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Unpacking the Stone Buddha

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UNPACKING THE STONE BUDDHA

Like all weaklings, I desire
something else—
intangible, but shaded and cool,
just on the other side
of this high, stone wall, the loose clear chime
of ice in glasses, and someone diving
into a pool. It's only Wednesday afternoon
but there's a little garden party, tuxedoed men
with silver trays, quiet laughter, you catch glimpses
through the hedges, or ivy-covered
iron bars. They have a shaded grass median
to jog through. There is a quiet intersection
with stone gazebo and fountain.
You can turn the corner
and relax in the sculpture garden
among ancient masterpieces, among modern works
few people understand.
Across the street, in the Museum of Fine Art,
they're unpacking the stone Buddha
from its wooden crate. At 11 a.m. it's 99 degrees
and 80% humidity. The lawn crews throughout the city
seem unfazed. In the basement, unseen
by Houston's millions, they unpack the stone Buddha
on loan from Ho Chi Minh City. Sandstone,
2,000 years old, removed from the earth in 1863, buried there,
they believe, by flood. No one knows
about this, no one comes to see it
three months on display—a basement gallery
where no sun can touch it, the dimmed lights
and dark painted walls, most guests mistake it
for under construction.
I leave my office with headaches

from the cold air we're piping in
and walk the rich neighborhood.
By living here, they can keep everything at bay—even seasons:
when the flowers stop blooming
they're dug out. With money, they have conquered
landscape, the drab moments
between color. In the basement, the stone Buddha.
Cut from the rock, polished down to these
thin fingers, one foot raised as if about to step down
from the 2x4's surrounding it, into a strange kind
of afterlife. Down in this dark room
we're trying to bury it like the river, to put it back
where it belongs. We're holding our breath
with a crowbar, popping each board.
It can only be lifted out by hand;
we must touch it, although the contract says
no one can touch it. I go look at it,
squinting through the dark.
When our three months expire
we send it back.