GATHERED UPON THE LANDSCAPE

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About the Author
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The Fountain

I

Dart of birds and stroke of wind
By *La fontaine des Innocents*,
Where water trickles
On basins of solid matter.
Hypnotic the sensorium
Of the plaza becomes,
Full of men and animals,
Each affirming each,
Splendid entities of the Earth
Becoming more than real
Under the sun's lambent light.
At the center of the square is the fountain,
Lifted on a pedestal of marble or stone,
Glorious in ancient age and intricate
In its statuaries of deities,
Creatures, nymphs. What does it become—
This sculptured monument in open air—
In happening gatherings
Of strangers at its feet?
II

Derricks and crates, drills and cranes regulate the city's
Modern arrangement. Their machineries bruise views
To the sky's azure blue, to build the latest venue
For consumption—the biggest in Europe, the skeptic locals say—

Erasing a once sacred space now almost no longer there
For touristic navigation. A new appetite swells
From mechanisms of machines, and a former civilized order
Disappears, never again to be seen, in the routines

Of trade. What is imperiled in what is being erected?
In the plaza square, where the length of silhouettes signifies loss
Of light, a woman has to find her way out
Of this maze, this disaster in the making.

But before leaving, she makes a wish,
Her last coin now lodged deep into the mouth
Of the water fountain. Still and supine,
The day dutifully remains.
III

Between this corner and that distance,
This lazy hour and the next,
The little girl runs after doves
That fly and flutter and croon

In the city’s busy plaza square.
And when she screams in glee
At the sight of sudden flight, her still-bright heart
Worn on her sleeve for everyone

To see, we know her still-young life
knows no grief it cannot contain.
She is not suffering, she is innocent,
she is withheld from man’s original sin.

She approaches the fountain full
To the brim, delighted by birds that bask
And bathe in cold liquid and sunlight,
Her reflection in the pool of water

An evidence of her presence
In her surrounding’s well-managed decay.
A smile for what she witnesses—
Feathers everywhere, shadow
On the ground, circular motion above her  
   Swift as today’s path of sun.
Her joy too contagious  
   To be named, her face lifted

To the sky like a votive request.  
   When she points to a direction
Too common to be recognized  
   And says, “Maman, regardez!”

Her words are codes to what signify possession.  
   And we consider what have caught her attention—
How they glide and lift, soar and tilt  
   This side of morning—our eyes relearning

The lost beauty of symmetries.  
   Do we owe her an explanation
For the things she does not know?  
   For what may give, and be given up,

Once she learns, in old age,  
   What can arrive and leave?
There are no words. This is her relation  
   to the Earth that makes her alive.
IV

When I tell you to meet me at a point in the city
Where a fountain lies at the center of a plaza square,
And I do not intend to extend my instructions further,
The way I start a letter and end it midway,
Without proper punctuations or final
Valedictions, it is my way of telling you I am lost.
You must not trust me. There are many fountains, of course,
And there, too, are countless cities in this corner of the Earth.
But you insist for an encounter—to meet eye to eye,
Face to face—even if the resident flock
Of birds has already gone tired and left.
The trust you give me is too much hurt to admit.
I come from miles away, and my origin is a continent
Like a fact you have never heard of
And do not bother to respond to.
This anonymity drives your desire to own
What cannot be yours.

I am unknown to you,
Other to the ordered terrain
You are accustomed to
And talk about with pride.
Treat me with caution,
Dear stranger. To you my color
May be a blanket of danger,
My language, a primitive hunger.
I have endured cruel weathers.
So when I tell you your kind
Is too much for the threshold
Of my heart, your grace excessive
For what I can take in,
I am telling you
Turn your back and leave.
Meditation

I introduce you
to the stories
I have collected in years,
one uncovering
the other, each
confirming each.
I talk about the dearth
of pleasure, the permutation
of grief, the battered
woman who whispers
wilted flowers of my dreams.
Almost always I speak
in terms of excesses,
like the ominous stretch
of the walled city,
like the perennial habit
of build-and-collapse.
Today I show you topiaries,
the projection of steeples
toward the sky.
Somewhere, daylight
on the pavement,
on the unassuming face
of a child. I confide in you
what the skyline amasses
night and day. Then I point
to a direction and speak
of an expanse
of land, seeds, a shell
found nearby a dead
river. Which means
I am thinking about grace.
Which means I know
about your yearning
for fields and fish—
palpable proofs
of what is not here.
So when I tell you
this place is yours,
as it is mine,
you must believe me.
We are gathered
in the Metro,
and you must learn
to say yes.
Passage

There should be more time like this, to sit and dream.
It’s as his cousin says:
Living—living takes you away from sitting.

-Louise Gluck, “Twilight”

Sunset came early that night, and the sky easily turned into an unusual pitch dark. I parted the curtains of my room, pushed open the large glass window leading to the landscape outside, drew a chair to sit on. It was slow and silent, this process of moving things around. Before me, a partial view of the suburbs of the city in which I study. I took hold of what I saw: houselights warming the horizon, tendrils and vines slithering through walls, a woman peeping through her window at the beck and call of the neighborhood’s resident crow. I did not know what I wanted that August summer, countless miles away from home. I turned away, I left, I arrived. The view was a betrayal to the grime of the world that made me. It sustained me, gave me bliss, the scent of wonder that rose from its ground was hard to ignore. Offering itself like an invitation, it was to be had. In those minutes of calm, between the French skyline and myself, something had begun: a connection maybe, a deep reflection on what could be mine. I was a young man then, selfish and impressionable. I was too happy to know betrayal, too hungry to abandon abundance. All I wanted was to be free. Come in, the visible world seemed to whisper, and I entered. Who was I to say no?