

WINTER'S COMING

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It is an amusing game, especially for a dark winter's morning.

—V. Woolf

TAKE THAT CHAIR beside me and watch: look out. Look out straight ahead through the window. Forget the stand of trees among the clear transparence of light, the sun's messenger.

Never mind the flock of sparrows stealing through the sky streaked white as undersides of shell or a pale wash of laundered watercolor. Never mind the currents stirring up—the empty rattle.

Focus past to the scooping hill, the brittle yellow, lime, the constant horizontal of the distance chiming.

There. You should see it now. Pictures reel steady-streamed as water, echo the remembrances so clear at first and fine—each edge of thought a steady line wrapped around the perfect image, faraway.

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Small boxed tables stuffed with fruits or greens line the slender walkway of the marketplace. Sometimes the sun will pick on shiny trinkets hanging on a wooden crate above the stash of chicken feet. Five-and-ten-cent house wares like wire dippers for deep fat fryers or feather dusters dyed like brilliant, fiery, flaming pink or saffron flares are made glamorous among ruins of pressed duck and somber black umbrellas. Mostly it's the dwarf banana or the palmy, emerald cabbage and you don't know what to make of it. Everywhere are mounds of foodstuffs grown in tiny plots along a mountain side, watered from the buckets tied to sticks, sticks balanced on the shoulders. All the crops are picked by hand and bundled in bouquets and hauled to market. It's Sunday morning and here we are with everyone else, scavenging necessity.

Squeeze the star fruit and search for bruises. You won't find any, won't even see the star until you slice it open, exposing in the pulp the five pointed petals buried at the center.

Would you like to see it? Here, let me take my knife.

Watch your step. Careful of the streams of water etching concrete. Paper sticks to your sole and single leaves of mustard that were broken from the stem mop the street. Peel of Bangkok oranges falls like little parachutes, touching down. The vendor offers you a wedge, clustered sweet and tender.

Dear, it's ten o'clock. For as much as there is produce, there are as many children, farmers, girls, old women, families, street kids, magicians, sages, gamblers, priests, villagers—all milling in the market. You must walk slowly, take your time past the bitter melon, make your way past the squid, the sea urchins. Burrow through the crowd around the hawker pushing orchids, birds of paradise, chrysanthemums and white gardenias.

Stop to buy—still with skinny stems attached—a sack of olives.

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You take a flight of stairs to the rooftop of the building where you stay, golden Peking apple in hand, gift from the marketplace—the vendor took a shine to you. No solid flags are planted here on the squarish mountain top, but still you have the shirts and cotton printed undergarments snapping with the pillowcases strung along the makeshift clothesline. Looking out, you see a barricade of structures gouging the skyscape. All is smeared gray. Beyond the tops you see the water, the great sea chopping steady where softness is the final medium. You feel the buoyancy, even though your feet are stamped against a slab of mined granite, and the sounds of traffic rolling out below are rumbling through the surfaces, up the stories through the walls, up the superstructure, and spreading through the roof, through the leather of your shoes and up your spine—out your certain pair of eyes. You are not shaken. The sea is soft. It spills like music over all the distance you can claim: the north distance, east distance, west distance. The sea fans out like a shell and is radiant. You want to take your hand and stroke the ribbing on its surface. You want to take the toy boats home with you.

You know from experience they are not toys. Yesterday you walked along the harbor for the afternoon and saw some figures cooking inside a tent strapped over a boat where flames shot out like watchdogs. Then you turned your head to walk on, stopping a few feet down, a few boats down. Flags blazed from the deck—red ones with a yellow slice, ones with stripes, ones with emblems staring back. Incense burned from little sanctuaries at the bow. Wooden mastheads carved from ancient trees were gods. Sometimes you saw men in undershirts drawing up the nets, and dots of a cigarette flame told you someone inside there was looking back at you. Life for certain in that sheltered, dark-cradled womb was a nocturne. Yet you stood in light of day where all was visible.

Remember, you moved on. One German shepherd started barking from the boat and paced back and forth on the length of his chain. Occasionally you saw the whole armada tip from side to side as the water nipped the stern and edged the moss that grew just above the water line. Rows and rows of boats that housed the sea people—you learned they were not toys.

Neither were the dinghies that had landed in the village and were planted several feet below the soil. The cloth tarp that had been draped across the top was now replaced with aluminum or tar paper. The old woman beat her rugs and disappeared inside the space of a fist. Rice boiled in a pan outside the arched opening and over by the water pump, clothes were being pounded on the stone by a clump of house girls as school kids pranced like puppets, chirping, "Hello, hello." Next door there was a factory where small flashlight bulbs were put together by six or seven workers, filament laced through half a dozen treadle sewing machines, the room otherwise empty. "You are beautiful," they had said, as you traveled further on to the silent temple.

The sea is soft and you want to take it home with you. The rooftop rumbles, but you keep on with your view, looking past the buildings, past the harbor to the sea consuming all the distance. Don't look back to Twin Lion Peak. You tried before to find them, they were gone so there: don't bother anymore. Forget the hidden outlines, the undulations in the mountain side that make the mane, projections for the face, rocky eyes.

Amidst the feeble land the sea is constant.

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She sits in a Buddha pose on bare concrete paved before the shore. Her hair is matted, sticking up like candles burned all around her head. Her face is brown and small and smeared with soot. Every now and then a jolt shoots through her pose to end in a jerk at the wick of her head. Body lumped in rags, feet like leads, her eyes remain the same two soundless pearls. People walk around her day and night as if she were a puddle, showing no aversion, no expression, as if she were invisible in her space along the shore, six large bags of trappings circling her, the fortress she can lean against and dream of next time's big catch of rainbow fish and oysters. She's rocking in the water now, sea salt span of blue, the cool blue spring, and bed. The breeze laps at the window where the moon leers. The window frames a field of stars, star fruits and children and the fleet of sails.

Your head starts to reel with all the pictures now like pin pricks of light in a darkened movie house that slither here and there as whatever moves them shifts or slides. Recall her once again—the woman with the faded mask tossed aside the sea. How can she be like that, you say; every time you pass, you see her, thinking, yes, she's disappeared, but only to the others—don't they see her? Watch her breathe. Her heart is surely live inside her paper

cage, beating like a sparrow, isn't it? It must, it must be there, for there she sits, face turned east and the sun is gone. You think she waits for one of five Chinese brothers from the fairy tale to come. She waits for him to come to swallow all the water.

You see her as you take a glass of water to a feverish husband. You see her out your windshield when you pass the mill pond, Lily Lake, the seaside where the great rocks wait for ebb tides. You see her in the rain, same gray looming and it won't let up. When you snap back, you know she sits there still—faraway, too far to touch, too far to understand and silent as the figures anchored down inside the hull of the boat village.

Pyramids of fruit, orange and red, the yellow plums and apricots, dried papayas, cakes, almonds pressed in creme, dragon fire from the corner at the marketplace—it comes together now and follows you to this place, to that place, when you're twenty, when you're fifty. Still the light and sea and harbor faces. Your vision of the city migrates to the middle of the ocean now and that old vendor with the apple shows up inside your piece of pie and orchids grow in granite in the moonlight when it casts a certain shadow that reminds you of the leaf and the looping petal. You spot the buglike aeroplane and see a pillowcase flapping stories up. The holiday parades are boats; designs inside kaleidoscopes, anonymous flames.

And that old woman. Maybe she was just a pile of rubble and rags that billowed when the wind got tangled in the hollow places stored inside. It's been so long but still you see it, don't you? Look, over there! Over there beyond the ridge of lime and yellow in the distance chiming, the armies pecking at the hill top.

See them tip their heads to the sparrows?

Yes, winter's coming.