

Michael Joyce

Last World Tour Before La Peste (for Peter Antelyes)

We lost track in the symmetry of the two half-dozen oysters, Duxbury and Taunton, we shared and couldn't recall which one of the last two, from Massachusetts or Maine, remained to the each of us. I left it to my old friend and colleague, who, hearing that I really had no preference chose the smaller, sweeter, Duxbury, by which I intend neither sly comment nor critique, being in fact happier with what the menu termed my one's "lingering sweet kelp finish."

We were celebrating each other's retirement in an empty bistro with large mirrors and leather banquettes and a fair approximation of the menu in a like place in Paris, here now however like the deserted dining room on a cruise ship in a film. The portly (no pun), waiter-bartender whose accent at first we thought Russian, plays his part in reply saying he's Portuguese by birth when in mauvais français I mistakenly asked was he a French woman (Êtes-vous une française?). On our way out we chatted with him about Vinhos Verdes and he spoke about how good and how cheap the wine was when he last went back to visit his mother while she was still living there in Porto, not long ago, before he himself went back to South Africa. Mystery of his accent solved, we headed home neither of us to emerge for a year or more.

Acts of Contrition

In the midst of cataloging my sins, I think instead of the feet of nuns, having stripped off their dark stockings and standing perhaps on a plank floor next to their beds. I do not think this is one, a sin that is, although surely a concupiscence, which I am surprised to find the Catholic Encyclopedia defines as “In its widest acceptance... any yearning of the soul for good.”

Nor are they necessarily ivory feet I think of, but rather those of the young Malaysian sisters at mass this morning, so modest and fervent in the pew next to the more gregarious older one smiling about the congregation at the sign of peace like an Irish alderwoman hunting votes.

The queer feminist theologian I am reading now speaks of the eros at the heart of theos, much as in prayer “in your arms” summons the Body of Christ as a fluid erotic presence. Perhaps in our time what used to be called an examination of conscience has instead become a form of entertainment or self-indulgence, sorting through a cabinet of curiosities looking for old lace and fin de siècle French postcards, guilt accordingly becoming a refined form of lust. Still, even as a boy before I had any sense what it meant, women’s feet occupied my dark, exciting dreams, which the sun, like the dazzle of a lifted host, could never fully extinguish.

An inventory

What prompted them to save smooth stones wasn't clear to him. It wasn't a formal collection, rather instances placed throughout the house, on a desk, a mantle, in an oval bowl on a shelf, gathered into a small, square basket like eggs. Of the two on the desk before him he knew the speckled came from Prince Edward Island but the gray ovoid, a lighter intrusive speck dead center like a tiny eye, had been there beyond memory. Vija Celmins took five years to paint bronze copies of the eleven stones she picked up around Taos, while it is said Amma Sarah lived beside a river for sixty years and never looked upon it, her eyes intent on god, a tale that seems made up by jealous men who could not abide a woman's flow of contemplation.