

YOU'RE PROBABLY IN JAPAN BY NOW

1.

You're probably in Japan by now.
I can tell by how the ocean turned blue
again this morning. How last night traveled
west, over waves, without a plane, or even
a stop in San Francisco. I find it so disturbing,
the way time can change, the way you
made this turning blue from a wispy pool
of red, soft—like seaweed— before one pull
from the ocean. I try not to think about you,
your hair so blue from black as you swim
away from shore, with a great wide wave,
nervous, as not kissing can sometimes be
when water is concerned.

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The closest I've ever been to your eyes
is the day you looked concerned for me
and my paintings during lunch. I'd been studying
patterns lately before that. For example: It's much
less cliché to paint eyes than to write about them.
But they both feel as natural to me, and certainly reveal more
than kissing, or eating, or even blue might, as it's focused
on your face in drops. Now on my face, through me, to a painting
about Mark Rothko being afraid of water—
through sunrise after sunrise, dripping down canvas
after canvas and then turning into a black church
across water, through me and over a white tablecloth,
the sky so sharp inside, to a curve, where water
meets morning.

2.

You're probably in Japan by now,
even now, standing here, I can tell
with the ocean remembering dark, and my sneakers
standing there, back there, next to the shadow of my car.

And here, back here, against the gray cement wall
the water makes this noise, like Ezra Pound
sounding out "April. No— *April*.
April is the cruelest month. April is *the* cruelest
month. April is the cruelest" especially this year

when winter won't let go of water, between the sand
and icicles, this stabbing pain has left us both
thinking of Montana which is where all good poems go

to die— there in the bottom of Flathead Lake, which prefers Eliot
over Pound. Which is where all states go when given the chance
to settle at the bottom of anything. But this leaving
makes it crueler. Like music you can't listen to
and the words, mismatched
in your head. Like the white as it drowns out black

or blue, depending on the rhythm, or the length of breaking
one can wish to do. And I know all of this
is like those black seaweed pods everyone knows
to break. The weakest points create the greatest sound

as solid switches to the forced escape of air that survived, somehow, beneath
the ocean. Holding between the tides. I wonder about the air
we breathe and how shallow and cold any moving thing can be

as spring creeps back and forth around the sand, the land
buried in the froth only Atlantic breezes know to send bursting
to bluer air. There again, it washes back against
the marble sand, the ocean, both
carving music and the air, caught here, and again to me.

3.

You're probably in Japan by now, but lately on the black and gray
dissolving under silver, I've been confused about how to time my step.

My leg poised to take the step there, but hanging in the air for a second
or two too long, and so afraid I'll get caught slipping beneath the escalator.

Just yesterday I realized I'd turned Mark Rothko into a character for my poems,
and how interesting paint and sound are compared to abstraction.

What a terrible tragedy to turn light— breaking to black fog— settling against
a wall— or creating a wall— into a caricature or a person even. Love.

I do this to all things I love, which should be flattering, but is not—
and now I have a strained relationship with *Untitled* from 1958.

Some of it is because Rothko was afraid of water and some of it

is because I'm afraid of Rothko who bought an old YMCA and painted

until orange was exhausted. There's something about looking
a painting onto canvas that is very different from painting, cigarette in mouth.

It's easier to look at a massive block of light melting like a molten ice cube
than to look at a man dissolving into paint.

4.

You're probably in Japan by now, wondering about your relationship
to the ocean. There are painters here, measuring bodies with outstretched arms
and three fingers extended toward shore. Toward torsos, toward the sky—
hitting stride in imitations of the image. How long can anyone wait for a color
to resolve itself? Seriously, consider it, all of us are imitating;
counting the length of eyelashes and perfume remains
that can somehow trail in an even smoke. This looking for rhythm

makes these painters too, as blue is seen in water only when the sky
is reflected back, long after it is ground, and before it is thin
and black and suffocating. Here it settles to smooth, as the coast
demands attention from both the shallow and the sun, watch.

Is it possible you've forgotten something about difference? while water

rises toward confusion and white-white trembling, spilling forward
over shore. Because the easiest trick in painting is to create depth
by using diagonal lines. They leave toward vanishing points— an Italian
revolution, as was the lack of halos over figures created from solid
light. But this relationship of light in front of light, without a line
in sight, is impossible to recreate. Yet it's everywhere. Look through, and as the sky
bends away from all of us, there is black somewhere—there—

in there. But that empty we run from might be beautiful, as endings
so often are. I had a teacher once who said a painting is finished
when to do more would be to ruin it. The point was to ride that tension
as far as you could. I have been imitating him ever since. That point
is closer. I am doing nothing. Add paint. That point is vanishing. Sure,

all this standing by the ocean, counting poems, watching the affairs of light
conspire through sound is wonderful, but carrying perspective into subsets
signals considerable understanding. This could be like nothing, this could be
nothing like kissing. Or silence. But more than anything,

I miss the ways in which sunlight can imitate painting in the hands of Rothko,
and how, in the hands of Rothko scotch on rocks might imitate the neon,
nonsensical light of Manhattan at night. Or a cigarette, mediating the space

between his thick eyeglasses, the thick sheen of 3 drinks washing across his eyes,
3 fingers of scotch as thick as smoke as smoke meanders into orange—
into some sort of consolation prize; for even chain-smoking artists might be better
described as airplanes. And all this talk of fear and flying, when in effect
none of it reminds us at all of falling, but rather, those silver shapes

pasted on the falling rain are more frightening because no shadows can cast
on the blue remains, which is how we all define our space, ourselves.

I keep wondering if I have skin, or if your scent is closer to that touch
than even the most delicate of flower petals could ever render. And if love
is looking for those colors to resolve. There seems some lack of understanding, some
lack of acceptance. There is genius in seeing that color, in seeing through orange,

in seeing through the character of orange, and how terrible it is, in seeing black
back there someplace, in seeing a cathedral of orange on orange on orange (light
light light). Black. But there might be love in leaving this alone. In leaving all of this
alone. Forget the character of suffering. Of emptiness. There is safety in there
somewhere.

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