

Before The Ship Leaves

by John Olson

Before the ship leaves port I want to buy a few trinkets. I have a pretty good grip on things. I know the streets. I know the museums. I know the pharmacies and dead ends. I wear a thick green wool sweater and a pair of cotton pants but I feel naked underneath and my neck hurts. It is a species of pain I call Chuck the Imponderable. I see the spars of a ship named Delectation out on the horizon. I stretch. I spin. I pray. I go to plays. I go to pieces. I round the corner and find a boat calling me to go on a journey. Instead I buy a canvas and slide around on it dribbling a world of paint with my elbows and crocodile slither. I have scales and feathers. I am a monster gardenia. A beautiful ghost haunts the incision on my chest. I wash it with goat blood. I practice Hinduism and ambiguity. It occurs to me that the curve of a boat propeller is precisely the kind of acceleration I admire. I also admire the air. And the garish abandonment of echoes. A batch of lightning shoots out of my enthusiasm. I feel parallel to an emotion propelled by an engine of birds. A 10 pound thought enriches the bone black antiquity of my Metro ticket. It was supposedly in the possession of a pharaoh visiting Manhattan 3,000 years before the birth of Christ. Before there was a subway. Or shoe stores. A massive pink cloud tumbles through the brocade of a burning filmstrip. A sideboard screams mahogany. I open a bottle of root beer and begin to paint. Delectation is coming into port. I paint the bow blue. I paint the sails white. I paint the eulogy puce and the slobber Sicilian umber. It all congeals. It weighs a thousand tons. It is an entire world. A world of paint. A world of pain. I title it "Poetry Of The Stove" and buy a sack of pancake dough. I head for the dock, and brush my fedora with a wad of Pythagorean moss. The captain is a clumsy angel with a stethoscope and a bowl of bouillon. Three months later we arrive in Cartagena. I have a headache the size of China. But the pain in my neck is gone and I have a trunk full of paintings. Watercolor. Oil. Pencil sketches. I am greeted by a lime green crab. I shout take me

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to the finest hotel. I need a bath. He shouts get a cab. I'm a crab.
The cab is mandarin orange. The driver is hellebore red. We arrive
at the hotel at sunset, which is old gold and opera pink. My
ganglions are celadon and I like my whisky neat. Let it be remarked
that practical medicine takes this shape from its own necessity. No
voyage is whole without a piano. And the first condition of playing it
successfully is to know that it is incomplete.

