

Bruce Whiteman / from
*THE INVISIBLE WORLD
IS IN DECLINE*
Book IV, Part 5

The heart cries out for gods and is forced to make do with history. The world shines with an epistemological lustre as though the brain's fire were reflected in a tarnished mirror. The paleolithic lust that inspires the neuro-anatomist compensates hardly at all the even more ancient needs of the blood. Begin with the body, which is old enough. Its knowledge is recoverable. Its erect carriage is the primal image of displacement. It is at odds with the horizon. It trifles dangerously with the clasp of earth. It wants to be ejected from gravity's garden. The child's hardscrabble for verticality initiates its grief. The perpendicular hoist of the brain picks up the body like an insect. It wriggles in confusion and fear, and takes refuge in the abstract geometry of rationality. Like a clumsy bird the head flies slowly over the ground in its misapprehension that the horizon will not recede indefinitely. It wants what is invisible and out of reach. It never gives up.

A time comes when the world appears grey under the shadow cast by the strange destiny of the heart. It looks the embodiment of plagiarism elevated to a fine art. The martial heart takes pleasure in massing its troops whose obedience is honed and perfect. If the sun doesn't rise at the heart's command it is only that that particular miracle has not yet been contaminated. There are suns enough at its beck and call, this master of impeccable tactics, generalissimo of a grey world. What the body forgets isn't worth the pains of intelligence. The heart huddles inside it and issues its directives, turning the visible world inside out for arcane reasons. It wreaks havoc out of a weird and impermanent motivation. Convinced of its privileged knowledge it sets out to make over the untidy world in its own image. It wants to ransom everything the eyes see—a tangled garden with monuments to the dead in varying states of ruin—in exchange for solipsistic certainty. There is no one to say no, for the heart knows it speaks on behalf of the mute isolate world, or the world will be content not to speak at all.

The heart's Aristotelian certainties count for something. Everything begins with such unscientific assuredness. Love founders when the heart can no longer measure itself. Like a lizard on a wall, drowsy with sun and frozen by the smell of a predator, it is unsure which way to turn. The shadow grows larger and assumes an instinctually recognizable shape. Under the walls of flesh and muscle the heart pumps hard and makes crazy. It was sure of the sun and the sun has disappeared. The photosynthetic world of leaf and flower is gone like a dream. It dreams everything but blood and its dark coming and going, its alchemical change of colour. Love and certainty count on the heart's unselfishness. The visible world is out there like a star.

At the margin of skin is the flesh of the world, the flesh of the beloved. Beyond all thought and the autonomic ebb and flow of the body's fluid architecture a flower blossoms on the heart's account. Spring arrives like a fish forcing its way home upstream, and the grey oppressive sky opens up its 100 million mile tunnel for the heliotropic flowers. The upright thrust of the body begins to make sense. The head wobbles on its thin stalk. Its ambient lust for light carries it over the ground, lambent and dedicated like a seeker after My Lady of the Stars. That is desire, that is voluntary movement, that is the instant map the heart makes of the garden it carries the body through.

The head grows large like a pumpkin left forgotten in the garden, overgrown and rotting. Birds and insects feed on its orange skin, the brown mush inside. In time no one can rescue it from flesh's fate, its headlong fling at compost, its decline. The gentle indifferent world countermands self-consciousness as ineluctably as a change of weather, as imperceptibly as the iridescent glow on a nameless insect's wing. Named things stay fixed in the head and preserve it like frost, like wax, but it cannot name itself with any certainty or illuminate the black point from which the gorgeous visible world starts out and to which mistakenly it seems to return—trickster, recidivist. The head decays amidst late flowers and the instinctual stirring in a bird's blood that drives it south.

History is a house built to keep the body warm. It walks from room to room, fragrant with heat, slack and somnolent and surrounded by cement. The sky outside is blue or black, the wind rises and falls, the sun lights up half the world at a time. In a low room the austere power of artificial light keeps periwinkle and primula in bloom past their season. All the cabala of intimacy and the consecrated silence of the upper rooms cannot eradicate the body's half-articulate wish to unbolt the door and rush outside. Its physiological destiny is to be cold and homeless.

No, time is light. The pure Devonian sun that bathed the shallow sea where ammonites died and purified into stone; the white Greek sun that made Longus' skin tingle as he sat naked in an open field imagining the unsallow hearts of Daphnis and Chloe; the pale filtered afternoon light that fell slantwise on William Harvey's dark oak table where in 1627 he sat day after day writing in chancellery hand the manuscript of *De motu cordis et sanguinis*; the imperceptibly muter sun that shines on the lavender and rosemary where bees steal sweet yellow powder and prepare for their instinctive dance. The heart has to trust to the history of light when its own instinctive involute manoeuvrings fail. The narrative of the blood is otherwise a conspicuous and hopeless story, the red and blue romance an ancient one, its denouement predictable. Time is light as the heart *in extremis* discovers, pumping open and closed like a butterfly's wings, at rest on a hot white stone.

Closure is the heart's peril. The bare authentic skin is seemingly as close as you get. It is easy for the body to close down on itself when the world seems a simple object in limitless space. It wears clothes with deep pockets in which to carry its images, and the invisible heart can secrete its tortured muscular shape behind a thin cloth dark enough to absorb the light. The skin at which all the information of the sensible world slows up is the heart's agent of terror, the beautiful deterrant, the white reflecting glass of hesitation. The choice for clarity is its own. Then the flood of light in the inner body is love, is the touch of the other inside.