

Leading to Your Hands · *Patricia Hampl*

The blue Chinese carpet
in the hotel lobby
was the only place
I really wanted to make love.
In the *lobby*? (Your round, literal eyes.)
Not the carpet: the cobalt dragon,
his worsted cloud. Not the palms,
not the room or the clerk standing there,
asking for the first night
in advance if we didn't mind.

In the bar the female vocalist
had ash in her voice,
the twenties in flint and drizzle.
Not an original voice, but Gershwin
died young again in her throat:
the man I love,
the man I love.

Our room smelled of hot showers,
vague damage. We made love there.
We slept. I heard you moan.
You said I spoke.
We're getting to know each other
was the complexion
you put on these things.

Then the walking, the city of slants.
The sidewalks were tall ladders.
We're tourists, you said, so we walk.
Also, we held hands.
In Chinatown we ate black noodles
and were insulted by the waiter
which we decided meant
he likes you, he really likes you.

On the cable car
you put your arm
around my shoulder.
It wasn't gorgeous or reassuring,
any of the things it might have been.
This was weight, burden ending
in the pitiless bloom of your hand.
I'm often depressed, you said, meaning
this is intimacy, the treasure
handed over, the soul tendered.
Other men have said I love you,
but you wanted to give something
personal, something that sinks in.

It looked like this:
your arm across my shoulder,
a man touching a woman on a cable car,
casual affection, maybe long marriage,
unconscious gesture, tourism.
Wrist, knuckle,
the soft pads of the palm,
the straight-edge of each finger,
the moony nails,
the hypnotic tracing
of my cheekbone,
the black marble table
I first reached across
(I started this, yes),
some pale drink you were holding.

That's the life of desire.
But intimacy is this passing
back and forth of bitter news,
stale bulletins, accrued unhappiness,
the family's old gold.
What I wanted (I started this)
was your body. Forever, but
don't laugh.

Breathed fire was the idea,
wild animals, passion
I'd heard about or imagined.
But forget that, forget
the long story I was planning.
As usual, I oversimplified,
even though there was that good omen
we found together in the library:
the city directory from 1900
with our grandfathers' names
on the same page,
both marked Laborer.