

Wayne Koestenbaum

when is a place

(a playlet in multiple voices)

horizontal lines you want to eat

can you eat a landscape

she stands with her back turned to the audience

do we resent her diffidence

and then the road curves its sullenness away from us

are we included in the journey's invisible destination

the effaced sky contains no salvific information

skies, whether butch or sissy, formerly implied doctrine

as if nothingness had a "boner"

she might be a fashion model standing lone on the field

a raincoat covering her magnificence

her fear of inclemency exaggerated

we are spared the rigors of conversation as if in *Persona*

a forked tree against bleached-out white sky demands redress

is *Night and Fog* always "at stake" in this banquet of images

why is any empty blurry field with few or no inhabitants a concentration camp in memory

why is stasis and statuesque calm always shell-shock

the road keeps curving away from us like a threat or a deprivation

the lowering sky, the unconditional sky, the not loquacious sky, the hurt sky
the bumpy pasture, the characterless pasture, the bereft pasture, the monstrous pasture
peasant woman or maybe just unfashionable
discovering her affinity with tree
discovering her own disappearance and the ghost of Robert Ryman
whose "whiteness" we photographed
whose apparent emptiness concealed differences as ridged as filth
we sought filth where it was not required
the image didn't provide the filth we'd begged for
somnolent as riding a train through a punished night
clean laconic line drawn across the waiting sky
you were deposited on this earth to answer the riddle
I haven't yet told you the riddle
the burning bush sometimes flirtatious rather than menacing
every natural protuberance has a voice, ribald or vituperative
like caramel in the mouth when you are passing this landscape on a slow train
in a sweater he turned away from me after I rejected him
is it possible for a photograph to instill guilt
nothing depicted contains recrimination
a changing room's ultimatum when the bathing suit is tossed on the floor
the hush in the room when the model takes off his clothes
black band on the image's left-hand side to make us remember the slap

the slap given to us by silent refusal, when she turned away, smoking in the parlor
her smoke creating this blur we consider a higher power
blur taking us away from our puniness
no way to mention your heavy-lidded élan
you sit shirtless at a table prepared for a literary feast
a piece of bread torn into small pieces
what comes through the window isn't Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"
the apparition resembles God if we blur our eyes
if we soften our gaze we won't see the primal scene
do we ask the window to behave itself
or are we satisfied with its lachrymose pageant
and then he takes off his pants and bends over
not to fuck or be fucked but to propose a theorem
to think about gravity and leaning
and the fissure-line dividing the image vertically
when you blur the photo you can see the fissure line more clearly
if you are in the business of seeking fissures
because the picture is blurry we can't identify the man
or accuse him of errors
we assume the man has reasons to be guilty
gaze I spill on him like a basilisk or penicillin
the fissure-line, a vertical cut, saddens you

his naked butt on the stool
always the gutter to his left, the lethargic empty gutter
we have spoken elegiacally about the gutter
the gutter where you deposit your secrets
the gutter that ennobles the sidewalk
he keeps turning his back because I instruct him to pivot or because he is rude
slim in his white jeans
delicate shoulders conjure vulnerability like a skyscraper in spring
we call it a gutter but perhaps it is a column
a reminder of the strictures that come with being an upright creature
like two parents experiencing their child's death
or a child turning away because of caution or miserliness
now we can see his pubes
but it is a different "he," an older "he"
the "he" keeps changing
his pubic hair recapitulates the dark background
like a Greek chorus sent packing
she qualifies as the melodramatic center
the Gare de l'Est narrating her sorrow
treat the landscape like a cup you are filling with bounty
the barns and outbuildings a promise
the usual hortatory pile

clumsy hills and stubble because it's dinner-time
sky takes up most of the meal
we eat the sky like a chunk of Toblerone
the sky's cup like the San Francisco bathhouse
I called it Liberty but it wasn't Liberty
the prairie landscape in Alain Guiraudie's *Staying Vertical*
the intrinsic sexual horror of pastoral solitude
repose of the elongated elm
as if in a caravan riding toward the Ten Commandments
or Ava Gardner storming out of the room in search of a beauty parlor
she almost knocks over the flimsy set
Poussin has no beauty parlors
or the book *Ideal Marriage* I keep mentioning because its presence on the maternal shelf
resembled landscape
the book blurry because I couldn't understand its contents
study the foreplay chapters before traveling to France
the photograph is the residue of a completed act
or the advertisement for acts you might have the audacity to attempt
if you are stuck in the bovine landscape
the landscape is "going ballistic," turning into irreversible blur
a blur apart from narrative
the questions we ask of blur are the same questions we ask of cheese after dinner

why did you arrive
do we have the appetite for you
the road leading away at the end of the photographic series
the road that took us here to the interrogation scene
every mystery is a diptych we're reluctant to plumb
father-like enigma of the blurred tree
or is the mother equally blurry
the stack of kindling
the felled tree
the hole formed by one cross-section of the murdered tree
is every photo intrinsically forensic
elucidating an unseen crime that only the camera has witnessed
do we require a human witness
and what is the crime
we are one of the crimes if seen from a punitive or wary vantage
moving a gloved hand slowly through the developer formula
his father's mother spoke only Yiddish
Yiddish is blurry if you don't understand it
we can understand the intentions of the speaker even if we don't understand the words
we talk about anti-Semitism in California
cataract surgery improved his vision
I keep postponing a return trip to the ophthalmologist who diagnosed an incipient cataract

what was the name of the bathhouse where I met the photographer who'd been to Bayreuth
the photographer for whom I posed nude when I was twenty
I keep bragging about posing nude for a photographer in 1979
oiled body in a dim loft on Market Street
as if this anecdote clinched every argument
dirty line drawn across a defocused sky
turning away from the scene while continuing to look at it
I turned my back to the photographer to give him the desired angle
as if in turning I were to discover the puzzling origin of the blur
the cul-de-sac of not seeing oneself clearly
the balm of dropping the crystal goblet
call it "the goblet of sharp focus"
and watching the punitive delineations shatter
goodbye to ancestral burdens and weddings and precise lineage
if you can't clearly identify the idol
then the graven image will remain suspended *in utero*
a condom against blasphemy
don't look too closely at naked Noah as you back out of the pastoral tent
blur your eyes against the allure of desecration
unless blur is a method of holding more tightly in one's palm
the lost treasure half-seen while in a posture of flight