

At the Brink – John Beerman

by Reynolds Price

One of the ongoing contests in the arts of the world, as in all life, has been the war between turbulence and serenity. Different eras and different artists have tended toward one or the other pole. Since cave paintings and petroglyphs are the earliest art we know, it's difficult to say which way most of them tend. If the imposing aurochs and bison are portrayed in the hope of success in hunting them down, then their apparent imperturbable majesty is deceptive. Or is it? Maybe those images are our earliest glimpses of a perpetual human practice—worshipping the victim before killing and consuming it.

But once we reach the art of our known history, a large proportion—if not a majority—of the surviving images convince us of the ongoing hunger of Homo sapiens for the promises of peace which art, supremely of our psychic resources, can give. We lack convincing samples of Greek or Roman music, but we possess a quantity of paintings and sculptures which more than adequately assert their sense of the central value of serenity for gods and humankind alike.

The serenity of the gods—as embodied in early Greek, Etruscan and Roman statures—is troubling to see, if not terrifying, more often than not. The peace of the Apollo of Veii or of Diana of the Ephesians, pure as the minerals of which they are formed, is threatening to our own fragile state. At their displeasure, our lives may undergo forms of trial that range from rape through torture to flaming death.

Parallel classic Mediterranean representations of violence in battle, domestic life and sexual intimacy are as memorable as Goya's. But when glimpses of landscape begin to appear in the interstices of their marble groupings or on the walls of their surviving temples and villas, the atmosphere is almost invariably one of consolation or reassurance. Only occasional glimpses of a manmade conflagration or of the gloom of the underworld are less than invitations to at least a moment of meditation—and a meditation which should lead a sane viewer to mental and spiritual calm.

And with few distinguished exceptions, like Leonardo's late drawings of catastrophic floods, that calm has remained at the heart of landscape painting and the graphic art including photography (seascapes, interestingly, are a different and frequently stormy matter). Why? The phenomenon seems initially odd, considering that the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries which cradled Western art are prone to calamitous earthquakes and most other dangers of wind and weather.

One powerful source for the long and calm in landscape art appears to derive from the fact that most of the art we possess from historic times seems to have been produced by urban artists—Sumerians, Egyptians, Minoans, Greeks, Etruscans, Romans, Europeans and Americans who dwelt in cities that were already afflicted with all the curses attendant upon any large crowd of human beings. The scarcest quality in any city is likely to be peace, whether we define peace as a literal absence of noise or as available serenity for the soul. Is there, then, a supreme landscape painter of the past millennium whom we know to have lived deep in the countryside—far from towns and cities—in the prime of his working life? I suspect not.

Despite John Beerman's relative youth, he has already generated a substantial body of memorable and surely durable landscape studies. He began to paint them in the early 1980s, a decade after he'd left his native North Carolina and was living in eastern Long Island. In the two decades since that beginning, they've ranged widely for their subjects across the American countryside and as far afield as Israel. And they've ranged in their media from small monotypes to large oils and in tone from the surreal to the forthright-realistic to his most recent pictures which may be accurately seen as dreamlike. Their technical mastery and care is self-evident, as is the unflinching steadiness of the painter's eye and the patience with which he delivers his visual and emotional findings and inventions to the viewer.

Perhaps a fellow Southerner, which I am, is unusually well-positioned to see in them a certain grave courtesy toward the viewer's inquiring imagination—a courtly deference to the spectator's desire to know what he's watching. Such a deference is often an abiding characteristic of a culture like that of the old Confederacy where two quite different races have managed to survive in a tortured though intimate relation for a slow four centuries largely through the invention of elaborate forms of proffered patience. That patience has, famously, been subject to frequent assaults of violence; and a Southern viewer of Beerman's work may likewise note that another aspect of their individual and deeply characteristic power derives from our gradual realization that human life is almost entirely absent from these scenes (though incidentally Beerman seldom paints in the South, where every field and tree may bear some tragic tale).

Beerman's scenes are empty of all the detritus of modern life, urban or rural—as they are of virtually all the beauty made by humankind—and they acknowledge only a very occasional hint that our species has lived on Earth. Nature in them is not the untamed nature of so much earlier American Romantic painting but an even stranger reality, almost a nature entranced by a barely heard music or dazzled into stillness by a sudden chord from the sky—a dehumanized nature that's raptly waiting. For what, though? Well, most certainly not for the millions of tourists who poured into the great empty subjects of nineteenth-century painters. Niagra Falls, the Grand Canyon, the Tetons, the Rockies are now aswarm with the men, women and children who followed the beckoning gaze of Cole, Church and Moran.

The hills, meadows, woods, lakes, even the deserts painted by John Beerman, wait for a single viewer—you or me. And if they make the least request of us it is only that we pause and contemplated this meticulously observed, brilliantly arranged and rendered scene as though it were a portion of a universe that promises calm—a more tranquil, safer and wiser life than the one we know too well and presently inhabit. Only then may we risk extending our minds, and our own hectic lives, into such a blessed world. It is a measure of Beerman's very large achievement that he lures us toward that beautiful brink and only then leaves us.

Among his thirty-three books, Reynolds Price has published eleven novels, his *Collected Poems*, *Collected Stories*, numerous plays, translation, essays and—most recently—his first book for children.