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Phantom Noise

Written by Brian Turner

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BRIAN TURNER

PHANTOM NOISE



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Viking 1

Viking Lander 1 made its final transmission to Earth

NOVEMBER 11, 1982

On approach to Mars, dune fields in the distance,
the spacecraft descends within a storm of dust
before landing on the Golden Plain, Chryse Planitia,
which is a vast and stony desert, a graveyard
of shadows cast sanguine in their repose.

Cameras click in shuttered housings. The landscape
a pornographic scene caught in apertures
opened wide: sand tables in their martial aspect,
compass points, barchan dunes, the far horizon's body line
in rocky silhouette, where Earth is a small, warm light
rising zenith blue beyond the dusk, where I am still a boy,
barefoot on the wet grass of the San Joaquin valley,
the millions of miles between made closer by opposition.

In the old days, they say the desert Arabs hung lanterns
high in the date palms, a guide for friends and strangers
traveling by night. And maybe that's what I'm doing
as I search for lamps in the night's vast amphitheater,
even if I don't know how to put it into words –
I'm searching for the face on Mars, so much like our own,
made from dust and to dust returning, the wind's erosion
calling into the void with that brutal instrument, pain.
And like so many before me, I listen.
I want to hear how the great questions posed by ruin
are given the elegant response of stone.

How we, like Aphrodite, are seduced.

Phantom Noise

There is this ringing hum this
bullet-borne language ringing
shell-fall and static this late-night
ringing of threadwork and carpet ringing
hiss and steam this wing-beat
of rotors and tanks broken
bodies ringing in steel humming these
voices of dust these years ringing
rifles in Babylon rifles in Sumer
ringing these children their gravestones
and candy their limbs gone missing their
static-borne television their ringing
this eardrum this rifled symphonic this
ringing of midnight in gunpowder and oil this
brake pad gone useless this muzzle-flash singing this
threading of bullets in muscle and bone this ringing
hum this ringing hum this
ringing

Lucky Money

It is 1971.

At Willie Lum's Hong Kong Restaurant
I am four years old and this is my very first job:
carry the steaming tea by the bamboo handle,
deliver it to Willie Lum's ancient mother.

It is much more difficult than a simple balancing
of heat over distance. There's the back kitchen, gleaming
in chrome, knives, the crackling of fluorescent lights.
There's the old man at the sink strangling the dishes,
the dead look he has for children, that bang
of pots in the slosh of the tub, and the back door,
how to squeeze past its riveted metal sheets
to the most difficult of all,

the bridge, the plank –
that weathered twelve-foot board which spans
the ledge of the restaurant's back door
to the porch of his mother's trailer and below that,
seven feet down, chained on a leash of stainless steel –
the bullmastiff, gnashing its teeth, its larynx
growling from the deep pit of midnight,
the nerves of my skin aware of the bats
skimming the oak trees, walnuts
forming in cerebral shells – and I walked out
into the universe, the frightening unknown beauty of it,
my hair turned electric. This is where I learned to walk the line
over bristling fur, the rough lungs of a language
calling up from the depths below, all I must ignore
if I want to cross over, a boy of four with a pot of tea
for an old woman buried in afghans, lit by Chinese lanterns,
an ancient one who gives me red and gold envelopes,
who says *Lucky money. No spendee. Lucky money.*