

GEORGE STANLEY / After Desire

Beauty

At a sushi joint I went to infrequently
there was a waiter I called Beauty.

I was tickled by his dark eyes
& his hip-length black apron.
I thought his dad must have been Russian,
he was so tall.

He only ever served me once.

When I'd pass by the restaurant, I'd always look in
to see if Beauty was there.

There was another waiter, looked like Beauty.
Sometimes at first I'd think he was Beauty,
but then he'd come toward the window,
showing some customers to a table,
& I could see it wasn't Beauty.

Sometimes I couldn't tell right away
because of the reflections of cars in the window.
And I was afraid if I peered in too intently,
Beauty would see me, and know.

One night I took Beauty home.
Took? His long legs loped
up the stone steps ahead of me.
I unlocked the door to my apartment
& followed him in.
But when we were face to face,
I didn't know what to do with him.

I didn't want to hurt him
(any more)
I didn't want him to take me in his arms
(any more)
so I let him vanish.

I let him go.

I let him go back to his body.

I let him escape
the violent eye
that fastens on beauty
to possess or destroy.

The Musician

After desire the air lost its voice.

The musician whose black curls were cut
when he went to work in the kitchen
now sits at the end of the bar
in my seat, and I sit perpendicular
to his sadness, watching the game,

and it's class, I tell N., the bartender,
to have the game on, it makes it feel
like a real bar. To go to the bar
& have to pretend it's a real bar.

Not to have to pretend the musician
looks straight ahead in his sadness.
I hear all kinds of voices here,
especially Jack's, always a bad sign,
tells me I'm pretending to write a poem.

Jack would say where are the musician's
black curls? Do you wear one on the corner
of your heart?

And sometimes he doesn't show up
for the Gong Show. If he reads this he would know.

The Phantoms Have Gone Away

The phantoms have gone away
& left a space
for beauty.

And the freedom from desire
leaves a stillness, a moment
when you believe.

This is that moment.
Visions of beauty
in an unfamiliar stillness.

They can be spoken to,
called by name.

Desire will not drag
them home.

Jack

Jack, dead at 40, sees me,
73, in the boring bar, waiting

for something to happen. There isn't even
a game on, just PokerStars.

At the Pub

At the pub I am pretending to drink at the pub, as writing a poem, I am pretending to be writing a poem. This is a valid activity. It is something that before I started thinking so much I thought of as art, or life, or didn't think of at all.

Hard to say what the difference is, between being at the bar, drinking, having a good time without thinking, and going now, having to insert myself into that role, sit on that stool, and think that is a good stool to be sitting on, the act of ordering a beer, a Pale Ale, a good act, & this role to be a good role—but not quite the real thing.

But I guess it wasn't the real thing then either. I guess then I wouldn't have understood the distinction, if it had been put to me. It must be all this thinking, all this knowing. Being at the pub then, writing a poem then, was quite apart from thinking. I didn't think then. I talked a lot, but I didn't think. But now I think this is all made up but it's all there is—save the body.

When I drink at the pub I say to myself, I'm drinking at the pub, & that's a good thing to do. That's the kind of thing a person would do who didn't think so much. It's good to write a poem, too, and if there's a phrase, any two words, a collocation, to consider it, it and its neighbours, the other words & phrases nearby it in the poem, study them, stare at them till they stare back, till you're not there any more & they can move, make the little positional shift something does that's coming to life in a scary world, coming to life to live in that world, maybe to save that world.

The poem I'm pretending to write—is that the poem on the horizon? You'd never know it.

When I drink at the pub I'm pretending to drink at the pub because that's a good thing to do, & when I'm writing a poem I'm pretending to write a poem because those are the conditions of my probation,

but when I ride the bus there's no pretense involved. When I ride the bus I'm just a bus rider.

Walking Slow

Walking slow to catch a fair
complexion.

Snuffling after your former prey,
pale cheek & neck, dark curls.
Do you dawdle, stumble over the man
in his bedroll at 1 PM?

Plan a trajectory to give the sleeper
a wide berth. Hop on the bus,
flash your pass, head for the back,
the right corner seat in the last row.

Always on the lookout for a cute kid.
But backs of heads, white earbuds in ears,
caps. Up front, a woman with a stroller.

"How old is he?" There's the community
of women. "Four months."

"Make room for the stroller" (the driver).

"You have to move." So she can sit down
& hold the stroller by the handle & set the brake.

You Want to Imagine

You want to imagine the words you would like to read
that would tell how the world suddenly came apart

more of how the parts, free of their false togetherness,
asserted their separate beings, the world of power without qualification,

the reality of pity for the innocent,
your own body & soul, blighted,

words that would grasp this process of disintegration, diremption,
as a moment of rebirth—

so the knowledge that no such rebirth is possible is one thing,
the rebirth itself another—

in the city, in lucidity for a moment
on the knife edge between truth (with no qualification)
and meaninglessness. That this observer will go

to one of the hospitals, and the young and
innocent who have never spoken

a script written for them by power
stay in their moments sharply divided
from your departure

and which proceed at a hundred perpendiculars
not to arrive at the same destination

no one to arrive at your destination but you
and power goes on,
a reality around your mind
seen as it would be seen, no interior
knowledge of it visible

just the way the air turns black
with an exudation of knowledge,
its own oil

I would like to read the poem
that departs from truth

at the cost of death
invisible to all but by its kindly stature

disclosing opening out
the eternal world where the others live.

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The passage of desire like a fact.
The heroism of young parents, another fact,
living with desire and with heroism
of care—how can they have been placed
on this precipice—always at the edge of being?

How can the world be so indifferent?
How can *they* be so indifferent and at the same time
placed at an extreme point, beyond even
all of their knowledge
and with desire?

Often it is as if everything has stopped
(though everything is moving, the bus is moving)
the heart without desire—is it a heart?
One must begin to gather *knowledge*
like this—the objects of feeling
without feeling,
the feeling of others,
second-best heart, Frost's
diminished thing

To make use of the feelings of others,
to make of them a cloak, to hide
from the screaming baby in the brain
(a cloak of invisibility
to hide insensibility)

always turn outward
world of heroism and indifference
and persistence, inertia, at the same time
and beauty—the beauty of innocence
even of one's own innocence
before death. Stripped of even the
desire for desire,

angry at the leaves you track in,

angry at the self you track in.

Home from peeping at the babies,
vicariously enjoying
the plight of the young
in their extremity
how can you be so indifferent?

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Les jeunes hommes on their way home from school.
Extinct fantasies.

They come to mind less often now.
Indescribable missingness.

Men and women take their place
(yes, men and women)
(you wouldn't be kidding us now, wouldja Mary?)
and strollers, and you ask, what are babies?
And, what good is a newborn baby
for whom you are already dead.

Electric shock of being looked at by a baby,
suddenly you come into existence, pierced,
then dismissed.

Pierced/perceived,
and to be perceived is to exist.

(Two generations of kids in the pub, X and Y)

The babies seem to stand up in their strollers
& raise their fat arms & grip
lightning bolts in their fists.

Too much pondering, too much walking
the streets ruminating
& then noticing, the strings of language
like chopped up DNA—
the illusion of “thought”
(these babies will wonder what that was)

O mournful. Strike any attitude.
Mark tells me, that’s what sucks,
attitude. So to remain quiet & let
thought silently recede beneath perception
like beneath a door-sill.

They are children, they become young
men & women. And at the meeting
my fellow board members’ faces grow
more sharp & pointed.

When in the restaurant a baby suddenly looks at me
I see myself in the baby’s view—
not there at all, & to recoup,
I look back at the baby
who seems on fire.

To be is to be perceived—by a baby.

The Infant

The infant takes a step & smiles, then turns back to look up at her dad, on the sidewalk outside Olympia.

The infant will live, god willing, in the world to come, will live *into* the world, taking a step, smiling, then look back quick for reassurance.

The world will hold itself ready for her step. The different parts of the world—the doors of the world—will open as she approaches.

Now she finds corridors and now ledges of mountainsides by the sea. All the ways the others live, unknown to them they work together to provide an entrance, a way for the infant.

And soon she is living and making her own way. And far away the police are chasing the bad guys who would corrupt her, and the soldiers are fighting other soldiers, to keep the world open, to keep the world wide, so the children can find the spaces opening wide for their ways.

Their ways through into the centre. Insensibly they lose this sense of making their own ways. They become masters of the partitions. Now they are older and they become the world themselves.

I am at the centre now, I am master of the partitions, I am master of the moving walls, I am the moving wall myself, but in it, moving as it moves, signaling as it signals, I still want my way back from that first step. Back to father, back out of the world, but I must be kind, it is not my turn anymore.

The last thing I see, everywhere, the new infants, descending from their parents' arms to the streets, taking their first step, smiling, then turning

back. There is no way to turn back. Sometimes you can stop and *look* a long way back, to see the family vanishing.

At the same moment you lower them into their graves, you look back & see them living, departing, backward, and now you are master of the partitions, a voice behind a voice in a moving wall.

Memories of Desire

I am unable to focus, I don't want to focus
on desires I can no longer feel.
Desires for power over
a younger, slender guy, a boy,
a son. A surge of anticipation
of the first touch, but first the words,
now mild, now menacing,
touching and talking,
touching after first talking, explaining
why this was good for him—and admitting, sometimes,
I knew it would hurt him more than it hurt me.

As flat on my back, I'd play with my cock,
I'd toy in my mind with the boy's emotions,
& touch his imaginary naked shoulder
paternally. And if it went well,
if the flow of pleasure came unhindered
at the last moment by interruption—
a holding back out of reconsideration—
then I could forget all about it, feel relief,
no different from a good, satisfying shit,
expulsion of waste matter recommended
by all the liberal scientists.

Waste matter of the body, semen.
Waste matter of the soul, desire.

But if at the last moment, the moment of release, I felt qualms,
then the qualms would pursue me throughout the rest of the day

until the decision had to be made about drinking or not,
to either blot out the knowledge of who I am
or go trembling with it into another night.

Memories of desire, memories of guilt,
of the primal scene of father and son reenacted,
the son now older than the father had been when he died.

Memories of desire, of longing, to repeat
the rite of submission, but with the roles reversed,
the fantasy son now reassuring the fantasy father,
yes, it is all right, for you to touch me, to talk to me that way,
I forgive you, finally.

Memories of desire, that now
do not reawaken. Father, again I forgive you,
says the son who never became a father.

Loss of Desire

It's been hard even to move the pen across the paper, suspended between the way the world is, presumed, and the hard to write words, near lies, relating experience.

Not to try to nail it, sentences long or short, bristling with qualifications, somehow *about* the way it is, it goes—another presumption, identity, who could care less?

Shall I slice up the world to offer especially tempting tranches? The poem is not much of a favourite in competition for eyeballs.

Maybe mere words... It always comes back to wheeling words (a difficult task, that, Wheeling West Virginia, especially without wheels. Without inventing the wheel. It comes back to wheeling words past the eyehole, peephole, of approval.

But the memory is of nothing—what is desire but a sense of meaning that dwindles, yes loses (lost) tumescence if you tell a story of it. It was that time, once, recognized, that some kind of node on a lattice, glowing without light. But drawn toward it, and the next time called the same thing, called desire. What was it like? It was almost more like smell than anything else, even though parts of the body gleam in recollection and recollection is a sweeping, stuff more swept away (a sweeping generalization) disclosing a shiny spot. That was it and then every time drawn to it recognizing it as the same and if not drawn to it but only mesmerized by the idea of it, a blatant lie, a whispering in the ear of passion, that it was there. I don't miss it, I miss missing it. I miss the lack of it, the failure, every time, to grasp anything but the scum of, the edgings of the shiny spot, the passion wound up, discharged, and left with the joke of being left out of it, turned away, turned down, a card,

again, not knowing what card (this is bullshit).

Still all I can say is that it was a place,
that desire that made all the difference,
that place that was not the world,
that seemed an ever available recourse,
a fountain to which I could repair—
(that's bullshit). Not a fountain, a dripping faucet, & me down on hands &
knees, an old pipe, in the alley, connected to another & to something outside
my life (my life seen as one of the numberless figures in single file towards
death). A colour out of space (Lovecraft)—it seems so odd to be
without it—out of it—like silence—like a silence experienced by the skin.

Desire for the Self

Laugh in surprise at beauty.
Laugh at your freedom from desire.
The boy boarding the bus may even
flash you a smile: Thanks for not wanting me.

Take this stillness without desire & breathe it.

But there's one boy who won't shrug you off,
and that's the self. Desire wakes at the self,
you follow him home. You look like
one duplicated figure with four legs
trucking down Broadway.

The self sets the pace & you follow,
the step behind keeping step with the step ahead,
the foot, the leg, the torso.

But this guy too
is not playing your game. Turn your self to your face & you see
the same patient mocking smile—don't you get it yet?
Step back & stop & feel the stillness & no, the abyss doesn't open.
What a joy to stand on the earth, in your own bedroom even, & know
your self doesn't want you.

But alas, there's a third, the desirophile,
nervous as hell, next to his reflection
in the bank window, alert to the hint of desire.

And when the desirer goes after the self,
he goes after the desirer. Now it's a six-

legged creature, out of R. Crumb
or Smokey Stover, step after step after step.

And behind the desirophile,
a whole string of desirophiles

After Desire

After desire the springs of longing
dry up, beauty is almost unrecognizable,
astonished that you passed it by. The background
wants to come into sharper focus, by default,
but you know the background.

And football keeps us going too, politics, reports from the slave trade.
Always readying ourselves for a funeral—being asked
to real funerals just sweetens the pot—
some kind of game or other always in play.

It's Friday again, time to do laundry.
The world trying to come into sharper focus
has nothing to offer but the impersonal.
Fair enough, but keep the old identity
in your closet, to be trotted out for wear on holy days.

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