

POETRY

Mark Wagenaar

MUSEUM OF THE STRANGE, LOST & CARNAL

Each time an artful film is made
the Eternal Judge of Cinema relents
a little, & takes a year off Michael Bay's sentence

of eternity in hell. *Ida*, for instance,
where a shot's mise en scène often reveals
the landscape within this girl who tastes

a man for the first time, tastes the world
a week before her vows. Or foreshadows:
watch the camera linger on the empty air

outside the window of her aunt's apartment. Lingers
too long on the nameless air that names her wordless
leap. A grief no one can explain—

could we call it need? The next night I opened
the bathroom door at the restaurant & interrupted
a moaning couple in the stall. Getting your ashes

hauled, I once heard it called, & loved the mortal
hail in the phrase, collision of flesh & the end
of flesh. What we're stitched of, & the beautiful

seam of the double body we make. Luck & bones—
getting lucky—though less to do with luck here
than need & a little coke, as the half-blown powder

on the stainless steel TP dispenser showed.
They left a sock on the floor as they ran for it.
Best tip anyone ever got here, someone said.

I was reading the *Inferno*, & wondered what
their *contrapasso* might look like—Dante's ironic
punishment. So fortune tellers walk forwards,

head carried in hand like a lantern, gaze turned
backwards. For the sake of their daring, this *jouissance*
in such a foul place, I hoped it would be light. Hell,

give them something as thanks. A rocket ship made
of coke & lavender petals & my envy. But I didn't know
what to do with that sock. Didn't that blue argyle

change the bar? Cézanne wanted to astonish Paris
with an apple. Here was a memento of our wonder.
Of their need, which explains our existence, or as near

to it as we are each other, when we fit our mouths
to Eve's sweet bite. I still think the sock belongs somewhere,
some museum of the strange, lost & carnal (how often

those three meet!). And all the good films, too, kept
safe in some doomsday vault— like the seed coffer
buried on a Norwegian vault—& played after

midnight for the sleepless. Some dark alley
in a godforsaken corner of Jersey redeemed by light.
And a place dedicated to keeping all the mercies

we've been shown, what might that look like?
Some birdcage of hammered ashes, I'd think,
like the cage that held the heart of St. Lawrence,

but maybe there would be no walls or wire
so anyone could get in. A place hallowed by
silence, like the circle of people who sign

Tuesdays at the coffee shop. Or the concavity
in Canova's side, from long years bracing the chisel,
little bowl of bone in his ribcage.

I'd find my brother, inexplicably healed of seizures.
I'd find shards of glass on a bathroom floor:
my wife was haunted by the numbers of a scale.

Days & days spent eating less than she needed.
One day she walked in to find the scale shattered.
Things that have broken for us to be made whole,

or fractured inside us for the same reason.
What sinew must tear in us to keep our beliefs intact?
And what can be borne after it's broken, or must be

POETRY

in order to be carried? I don't know if this is the place,
or if there is a place, for the bodies shelved
on Everest slopes, or the migrant boat overturned

on the rough tide. I know my daughter's sleep is there.
My mother's should be there, but it's missing,
it's walking the alleys, barefoot, looking for an old flick.

This evening I cradle my baby's head, three months old,
more neurons than Milky Way stars, synapses that flash
with blue lightning as she cries. Baby on the cusp

of language. In the hedges starlings chatter, a wall of sound,
some fifty cries flashing on the nameless air
like the artesian sunlight upswelled from the green leaves.

Song without words. The odds, my God, of gravity
being just right on this world for life to loosestrife throughout
is the equivalent of hitting a pie plate with an arrow,

if the pie plate's on the other side of the universe
& the archer's blindfolded. I wasn't blindfolded that night
(maybe next time) when my wife & I arranged ourselves

just right, at the right time, & the stars lined up
for your cry to come, daughter. Constellations & skeletons,
film scene or human chain upon Dresden cobblestones

or bathroom fun time, it's the arrangement that matters.
Even on the body farm, the residents are laid out
as randomly as possible. To measure how we

disappear. The last word in the Divina Commedia is *stelle*,
stars. Out of that dust our bodies began, earthblown ashes
from their mortal lungs that met word. We end here,

beneath the trees in late afternoon light. One's facedown
in the grass. We should relent. There's so little time.
We should break, if that's how grace, or grief, calls us today.

One leans against a tree, arm upon chest, face to the stars.