

Douglas Kerr

Suspicious, Homeward

Your suspicion, David, was right about moving directly to the Czech Republic without a long interval back home in the arid colors of seasons in California. Desires ached from grafting slender insights of Japanese light onto scenes in Bohemian tales. *The full fall moon, large, at hand, and the wet ayu scales, the skin of the “sweet fish” shimmering across the weir’s ribbed bamboo slats at the river Oi’s edge* wouldn’t take to or brighten the ruffled figure of the last Premyslid king whom pagan nationalists killed on the worn church steps in Olomouc. There was no shriek, no blood warming royal velvet and furs, nor were eyes shocked null—and I remember a quick disappointment that it was not the “good king Wenceslaus” of the Christmas carol but some unknown Wenceslaus III. What did “take hold” was the float of ecstasy in sensuous testament: *sooty snow crystals clumped in corners, trailed along crevices; the run dull of sandstone ledges, and at length gray day spire tips.* I couldn’t stay to teach English through the winter because it sounded like Czech or Japanese. It was a dissipation of words. The physical plenitude of speech dissolving touch. In Santa Fe on the trip back to Berkeley these sensations peaked and opened a hard vertigo in the territory museum: Mexican jars gaped from the jagged rims of their broken sides, the silk and satin hollow of an aged wedding dress wailed. I rushed out to the plaza and the smell of sage in freshly fallen snow calmed me as a harbinger of the west I know.

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My suspicion is that the boat off the coast of India, as well as the other myriad locations of ‘calling’ from which you and your family proselytized, gave you an alert want of place. Traveling on a nearly deserted Czech train, a lolling redeye, you were able, more than I was, to lead us with great bursts of evangelical bravado into a rousing cry “how great thou art” and then temper our enthusiasms with tasteful, well-timed swigs of beer in choruses of “amazing grace,” the sweetened hymn out of slavery. We’d chink our bottles, Missionary kid and Baptist boy, in the silences of the verses we’d lost, and the metallic knocks on the tracks rhythmically carried us outward. What was the name of the small country station where we left each other? The little crowds milling around the train exchanged their good-byes with such patient and casual expectations. Our love felt reduced to a cohesive anxiety.

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Now it is at least 12 years past. I no longer would use the words desire, float of ecstasy, plenitude, lolling in the same manner. I would not

write thus mimetically. I no longer send you letters,
only brief emails. You do not reply much.
We have not been to Olomouc to see you
since E was 2. Computers now are so
prevalent in our writing & teaching.
All this occurred at a point over which
the change took hold. I have always wanted
to send you money to relieve the burden, so
Ladka could sing more, maybe you drink less
or for other reasons. Are you well? Do you
look older? Balding? Heavier?
What I write now replaces what I wrote earlier,
yet there is not much difference from the original
end with departing Japanese trains.
There is a similar classical trope of time
passing. There is a relevant self-
conscious writing, persisting.
How are your 3 children, the beer, the house,
the students?