

Oh Watchman, What of the Night?

Brian Brown

The following verse I recited on December 10, 1978 at a farewell party for me at the Riverdale Center of Religious Research, the Bronx, New York, where I spent a graced year with Father Thomas Berry to whom I dedicated these words and who alone evoked and inspired them:

Unfinished thesis, finished for the night
I wander down stairs in this house that has been my home.
I have known its silence before in a year of nights
and have haunted its rooms often at this hour of favored quiet.

But tonight, like an improper Buddhist, I stand warmed
by the memories of enchanted months, shamelessly, flagrantly moved by
their passing.

The red-tiled entrance, lit for the night,
reflects now the images of how many departures...for the Seychelles and
Los Angeles, for Toronto and Louisville, for Washington and Greensboro,
Detroit and San Francisco.

What enthusiastic journeyings of happy goodbyes!
The casual corduroy prophet of earth's wisdom and heaven's goodness,
of passports forgotten, of a bag with only books, of detachment's mirth at
the prospect of the challenge and the relish of the audacious phrase.

To the left, in the great, dark-wooded room
the Chinese and Christian fathers sit in their shelves of green and purple,
exchanging the muted silence of their common mystery.
A paneled hugeness—it is empty now of its May-time volumes, the scattered
lore of a universe piled deep and wide across its table, awaiting the
magic distillation that would become June's conference.
And its ceilinged solemnity still pales at the revered Benedictine of a summer's
eve, impervious to the gentle demands of an immense magnitude,
the spirituality of starry energies eclipsing the shameful boundaries of so
impooverished a monasticism.

A few steps beyond, and China and Japan expansively lie before me,
along their wall of moonlight. While the Hindus and Buddhists are patient
in an appropriate modesty, sharing shadowy space with myths and
symbols, Dante and Blake.

It is a room of rare texts and of Brittanic knowledge, yet somehow, only the
antechamber, the passageway to the site of my most attentive scholarship,
my most frequent inspiration, my warmest and most constant laughter.

Multi-glassed prism, reflecting onto rock and river,
I have known such a gladness in you
That will warm me in my going and lure me to my return.

I have sat at your table of frequent polishings and only reticent shines
through lunches and dinners of quartets and sonatas, concertos
and symphonies, hearing beyond these-only-partial strains, the
song of the spheres, the wondrous movements of time's transformations,
through the voice of earth's sage, my spirit's father, my heart's friend.

Greenhouse porch of my imagination's growth, I have sat dumbly
for a year like one of your potted plants, content merely to listen with
geologists and bishops, technicians and planners, contemplatives and artists,
engineers and scientists, dearest friends and fellow students.

Content to root in my mind's soil

the vision and the challenge, the perspective and the approach,
to be schooled in the responsibility and energized by the tireless dedication.
Though you have been a room of the most sublime idea and critical
thought, of the most sober evaluation and urgent quest,
I shall stand in the breeze of the Caribbean night
still smiling with the constant laughter of your year's grace.

The sky is pale with moon and stars, and as I turn to go,
instinctively I hear the question of night's sentinel, holding its branches
protectively for this house that has been my home. A question posed night-
ly as I stood for a year and shared its rooted stillness, before sleep,

“Oh watchman, what of the night?”

A time of memories and their tears,
of ideals and enthusiasms,
of deepest admiration and warmest gratitude,
of affectionate welcomes,
and happy goodbyes.