

Sunday Afternoon at Fulham Palace · *Elizabeth Spires*

Putney Bridge, London

A Sunday afternoon in late September, one of the last
good weekends before the long dark, old couples
taking the air along the Thames, sunning themselves,
their arms and legs so pale, *exposed*,
while the young press forward, carry us
along in the crowd to the fair at Fulham Palace
where a few people have already spread blankets and tablecloths
for the picnics they've brought, laughing and talking
as they wait for the concert to begin at three o'clock.
Inside the palace gate, a man inflates
a room-size, brightly painted rubber castle,
the children impatiently waiting for the walls and turrets to go up,
the spongy floor they like to jump on.
The palace is empty. The Bishop gone.
Now overfed goldfish swim slowly round and round
in the crumbling courtyard fountain, and farther on,
a white peacock stands still as a statue,
still as a stone, whether in pride or sorrow
at being the last of its kind here I don't know.
A low door opens into the Bishop's walled garden, but once
inside nothing miraculous or forbidden tempts us,
just a few flowers and herbs among weeds
(unlike those illuminated scenes in books of hours),
the past passing away too quickly to catch or recognize.

Out on the other side, we pick our way
among booths put up for the day,
one woman, predictably, passing out pamphlets
on nuclear winter and cruise missiles, as if she could stop it alone.
The Fulham Band takes its place on the platform,

the conductor announcing as the overture,
“Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines,”
the crossed shadow of coincidence, of airplanes from Gatwick
passing over at two-minute intervals, touching us
for a moment before they fly into the day’s
unplanned pattern of connections, the music
attracting more of a crowd, men, women and children
making their entrances like extras in a movie,
in pairs, in families, no one alone that I can see
except one girl, no more than ten,
lagging behind the others, lost completely
in a vivid, invisible daydream until her mother finds her,
brings her back with a touch on the arm,
and the daughter says, unbelievably,
“I was thinking about what kind of anesthesia
they’ll give me when I have my first baby.”

The future expands, then contracts, like an eye’s iris opening and closing,
walling me into a room where light and sound come and go,
first near, then far, as if I had vertigo.

It is easy, too easy, to imagine the world ending
on a day like today, the sun shining and the band playing,
the players dreamily moving now into Ellington’s “Mood Indigo.”
Easy to see the great grey plane hovering briefly overhead,
the grey metal belly opening and the bomb dropping,
a flash, a light “like a thousand suns,”
and then the long winter.

The white peacock. Erased. The goldfish in the fountain
swimming crazily as the water boils up around them, evaporates.
The children’s castle. Gone. The children. The mothers and the fathers.
As if a hand had suddenly erased a huge blackboard.
Thank God you don’t know what I’m thinking.
You press my hand as if to ask, “Am I here with you?
Do you want to go?” pulling me back to this moment,
to this music we are just coming to know, the crowd around us
growing denser, just wanting to live their lives,

each person a *nerve*, thinking and feeling
too much as sensation pours over them
in a ceaseless flow, the music, as we move to go,
jumping far back in time, the conductor choosing
something devotional, a coronet solo
composed, and probably played here, by Purcell three centuries ago.
All is as it was as we make our way back along the Thames
to Putney Bridge, the old souls still sleeping unaware,
hands lightly touching, as the river bends in a gentle arc
around them. Mood indigo. The white peacock.
The walled garden and the low door.
As if, if it did happen, we could bow our heads
and ask, once more, to enter that innocent first world.