
Gwyn McVay

Entering War, Being Literal

I.

A group of women in their nineties
have dressed, for the occasion, in soft crepes
and taffetas and stiff rayons, not one of the black gowns
costing less than a thousand dollars.

The old women, as might be expected, are sweet
as rain, nodding, nodding, perched on their iron bench
admiring a crow-gloved hand, a delicate lignite slipper,
rendering dreamy judgment on what passes by.

II.

Carry nothing, nothing you
value, your empty torso, fresh
wet roses that break

Stones hurt the women's bare feet

Between shot and echo is a lapse of two
seconds, one-one thousand, two-one thousand,
that makes *facing it* impossible —

 Is it expiation
enough, for us, the next, now, to scrape
blood from our wrists and faces
into the dull stone letters?

 Self, here, is put mute,
written over with rules that at one time were names

There is no disobeying them,
 Walk to the deep end,
whose top is over your head, where black in a black
 mirror
we call it *planetesimal*, the gray names stellar dust

or smoke from tracer rounds, welcome burnt gasses
that hang, gray vessels on a night-air retina

The very last name on the east point is *Alba*,
"dawn," a joke, or the light from a falling flare

III.

Our special sale is the Dragon of the Four Winds,
pleasing showers of purple-gold, a bargain at half the
 price.
We have the Spinning Diamond and the Flying Saucer,
 same
but for subtle differences in their color and rise.
The Apollo Rocket, a three-stage explosion, the Snake,
of which it is no exaggeration to say it scintillates.
For your finale may we suggest the Tree of Heaven
or the Showering Willow, a full thirty seconds
during which your customers will see another world.
Each shot illuminates the smoke of the last—the ache
for the light just glittered out is what you aim to create:

the desire in either case is the same