SOMETHING ABOUT THE LIGHT

The inspiration for Xu Bing’s approach to landscape
painting came to him in Barajas airport, in Madrid

Something about the light
captured Xu Bing’s eye in Barajas, made him see
a plant as something other, made him paint the Fuchun
mountains using light, tricks of the light,
detritus turned to ink.

Something about the light
in Madrid: you know it even before you land
in Barajas, as the flight crews clink their trollies
down the aisle, offering coffee and cellophaned croissants,
as you straighten your hair, stow your sleep mask,
fish legañas from the corner of your eyes.
The light—shafted, dazzling, golden,
palpable and full of dust motes—delights you,
announces that you’ll soon be home
in the city of chispa, of vim and effervescence,
of sunsquint and surly, of Ducados and high heels.

Something about the light
in Madrid makes you see yourself as other,
emerge from Barajas each time in that shape-shifted self.
Something that sears the Guadarrama
to sienna, straw, umber, canela, the peaks you now,
after three decades, can point to, flying over:
There’s Peñalara! La Pedriza! Las Cabezas!
La Maliciosa! La Mujer Muerta!
Mountains of Fuchun / la sierra madrileña
your bones are sepia and ancient,
you are both tricked out in light.

Something about the light
made him want to work with it forever:
assembling odds and ends, the refuse of lived lives—
plastic bags, fisherman’s netting, leaves, husks, scraps of paper.
A light box made them land.
The artist’s sleight of hand.

Something about the light
in Spain is lacking in you now:
ten thousand lux
from a light box you look into
half an hour a day,

(no stanza break)
to keep your dark away.
It helps you keep on seeing mountains.
Not just trash and tail-ends.
Not just the hangnails and dead ends
of your light-starved mind.

Something about the light
how it transforms us, tricks us
into seeing / seeming other,
some place where there are mountains,
their sharp bones outlined
in sepia, glowing
in the middle distance.

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