

Still Life with a Bottle of Olives

by stephen hastings-king

1. Outside the sleet is drumming on the awnings.

On the table the image is by Chardin, "Still Life with a Bottle of Olives," made from candle light, the black beyond and a wooden table on which is a composition of glowing soup tureen, pears and pomegranate, two glasses and traces of wine, a loaf of bread face down on a cutting board and the present giving way to the past.

On the table the image is by Chardin but the puzzle is by someone else and that is what he has dumped out of the box. He spreads the pieces across the blue and white checkerboard plastic tablecloth and turns them same side up, savoring the process, another glass of wine and a Haydn string quartet.

When the wine makes him sleepy he snuffs out the lamps and in his bed slides into an envelope of chill between quilt and sheet, closes his eyes and waits for his body heat to catch up with him.

2. The drumming on the awnings outside tangles with the metallic clangs and pings and the hissing of steam passed amongst the radiators and the scurrying overhead and through the walls of the squirrels and mice that together articulate the geometries of night like they have since he was a child and would listen to the same sounds while watching the movements of parental arguments along the shadow flowers cast by the lights downstairs through the iron grate over the hole in the floor of his bedroom. Sleep is a falling toward a somewhere between present and past like it always is.

Camouflaged in this way the night creatures scratch their way down the inside of the walls. They sound like what they are made from, fine black lines and long pointy hats and peculiar artificial noses. They position themselves around openings in the floorboards until everyone is asleep. Then they enter the rooms to rearrange and remove things.

3. From outside the streetlights illuminate the Chardin spread over a blue and white checkerboard table cloth in the living room. From beneath his quilt he can hear the night creatures disguised as mice and squirrels rearranging and removing things and thinks: The puzzle. They'll go after pieces of the puzzle because they're small and look like dinner. By morning the still life will have irregular holes in it that will fill up with blue and white squares. That is not right. So he is also back at the table with all the lights on touching the puzzle pieces in no particular order until he takes the first look beneath the table which leads inexorably to another then another then to crawling around the floor.

But he cannot find the missing pieces.

So he thinks: Maybe there are no pieces missing from the puzzle. There's no way to know unless I assemble it. Then he has poured another glass of wine and assembles a corner of brownish black candlelit space until his attention is pulled under the oven and then the fragments of the glowing soup tureen until he starts thinking that if the night creatures live inside the wall and enter through holes maybe I can get a small camera in a flexible cable with a light at the end and feed it through I can see where they hide.

