setting the table,
she repeats it again, another gesture
of her lovely hand, from which you glean
no more than you did the first time.
And as you thank her profusely
and set off full of doubt and groundless hope,
you think this must be how it is
with destiny—God explaining
and explaining what you must do,
even willing to hold up dinner for it,
and all you can make out is a few
unconnected phrases, a word or two, a wave
in what you pray is the right direction.

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EVOLUTION

Loss and ruin grind under our feet
like spilled salt, bad luck sticking
to our soles. And joy
streaks across the sky, a star
burning out. Who knows
what will save us?

A man yanks the hair
of a woman he once covered with kisses.
Each kiss was a blossom and he thought
he was making his own garden.
All over the world there is failure.

Our species can enter the human
body with a laser, repair the shape
of a cornea to sharpen all it sees,
or crack the ribs and lift the heart
from its home, plant it again.
This exquisite intelligence—a brain
firing one hundred billion neurons—
is still bashing itself on the skull with big rocks.

Everywhere, staggering
beauty, intricate and connected.
Under our skin are rivers and streams.
We can see them through the translucent cells.
And inside the modest and flamboyant organs of
plants
a vegetal sex is taking place.
If you lie still in a sound proof room
you can hear the high tone
of your nervous system and the low
tone of your blood.
In caves the thinnest strands of stalactite extend
a centimeter in a hundred years, a single drop
of water hanging from each tip, returning
its burden of mineral to stone.
What kind of patience can we learn?

Goats chew the brilliantly
long green grass. Wind carries rain
across fields in dark transparencies.
The water sings in the gutters, the earliest song on
earth.

Lovers keep breaking each other open
like soft fruit, trying to bury their souls
in each other's flesh.

As termites undo the material world,
taking apart the day, the universe
is expanding, so precisely held
in the web of tension, we can sleep
at the edge of an ocean while a child
jumps in the surf.

Somewhere in a barren desert, sand
is blowing, burying the tents, grit
biting into skin, someone cradles
the skull of a being born
seven million years ago.

Oh primitive brain, perhaps it's you
we should pray to, heaping our altars
with spliced DNA and the score to Bach's
Magnificat, one hair from Mother Teresa, Gandhi's
dhoti, and a cup of clear water.
We could bow
through the long night, prostrate,
breathing in and breathing out.

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