

Flux of Conversation

Doug Barrett

Yet again through this house like a mountain stream
 chatter has run down the pine-framed vistas
 each landing's distinctive prospect of Tahoe
pressed flat by early August heat
 to the conversation pool
 at last almost drained of guests.

All afternoon like a young girl in a creek
 enchanted by its babbling
 and, in order for the current to flow freely
 with a word here, a word there
to this person or that, arranging stones
 adjusting little logs to make eddies
 so you've played with us.

You like these metaphors, don't you, that sink us into nature.

 "We're sun worshipers," you used to say.

 But also: "If only the gospel excited me like the Beatles excite me
I might really do something." This to us as if
 as if poverty qualified confessors
 as if guilt fashioned the perfect wife
perfect hostess comparing notes on old friends, kids, and yes,
 grandkids
 running smooth or wild.

And so today: "But for me now it's just a matter of getting
 the inside to correspond with the outside."

 Confess—confess that you're still stuck here
in this beautiful house, never locked,
 shaped not for envious show but rather quite unknowingly
 to shape you, nature contra nature, mind eroding mind

as if matter could teach morals.

Life of flowing water, reconciling energies
dissolving obstacles, architecture murmuring to itself
in banks
dams
cascades
shaping
and shaped
releasing, restraining, to avoid needless destruction
but the morality, the intelligence, of a stream, not of a
canal
or a
cattle
chute

much less the cultured discipline of fields
and rigid tree plantations, forcing life
into a fearful frozen symmetry
and regularity of rhythms, framed
in lineaments of compromised desire
that desperately strains against the cage:

“As for living, our children will do that for us.”

Or are those rhythms really
trance-inducing drumbeats
thrusts of love?

So the flood falls, rolling toward Tahoe, big water calling
boiling vapors breathing toward the sun
thundertalk rising over Rubicon Peak.
Don't tell me you can't hear it—the ill-mannered jeremiads:
How many innocents saved from inquisition?
How many false friends lost?

How many times excommunicated for conscience' sake?

How many times crucified for another's sins?

Yes, the cycle is beginning again, deathly sublimation
cumulonimbus billowing as if

from a thousand burning houses.

and you have to say something.

And these houseless naked locals, what shall they do?

Dig deep, ground squirrels, slant upslope marmots

your wretched tunnels, downpour coming—

time to go before cloudburst hail and washed-out roads cut us off too.

We'll talk again, compare our answers maybe

after the walls fall down, the air clears, and all spills happily on
sinking toward desolation, watering alkali flats

the rejected places—and the boulder-rolling pelt-penetrating

ungovernable torrent destined never to reach the sea

has washed away the good as well as evil