

The Irenaut

Exploring the human genius for peace; charting the violence that stifles it

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Rothko Chapel

By Rachel Hadas

When I came back everything had changed.
Or was I what had changed?

Surfaces pulsating into depth.
Buffed and burnished canvases, enormous,

throbbing, resonating in the silence.
Roar of an echo

as if the wilderness of sea were framed
and beating on the wall.

Do these ambiguous guardians of darkness
invite the chaos in or keep it out?

In the visitors' book, the poetry of struggle,
mosaic of fragments, fragments of mosaic

too fraught, capacious, hopeful to take in.
Back to the brushstrokes, where to look

is also and is equally to listen.
When I came back, everything was different.

What was the agon, whose the agony?
Whose were these massive, fugitive reflections?

Everyone's and no one's.
Chorus of global senses, sufferings, cries

pressed between the pages of a book,
sketched and half deleted onto paintings.

After a decade, what had seemed turbid, sullen,
unyielding, now looks reticent but also

if not quite radiant nevertheless
glowing from within with masked intention,

coded in a language
everyone and no one can interpret.

Here emanations
dance in diffused light.

Sit still. Wait long enough
and what emerge are countenances,

recognizable features,
gaps and suggestions, cloudy forms that beckon,

approach, recede, return.
Look closely: there's a frame. If you lean on it

and peer out of it, it is like a window.
You plant your elbows on the notional

sill and look out into a pool of darkness,
into the twin impenetrabilities

of past and future.
History: the bare *was*,

an irascible scholar said that someone said.
The form, he also said, contains the crisis.

The crisis molds the form.
The slant and then the bouncing of the light.

What had I expected?
Apocalypse? There still were sunsets.

Little pink clouds still floated in the sky.
Back to the words in the visitors' book

or play of light on the reflecting pool:
fleeting phenomena

(thought is too firm a name)
until the ripples smoothed themselves again.

Sunrise, moonrise, dawn, noon. Repeat.
Precarity, predictability.

At a perpetual edge of life,
a rededication, an allegiance

to whatever it is we have spent our lives doing.
Or restlessness, rejection of the past,

as if in this silent space a snake
were to glide in and shed its skin and depart.

Even with emptiness, to fill the space.
Everything, says Koheleth, is full of emptiness.

Vacancy pours into each corner
and rises to the inscrutable surface to greet us

and every congregant becomes
an emptiness confronting tumult,

tumult punctuating emptiness.
My one small indistinguishable voice:

tinny and dwarfed by the majestic panels
which now seem to be leaning slightly down toward us,

grownups hovering over children –
gesture of greetings, sheltering, or threat?

All of the above.
Canvases somehow somewhere once

stroked by a sunbeam and remembering heat
if only because we know there is sun out there.

But in here, light
is sobered, filtered, somehow purified.

The silence draws us all into its frame,
us being two or any larger number.

People try to come and go,
enter and leave, in silence.

There is room here for any visitor
to feel surrounded, neighbored,

and also alone.
I sense the darkness looking back at me.

Faces not faces waking us from sleep,
wakened themselves, emerging and dissolving

and then themselves invisible again,
fading back into their frames

like the ghosts in the gallery in *Ruddigore*.
When I came back, everything had changed,

and not. I ask: enfold us in compassion.
Bless and seek the silence.

Pray: the answer is silence.
Pray: the silence answers.