
From *Thursdays Are Almost Images of Being*

ROBERT KAPLAN

(Selected by Jonathan Tannenhauser)

Fledged in a tongue remote from those that gave
substance to passing shapes, how can I speak
but at a third remove? Not mine the cry
of eagles in the rushing air above
bleak battle, nor beside the warming hearth
the voice of him who sealed event with song,
Demodocus. But in between the tea
and sandwiches, on Thursday afternoons,
some pleasantries may pierce a window through
the tinkle of civilities to let
harsh need and enmity a moment in,
a glimpse, before I draw the curtains closed,
of seagulls circling endlessly above
the Charles, savage slaves of appetite.
Then to the shaven acolytes and pale
magisters of a referential art,
the homesick Dane, the Boston Latin Jew
who offers grooming up to diligence,
the Exeter aristoi and perhaps
a goddess or a stranger in the midst,
my similes may summon Athens up
and touch with brightness the familiar cloth,
this Georgian grace, this Harvard ease, until
Thursdays are almost images of being

and I, in whom these similes resound,
take on the mantic fervor for a time,
attuned to song, instilled with memory,
blind to the gap of likening and blind
to bloodless eidola of academe
grasping at me as if I were their kin,
father of fools and husband to a shrew
or master of a house that wasn't mine.

Each year the Greek and I set out to sail
past islands of enchantment and the bounds
of innocence to wisdom, he alone
but I with fresh companions. And each year
the clashing rocks, the clamors are the same,
the changing sameness of the autumn moon
once more exalts the dome of Eliot
and on her courtyard casts the shadowed shore
where, half immortal, the Phaeacians dwell.
Days in their courses, like the gods within,
declare a common measure. Row on row
the faces that look up to mind are those
their fathers bore when first I carried back
Odysseus' oar to Ithaca.
And if at fifty now lunettes intrude
between their eyes and mine, they magnify
what eye must own, that through the bend and blur
the figures change, their attitudes recur.

Lodged in the heights of Widener looking down
 I saw the hunchback hobbling through the Yard.
 Was it the sunlight flashing from his rings
 or did a splendor go with him, who could
 elicit the Symposium from one
 sealstone of Eros? Afterwards we knew
 he was no scion of the Baltic but
 the obverse of a centaur, bearing off
 the minds of undergraduates. They formed
 as solemn a procession to his shrine
 as that which once in Athens brought the robe
 up to the Parthenon to lay it down
 before the goddess who (he showed) had turned
 her back disdainful on them. They in stone
 but he in harder memory is carved
 while all around the Lapiths at their feast
 drink with the lusting Centaurs.

If my thought
 lurches it is to keep the limping step
 of corybantic music.

Socrates

was beautiful in ugliness, and what
 teacher was not half man, like him who reared
 Achilles and the wise Aesclepius?
 The spines of books obscured my vision: first
 his nimbus went, but while the shadow still
 struggled along behind him I could see
 him toss his noble head above the strong
 shoulders, from which the body trailed away
 poignant and inconclusive as a myth.

And you, Hermesianax, autumn flower
of all that seemed the endless Grecian spring,
what of you lingers? Your Leontion,
corrupt, a single copy in St. Mark's,
“...he whom Oeagrus bore...”, “...the arid lives
of scholars...”, ἐκ συνοχῶν (emend. Diehl),
“...painstakingly the spirit of sweet song...”,
a fading coruscation of the fire
that burnt the semblances of things away.
Your love was woody Colophon, a glimpse
through pines of the Aegean, grapes and figs,
the shadows chasing languidly along
the arms of your beloved, like strange words
entangled in a supple metaphor.
Although the aster's touch you thought to save
by artifice long since has thinned to air,
between the oversaid and unexpressed
your single voice elusively yet sounds,
as when through bright cascades of lyric dark
hapax legomena declare their names
that have no other meaning than themselves.

He was my student and he would have been
with patience my successor. But the gods
put gaps in human consequence to keep
logic distinct from time. He heard the flutes,
he saw the snakes of Dionysus, felt
another order sharpen as our small
delights in order blurred, until he left
shadow and dream, and lastly time, behind.
Now of his mortal presence, what remains?
His Sophocles, his Homer—but we have
more fixed than stars a firmament within
of distant lights that light us not at all
(so little do they care for need and doubt
and all the chance of human consequence)
but we must steer by, brightened instances
become exemplars. Niobe is grief,
Patroclus lost companionship, and he,
noble incontinence that leaps the gap
distinguishing the human and divine.

Graduates, we have watched so many days
lighten in Lowell's east together, pause
resplendent on our paths until the Charles
drew them unwilling down; together read
so many books, exchanged so many words
rubbed lustrous mind on mind; that almost we
become each other's selves. My thoughts in you,
your hopes in me take on a common cast.
It is an understanding we compose
of intermingled effort, rimmed around
by day with wonder and by night with awe.
Not selves but their entanglement becomes
a moment iridescent. Carry off
our mutual accomplishment with you.
Yet courtesy, restraint, a readiness
to recognise the god in all things help
half only: may a state of luck be yours,
and when the autumn ushers in new selves
may my heart be hospitable to change.