Beyond All Ken

Pattiann Rogers
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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' pigtails, 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.

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