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West Coast Mythistorema

*“Our country is a shut-in place, all mountains
And the mountains roofed in by a low sky,
day and night.”*

— Seferis, *Mythistorema X*

I

Sometimes the mountains shut out the sky
and throat-pipes constricted
we gasp for air.
Other times clouds lift
and the sheer extent of heaven
makes us land-sick,
losing our balance where the river treads
a cold grey line down through alpine passes.
Already those who came before
knew there was no going back,
no westward haven to which,
like the refuge cities of old
one could run in one's hour of need,
no further parting of the sea
leading to some promised land.
Those who put down roots here
knew how thinly they grew,
top-soil washed away by salt and snow,
ghost towns where gold seekers came to dwell,
settlers from earth's four corners,
never quite sure why they had come,
what restless energy drove them on,
their skeletons consigned to graves
with moss for sheets
and stone markers, often in an alien tongue.

II

You can hear the shamans at night
amidst the numerous inlets that dot the coast
but all must be still,
no motor boats, cruise-ships sailing north,
garbled sounds of a centaur civilization,
half chaotic, half addicted to the code of work.
Plosives, guttural sounds, an occasional cry,
blend with gulls along the shore,
or the smooth flight of eagle,
wings streamlined, almost motionless against the sky
that in the distance seems to meet a point
where killer whale holds land and sea
suspended on its back.
Bear and beaver have been summoned to this ancestral rite,
and raven, tricking the first children who crawled
from the gelatinous mucous of a giant clam
deposited by the tide
to revel in the sand.
Before the fire dies down
and the young have drifted off to sleep,
legends are embedded into poles,
carvings to keep the founding myths intact,
even as the shaman's voice grows mute.

III

No Argonauts sailed this way,
no warriors in hot pursuit of an absconding slut,
nor does the landscape bear the mark of overlain ruins.
We are so young,
and explorers whom our civic texts
try desperately to celebrate
could be down the block, cutting the lawn,
walking the dog,
or leading hiking groups
along the West Coast Trail.

IV

Religions come to us from far away;
those who are self-sufficient
have grown to do without.
For others, there is the fervour of rekindled faith,
a desperate need to relate
to a creed rooted in another age,
to mime the words, observe the formal rituals.
There is no burning bush by Jericho Beach,
nor do the fish in Okanagan Lake
redeem the Gospels' miracles,
even if one keep vigil for forty days,
or fix the sun where it sets towards the west.

V

As for politics,
the Persian Wars, the fall of Rome,
the yoke of feudal lords, Bastilles and sundry revolutionary wars
are foreign to these shores.
But we grow passionate in our hates,
the right with its nasty streak
for elevating private greed into an affair of state,
the left with its utopian zeal
for an eco-welfare paradise.
There are Mammons to be served,
cult goddesses and social trends,
bonds of commerce stretched
across the great expanse of water
that has displaced an earlier sea.
Yet our search continues
for a communal sense of place.

Arbutus Trees

Their roots like Gorgon locks
flare from the escarpment
against which a winter sea
pounds its unconscionable beat,
tearing at the loosened earth.
A felled one down the beach,
where the herons stand guard
probing the shallows with their beaks,
has blackened fingers instead of leaves,
its branches mangled by the surf.
Those still clinging to the cliff
lift foliage high above copper-tinctured bark
shredded into strips,
oblivious to the waves
that inch by inch reclaim them for the deep.

Siwash Rock

What elegance each step
of a blue heron
stalking prey,
what symmetry a bevy of ducks
cresting intertidal shoreline
this first spring day.

Vancouver

The most liveable city on the planet, they say,
which seems true enough on a mid-August afternoon,
sailboats dotting the bay,
picnickers at crowded beaches
competing for summer heat
and precious square centimetres of sand.
Sunlight casts its spell,
and hearing over and over again
how wonderful you are
has a hypnotic ring to it,
much like lovers gently rocking
to rhythms of the midnight hour
or first sight of running water to the parched.
We who grow old here
have like Cavafy's Alexandrians
learned to treat such messages with suspicion.
Those bereft of love
find little compassion betwixt concrete condo towers,
those with few means dwell in the same Inferno's circles
as the bereft of other cities,
and those in hock to the god of greed
are no less addicted to living in the suburbs of insatiability.

West Coast Muse

Between slivers and cracks,
hollyhock, tiger lilies,
intonations of autumn looming,
you feel her presence.
No full-blooded Aegean muse,
who stirs with the morning light,
hugging shore-line and mountain-tops
with overflowing palette and Maenad gaze.
Her West Coast sister is more laid-back,
like folk who dwell in these parts,
pursuing whimsical passions and desultory beliefs.
Yet even here sunset off Spanish Banks,
behind cascading ridges
ignites a darkening canvas.