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Unpacking the Stone Buddha

Craig Beaven

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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.