At Chartres

James Doyle

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JAMES DOYLE

At Chartres

If we bunched together cathedrals, bow-legged horses, all the oxen left in the world, parsley, sweet corn, mead, the crawl of late afternoon and its blood paralyzed in old ballads, light laboring uphill each day to close the day, would we have a bouquet to hand the Middle Ages? Or would we still need faith to get through the nights?

A monk wanders the broken edges of estates as the millennium comes and goes, 1000, 1100, 1200, 1300, treaties, councils, papal letters rounded off to the nearest century. He is circling the banquet halls that radiate these waves of land. Indulgences pour through his fingers. A farmer has to stop his plow, peel back roots, scatter the rocks, before he can go on, complete the spring seeding, mark his name in the lower right-hand corner of the finished field, sleep on it.

We will be waiting for the plague when it comes. We will carry bramble in our arms to burn the corpses. We will clear the streets of ash, maybe even wear it on our clothes.
and foreheads. Death is different when you can sign patterns in it, heighten cheekbones with it. We will draw hoods over our shorn heads and go to the monasteries. We will learn to scroll radiant insignia in the margins of Bibles. We will be inaugurated in museums.

Every person in the tour group knelt down before leaving the cathedral. Yes, I counted. We could say it was the height of the ceiling pressing all that seamless air down on us. Or the sun's tides through the stained glass, waves coming right up to us before receding as if we weren't there. I only know that when I knelt I could feel each of my veins, one by one, bending with me, my body nothing more than binding for a sheaf of dowsing rods intent a thousand years later on once more scouring the currents beneath the earth.