The Beautiful Particulars

After Xu Bing’s exhibition, Background Story: A New Approach to Landscape Painting

Because I have forgotten to bring my small, travelling notebook to this exhibit where I’ve come to fashion a poem, I’m making notes on the first piece of paper I find in my purse, scribbling gibberish about the ocean and mountains that unfold without end, willing images to catch and hold, heavy as black ink in the Chinese brush of the mind, and thinking grumpily how the background story of anything is almost never what it seems.

But when I turn the page over for more space I see it’s the last veterinarian invoice for my ancient cat, printed the day before she died, the record of her failing kidneys somehow colliding with my mother, who dies again each autumn, though she’s been gone fifty years – everything from my one, small life illuminated by a Chinese “painting” that isn’t really one at all but a box of light that fools the eye with shadows of found things become something other than themselves when lit by LED, our ephemeral world limned real in black and sepia and pearl.

I don’t want to write about sadness or try to fit the word “synchronicity” into a poem. I want to be the one figure in the painting’s huge landscape, staring into the distance from a grass hut at something only the artist sees. But it’s all done with shadows and this is what I have – loss invasive and beautiful as the branch of bittersweet at the bottom of the light box and the silhouette it casts – this paper I write on shining like a receipt from the dead.

(stanza break)
The truth is nothing lasts.
Not this installation,
which will be taken down
and scattered to the wind,
its beautiful particulars – ferns,
corn husks, hemp fabric, paper,
plastic bubble wrap – never quite
the same, no matter how carefully
they are reconstructed.
Not my cat, beloved familiar,
lying in her grass-lined grave on the back
of our Wisconsin hill. Not my mother,
dust for most of my life, or the girl
I once was, standing at her grave, a clod
of cold earth clenched in my hand,
Not even the shadow that memory casts
on the radiant scrim of my life.

I wouldn’t have believed it possible
to paint with light if I hadn’t
seen my cat’s grave glazed
with gold one afternoon, last leaves
sifting down, piebald over its surface,
or if I didn’t remember my mother’s face
outlined once by sun when she tilted
her head back and laughed, savoring
the heat of living. I wouldn’t have believed
the dark can tell us so much because of how
it shapes the bright, or that I’d be standing here,
seeing this painting as the act of magic it is,
dazzled by how many places
light unexpectedly lands.

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