

Luke Sawczak

“We were dark . . . we all were then.”

Burning lights in a sea of lights,
fireflies and moths, young people lost as Europe.
They come here from Chicago, Oklahoma, and Uzbekistan,
San Francisco to Boston to Toronto,
to sit and drink wine and beer in Paris,
to drink Pain Liquide, and talk about
NGOs to develop land, Nordic robot people, programming as poetry,
how to keep friends when circumstances change.
How surreal it seems to me, that souls should find each other
in one bar among dozens, one city among thousands,
one planet from which you can see just how many stars.
“We were dark . . . we all were then,”
says one of youthful university years,
and another, nineteen only, gazes at him starstruck,
because she sees herself in there, dark,
smoking hand-rolled cigarettes and looking like an angel
though she’s only a baby, talking about art, and laughing.
In another’s eyes, those of a young messiah
baptized by a role in Occupy, dim light
but the way coals contain the fire:
can erupt into the air at any moment.
Looks haunted like Adrien Brody. But he laughs.
Those who don’t work always laugh loudest.
“We were dark . . . we all were then.”
Glints of silver under black iron clocks

like so many Kabbahs, foundations of planets
drowning themselves in affordable liquor,
looking back to the Bastille with hindsight,
thinking: Would I revolt or sit and drink?
Would I have fought or had religion?
They say the good life is collaboration.
Must I too make my pilgrimage, long past
the time the first fire was extinguished?
Here everything is done *en masse*.
These strangers don't know turning away tarot
from the Roma girl approaching isn't done.
When you are shown a way, don't close your hand.
Our angel is nineteen, miles behind his twenty-one.
Ghost monuments leave space the night fills in.
We drink to them. She looks to him; but what's
this gold shining underneath scorched skin?
"We were dark . . . we all were then."

The alley

It's like this now, but it may end
in an alley in the rain,
under heaps of blankets,
my eyes my last shreds of dignity
if they are not by then wild.
The world is wide, and closed,
each corner taken and owned
long, long ago when you were young
and I was never born.

I am ashamed, walking, of a man
blowing leaves out of his driveway
and then even out of the road.
I can't even look at him, or at myself.

They tell you the joy's worth
the price of admission, but not
that the heartsickness means
you'll be kicked out, nor
that there never *was* admission,
nor a door, nor a place,
nor joy, nor you, nor the world
where we could reckon and reason
and choose what might happen.

For now, I can be wise and gay
in my talk and work and in my gait,
but my heart hides a future

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where I wait in rain and dark,
the longest part of life by far,
to be swept impossibly away.

The Valley

I woke with the phrase *mais à la fois* the Mexican Something
dying away on a tongue that tried to form it again.
It was the other name that humans give a pufferfish
that closed a poem—I know I'm telling this all wrong!

The poet had gone miles in sandals over thistly jungle floor,
I think, and scattered rocks, and the poem was called “The Valley”,
but it was about how after all the roughness of the world
“real love” or “life” was to stand barefoot in the tide, coolness
at your ankle on the sand and smooth black stone, and to be cooled.

It was a poem by T.S. Eliot read by Anthony Hopkins at the end
of a movie that didn't deserve it, yet which seemed because of that
to be itself a thing of grace: as though the message of the movie
were that it had been unworthy of what it tried to say
through its entire runtime. Eliot never wrote the poem, I know,
but I did once,

fifteen minutes ago, while I was elsewhere.

Now I'm writing whatever comes in case it smells the same.
The poem had three stanzas, four lines each, with rhyme and meter.
It had taken a long time to get there, through a world catastrophe
that turned each nation on the others, where I'd crawled away
with gun in hand and tried to live. Now we were watching this movie
as a family in the theatre, and I knew that to the left of me,
if I should turn, there would be tears in my mom's eyes as well

when they showed the feet immersed in water, walking not along
the beach but further out and deeper in, knowing something
was out there that wasn't to be found on *terra firma*. It's my belief,

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as I await my steeping tea, that's where the pufferfish came in,
an afterthought—it was only a part of the poem
that Hopkins discovered on seeing the back of the page.
Maybe my body woke me to stop it going any further.
I wrote that line five times; I'm editing: I'd better stop.