

Brancusi's Egg

In the plaza of the Centre Pompidou
Hannah twirls on one foot,
her blue cotton dress billowing, her face clouding with a scowl:
I will not buy her the wooden ladybug
an African peddles--in soft appealing French,
with liquid eyes that meet mine--
nor the grain of rice engraved with the Lord's prayer.
Bongo drums beat, the air is thick with rhythm, with odors:
frying crepes, diesel exhaust and hot-house flowers.
Camera-laden tourists part like water
around the stone I have become--
feet rubbed raw, sweat tickling my armpits--so that
the cool lobby, when we finally attain it, is a
beneficence.

You are in Athens, dying.
Your air-conditioned room, shut against the mid-July glare,
is a sealed chamber, quiet but for the whir of the respirator.
Your lungs pump in unnatural steadiness,
unimpeded by sighs, gasps or words.
Your artist eyes stare at ceiling tiles;
eyes that caressed the dancing shapes
of the visible world now
touch nothing. Your empty hands,
the nails cleaned of ink, of clay,
lie gently cupped,
or wander fretfully
the blank expanse of sheet.
I am not there, and so must conjure
the room, the bed, you.

In the Sunday bird market outside Notre Dame,
Hannah befriends a fat white cat.
She is no party to fevered calls across an ocean,
to this nightmare limbo.
No, she is entranced
by the rucking of feather, the vain display of cockatiel,
the raucous calls of birds and vendors.
Greedy for life,
she wants birds, dogs, lizards.
I shake off the solemnity of the Mass,
the chill of the marble floor, the smell of beeswax
from the fifty-franc candles
lit to the Lady,
serene in her shadows. Here, outside,
I watch finches fight and feed.
Here the light is too bright:

I abandon you.

They tell me you come and go.
Go where?
Back to your studio, fragrant with wood chips
or acrid with rubber molds?
To the angels wrestled out of clay
on hot Georgia days?
Do you go back to us, to our large and small rebellions,
the slick arrogances of youth?
Or to a rowdy band of freckled kids,
to sunny days rolling down grassy hills,
to toothpaste kisses, to all of us draped across your bed
watching the Honeymooners? Or maybe not
to us at all, but to your own youth,
to the swing band and
companions stationed in Japan?
To your mother calling "Billy?"
Or to the coal scuttle in the frigid mornings?

Knowing, but not knowing
your light is going out,
and what am I doing here
in Paris, at the Brancusi retrospective?
Yet I soak it in,
the language of space, of light.
I enter as reverently as I had entered Notre Dame
and am surrounded by Brancusi's women:
blocky, substantial, stone braids down their backs
their faces birdlike--
stone, marble, wood
out of which emerge the ever more simplified shapes--
head, womb, egg, wing,
over and over,
the child's head so egg-like, the woman's torso becoming
less and less flesh and
more and more earth,
his work as it progresses going backward
backward towards some infinite origin, back
to the bird in the stone, the woman in the wood,
the green marble shark, one fin
swimming in the cool afternoon light,
finally, the bird,
nothing but a stone wing,
lifting.