

James Matthew Wilson

On a Cocktail Umbrella

He didn't know the place and sat alone,
Braced between stool and bar, and drank his beer,
A crowd of lilting voices just behind him.
Five men, theatrical with their fay gestures,
He watched them through the bottle-crowded mirror
And knew the show that they were putting on.
A game played on a set above his head,
Its mass of muted faces crying out
A warning he should leave. He had no place
To go, and concentrated on his glass,
The Bass Ale logo scratched away with washing,
As if it were a thing of seriousness.
Headlights from cars on 9th flashed in
And turned its shadow clockwise over and over.

The bar man's shadow called him back, and, plunk,
There, on the wood, before him now, a goblet
Whose big-mouthed bowl was faceted and held
A liquid, ruby dark with grenadine.
The lip was loaded down with chunks of fruit,
Orange slices twisted to a kind of writhing,
Pineapple floating in a sea of ice cubes.
And primly propped, surmounting all, a red
Cocktail umbrella, fragile ribs outspread,
And marked in gold with Chinese characters.
"This one's on your admirer," he said.

"My what?" he asked the barman, who had turned
Away and pushed his towel down the rail
To sop what this gargantuan mess had splattered.
The room was long and narrow, hot with bodies,
But open to the street so traffic sounds
Passed over bunched up voices in the booths,
Those bright and fawning laughs behind his back.
He smelled the sweetness and the bite of liquor
Fuming up from beneath the red umbrella.

He knew who'd done this, one of them behind,
And pushed the drink away. A joke no doubt,
Or maybe some half-serious proposition,

As if to test and probe for what he was,
What kind of thing it was that he desired.

When still a boy, his cousins came at Christmas,
And brought with them umbrellas just like that one.
Where did they get them, he had asked, and listened
As they told of a Chinese restaurant, draped
In sequined panels, dragons on the wall,
Brown tea set steaming on their calendar placemats
And into which they stirred whole packs of sugar.
And these, they smiled, came with the Shirley Temples.

The food, it was no good, they said. By then,
However, he had watched their fingers spinning
The small umbrellas, close and open them,
And did not care if food or tea were nothing
A boy like him could stomach. Didn't care,
But secreted away that he would beg
His parents take him to that place, and beg
Them order him, just once, that lithe red drink,
So he could have himself a small umbrella
Spiked in a bobbing maraschino cherry,
And raise its gentle sprigs, then fold them tight,
And watch its turning letters blur then still.
He thought of nothing else, till the thought faded.

That's how it was, he knew, with all desire,
No matter how it crown itself with sugar
Or draw away attention with high laughter,
It warms itself with the blood's heat, blood's pulse,
Which knows nothing but its own serious rhythm.

James Matthew Wilson

High Seriousness

Having emerged, at last, from the hot train,
Its silence broken only by newspapers
And the conductor, shifting down the aisle
 To take each fare

Pinched on its perch atop the canvas seats,
We come out where the evening brightness opens,
The row of maples by the station woven
 With cool, clear air.

And even now, across the road, old couples
Follow the hostess to an early seating
On the trattoria's stone patio
 With white draped tables.

If you should pass, you'll see a waitress lift
The pinot grigio from its tub of ice
And pour. But I recall, two decades back,
 The cloistral classroom,

Those arguments we had about the art
Of poetry — its craft, what lasts, what fades —
And that mute glare of anger toward those who
 Sat there indifferent.

How could they not see our lives staked on rhyme,
A civilization's rise in Sidney's meter?
And passing, after, still in muffled rage,
 By the frat houses,

I'd see the boys out idle in their yard,
Shirtless, a football arcing back and forth
Between them, as if just there to remind me
 I had no time.

No time for that loose spread of fingers, no,
But only for the hard pinch and strict grip
Of pen and book, when darkness closed down hard
 On autumn study.

Among Americans, Tocqueville had noticed,
Every idea was softened by the chuff

Of humor, as if they drew back from faith
Like Abram's knife;

Convinced himself, through unbelief and anguish,
They'd lost thereby the last high seriousness,
Which faded, now, away, with the old order,
Her sabers trampled.

Some decades on, that stern schoolmaster, Arnold,
Felt stung straight through the heart and blushed to read
Of Palemon lusting over a silly girl
Spied in the garden;

Or of the Miller's man who came in darkness
To his beloved's sill and kissed her ass.
What kind of sober lesson could that give
To all the vulgar?

The rioters who forced the gates of Hyde Park?
The liberals from the mills of Birmingham?
We need an image higher, more austere,
To summon us.

We need, in fact, to be thrown down, horse bolting,
And blinded by the gravid flash of truth,
Which suffers no glib smiling, if we're ever
To heed our calling.

We need to sense that our first intuition
Of truth is something worth descent through darkness,
Though it demand our solitary parting
From all we've known.

But, when we rise, we come to a spread table,
Where laughter, light as music on the air,
Weaves through our argument. We sit at leisure,
And lift our glasses

To one another, their rims radiant
And bringing a cool sweetness to our lips,
Till all we'd guarded with astringent strictness
Returns as joy.