Proposal to Misty

Denis Johnson

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The early inhabitants of this continent
passed through a valley of ice two miles deep
to get here, passed from animal to animal
eating them, throwing away the small bones
and fornicating under nameless stars
in a waste so cold that diseases couldn’t
live in it. Three hundred million
animals they slaughtered in the space of two centuries,
moving from the Bering isthmus to the core
of squalid Amazonian voodoo, one
murder at a time; and although in the modern hour
the churches’ mouths are smeared with us
and all manner of pleading goes up from our hearts,
I don’t think they thought the dark and terrible
swallowing gullet could be prayed to.
I don’t think they found the smell of baking
amid friends in a warm kitchen anything to be revered.
I think some of them had to chew the food
for the old ones after they’d lost all their teeth,
and that their expressions
were like those we see on the faces
of the victims of traffic accidents today.
I think they threw their spears with an utter sense of loss,
as if they, their weapons, and the enormous animals
they pursued were all going to disappear.
As we can see, they were right. And they were us.
That’s what makes it hard for me now to choose one thing
over all the others; and yet surrounded by the aroma
of this Mexican baking and flowery incense
with the kitchen as yellow as the middle
of the sun, telling your usually smart-mouthed
urchin child about the early inhabitants
of this continent who are dead, I figure
I’ll marry myself to you and take my chances,
stepping onto the rock
which is a whale, the ship which is about to set sail
and sink
in the danger that carries us like a mother.