

STRATIFIED POEM

John R. Campbell

I walk medieval streets. I assume an oblique angle to the world.
Vendors proffer sweet solace. The calçada accosts my feet. Saints,
kings, navigators, poets: their names inscribed everywhere. Ages
bleed, palaces falter. Ubiquitous filigree, tiles, graffiti. All is ornate,
just as it should be. Surf assaults the cliffs and the beaches, urging
us forward, drawing us back. So why does the sea seem vacant?
Why does the city seem lit from beneath, as if from a buried sun?

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Cumulonimbus rise, agitated, fattened with heat, then flatten.
Soon rain, pelting the Sintra ridges, erodes the watchtowers
and crenulated walls of a Moorish—eighth-century—castle.
While from apartments and villas, aromas of garlic and onion,
of sardines, of carrots and potatoes, drift into the air. Human
bodies hustle along, duck under eaves or umbrellas—soon
we'll sprawl in beds or on beaches. We defy ephemeral weather.

Stratospheric ambitions, yes, but they sate only our carnal
desires. Another ideal remains: an obscure, a-historical poem,
beneath or barely surfacing. Like the dorsal ridges of whales,
like the noise of public spaces. Like liquefied bedrock, like
a sublingual dose. It lulls, it eases us down. It oozes from languid
marshes, from the seams and edges of the sea. As an oil,
a balm, it glides, it allows our sexuality. When the body glints,

when prismatic light glances, this one ideal underpins all:
and yet it remains unsaid. Maybe the problem is the number
one. Maybe the spaces between us are more real than are we.
Or maybe there is no problem at all—are we free from essences

at last, at last, so that we might spiral, in loose procession,
down the initiatic well, thirsting only for water. Needing
only necessity. Bearing only our open, our unspeaking mouths.

To the south the silence expands, a massive desert, and ascends
in a column of super-heated air. To the east the silence settles
in valleys, in linguistic pockets, in regions of distinctive cuisines.
In the north a religious silence descends, spare, authoritative.
While in the west the silence, once oceanic, once the object
of navigators, assembles in particles over the sea. It warms
the currents, it no longer stirs. It brushes surfaces, yet it leaves

no mark. Nothing discernible, nothing expressed: again,
entangled in the conundrum of desire, we falter, with our old
misgivings—so strangely familiar—and our feeble vocabularies.
We walk among artifacts, inhabit the past. In cisterns, traces
of precious water. In ancient granaries, fossilized seeds. Ruins
are meant to be vacant, romantically vague. Half-formed poems.
So why are we trapped here, uttering nonsense, imploring nature

to favor us, to endow us with grace we no longer possess?
The half-eaten apple, the half-formed poem: again,
again, to the point of obsession. Delicate hope, sturdy despair. Salt
for our beautiful wounds. We segue from cities of quaint decay
to swirling, decentered skies. The domes of cathedrals: aloof,
unsupported. Swallows and seabirds gouge the air. Fires
soar. Clouds are disassembled. It's a typical apocalypse, all

flood and unholy mingling, all spectacle and dread. Emblems
rusting. Pageants of dying animals, distant, relentlessly innocent.
What once was immediate is now just a remnant—of a present
we can't contain. We live in an age we no longer embody. So
that every piece of rubble, scree on the mountain or paving
on the street, is insubstantial, even as we walk upon it. Matter
barely shaped by our consciousness: beneath us and our schemes.

But below the streets are Roman catacombs, beneath the cisterns,
the bones of kings. Underlying the Alfama, solid bedrock. Allowing,
disallowing matter, gloriously neutral. Even our cathedrals, great
hewn stone, return us to geology. Stratified earth, stratified life,
stratified culture, stratified poem. Meaning stacked upon matter,
not eradicating, not obscuring: meaning as substance, significant
but thin. It accrues in microdermal layers, it becomes itself a trim—

a crust, a neocortex. A regenerating skin. Begin with appearances, texture. Trust surfaces; they mix. As in a child's drawing, we mingle with trees and moon and sun, and the empty space between. We are stick-figures strewn among the stars. Apparently we are happy. Inhabiting the folds, amid firing neurons, in interstices, we thrive. Surfaces are interior, too. Strata recede in the earth, inside our bodies, delineating mind. Mind is an alcove: empty, striate. Mind is embedded,

embodied. Is myriad: just look. Above the city, low-level bureaucrats unfurl Portuguese flags. Among scents of pastel, of cabbage, of cod, people amble cathartic streets. Ragged buildings cling to the hills, a shawl of civilization. Roman, Visigoth, Moorish—presences draped and shed. Inhabiting the folds: Jewish, Christian, Islamic consciousness. Royalty, fascism, democracy, greed. A seismic shudder. A tidal surge. Science, detritus. Bells and then more bells. The city's foundations

and its emanations: all strata, all substantial. All in fact the city. Auras, roots, and markings—there is no other city. Strata slant deep, edge upward. Whether massive or sliced to a thin cross-section, they contain the city easily. They are the city, they are all history, they are insistence itself. We come to the city insisting. The city insists on us. Reduced to particles, we travel in waves. Our bodies arc. Our language trembles. We crest, we collapse, adorning the shore.

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