

Roger Mitchell

Delicate Bait

The shell of the meal broken
and sucked clean, the ocean
chewing up the beach beyond the palms
made it seem that eating a simple meal
there by the ocean at night
on an island heaved up millennia ago
in fiery explosions, and the fish
having leapt out of the same water,
bodies of a movement of that sea,
ocean larger than anything
on earth, would suffice. That we should come
and go, eating the few thousand meals,
a few hundred fish, a room full of grains,
that we should put the world in our mouths
and swallow, become the fish,
the deer, the goat, the field of wheat,
walking graveyard with no stones, body of death
and the world. Out of the fish
and our sitting there, out of our
being together briefly in that place,
our scattered and gathered trying-to-be,
one to the other, less evanescent,
less brief and accidental, something,
so that when, in the impending hour,
oblivious, hour of cancellation and woe,
we turned back to our lives, whatever they were,
we would have, or keep, maybe a phrase,
a sense of the light, the look
of the fish arranged on its bier of rice,
the voice of the ocean, continuous, around us,
the burning of that hour together, something,

something even memory cannot reach,
wave that comes across an ocean,
only to fall gratefully onto the sand.

On the north side of the island,
region of small icons and cairns,
in the voice of that place, tumble
of rock back into the sea from which it came,
people stack one rock on another,
two or three, a cluster,
sometimes a single rock set out alone
on the edge of that other rock,
the island itself, saying here,
a flame in a red dress, I was here, and the fish
is a part of my body, and I thank
the fish and the cook and the person
who brought it to me and those
at the other tables making cairns
out of words and gestures,
glances in every direction.
It was beginning to slide, wash
back into the silence from which it came.
It was happening to me, to us,
and I was watching it, lifted
one fork at a time into my mouth,
into the mouths of the others, those
I was with, those I was almost with,
those gone and going before,
those for whom I am the one going before,
scattering, as when alarmed,
not scattering really, but moving just beyond
the ends of our fingers,
when, swimming among them,
we reach out to touch them,
almost become one ourselves,
fish in the sea.
And, that more delicate bait,
the you and the me.