

JAMES SUTHERLAND - SMITH

Mayflies

i.m. James Merrill (1926-1995)

I sunbathe at the bottom of a well of green,
A thousand thousand tints; beech, acacia, pine
With its new growths of emerald buds, the linden
Whose scent is sharpest before storms, a birch tree's sheen
Or tinfoil glimmer in the breeze mayflies still rise upon.

Squinting, I look away from a stem's jade tip
To the vivid spider centred in a beer bottle top.
Rayed like a star it might sense a whole world in its grip.
It only has to wait and wait for something to drop
From what must seem to be nothingness as mayflies still rise up.

There's a warbler in the lindens whose stuttering cries
Are answered by another from the slope of beech trees.
A third also stakes a claim for territories.
I can't make any of them out so my gaze
Focuses on the space where mayflies still rise,

Miniature Chinese kites with split hairs for tail
Or the angels that dance on the end of a needle.
How many since morning have dizzied up from the pool?
How many hemi-demi-semi-quavers in a warbler's trill?
What else except death can make mayflies still?

Close to, my face must seem to them immense in size,
A wall of folds and sweat, monstrous grey-green eyes
Yet less eloquent with harm than the warbler's cries
Whose replies are questions and questions more replies
Unheeded by their prey which cannot hear: mayflies

The Light in the Elderberry

It's impossible to put into words, into sound,
The light in the elderberry
From the midday sun in February,
In the wild hair of twigs tangling from central shoots
Down to chunks of unmelted snow
Among logs left to decay.

Above us is a sky so blue it must be the ultimate
In the scattering of light.
And we crane our necks as if about
To see all the way through to deep space and star shine.
Just photograph the light
Says my serious Russian friend.

And so I focus on the hard glints and knife blade sheen
In snow and elderberry buds.
Below us the Malá Deľna thuds,
Whose groan can be heard soft or loud from the ravine
According to weather or season
Ten feet from our cabin.

When we go back I'll take shots of its sinuous water,
A cold muscle which flows
Between the remnants of the snows
Around the cabin and I'll put the prints with one I took
In Libya twenty years ago
Of fresh steak on a butcher's hook.

Nearby bullock heads had been piled into an old dustbin lorry
Painted in the corporation green
Of nineteen-fifties Britain.
Long lashed Black Angus eyes stared as if they still had sight.
Just photograph the light
Said my serious Russian friend.