

The Gazing Eye Falls Through the World

- for Ono No Komachi, 834-880 A. D.

Philadelphia, almost dawn. The Delaware stares
Back like lilies. In their ten thousand sets of eyes

A hawk's claw moon again, hung barely,

And there goes a train clearing snow
For someone beautiful. And while she isn't sure

Why, she's dreaming of moving again
While a Japanese poem whisks by in shapes the snow makes:

*As certain as color
Passes from the petal,
Irrevocable as flesh,
The gazing eye falls through the world.*

The heart does break.

Ono No Komachi did not beg for her beauty back
On the streets of Kyoto, and the boys running
Past her did not throw carp at her feet,

Nor did they force her to see her age anymore
Than she already had, for she was fire, only

Smarter. *Yet, I exist*, is the line she hides.

Her eyes, hazel if the sun glanced her face
As she turned away from the street and toward the sea,

Would tell it another way, distilling, as they had for years,
The Sea of Japan until it was a shawl draped across her back,

Its wind carrying the scent of a snuffed candle, until
She was a little snow drifting onto white paper

Containing no lines...



A stack of white paper, in fact, packed
In a box and taken cross-country.

Even if this story weren't true, I'd still tell it.

I traveled with a woman whose eyes reminded me of Komachi's,

And on a train stranded outside Strongsville, Ohio,
We held hands as long as we could.

The trees rustling lullabyed like waves.

I'm keeping this picture.

In another, the man—crack, angel dust, loss—who clicked the camera
Must have said *Smile Sweetie* because she is,

In one of those blue Nantucket chairs.

Her feet don't touch the grass, and behind us
An afternoon drifts

Into Michigan, a horizon of stains stirring
A song from a wren I used to be able to hear.

These kinds of epiphanies, friends, rise as blown snow,
As flame. The cosmos is trapped inside me,

And her, now, and her muffled laughter
Into my arm that day,

Her laughter and surprise mingling with pity

At the man shifting his legs and arms, looking
As though he were fretting an equation he couldn't factor

Into this last decade of his life, one failed attempt
At kicking after another,

How he almost moved in concert with things
Around him, with the august music of snow and Mozart

He could see from the high window of his room.

And now it's me fretting over that day when he held
The camera, zoomed us in, raised a finger, then pressed

The ball of his hand to his temple, the gesture
Of Aquinas flirting with confusion, only

To disappear into a fog covering all things
Worth glimpsing, as it always does, because

He had resumed his sermon, the one with no ending,
Whose ellipses carry the scent of ecstasy:

Sulfur of a snuffed flame and crystal-led breath
Blossoming by his heart.

He shook, briefly, and dropped the camera to the grass,

Indifferently as a dirty shirt, or notepad full of slant rhymes,
And sat under a dogwood.

She couldn't speak, so she laughed.
If laughter is a kind of music whose theme is forgetting,
Then I hear it transposing a temporary affliction,

Happiness, perhaps; belief

In an incalculable beauty of numbers;

The sound of her voice hailing a taxi to the airport.

∅ ∅ ∅

And so once more the scene is full of perfect reminders,

Whatever form harmony decides not to take:

The Delaware carrying a baby carriage, wheels-up;

A rusted muffler pushed into its bank; and deeper still,

Her freckled forehead when she used to lean over me

As I napped in our yard, the past kissed and set spinning, even then...

And now...the searing bliss of the runner's high
I've learned to acquire, sapphire gin on the rocks.

And the names we gave, the smallest stories
Of a flocculent sun that seemed to matter once:

Jelly Bean, Baby Man, Gloria & Zeus, Honey Suckle...
I've tried to forget, and tried. In time,

I will, with practice, and extravagant, long-winded lists.

Still, they were all we had, so we held onto them,
Almost fiercely, and without any regard

For reality, whatever that may come to be.

Today, it's a river, snow in the form of words,
Me humming a Paul Desmond riff, for sadness

Gravitates toward other sadnesses.

Each night, after his third scotch, and feeling an air
Pearl-pure in his lungs, he'd light a Lucky, drag, then ride

The lowest *b flat* his alto allowed.

The smoke grew from the bell like a lily,
Trickled through its keys,

And when he was done, streamed the rest
From his nose with a grunt.

This was triage for the soul, and while cancer transcribed itself
Onto his lungs, he could taste the purl of heaven,

Which came from the reed.

It burned a little and carried a hint of tobacco, maple wood,

And Glenlivet 18.

When he leaned over to kiss the girl he thought he saw and knew,

There was an empty space with lilac still lingering.

Actually, there were many,

Though their names became one drawn-out phrase
Whose root was in the key of loss,

Or *b flat*. It's easy

To get lazy in a world like this, to let the shoulders slump
Under serenity's lassitude,

To let the eyes fall through it all, like light.

Near the end, she and I simply stopped listening
Because what we had to say amounted to a gesture

Of confused indifference:

A flick of hair over the shoulder, tapped ash, the head bent
Back, as though to climax, a throat

Opened and releasing its smoke, enhancing
And ending slowly all the rhythms of pleasure the body allows.

It takes a while to figure this.

It's meant to.

Good-bye anticipates both sides of nothing.