

The Pleasures of C

—
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Paris

There is, mother, a place in the world called Paris.

*Après le déjeuner, au café, my mother lights a Gauloise, flicks some ash onto her plate, blows a cloud of bluish smoke into my face. I start to lecture her about smoking, then remember she's been dead for thirty-two years. The obvious signs of age in my face don't trouble her. Maybe she forgets that I'm her son—I see that neither my father nor my wife is here to remind her. Always talkative, she's almost giddy as she babbles about movies—*Bob le Flambeur, Tirez sur le Pianiste, Le Souffle au Coeur, Les Enfants du Paradis*—that I know she never saw while she was alive. As she speaks I notice her resemblance to my youngest daughter, especially her sea green eyes and the great bush of auburn hair she still wears fifties style, in a permanent wave. She reminds me that Vallejo learned to walk in a special way so that his shoes wouldn't wear out. As she recites his poem about chestnut trees I look out the window and see chestnuts in full leaf, green at midnight where streetlights caress the tips. Through our window a few barges remember the Seine's current. *Let's step on one of those boats, my mother says, and ride to Dijon. Then we'll take a train to the Saône and flow to the sea, float the Mediterranean to Africa and disappear.**

Fireworks over Ryōgken Bridge

Poetry is a human art,
like cocksucking, like finding
the angular knees of young men
under after midnight tables at Brink's
or the Blackstone Grill. Always
fireworks: under a sky
of dark blue gin
Hiroshige has filled the harbor
with boats. You see
I've learned to do this
just like you—one visual
reference, one dropped name,
a couple of autobiographical
details. Always
in italics, those quotes—
*a man cannot be a poet
if he died.* Hiroshige's
capillary of fire ascends,
apogees and wilts, a dazzling
plummet earthward—
because all desire dissolves
in gin, in night, in sleep,
in dreams, in poems. So many boats
under that bridge, and on one
a man's hand finds a man's knee
under an after midnight table.
What did you say in those hours?
*Your alchemy can change my clay to skin.
By our human art, we mime the sleeper till we dream.*

John Coltrane, Half Note, 1960

Without his horn.

Framed by a dark
doorway or window,
right hand a blur

of glare
 as he leans back
on his arm—

a big man's relaxed posture.

That he should know his strength,
the weight
 of the body
he rents in these years.

His left hand rests against his lips

as if he might succumb
to a sudden need
for solace
 and suck
his own skin.

On a hanger
a white coat waits
for somebody who needs
thin cloth
 against this cold.

Just as a singer
lingers, all night sometimes,
until a song arrives.