

Martin Earl

THE OLD QUEER

While his younger friend was buying bread
He stood among the children, the nearly dead,
And the terribly poor, just looking, holding
The plastic shopping bag, no longer waiting
For something significant to happen. And
When his young friend came out and said
Something, witty but trifling compared
To his just standing there, separated
From everything, he remarked, I'm just so far
Removed from the concerns of these people.
It seemed that a kind of compassion
Had distanced him, as though he'd wanted
Proximity too thoroughly, and shot right through it,
And now stood there alone, on the other side, looking back.

In the evening they spoke of many things.
Conversation made the older man seem younger.
And the younger seemed older, the one
Adding experience which the other subtracted.
The way they could complement each other—
Trading roles—the younger speaking from
The staged vantage of wisdom, mimicked;
It was like a dance in which disbelief
Took the hand of time, and a confusion
Of perspectives ensued . . .
And he, irreverent, enthused, contradictory,
Wanting to scandalize his friend, and somehow
Reassure himself at the same time, could say
Such irresponsible things, then laugh cruelly.

He is the kind of man who could say
Of a certain author, his genius lay
In his stylistic defects, in the agonizingly
Long sentences, the irrelevant tangents
Which seem to march forward in thickets
Of foggy sentiment, in the obsessive concern
With impression to the near total dereliction
Of plot . . . and be speaking about himself with such
Candor, such exactitude, that he blushes, falls
Off, confesses that he's happy just reading
A sentence or two a night, because there is
So much in them which connects so sublimely
With what is so little in him. He sits
Among Moroccan rugs, opera, television.

ROAD

I have a—possibly false—recollection
of a donkey parked near a gas station,
with trees beginning to sway,
heavy with rain. It brays.
Its wet coat is dirty yellow
like the clutter at the base of hollows
of leaf and paper, or, in our rooms,
the tinge of tea. Nothing blooms
but cabbage and nettle.
The fanned flow of motors in the rain
is punctuated by what seems increasing pain
as it winds tighter on its cord and will not settle.
Whether it is the beauty of categories,
or the beauty of complaint . . . we pass by.