

Pamela White Hadas: On "The Fish"

"The Fish," not properly an "animal poem," though its title suggests it, deepens our sense of this "unpreventable experience," this quality of life that despite the exuberance of living forms and immortal art, contains our death. It is an immensely powerful and bitter poem. It is full of a sense of infringement, violation, and injury; it is also resigned. "The Fish / wade / through black jade." It is not an easy, fishlike movement, but laborious. and the water is not liquid but stone, not translucent, but dark. One of the morosely-colored "crow-blue" mussels "keeps adjusting the ash heaps" on which it lies by opening and shutting itself; it is not a happy animal expression. The shell moves "like an injured fan." "The barnacles which encrust the side / of the wave" again the water is seen as an unpleasantly solid substance? do not have privacy; "the submerged shafts of the / sun . . . move themselves . . . into the crevices? / in and out." It is deliberate, not playful; not an expansive sea, through which anything can freely move, but a "sea of bodies." (Recall the sea of "A Grave" into which "men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave.") The water, this evilly forceful and solid mass, "drives a wedge / of iron through the iron edge of the cliff." This violence is followed by a chaos where starfish, jellyfish, crabs, and submarine toadstools "slide each on the other." The sea is full of internal revulsion. What stands out on the "defiant edifice" of the cliff are "all / external / marks of abuse . . . ac- / cident? lack / of cornice, dynamite grooves, burns, and / hatchet strokes." The side of this chasm is dead. The poem ends:

Repeated

evidence has proved that it can live

on what cannot revive

its youth. The sea grows old in it.

The accident is lack. The chasm side is permanently mutilated and abused by some mysterious unpurposeful purposefulness of nature. This strange poem is the work of a thirty-year-old woman whose rather unnervingly cool sympathies lie with a battered and violated nature. It is a poem about injury of wholeness, resentful but resigned deprivation. It contains the prophecy of "foiled explosiveness" that is suggested by the late poem "Then the Ermine:." The sea, with all its rushings of individual lives, all its bodies injured and insulted, grows old within its "dead" walls. How does one make up for such unintentional, natural desecration?

For what it is worth, one can invent a personal myth. One can try and convince oneself that life is worth efforts of affection and loving observation, that vicarious pleasures are real, that loss and desecration are only temporary setbacks in a vision that is essentially whole and infrangible. Myths, like dreams, express wishes, wishes to do away with limitations. Marianne Moore expresses her wishes with as much directness as she does her sense of limitation.

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