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Letters To Michael

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MARK McMORRIS

LETTERS TO MICHAEL

Dear Michael (And this shall seldom chance)

When she comes back the day is still drawing
to twilight, and the wind is fresh. The
clouds move hardly at all in the windows.
The feeling you have is of questions
beginning to nose forward like feet in wet grass
and the pace is slow, rhythmic, pastoral.
There's no reason to spin up the siren
alarms are common and leave things as they were
mute or pregnant, and bathed in half-light.
It is always there, under the surface,
voluptuous chords half-sensed, a whisper
(trailing fingers across a bowl of clear water)
that once you felt could rise up and demand
obedience from the most nonchalant pedestrian—
that man in a black suit waiting to transit
the boulevard, while mules and ox carts
lumber slowly into the future of perspective
into birches, into moonlight, and finally vanish.
Today is another matter, with rain dripping
from the gutter after a week of snowfall.
The chords are shining in the distance, like elms
lining a field you want to lie down in
and her beside you, oh yes, for a change.
The sound they make is tentative
but audible, the sharp notes well-spaced, shapely
with room to breathe in and together
and time suspended in the gap light crosses
from thing to thing and thing, the thing
you look for in the brilliant decline
of afternoon over the backyard rose bushes.

165

Past the torn fence where trash cans scatter
the whisper gathers force and starts to invade
a space you thought fortified against surprise
such dithyrambs as keep a body awake at night
parting the curtains to see what the dogs
already know of shadows in the alleyway.
Another daytime drama peters out in the envelope
of twilight, which turns chill towards dawn.
Disappointed—not really, not by that name at least
since tomorrow a voice might send metaphors
of itself over the transistor radio
breathless and new with common purpose
like the unforeseen discovery of the lunar orbit
or the origin of starlight, replaying
as certainty what was promised, at other times.

Dear Michael (19)

Once we played “sprung bone,” and bone flute
followed the curve of letters, and white masks
with mouths like caverns held our secrets
that were not repeated at the time, in the midst
of all that dust. Say that a horse gallops
from a field, that he finds a world overcast
with lead. The horse’s eyes are black marbles
the head is black like the night, turning
about a campfire, shadow of a Platonic idea,
or a metaphor. The name of the horse is desire.
The fountain was otiose. The other day I read
of a tale sometimes chanted and almost forgotten
of gardens walked in by big-voiced women
arrayed like Saturn with their hair all black
of sojourners at an oasis of blue larkspur
the washed-out mirror and miniature of the sea.
Clusters of blossoms dangled from the limbs
of evergreen galaxies, as close as breathing.
The sky was formidable, without an imprint
to nuance the Ideal it forecast. The lexicon
held such promises as this, but we were cheated
by edicts of stubborn ancestors, and went astray,
turning in a vast circle, like unruly shadows
on a sundial. Clouds make the shape of cattle.

167

Utopia once flowered like totems in the heat
stacked to interrupt the horizon, and the rest
departed and maligned Tradition as a mirage.
Until landed here, a window opened, and song
began again where nothing was to be, save

catapults and fire, and dirt trenches bloody
with bone from catastrophes no one recorded.
Ah sentience, what do you offer to those
who scour deserts like the Bedouin? What place
is this? Fireflies scatter from my hand.
These questions, choreographer and dancer,
I submit to the alphabet, and to your witness.