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Letter to Oregon, From Montana

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LETTER TO OREGON, FROM MONTANA
for Jack Wendel

Old friend, I am nearly awash. My house fills with boiling sound, the unfamiliar clatter of rain against tin. The garden dampens a darker green. You might think some strange orifice had opened in the churning sky. I know better. Oregon is moving east.

*

It is evening. Worms sleep at the roots of things, in rain-swollen apples and soft, ovular pears. The streetlights are muted. Like the torches of an underwater city, they struggle to burn. The house shifts and settles. *Oregon is moving east*, I tell the quaking walls. Though asleep, my cat believes. In her dream of elusive fish, she drowns and drowns again.

*

Perhaps, like two old sealions, we should meet and discuss this damp despair. And forget what isn't worth remembering, until nothing remains, but mildew and two chairs by a streaming window. Already, I'm discarding an image or two: white, coiling dust; the last edge of sunlight; love in a sweating room. Tell me, if bones turn wet, won't they crumble like decaying stone? Yes, we should meet. I have many questions. And a letter is not sufficient answer.

*

What is a letter, after all – a crude approximation of internal weather, a report from the coiling guts, some epiphany clarified? No, a letter is a mask, a clown's painted face. Once, you showed me a certain shrub, with white enfolded blossoms. Patiently, in a cool scientist's voice, you explained their inner workings, revealed, with gentle finger, the tiny sexual parts. Now, as I tend my garden, those white blossoms – emblems of an earthly paradise – set me trembling, bring my blood to a raging fullness. Nothing could be simpler. This letter, symbol for

what might be true, remains a grinning, lying mask. And there, on the mantle, beside photographs and a broken pipe, the wild sexual blooms of rhododendron breathe, are present, and presence is true connection. Each afternoon, for my pleasure, they elucidate forbidden texts, strange erotic practices. And each evening, I prove a willing student.

*

Tonight, my cat swims across the floor. And I caress a woman's thigh, touch the essential dampness. In that bottomless, liquid well, my fingers drown and drown again. Her breath quickens, her soft breasts rise before they fall. *Writers speak a stench*, said Kafka. He was sorely mistaken, that fearful, saturnine man. Her scent – *of seaweed and stale sweets* – still lingers on the hand that writes these words.

*

Do not be fooled. Some days, the white blossoms are stained and withered; they do not kindle my loins. A botanist, you understand these things, the inevitable turning of seasons, the small deaths and births. On such days, I let the needle scratch across the grooves. I close my eyes and listen; hard-pan drums, sly piano and somber tuba, the stinging wail of trumpet and clarinet, locked together in pure conversation. Jazz, jass, jism, stained sheets in an uptown hotel: the world begins again. Underfoot, sand crumbles like *tabac du caporal*, that foul and fuming blend. Mice gnaw my dreaming feet, the bindings of old and beloved books. I will not be bothered. I am listening to the creation of a world. A botanist, you may not understand this subterfuge: an old record, a mechanical, wind-up toy. But the music is elemental, rising out of roots and stems and leaves, out of the ancient, surging earth.

*

Asleep, the woman smiles and stretches, arranging her limbs. She is composing: a song, a lyric of ecstasy. With her body, her round, Grecian form, she composes the simple verses. They are not to be sung. They will not translate. They must be danced. In a softly glowing bed, at the hour when rain is music.