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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.
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.

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

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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.