our measured treads

by strannikov

in the neighborhood of Vesuvius

for Herculaneum as for Pompeii
the blast announced: “too late to flee”.
all public streets each private space
all sites decreed—no lives survive.

—yet frantic to outrun the racing sky
useless curses hurled 'pon falling down
moments colliding cooking frozen steps
paces cease as hot grey mortar swims
few hurries left to be in—

carts horses mules without speed
with no escapes no paths away
shores achoke while being pushed offshore
boats ablaze float off to sink
as ash displaces every air
no space for bugs nor birds to fly.

racing only out of life this day
concealing childs from ashen airs
bricks lie beneath thick mortared rain
grey ash the whisper of the world
all silences are swallowed gone.

clouds had to be inhaled this day
no place was given else to breathe:
faithful dogs howl and howl no more
rats perish, cats slink off to die
each curled into enduring sleep
in each grey corner hidden deep

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relentless storms of ash fell grey
rinsing floors caking tiles silencing all steps.

moans of final prayers subside: hearing gods
listen as ashes wash over those towns
hear floods of ash wash through those towns
into submerged sealed silenced sleeps.

crowds commuting to

I recall hearing hundreds sprawl
across the terminal's paved floors
most for the escalators bound
(career-bound for cabs, at least some few)
most a scurry of legs like me
legs quick as the wheels of the trains
that had traveled us there, that far.

some dasht to one side first to shop:
might drop off some shoes for repair
or browse newspaper racks for truth
(preferred reads for coffees at desks)
bagels doughnuts cinnamon buns
voices asleep in coffee queues.

I saw over twelve hundred times
morning commutes across five years
regularly keen to see them
more faces an hour than back home
(where not one minute's faces lived,
nor to be seen in just one day)—
hundreds of faces, thousands, too,
varieties of faces read
for features expressions displayed

for what their histories could tell.

through twenty seasons faces marcht—
not as battalions, regiments
aligned in step, alike in garb—
but pedestrian, none the less.

their faces moved as fast as legs
through any weather any day
(Mondays through Fridays, holidays off)
with and without umbrellas in hand
with and without overcoats and hats
depending on the season and day,
no scarves in summer, gloved winter hands.

—and the god presiding over all
a four-faced, double-Janused clock
its equal seconds clickt away
ticking us our steps and breaths
timing us to traffic and to trains
chronicling moments of blurring sight
circling over chattered talk clattered steps—
but not naming once how late the day.