

Until You Come

J.S. Absher

Taipei, '97. I walk past side-street
vendors selling lychee nuts and black
rice cakes, to an acre of bare dirt,
concrete pylons lifting a cloverleaf.
A grizzled man by a beat-up Buick
throws gobbets of meat from the trunk
to a growling scrum of gaunt,
scruff-biting dogs, their flying spit
bright yellow in the headlamp.
They've waited days for this.
I turn back before they see me,
dogs or man, fearful I've seen
things I shouldn't.

Cherbourg, '71. Hair cut short, shirts
bleached white, with copies
of Mormon's *Book*, we reach
the lone house facing a field
where the North Sea rigs are being built,
on the paved yard a graying woman
and her mewling, hissing cats
hunkered head down by lumps of flesh.

*Five years since I came here,
the woman says, in answer
to a classified, to help madame*

*tend these cats. She disappeared,
left me a car, this house, a note—
'Look after mes minous, I'll
be back.' No, not interested
in your religion, unless it'll
help me eat as well
as these cats. Hard to swallow
the bread of patience,
the salt of courage. Bye-bye
(she dismisses us in English),
tell Maman you've met
the viceroy of the absent.*

And now it's me who's gray
and waiting,
at times almost undone,
having neglected nearly all
I should have tended:

undo me further
till I am wrecked, not
man or mammal,
bird or insect, but
elemental,

till You come to heal
or break.