

JOHN GRIFFIN

WANDERER

Wanderer 1

I wish you'd get it. I *want*
to sit down here. I do not care
if you close the gate at sunset.
I've chosen not to step inside
and if you cannot cope with that
I'm sorry, I didn't ask for walls
and safe streets after dark, and cats
that come for milk, and drying sheets
on rope keeping windows apart . . .

I wish you well, at least not ill,
you who stand above the gate all night,
you who sit beside a feverish child,
you tossing on mattress dreaming coins
and tomorrow's custom. Wish me
free sleep and an absence of jackals,
a crust I can buy at someone's door,
a couple of figs, and a good day's walk.

Wanderer 2

The glimpse of a neat regatta in the sun,
the bubbling sympathy of parasols and water.
The hand around the waist. A crushed bow.

My passage of foot across the random lands
trudging on towpaths, stopping for applefall,
allows my eye to focus closely on the gnat
or from a hill to see unregistered crowds
and counties that settle at history's speed.

Some frayed lace. Lust in a soft hand.
A river's fringe of open pavilions and flags.
A line of sombre trees. A still gold sky.

Wanderer 3

The man who takes a city
as his goal
chooses a rich confection
riddled with worm.

Wanderer 4

Come closer to the fire. I shall tell
of the only city I was ever happy in.

It had been, I suppose, a trading place,
a town of camels and bundles, of rope
recalled and rewarded and sent out
at the end of hoofprints again and again.

I could sense ghosts. This city smelt
of ghosts, whining for lost coins
among its fretting walls. I came in
through an emptiness of stone, where once

a gate kept out the darkness daily.
It was all fallabout stone, tumbles
of tile and broken brick. So lost
were the streets that I could only walk

where my feet wanted. There were rats,
there were thistles, there was a niche
not far from a stream, and warm at night.
I could laugh at the ghosts of trade,

who were weeping there. This was a city
where the bones of houses were warmed by sun.

Wanderer 5

It is called a *tell*: part memory,
part muddy presence, a low mound
dissected by trenches. The diggers
are ants arranging pretty stones
on the surface: old bricks and straw,
old shards of cooking pots, the bones
of lonely rats. Someone's sketch
has a street just so, a little square,
a house or two possibly defined.

It is taking shape, as slowly
as it lost its profile to the wind.

I have stayed briefly at, avoided,
skirted round a hundred towns
like this, waiting for dust to fill
their streets, and wolves to come.

I am not a map, a chart, a diagram
to help you out. Call me, perhaps,
a smudge on a page, a grain of wind.

Wanderer 6

This does not touch me. When I step down
from a ship, I find a dusty road
and whatever city lies beyond the hill
will be my destination. You do not cling
with your cries of Love me! Settle down!
Plant a tree and wait for fruit to come!
I have abjured these local pieties.

I am committed to dirt between the toes.
I am the friend of grass seeds hitching rides
on trouser cuffs. No need to ask of them
opinions of ditches, statements of pride
in owning meadow and wall, and an eye
for the same sun's same season again
and again. Seeds blow in wind, drown
thankfully in flood, take passage on traveller,
man or bird or dog. Explode in brief green,
make this temporary city or short theme
for a wanderer's words, but not put down
foot into permanent shoe, back on mattress
or the historical eye on the crumbled wall
that someone will get you to raise in stone.
If you stop. If you let them. If you don't go on.

Wanderer 7

I've been in barracks and galleys
unwillingly and often.
I've been seduced by the soft cloth
of mills, moving the air along.
I've been in a house of high bamboo
on stilts, and fish for catching below.
I've been in cells, wrapping my skin
around me, throwing my eyes

out of the clutches and kisses and cords
to that place defined by places
the road between towns
the perpetual arrival
the going again

I own what is not owned:
the spaces between, the empty richness,
the air, the stone, the tree.