

Herbert Morris

Soir Bleu

—Edward Hopper, oil on canvas, 1914
for Steven Millhauser

Plan, then, should the artist have acquiesced,
even, unknown to you, collaborated
in the planning, to penetrate that landscape,
difficult, stricken, fierce, where some pure splendor,
nameless for now, rises always to meet you,
rises, despite acknowledged ignorance
of the terrain, inexplicably rises,
the players — there are players — poised, in place,
more than in place, positioned scrupulously,
juxtapositions fitting yet quixotic,
rehearsed and coached, drilled, grandly costumed, masked,
should a ball scene loom deeper in the plot,
given those cues one knows prove unavailing
(what shall quite have prepared them for their plight,
or us for ours, E. Hopper for E. Hopper's?),
however charged, dramatic, futile, timely,
ready, at last, to move us, speak the lines
poignantly late, too late, for them to speak,
some last, irrelevant, yet strangely crucial
extravagance of spectacle, of music,
transfiguring, unprecedented, dream-like,
drawn thinly through the reeds, across the strings,
no more than echo, rumor, intimation,
tin drum, child's flute, toy clarinet, mere whisper
of evanescence on the keys, thin tunes
sweet to the ear, nostalgic, hardly music,
but what one takes for music until music
announces itself here one summer evening,
late, the dark falling, fallen, what comes down
already come down, look, still coming down,

enters our lives quite tentatively, trails off
 into the subtle shade, this queer light, half-light,
 E. Hopper might have called the blue of evening,
 had he called it anything, bleu, soir bleu.

Seduced by mystery, such complication
 as dusk and fall of darkness here imply,
 the first stars rising, lanterns being lit
 with just that touch of drama one might hope for,
 in time a touch in excess of the hoped-for,
 a wind, a south wind, even from this distance,
 this perspective, one knows reeks of the sea
 (or shall reek of the sea, should the designer
 not yet have struck the set, not told the grips
 precisely where the moon goes, where the surf,
 where these resplendent stars are to be hung
 with the requisite tenderness, the care,
 the passionate attention to detail,
 the rising and the falling, each on cue,
 meticulously rhythmic, no beat missed,
 nor in which of the acts — the choice is yours —
 the hearts — in the end it devolves on that,
 not the great sweep of history, not treasure,
 not tales from the far reaches of the kingdom,
 nor the fabulous, storied realms themselves,
 the prince apparent garbed in robes, the gems,
 masks in the ball scene, that, that alone, that,
 the players' hearts, if not, in time, our own —
 are, first, to be deceived, manipulated
 shamelessly under this sweet air of summer,
 on a coast whose name is to be withheld,
 then, as we feared, device after device
 introduced that we not grow restless, bored —
 an agony of waiting — , quit our seats,
 stroll on the dream-struck terrace, view the sea,
 listen for waves, should there be waves, succumb
 to the rhythms of tango, fox-trot, waltz,
 should the musicians have made their appearance —
 delayed, perhaps, but no less crucial for that —
 and the insinuations just begun,

the mind no longer offering resistance,
 as once it had, lulled as it is, distracted,
 through a long denouement, the darkness falling,
 utterly shattered, as the plot demanded),
 we Americans wait in silence here
 (how else is one to wait?), the angle skewed,
 the sightlines blurred, the weather unresolved,
 the facts too problematic to prove fact,
 no certainties obtaining, none expected.

Famished for magic, some stray, random glamour,
 however fragmentary, poignant, brief,
 not native to these shores we now inhabit
 in exemplary fashion, poor, stripped, dumb,
 living as we were meant to, making do,
 having no longer need or hope of dreams,
 the splendor of what shall not give its name
 easily, soon, not quickly nor completely,
 we wait for revelation, with E. Hopper
 (permit us that which utterly eludes
 our hold on it at evening, our attempts
 to capture, weigh, articulate, explain),
 asking somehow that we be spared none of it,
 the gorgeous, and the shadowed, and the rare,
 the littoral now going under, swamped,
 the air rich with the coastal, the musicians,
 ragtag players having agreed to terms
 by cable, wire, long distance or, quite likely,
 never having agreed at all to terms —
 never having been asked to scan the contract,
 should there have been a contract, sign their names
 on the line where, consenting, each must sign,
 assuming there were lines, or names assigned — ,
 long since expected yet nowhere in sight
 (elsewhere detained?, held on a farther coast?,
 late?, lost?, forgetful?, stations bypassed, sped through?,
 connections missed?, aborted?, unavailing?,
 no longer scheduled runs?, angles askew?,
 sightlines wavering, cropped?, the signs misread,
 if, in fact, there were signs?, directions garbled?,

their language foreign, lyrical, forgotten?,
 maps, had they sailed with maps, bleached, mottled, smudged?,
 outer edges eaten with light, with salt?,
 devastations not as easily named?,
 distance miscalculated?, depth misjudged?,
 true north taken for south, or south for north?,
 or none for either?, neither for the other? —
 fiction, all of it?, myth?, invention?, dream? — ,
 (a chaos of unspeakable proportions,
 an act of balance for which Mr. Hopper
 makes certain one comes fully unprepared,
 distraught?, disheveled?, misinformed?, perplexed?;
 wholly wanting in that transcendent courage
 one asks at the beginning of all travel —
 strength for departure, only that now, nothing
 asked for arrival, that which shapes itself — ;
 all that might have been of use to us scattered,
 the beautiful, the light-struck, the profound,
 all that might touch with grace, suffuse with warmth,
 soften, make gentle, human, ample, whisper
 ravishments in the ear, begin to speak,
 at last break into passionate, pure song,
 through a difficult passage somehow save us,
 locate us, give us authenticity,
 yield, at last, the unspeakable, rich names
 of coasts traversed, the barbarous terrains,
 those ultimate, dream-struck geographies —
 all pinpoints, half-lights, glitter, undulation —
 on which, glimpsed, half-glimpsed, set course for, imagined,
 half-imagined, we were destined to founder;
 in some remembered, half-remembered, tongue
 only E. Hopper cannot have forgotten,
 in which he alone, he, only E. Hopper,
 can be said, all this while, to remain fluent,
 render, complication for complication,
 the word for anguish, the word for desire,
 the singular, resplendent name for landfall).

We Americans take to such exotics
 as assiduously as we were meant to,
 should it be evening where we find them, summer,
 the dark the dark that seems about to fall,
 wholly unlike the dark already fallen,
 on a coast which shall not yet yield its name
 (though there are hints swirled in the pigment, clues
 hidden in brush-strokes, intimations spilling
 over those borders meant to curb them, bridle
 their propensity for loquaciousness,
 premonitions for which it can be said
 we on this coast were seldom at a loss),
 that half-light one envisions in a province
 where it seems likely one has never traveled,
 where one expects, in fact, never to travel
 (the stuff of myth, perhaps, more than of darkness),
 all the paraphernalia now at hand
 for the gathering of such properties
 as are thought necessary for enchantment,
 for the making of rapture, magic, dreams:
 first stars, lopsided, pinned against the backcloth
 in a provisional attempt at stars,
 tenuous, wavering, quite nearly star-like,
 inordinately beautiful, for all that;
 little lanterns swaying above their heads,
 no more than children's winsome, free-hand cut-outs,
 delicate, crinkled, fluted, Oriental —
 romance of distant parts, the splendor muted — ,
 a makeshift scissoring, a makeshift pasting,
 paper lanterns casting a strange, soft light,
 all pinpoints, half-lights, glitter, undulation,
 only conditionally here called light;
 beyond, the sea, the question of the sea,
 unlike the sea one may have known before this,
 murky, dim vastness those grouped on the terrace
 face, put their backs to, peer into, ignore,
 its depth the depth one learns to crave, to need —
 the stuff of dreams, perhaps, and not of water — ,
 even insist on, to what small avail
 the learning comes, all learning ever comes

(what did E. Hopper "learn" here?, what do we?
 shall such knowledge enable us to choose?
 to be generous?, kind?, invent ourselves
 once more?, after invention reinvention?
 to wrest what we can never wrest?, to live?) — ,
 a night sea into which, as legend has it,
 a princess (someone glimpsed by Edward Hopper
 himself, perhaps — a glimpse, just that, no more — ,
 spectral, ghostly, part woman, part dream-stalker,
 the rest whatever one might need her to be — ,
 late on certain indeterminate evenings
 at the end of summer one cannot say
 belong definitively here or there,
 partake, in fact, of this more than of that,
 but floating, vague, utterly inconclusive,
 when the half-clear reigns sovereign over all,
 muddled as to what its kingdom comprises;
 when one refers to "visibility" —
 was there need before this to use the term? —
 as "limited," at best, "obscured," as even,
 for reasons best left unexplained now, "haunted",
 pale, nervous, by-now legendary figure
 placed at the very center of the grouping,
 the only one E. Hopper wishes standing,
 imperious, statuesque, prepossessing,
 able, should she wish, to survey them all
 yet able, too, to cultivate her blindness
 by looking at them but not seeing them,
 the dark beginning to come down, forever
 on the verge of beginning to come down —
 ominous slants, angles tilted, awry —
 remember: "visibility" — , the sky
 altered, defaced, too soon obliterated,
 itself portent enough, more than enough,
 of changes taking place, or soon to take place,
 their gravity unspecified, their anguish
 not yet disclosed, to be accounted for
 only later, when the thing that comes down,
 by whatever name it is called, comes down,
 comes down, stays down, all things unprecedented —

glitter, say, undulation, transformation,
 subtle, beguiling, overcoming us —
 plotting subversion, anarchy, the omens —
 how is one to put this succinctly? — rifle,
 unmistakable even in the dark,
 pinpoint of rise, half-light of fall, their scents
 lying heavy across the coastal air,
 restless figure glimpsed always at a distance,
 shrouded, clenched, in-drawn, taking to this coast
 as to little else in her life E. Hopper
 may have surmised she took, would take, had taken,
 as though her destiny had come to this,
 roamer, stalker, woman never at peace,
 memorable yet indistinct throughout,
 through half-closed lids cut in a mask-like face
 appearing to survey the scene but seeming,
 at the same time, determined to remain
 as separated from it, as detached,
 as E. Hopper's vision shall have permitted,
 head erect, chin high, sleeveless gown the gown
 appropriately chic, in 1914,
 to smoulder and to brood the night away in
 on a terrace whose talent it may be
 to be located neither here nor there,
 where no one looks at no one, no eyes meet,
 no one quite speaks, musicians do not come —
 had it ever been hinted they would come? —
 all music promised — heard?, half-heard?, implied?,
 or shall the music, too, not have been promised? —
 is late, deferred, postponed indefinitely,
 dancing, as such, will not take place tonight,
 and the stars on the backcloth, fabled stars,
 fabled backcloth, would seem to have the evening
 blue as it is, astonishing, oh, depthless,
 wholly, as intimated, to themselves;
 pacing the length, the full length, of dim terrace
 from here to the ambiguous and back,
 until there seems so little left to pace,
 so little left to anger in her, rage,
 to need, to dream, above all to desire,

one comes to think she may have paced it all,
 nearly all, at the end of all that pacing,
 all that scanning of sky, those portents, omens,
 those waves not waves, that sea not quite the sea,
 that waiting for musicians to arrive,
 music soon to be played but never played,
 one knows, perhaps, as little as before,
 as little as E. Hopper may have known,
 even less), in a show of pride, or pique,
 a seizure one need not be made to name,
 an evening of late summer, much like this,
 all pinpoints, half-lights, glitter, undulation,
 all rising and all falling, wave on wave —
 requisite stage tricks, requisite effects —
 poised at the very edge, stripped to essentials,
 roamer, stalker, woman never at peace,
 cast, one by one, defiantly, her jewels;
 lastly, the planned-for entrance of musicians,
 as fabled, as preposterous, an entrance
 as entrances in myth are known to be,
 fanfare and panoply, drum-roll and clamor,
 players for whom one waits, and waits, all evening,
 musicians unaccountably delayed,
 musicians to whom, each, shall be entrusted
 something ineffable yet something crucial —
 for those in want of grace, a dream of dancing,
 for those in want of light, a dream of light,
 a dream in which the partnering is all,
 intimate, huddled, warming, all-embracing,
 all rising then all falling, touching, holding,
 the music leading us beyond our depth,
 beyond all depths, precisely where it should lead,
 that enigmatic, singular, true place —
 all pinpoints, half-lights, glitter, undulation —
 where, in the evening, we would ask to be led
 and from which we would ask, if we were asking,
 not to be banished, not to be sent back.

Three men are seated at the center table,
companions who have entered here together,
one assumes, to enjoy the company
of each other, or, more emphatically,
friends who thrive in the presence of each other
over late summer drinks served on a terrace,
lanterns swaying gently above their heads
should the wind lift, all at once shift direction,
their conversation (little of it carries
from this distance — the breeze?, the waves?, night-music?,
though the breeze that may stir here is imagined,
wholly a thing in mind, wholly affectless,
the sea merely blue pigment on a canvas,
no matter how believable, how blue,
and the music blatantly less than music
since the musicians — winds, tympani, strings,
those to whom music was to be entrusted,
the whole dream apparatus striking up
as it alone is given to strike up,
those we were to have looked to for the dancing,
should the program later have called for dancing —
are late, delayed, lost, swamped, not yet arrived,
have failed, a crucial failure, to appear,
and we who sit here, we who wait at tables
set on this coast tonight, or still unset,
for night to come down, shall not sing nor dance,
consigned, as seems our lot, to utter silence,
fixed in our immobility and dreamless)
the conversation these three should engage in
allowing for the givens as presented:
clear evening, starlit, blue-tipped, depthless, calm,
the dark particularly deep, the stars
particularly striking on the backcloth,
and the sea, where the grips have tacked the sea,
particularly glittering and vivid,
as though someone, radiant, mad, defiant
(a princess touring in disguise, in transit
for the season, or for the next few seasons —
have patience now: E. Hopper knows of coasts
beyond this coast, evenings well past this evening,

uncounted, not yet fallen, to which flight
 may be the single, small, sane thing availing — ,
 even beneath her manifold disguises,
 roamer, stalker, pacer, mother, lover,
 undecided as to where she might settle,
 should it, one day, have come to that, to settle,
 undecided where she might come to rest),
 had cast her jewels in it, all night watching
 from the edge where each pinpoint, seen descending,
 lights torches on the flame-wreathed surface, sputters
 through the depths ranged beneath it; comradeship;
 not least of all specific intimacies
 of thought, of speech, of shared and warming presence,
 need responsive to need, more than responsive,
 each offers in the dark, is touched by, shapes —
 liberation and refuge, both at once — ,
 and by which, for all one can tell or guess,
 all one need never tell and never guess,
 three are sustained, moved, comforted, kept human.

Though the center table accommodates them
 almost felicitously, in a manner
 sufficiently persuasive, by degrees,
 to cause you to believe, no, to convince you,
 these three, no doubt, shall have arrived together
 to order drinks, converse, to tell their dreams,
 however difficult the telling seems,
 at the conclusion of their stay here, darkness
 all the while deepening, flaying the angles,
 assailing the perspectives, one by one
 swamping the more familiar of the landmarks,
 even the unfamiliar, the night sea,
 what we take for night sea, where terrace leaves off
 and nothingness seems destined to begin,
 somewhere beyond the last pinpoint we see,
 insistent in its rhythms, wave on wave,
 muted, hypnotic, no doubt leave together,
 under these same fierce stars flung on the backcloth
 from the beginning of the enterprise
 with such caring, meticulous abandon

find their singular ways home, star by star,
 other persuasions now assert themselves,
 nag at the mind, defy the common wisdom,
 clamor to stake their claim, to hold their inch:
 one comes to read them as quite solitary,
 each in his fashion singleminded, bent,
 private, but more than private, wracked, adrift,
 preoccupied beyond preoccupation,
 so self-consumed, so utterly afflicted
 with the convolutions of self-absorption,
 you know each has arrived alone, despite
 surfaces, clues, appearances, you know
 it will be of little use, none whatever,
 to think of them as having quit this terrace,
 when it is time, walked out into the dark,
 no matter how seductively arranged,
 even in its least aspects, by E. Hopper,
 other than the way they have come, alone;
 know what you would not quite have known before —
 one must look elsewhere on this fabled coast
 for everything one thought one could look here,
 since few gifts here avail, too few, this evening,
 not warmth, not hope, least of all consolation;
 and, though the mind balks at the need to phrase it,
 hopes, to the end, for other formulations,
 there shall be no telling of dreams tonight.

*

A bearded man in a dark, floppy hat
 it seems fitting to call a Rembrandt cap
 is seen in profile, seated at the left,
 the cap obscuring all but nose and cheek
 and the cigarette poised between his lips.
 He seems utterly still, and not much more
 is to be said of him than that he may,
 perhaps may not, be studying his hands —
 though E. Hopper shows us nothing of that — ,
 hands one can nearly picture with one's eyes closed,

delicate fingers, fragile, bony wrists,
 placed on the table, artfully, before him;
 that the garment he wears, voluminous,
 loose-fitting, may or may not be the smock
 artists have not had time to change from, fleeing
 the confines of the studio, the dimness,
 the air indoors now difficult to breathe,
 to sit beneath the stars here, evening, summer,
 these last few, waning days of a deep season
 made deeper with the knowledge nothing lasts,
 dusk falling as it never fell before,
 nor shall again, on what we seem, by now,
 to have agreed, each of us, we shall call,
 with E. Hopper, a terrace by the sea,
 glittering, fragrant, wave-swept, visionary,
 indelibly, though no less strangely, coastal.
 He seems wholly at peace (could resignation
 be what we take for peace?), exhaustion having
 overtaken him, needing now to rest,
 perhaps, before pressing on, or before
 once more going back to resume that struggle
 the nature of which one can only guess
 (those enigmatic figures on a canvas —
 what are their stories? — never to be finished
 to his satisfaction, left in mid-gesture,
 or in mid-life, unresolved, inconclusive —
 could one have thought anything was concluded,
 could be concluded, settled, fixed, defined? — ,
 each with the weight of history behind him,
 personal history, the weightiest
 of all the histories imaginable,
 the one neither deciphered nor disclosed?),
 which one knows he has only briefly left
 to take his place here at the center table
 against this patch of raw, transforming muslin
 so plain, so rich, so charged, so drenched with promise,
 E. Hopper, too, the deeper he advances
 into sheer complication, may believe
 all things are possible for seven figures
 division holds so fiercely in its grip —

purpose?, hope?, reconciliation?, even
 the mere prospect of tenderness, of passion? — ,
 may become possible, given whatever
 powers of magic he may bring to bear here,
 transfigurations he may yet devise,
 transcendences not too late to paint in.

Beside this artist who has fled his canvas
 momentarily for the air, the view,
 for whatever change in his life he thinks
 a terrace such as this might yet effect
 on an evening such as this, late in summer,
 a man is seated with his back to us,
 a man of whom we seem destined to know
 nothing but that the jacket he is wearing
 sports epaulets adorning both the shoulders,
 a flurry of white silk fringed into place.
 (It is the thought of salt, all night, which blinds us,
 and it is to sea that we peer for fleets.)
 What takes place on the table's space before him,
 what he does with his hands, the precise shade
 of emptiness which rises in them, stains them,
 or the curve of the smile which stuns the face
 of the Knave of Hearts he has dealt himself
 from the deck he may see fit to keep shuffling,
 reshuffling, for the game of Solitaire
 (or whatever name by which it was known
 that summer, Heart's Desire?, Unavailing?,
 The Game of Loss?, One-Handed Desolation?)
 with which he may attempt to dull the boredom,
 the vast uneasiness, assailing him
 those nights which do not find him under sail,
 E. Hopper fails to tell us, should he know.
 All we are told is that this Admiral,
 estimable though he may be, sea-worthy,
 of sterling character, even courageous,
 preeminently capable of manning
 the bridge of some stout vessel any navy
 would indeed be proud to claim as its own,
 is separated from his ship, division

rides the waves where the grips, at the behest
 of the designer, earlier, tacked waves,
 darkness knows nothing, nothing, but to fall,
 and, with E. Hopper, we, the rest of us,
 audience, actors, strutters, dreamers, mimes,
 the plain, the poor, the paltry, the pale-shouldered,
 nameless, authentic, fictional, exotic,
 we who once had a life, a light, a warmth,
 wasting beneath a weather largely coastal
 against a backcloth by now wholly mythic,
 are left to feast on salt, to peer for fleets.

The third man seated at the center table
 is bathed in ghostly light whose precise source,
 seemingly bottomless, hidden from view,
 mysterious and unattributable,
 remains, throughout, unknown to us, whose nature,
 though calcified and chill, is problematic.
 Even the rain of light the Princess stands in,
 herself as problematic as the rest,
 difficult, in-drawn, clenched, forever pacing,
 not yet having decided where to sit,
 should she decide to sit, surveying all
 but seeing little, if even quite that,
 seems meager next to what falls on the clown,
 this clown who may have fled a one-ring circus
 (should he be billed, his billing next-to-last)
 rumored, in certain parts, not to exist,
 dust-blown and motley, hazy in the distance
 where it recedes into the convolutions
 of some slow but pronounced dishevelment
 advancing by degrees to utter ruin,
 a bedraggled affair, markedly joyless,
 stripped even of that music one expects
 accompanies such side-shows in their paces —
 fanfare and panoply, drum-roll and clamor — ,
 where memory enriches more than fact
 and fact, for all its worth, proves unavailing,
 a carnival tending to favor backroads
 perhaps more than it should, although E. Hopper,

not disclosing his view, nor likely to,
 neither judging nor refraining from judgment,
 may well have understood the case for backroads,
 considering his gift for isolation's
 peculiar atmospherics when the dark falls,
 the fatigue of abandonment, its pallor,
 this longing for oblivion in us,
 the need to be anonymous, forgotten,
 so that, in its travels, province by province,
 lurching village to village, its slow progress
 barely perceptible, if even that,
 on rutted, wooden wheel-spokes, routes worn thin
 by whatever traffic, meager at best,
 may have crossed here before it, it escape
 the notice of those witnesses, bystanders,
 perched at the sills of those atrocious windows
 seeming always to look in, never out,
 windows too dim to afford a fair view,
 a clear view, a view one might deem judicious;
 peering from doors of cottages, mere shanties
 weathering to their very boards, best left,
 in that unrelenting yet quite deceptive
 air of simplicity with which their rawness,
 their commonness, seeks to conceal itself,
 imagined for the moment, undescribed;
 lining the shoulders of appalling dirt roads
 whose crime, as charged, shall be to leave and enter
 nowhere at the same moment, leaving us
 stranded between forgetfulness and loss,
 at that point where, each night, they intersect.
 The lips are red, too red, the eyes have slits
 slashed through each brow, drawn evenly through lids
 lowered, half-closed — a blindness self-imposed — ,
 ending on either side above both cheeks,
 and the ruff of the collar, white, stark white,
 white as searing as any moonlight painted,
 never painted, one is tempted to claim,
 though one resists, at this stage, claiming too much,
 puckered, softly starched, intricately pleated,
 cushioning neckline, hairline, ear-lobes, chin,

further deepens, should that be possible,
 implications of light in which he sits,
 in which we all sit, as E. Hopper plots it
 (let nothing they are bound, this late, to suffer,
 seven figures waiting on a blue terrace,
 a coast unnamed, dusk fallen, end of summer,
 unobstructed the view, balmy the air,
 be less than what we, too, we, too, must suffer),
 this irretrievability of white —
 too pronounced to be wholly inadvertent —
 in which a clown, this evening, sits engulfed,
 splayed on a field of tunic, trouser, arm-hole,
 on that anguish we call the human face,
 on which this ghostly shining, mask-like, plays
 (see E. Hopper on White as Absence, Loss,
 The Desolations of Extremity:
 it is in the presence of nothingness,
 the heart, unmasked, the first and last address,
 of all that we would call American,
 we sit, we wait, we languish, we cry out,
 an insufficiency so vast, so telling,
 so suffused, throughout, with the emblematic,
 nothing the artist does or says can change it).
 We have reached the end of the tonal scale,
 where, for reasons not yet disclosed, all values,
 vivid, obtaining once, are now withheld,
 bled from the palette, utterly expunged,
 point zero on the color chart where one
 just as well may have scribbled UNAVAILING,
 the letters wild, misshaped, the writing tortured,
 across this icy sector of bleak canvas
 where Clown sits, waits, languishes, all but cries out
 into the void of raw, untreated muslin,
 with whatever strength remains to us this late
 with which to raise the brush, apply the marker
 indelibly where it should be applied,
 scrawl, one by one, ferocious, living signs
 that we were here, bystanders, knew them, touched them,
 that, throughout, their suffering somehow mattered,
 their breathing rose, then fell, their light availed.

Light plays on the beaker from which he pours
with uncommon felicity and grace,
causing its surfaces to appear even
more glistening, more rounded, than they are.
Is it moonlight its shining catches?, stars?,
lanterns, above, whose lilt seems Japanese,
a shapeliness both child-like and hand-wrought?
What can be attributed to E. Hopper
and what to us, each of us, bringing with us
such visions of romance, of the exotic,
as, from the start, we lived by, long for, dreamt?
Or could it be merely one more deception
foisted on us by a magical backcloth
reputed to be all one asks it to be,
ready to do what one would have it do?
He tilts the beaker slowly to the glass:
all night the snifter fills and fills, but fills
with nothing clearly visible, steep, fragrant,
a brandy strangely colorless and chaste.
The cigarette his lips hold hardly moves;
the wind has dwindled, died; surf breaks, but elsewhere,
out of range of anyone who might hear.
He will have come alone; when it is time,
let him shuffle his feet, rise from the table,
blow a kiss to his shadow, leave alone.
Intermissions come rarely, if at all;
it is enough to sit here, look down, wait,
inhale the liquor's fumes, study its hue.
What does E. Hopper ask of him, of us?:
that we be patient?, that we drink here, too?,
sipping from some insufferable stew
(apple?, plum?, cherry?, kumquat?, fatal peach?)
whose nothingness consumes us, brew by brew,
wreaks devastation nightly through the fruit.
The musicians have been delayed, the circus
cancelled, the little that we thought we knew
(fanfare?, panoply?, drum-roll?, stunning clamor?)
muffled, revoked, obscured, declared invalid.

Consolation, dear players, is deferred;
 the surf is bound to break elsewhere tonight.
 Dancing will not take place beneath this light.
 It pours, it pours; the snifter fills and fills.

*

From the evidence to be pieced together
 from scratch, no, less than scratch, random, haphazard,
 from clues not asked for nor from clues received,
 it may be, at the table to the right,
 crowded into the little space remaining
 before the canvas gives out (or before
 the painter tire of looking), part of him
 excluded by E. Hopper, arm and shoulder,
 where the rim of the frame divides the torso
 unaccountably now, perversely, cropped,
 the Count of Luxembourg himself, intact —
 though one can ill afford to claim as fact
 all one would claim, give it a name, extend
 the courtesy of an identity
 to the heretofore unidentified
 (recognition's perversities: night falls;
 the stars have just begun to work their magic
 against E. Hopper's vibrant stretch of backcloth
 we are tempted, in accord with his wishes,
 now and for all time to mistake for sky,
 to confuse, in our wonderment, with life;
 overhead, the frail, stenciled, painted lanterns,
 their emphasis child-like and Oriental,
 pasted cut-outs, makeshift from the beginning,
 are strung to lend enchantment here, not light;
 all one sees on this coast, has seen, or shall see,
 all that may come under one's scrutiny,
 however undivided one's attention,
 however scrupulous the will to see,
 to specify, to explicate, to name,
 must be seen as conditional, no more,
 temporary, awaiting reappraisal,

the reappraisal bound to follow that,
 subject, in its least aspects, to a process
 of intensive revision, never-ending,
 one's judgment, one's acuteness, each time suspect),
 dapper in dinner jacket, starched white shirtfront,
 black tie, seated at the edge of the frame —
 one may come to think of it as the brink —
 where a zinc table holds two brandy goblets,
 his and the woman's who accompanies him,
 casting shadows across its smooth, cool surface,
 his beard flawlessly groomed, joining the mustache
 in one long, sweeping arc, unmediated
 from beginning to end, of utter maleness,
 from upper lip to well beyond the chin,
 as black as black tie, dinner jacket, blacker,
 its blackness so luxurious, so rich,
 its dimensions so undisputed, fixed,
 it will be sufficient, or so it seems,
 to anchor him to the scene should a raw wind,
 sweeping slantwise across the littoral
 this evening, as such winds frequently do,
 slamming against the stones we know must pave
 E. Hopper's dream of terrace late in summer,
 a sudden gust quite common to this coast,
 all coasts myth shall be hesitant to name,
 rise from behind, threaten at once to push him
 out of the limits of the frame completely.

It is from the rear we have come upon her,
 but with great care have done so, utmost caution,
 needing almost to slow ourselves, delay,
 that we not move too rashly, show impatience,
 making progress, should it be that, but barely,
 quietly, indirectly, stride by stride,
 a splendor, one might claim, of circumspection,
 an approach seeming not quite an approach,
 hoping not to startle, distract, intrude,
 taking her by surprise, being ourselves,
 in equal fashion, similarly taken,
 this woman who sits opposite the Count,

perhaps the actor asked to play the Count
 (which one is it to be?, who takes the part?,
 reads the Count's lines, walks with his bearing, shows
 such style, tonight, as Counts are bred to show,
 even unpaid?, late changes in the casting
 unannounced in the program, understudies,
 despite their gifts, the fullness of their beards,
 that opulence of black more black than black,
 dinner jackets which, more than merely fit,
 become them, almost speak the lines themselves,
 themselves begin — how is this said? — to move us,
 their skill with posture, perfect posture, stance,
 with mimicry in which false turns to true,
 the spurious, at last, becomes authentic,
 with all that lends itself so handsomely
 to seeming, to no more than that, just seeming,
 never given their due, never exceeding
 their success at being anonymous,
 even E. Hopper, to the end, uncertain;
 give us occasion, he might ask, for wonder,
 the wisdom to know nothing has been settled,
 to separate ourselves from preconception,
 from all that would persuade us not to see,
 and keep us, those who can be kept, astonished,
 undercut by perplexity, in doubt,
 moved by the sum of all we fail to know),
 extra, stand-in, bit player, in the wings
 known as the grand, the consummate, imposter,
 should the Count find himself elsewhere committed,
 in pursuit of other endeavors, summoned
 to tour the provinces at a late hour,
 see to domestic crises, calm the rabble,
 stroke the coats of the horses of the gentry,
 gather the children in a circle, reading
 slowly to them lines which unfold the tale
 in the only manner tales are unfolded,
 lines which begin: "Once, once upon a terrace,
 a dreaming man, E. Hopper, wove this fable:
 dark Count, mad Princess, Clown without a circus
 (due, any moment, to make an appearance)

met, unknown to each other, on a coast,
 late of a summer evening, so enchanted,
 done in a wash so ravishingly blue,
 its name would not yet even be invented
 for as long as it took to tell the fable . . ." — ,
 being, to the extent his gift allows,
 even to the hue and strain of the bloodline,
 unimpeachably, variously, royal.

Though E. Hopper will not show us her eyes,
 seated, as she is, with her back to us,
 studying the Count's face across the table,
 and we seem destined not to know their shade,
 it is by the tilt of her head, hair gathered
 softly at the top, wound into a crown
 bound delicately by a band of velvet,
 by the tenuousness of the slight angle
 at which the neck permits her to lean forward
 in his direction — hear him, should he speak?,
 move to him, bend to him, signal a warmth,
 an intimacy, unarticulated
 as yet (patience, E. Hopper asks of us,
 that wisdom which knows nothing has been settled),
 peer at him, study him?, for the first time
 see him?, see him as he might ask she see him,
 could he bring himself to ask something of her? — ,
 in that posture of fervent expectation,
 the gesture's tenderness, the offering's
 air of unremitting solicitude,
 it seems not at all inconceivable
 she might, given the moment (and what are we,
 E. Hopper might well ask, if not our moments,
 if not passion invested in attention?),
 one of many possible moments, given
 darkness past any darkness known before this,
 a backcloth against which, thanks to E. Hopper —
 the merest patch of unbleached painter's muslin
 imaginable, common workshop fabric,
 not even that, enough to plot a grid on
 where stars are to be radiantly splattered,

unstretched, untreated, raw, waiting for marks
 to be scratched on it, flames to leap up, life,
 passionate, breathless, hushed, to break out on it — ,
 all things are possible, unfolded, played out,
 are, even as I write this, being played out,
 the mild, sweet, haunted fragrance of late summer —
 jasmine?, mimosa?, larkspur?, bougainvillea?,
 the scent of all things lost to us?, regret? —
 drenching the terrace, those assembled on it;
 given the cue which proves, at last, the right cue,
 the fruitful, or the fateful, or the crucial
 (the one E. Hopper may have had in mind
 when asking, had he brought himself to ask:
 are we not, then, the sum of all our cues?),
 soon be prepared to give herself to him
 (though E. Hopper speaks only for himself —
 should the verb in that line read “sees” instead? — ,
 vouches for nothing she may or may not do,
 whatever the shade of the man’s blood, whatever
 the role, the need, the longing which compels him,
 in half-light, to look out to sea, this sea
 we know to be illusory, to be
 E. Hopper’s blue dream of a sea, whatever
 the landscape of the kingdom left behind
 that he might come to take the air at evening
 from a dramatic sweep of summer terrace
 perched on a coast to which one gives no name
 not for want of a name, a wreath of names,
 not for want of a myth, a myth retold,
 told once more after that, in which all names
 are power, and all power rests in names,
 signification, what things come to be
 because they hear the names they have been given,
 nor for want of imaginative passion,
 but for this multiplicity of names,
 this splendor, this profusion, we now find
 spills from the mind, in some ultimate sense

suits the geography throughout described,
 appears, on a blue evening here, momentous,
 as E. Hopper intended, just, congruent.

*

There are thugs at the table to the left —
 no need to ask, this evening, how we know;
 we know, and that shall tell it all, or nearly — ,
 only one of them visible (his cap
 the cap, one has decided, of a plotter,
 roomy but squat, a peak which would cast shade,
 were there the chance illumination find him,
 the risk that dazzle soon befell his life;
 a thin mustache, trimmed, dark, a cigarette
 between his lips, his arms crossed on the table,
 the left hand placed, almost protectively,
 across a small, rectangular, black box
 which, in the course of a long night, E. Hopper
 wishes not to identify, prefers
 to know little or nothing of, despite
 his readiness to travel to the heart
 of certain obscure, infamous, drenched corners
 something pernicious may have overtaken
 by the time one has reached this page and read it,
 refusing to turn back, to be turned back,
 until, shudder by shudder, he has shown us
 the scope of what awaits us there, the depth
 of the utterly bottomless, the nature
 of the unspeakable itself), a crew
 causing pronounced uneasiness in us
 were they, and soon, to take charge, seize command,
 should we have turned away a moment, followed
 the salt line through the waves, counted the stars,
 find themselves in control of the direction
 in which a vision can or cannot go,
 forms too dim to distinguish in this half-light
 E. Hopper chooses for them now, must choose,
 those whose intentions one knows do not rest,

never rested, with the forces of light,
 and from whose shadows seems to rise a chill,
 autumnal, dank, enigmatic at best,
 almost palpable on the air E. Hopper
 sees fit, despite inherent difficulty
 for him in the bestowal, in the gift,
 to provide, this evening, for them to breathe,
 at least subsist on, through yet one more night,
 until his task, or theirs, is at an end,
 men who dream, should they dream, of certain crimes
 against the human mind and human spirit,
 thugs in the truest sense, assaulters, thieves,
 plotting all the while to subvert the canvas,
 set fires on the terrace, plant explosives
 in the pots of acacia, slash the sky,
 run E. Hopper's train of thought off the track,
 undermine that now-mythic blue of evening
 looming, throughout, uncompromised, fierce, blue,
 the first and last of what we start and end with,
 clearly too *bleu* for plotters' tastes, too *soir*,
 at every turn test his will, his resolve,
 as to who these figures are, were, shall be,
 beneath the masks, the titles, the emplacements
 where we have come upon them in such postures
 as beg we understand them not too quickly,
 ask for not too certain an explanation,
 too facile a dispelling of all doubt,
 seek answers to a question one concedes
 may not even as yet have quite been asked;
 brutes who, if permitted to have their way
 (E. Hopper, almost out of inadvertence,
 gazing off to the right now, far right, needing
 to look, to look again, not for the first time,
 not for the last, the eye, and the mind with it,
 compelled to stray in that direction, pulled there,
 leaving the others to care for themselves
 for the moment it takes to look away,
 no more than that, until he can resume
 attending them undividedly once more,
 as before, this division indication

of his unhappiness with them, this twosome
 from whom he had believed he might move on,
 put them behind, see to the others' welfare,
 seated together in such isolation
 it causes him to shudder contemplating
 how he may have composed it, how the mind
 may have contrived to bring them to this, made them
 become whatever it is they now are
 under one's sponsorship, one's guidance, shudder
 at such separateness he may have crafted,
 such coolness to which he has acquiesced,
 figures seated before us in the dark
 placed so far at the far edge of the frame
 the mind has so long plotted, dreamt, arranged,
 rearranged, one by this time seems convinced
 it will take all his strength merely to keep them
 here, a small table, far right, set as though
 desolation itself made reservations
 (table for two, facing no others, Absence
 the only game to be played, should a deck
 be offered this late, should they care to shuffle,
 the only liquor to be poured, should brandy
 rise in the snifters, rise, fill, late be poured),
 anchor them to the canvas, forge a pact
 between these greens and blacks in which they live,
 think they live, and this muslin to which one would
 commit them now for their own good, prevent them,
 should the weather not hold, or the wind shift,
 or the bend in this strand of Hopper coast,
 suspended in no time and in no place,
 change direction, turn to the ominous,
 from somehow easing off, from being eased off,
 into a province not yet mentioned here,
 not about to be mentioned here, yet wholly
 manifest in the context, intimated
 by the gaps in their desolate, proud faces;
 once more scrutinizing the bearded one,
 looking sideward, backward, downward, inward,
 into that life, Count of the Enigmatic,
 famous, all evening, for revealing nothing

but, in time, its own time, revealing all;
 once more peering at eyes, at dinner jacket,
 the cut, the fit, the fabric stitched like sorrow
 binding the chest, gripping the arms, the neck;
 estimating the weight the bones displace,
 the true shade of the so-called royal blood,
 the anguish of the lineage; devising
 ways that, at last, he look to, see, her splendor,
 ways to cause two white satin straps attaching
 the low back to the bodice of the gown
 he has dressed the young woman in to glow
 like moonlight on the pale flesh of her shoulders,
 wanting, once more, to know, to understand —
 wisdom cautions nothing is ever settled — ,
 why this man must be made to look to sea,
 to stare abstractly, half-turned in his chair,
 into that space one best leave undefined —
 void?, or abyss?, or backcloth jammed with stars
 such as one knows exist nowhere but here? —
 rather than face directly the resplendence
 emanating from this woman seen seated
 in magnificent fashion opposite him,
 consort, companion, stranger, wife, enchantress,
 her gown the green of fragrant, just-ripe peaches
 (apple?, plum?, cherry?, kumquat?, fatal peach?),
 her hair, thick, brown, bound by a band of velvet,
 the luster of her shoulders so heart-stopping,
 her patience so endearing, her attention
 so finely-tuned, extreme, unstinting, touching,
 E. Hopper needs to know, to know again,
 know even once beyond that, what it may be
 this man — imposter?, understudy?, Count?,
 the stand-in for the stand-in we think real? —
 must contend with within himself, the nature
 of the affliction keeping him from her,
 the flaw, the gap, the lack, the desperation,
 insidious, demonic, keeping him
 from himself, even now, now as I write this,
 compelling him to turn, to half-turn, after
 sampling brandy from the glass turn again),

would so soon have overtaken the canvas,
so soon have held the terrace, its vague auras,
fastidiously in their plot, their grip,
the rest of it, border to border, edge
to edge, shudder by shudder, would be placed
in nothing less than the acutest danger —
Princess, table for three, Count, the pale-shouldered,
the night itself, stars E. Hopper has hung
for whatever their influence, their magic,
these lanterns he has strung that, late, they lend
precisely the right glimmer of enchantment,
the hope, though unavailing, of romance,
even this dream-struck patch of makeshift backcloth,
dazzling but plain, miraculous yet common,
we have, at last, consented, with E. Hopper,
to call the sky they move beneath, the waves
they dream all night break here, below the terrace —
of being swept away, of going under,
gutted, abandoned, lost, in flames, corrupted,
the music never played, the would-be players
never having arrived, arrived in time,
no fanfare, panoply, no drum-roll, clamor,
the partnering never initiated,
nor holding, nor embracing, nor those glides,
languorous, long, luxuriant, exotic,
into the possibilities which music
opens before us on a coast not named,
soir bleu, blue evening, heart's desire, late summer.