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Transcendentalism

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TONY WHEDON

Transcendentalism

1.

After church, my dad's Dart leapt onto Soundside Road,
followed the curve of beach past the yachtsman's bars,
the Negro ponds, the drunken eelmen (dignified as herons);
and my heart quivered at a luminous lobster sign, its neon pincers
snapping at starlight, at the moon fallen like a clam
 into those ethereal waves. That Sunday—a
church evening in May—I believed in universal goodness,
 in the absence of any kind of sin.

In bed, I'd recall Reverend Weary's voice intoning Thoreau's maniacal
theme:

"We can't get enough of Nature," he'd say, and I saw
 the church steeple tumble,
its columns rising—Doric and barnacled—into some
marvelously ruined future. That was the word, "marvellous,"
a word rhyming with marble—a cold astonished word I kissed to sleep;
 the world—the church,
the gentle island air—everything I touched in it, was "marvellous."
Alone in my pew, I prayed while I dreamed Laura, a gawky Unitarian girl,
 into life.

The night before when I'd touched her cheek I'd felt beyond the church lay
a lighter world—beyond Weary's benediction there was Laura's
 henna-colored hair; three years
later we'd sail across the Sound, breasting a sou'wester,
sipping pink gin, our spinnaker puffed out, Laura figureheaded on the bow,
and Lizzie, Laura's willowy twin, at our Lightning's helm:
I can't tell you how much I wanted both of them; how the mainsail trembled,
or how we drank till that white-capped world dissolved: We lay at anchor
off Half-Moon Cove and as the wind dropped images—
 raw, mysterious—of two girls
who, as Thoreau had said, wouldn't—couldn't—"get enough of Nature"—
floated in gold bilge. I remember Liz and Laura nude on my
 sloop's teaked deck,
sun off the Sound baking their sleek bodies into porcelain.

Eliza Cook, in her “Diary,” defines the Oversoul as the outer skin of a Cosmic Onion—concentricities, slicked together by mutual love, breathe (like Laura, like Liz) through their skin, which means, to my regret, we can’t help loving who we love. I heard Miss Thorne our Biology teacher explain it one November afternoon, and I swear the classroom filled with a scent of lotion and perfume. “Osmosis,” she called how capillaries absorb—that is, how bodies breathe—“marvellous” is the way she explained it; and I lit on that word—as I would decades later on a hilltop in eastern China, the Yangzte’s lotus ponds and slow canals lacing beneath me and a Chinese girl.

The wind blew through the pagoda bells; and as I lit a joss stick on the altar of Kw’an Yin, I watched the past swirl up in Li Wen’s abundant hair. I held her on the bus at sundown, believing our belief fed the same blue flame, that souls rise from the living as they do from the dead, abundant and forgiving; but what I felt—its shape was lost in the dust and chickens; the bus bumped along a rutted track into a town that smelled—with its urine-filled vats, its filthy cabbage stands—past saving.

2.

Li Wen neither lover nor daughter—lived in a waterside village a few li from that pitiful town. At midnight, under a lantern-jawed moon, we ate juicy melons, drank pots of stinging tea. I played mah-jong with Li’s dad while her grandma chanted “The Heart Sutra.”

And I wanted to be a part of this, to let that Yangzte dialect wash over me in the slow oozing, hour after hour, of sweet river time. I thought the whole thing quite marvellous. In Shanghai, Li wrote poem after poem in a blank verse that called forth (in English) the voice of her sutra-chanting grandmother—these were written not with calligraphic brevity, but in loping stanzas of repetend on repetend that descended into the swarming fish pond muck of eastern China, poems kindled by Li Wen’s tattered *Walden* which she read and reread till Thoreau’s thawing railroad bank revealed, molten and delirious, the scrape of crickets,

the click of her grandma's thongs across damp tile. In Li's poems—
the rapture of whose lines
were layered like sleep, like necklaces—each syllable measured against
a raw spaciousness; in these Buddhist poems—inspired by
Emerson and Thoreau—I heard a language of optimism and innocence,
bathed in passionate agnostic disbelief. Outside Li's dorm window,
students rehearsed "We shall overcome," their harsh tetrameter
repeated hours
later on Shanghai's bund, Li's wren-like voice among them.
I thought of Thoreau's night in jail, of Martin Luther King's
reading of Thoreau, and how that message was transposed
into bell-like Chinese.
On the student barricades, Li said, Thoreau's voice rattled
around her head;
my disobedience will be civil, she cried, her bloodred commie flag
fluttering while a hymn-like Internationale rose from the student crowd.

And I thought of my easy piety, my radical posing—and I felt
ashamed. In Beijing, tanks crushed the Lady of Liberty,
and Li's winged sentences,
her hypnotic syllabics, seemed to her sad and wretched.

Then the panic set in.
The streets went a grayer gray—a sulfuric
mist pattered down for days. Rumors
caught fire, burned in wild patches, then guttered
out. That Fall the students returned brainwashed to their classrooms—
in China, Li said, there's no place, no hope for change.
We sat in a noodle dive off Nanjing Lu watching a monsoon
blow in from Japan.
Rain droplets pearled in the sleeves of Li's blue slicker;
behind us two young cops smoked in smoggy twilight, and I heard
the monotonous shuffle, the splatter of rain black as Li Wen's hair:
heard the lap of junks and barges on the Wangpu,
and a foghorn drawing its anapests
across the harbor. Next day, the anniversary of Liberation,
forty years since Mao's ragtag troops seized Shanghai,
the mood was anti-climactic, kids on the quay,

a poof of pyrotechnics after dark—I try to bring it back;
I'm there but not there, on Shanghai's exquisite edge as time loops by—
frame to smoldering frame—and my students drag through fall term
into a season drabbed by sleet and rain.
The fanatic turn to religion; others slip into a recalcitrant
Marxism. Who is this female Buddha they worship, this Lady I dream
one drizzly afternoon? Our Lady of the Springs,

a soapstone Madonna from whom the barren
and the brainwashed ask a benediction. For the first time in my life,
I really pray; I'm on my knees at the Jade Buddha temple,
soliciting relief for my student's suffering, but
my prayer has more to do with ecstasy than pain. When the bells
and conches bong, the stone arhats grin in recognition;
and when we leave the temple, Li says
if she had to do over she'd never leave her village.

3.
Now my beard's gone gray from black.
I heard from Li a year ago, tried to write back—
and twice the letter returned from Hongjou
where she's teaching at the university,
a lake city of gazebos floating on silk water, of lovers loitering
on Ming bridges. China's no way out,
she wrote (in veiled paragraphs). She's dropped
Emerson and Thoreau for a night course in Economics. Meanwhile (it's
late April) I watch snow spit against the cabin window.
I'd give anything to see the past flashed before me in quick
segues, for a moment of sun and sails, a sloop's prow slicing the Sound's
green crest, a Heineken bottle balanced on my breast. But it's a cold April.
And China's a dimpled dream, a ripple on the cosmic waters.
When the river ice went out last night I heard the hillside tremble.
Thoreau spent two years at Walden, but I've been here
fifteen winters, watching the snow linger into Easter.

Yesterday,
I skied to a meadow I rarely go to—
and I came on a freshly killed yearling,

still warm, rib-cage plucked clean by coyotes:
an assemblage of bone and gristle around which new snow tumbled, a
snow
so fresh that of the scurried tracks
only crosshatchings, delicate crow-prints,
remained: and, somehow, I summoned courage to see past the hints of
blood, the tattered
spoor, a lesson: not of mortality, but of the brute force behind that
hunger—
the scattered bird droppings... the yearling
a cleaned carcass—things I didn't learn
Sundays, those Unitarian Sundays,
when we sang "Trees" and the Reverend's voice
rose above our bowed, dreaming heads.