

Jonathan Minton

From *LETTERS*

There is matter, there is void, and nothing else, you said,
as if the words were yours. There is the pleasure when we speak

and pain when we perceive whether it is true or false.
We break so easily, and then we imagine monsters, uglier than ourselves,

with heads in their chests, eyes in their shoulders, thick-furred bodies.
There is seldom clarity, you said, in what scares us.

But it wasn't the unknown I was afraid of.
It was this plateful of mirrors, mouthing each word I say.

from *LETTERS*

In the 4th century BCE, the Persian king decreed
that soldiers guarding the Grecian bridge should untie one knot per day
on a string of sixty knots. On the last one, they could return home.

The Roman *m* derives from the Egyptian consonantal *n*, depicting waves.
If I could draw my voice, as an arrangement of dots along a willow bending
low towards water, or knots in a weave enumerating generations,

with blank spaces to follow, or rivers emptying into harbor,
if my hands could place stones in the likeness of hands, or marking
something hidden, as if any of this could say *come home*.

from *LETTERS*

Put into one scale the pleasures which any object may offer.

Put into the other, the belief in an abstract sea where the future drifts.

If I must believe in the sea, I will imagine a boat house.

I will imagine a world of leisure, a world without pain.

The most effective means of avoiding pain is to retire within.

I will imagine a world without water, a boat moored to a high cliff-top.

I could fill this letter as I please with perfect triangles and squares.

I could imagine an infinity of boat-shaped squares, tricycles in a park.

I could imagine volumes of water emptying into an invisible mouth.

** Adapted from Thomas Jefferson's letter to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786*

From *LETTERS*

Our failures were like a thicket between adjacent harbors.
We stepped across their like spear-tipped thorns.
Above us, the stars softened into pale moss.

When we had nothing else to say, we returned to a house
stranger than we remembered. The porch had fallen,
like a mouth, and swallowed the garden whole.

Small animal bones were scattered among the weeds.
You said this would be our sentence
until it weathered like fossils pressed hard into brick.

You said this was a myth about the quickening of ash and seed,
the shedding of skin. You were an augur tearing every page
from our book until it read as a catalog for things

we could never purchase. There was never a siren
calling me to water. I was a boy holding a bell but refusing
to speak of it. It was a kind of fate. It is a kind of fire.