Certainty; The Storm Garden; Millet's Winnower; Domestication

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CERTAINTY

Siobhan Phillips

Back when you were sitting for exams on Paul, the getting saved upset me more than rules on women's hair: his little dictums, touchingly ad hoc, for hats and headgear seemed to apprehend a real request for reassurance (male) with near-pathetic care, but his commandments on the mix of faith and works, his scorn for any sinner trusting in the latter, his contempt when banishing delusions over deeds and sloughing off in wholesale condescension epochs-tested acts as guesses dense to facts he understands—it all seems clumsy, bluffing, even, boorish; he ignores how creeds of sola fides supersede the duties countermanded with a practice no less willed: a stuff of inner issue, yes, but still a chore that's posed and done. Belief while lacking proof: that's not a task? Demands for resolution aren't law? The merest daily habits show the flaw in either-or, the smallest daily tests and inattention, say (confirm you missed a difference in the way I knot a scarf or fix my part, for instance, then record and nourish the offense), the steady need for means as well as meanings. Something settled, maybe, as in someplace we can dwell. And even the apostle, incidentally, holds that coupled skeptics might be blessed by virtue of association. Well. You passed. I stay apostate. There we are.
What was it—envy, sorrow—that tonight, when musing through your baby book of posed mementos, whispered back: okay, give up, you're right? Relentless rain all day. Now mists confuse the moon, exhausted as a cup of heirloom glaze; the battered creamy-white of petals from our neighbors' yard insists on crying its destruction, heart exposed. When we arrived, we questioned how the pair next door in jeans and All-Stars could afford three pre-war stories all their own, assuming trust funds: then, ashamed, we watched a bare half-acre lot put on a week of blooming light. Prepared and lost without reward.
MILLET’S WINNOWER

Siobhan Phillips

A picture of what works, and this bent
body, tense as the resonant cut

of a violin, its signature.
Pads of blue rags twine-tied
to its legs and, above the rough shirt
some dubbed égalité, a red scrap

knotted around its head, mean hours
on knees, bare to sunburn,

and dried sweat. And if that canvas
blouse across its back

should draw our look
somewhere other (light beyond the frame

shows the cracked, plastered white—strokes
some disdained as scrubbing, trowelling—

to be chiaroscuro, a master’s love
of dark and difference) than down

to the tight grasp of hand
on basket, still, the hand works: Its tilt

yields to the undiscerning wind.
Its slack judges the weights of waste

and store. Harder, hard to see
in paint, is the task of eyes;

their resigned downward measure guards
what free crowds and critics,
what the Minister of Finance, the buyer,
idealists, appraisers, connoisseurs,

what even the artist with his daring,
redeemed brush, could only

presume: clean grain, hidden
at the center of the work

by the body's shadow
and the gold glow of the chaff's rise.
DOMESTICATION

Siobhan Phillips

Oh, my love, I hear you can pop champagne
with a cleaver. Knife down an ice-cold neck with a slicing
chop so fast and clear that it nicks the overlap

lip of the greenish glass and the mushroomed cap:
boom. Two bits, the wood, the gleam, left plain
on the square of blade. The motive? Flair, I presume,

vanity: why else risk the shatter and waste,
the cuts? Though just last week in a Payless, trapped
in line and watching a cross-dresser tap-dance test

some lavender pleather oxfords, me with heels
I'd picked for nine-ninety-nine and already late
for a meal with distinguished guests, I pictured trying

once at home in our scarred linoleum kitchen
box a quick stroke flung toward broken: feared,
here, before you or I exhale, even, rush

of foam in a steady flute—its crack-edge set
in a soft, moist fist. Relief. Then stars of air
unsealed at last on the covert, thirsty tongue.