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Beyond All Ken

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Beyond All Ken

I don't know anything about banquets
given thousands of years ago by Egyptian aristocrats
living in villas along the Nile.

I wouldn't know about dressing for such an affair—
the chaos and clatter of metal combs and curling
irons, the feel of the cool, vaguely
transparent, linen shift gathered into place;
or lining my eyes, for instance, with black kohl
kept in monkey-shaped jars, a naked servant girl
fixing gold jewelry to my ears.

I wouldn't know how to fasten an herbal-scented
wax cone on top of my head or how that wax-and-oil
mixture of perfumed spices might feel slowly melting
during the evening, the rich heady fragrance
of the pomade released, seeping
like an anointing, about my head.

Date wine might be sweet and penetrating, and roasted
long-horned ox astonishingly tender and rare.
But I can't say for certain.

And how could I know about the boy
(dead now for thousands of years) on the other side
of the banquet hall, that boy for whom one dressed?
or the excitement, increased by the noise
of the double clarinets and sistrums,
the heavy metal discs swinging from the dancers'
pigtales, that excitement of imagining again
and again the hidden and mysterious
furry place of his body?

I've never been in a courtyard, in a garden
beside a pool where blind fish slip
in and out of cavernous lily roots.
I've never seen the moon shining
with its white hallelujahs through myrtle trees

or making jubilant shadows of cedars
along a path. I've never listened
for the footsteps of a young Egyptian boy.
I don't know how his voice might sound, whispering
my name over and over to me, or the manner
in which he might kiss the perfumed oil
from beneath my ears, take it on his lips
eventually to my breasts and belly,
how he would part his clothing
to free himself as he eased forward
and forward, his dark mouth open above me
finally in a long cry as if he had swallowed
the moon and become at once all its streaming
celebrations. One might neither recognize
nor care for anything else in the world
at that moment, not era nor time nor person,
not the blowing myrtles nor the resurrection
of the river, not the fetch cat yowling
behind the stable, not the greyhounds
baying in their cage.

But I've never been to Egypt or slept
beside a boy four thousand years ago
beside the Nile, and all I know of such affairs
is simply everything I know to say
I do not know.

Pattiann Rogers