

Alchemy

“Chemistry raised to such perfection is what we call *Alchemy*. That science, like all others, perished during certain times and remains now in name only.”

— from the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and D’Alembert

A discourse on the quality of being seen:
you are an average of space between particles.
Not a sum divided by the number of parts comprising it,
but what is normal, acceptable, tolerated.
You are made up of what is average and can be seen.
This is chemistry.

This is to put ink down on a page,
an average of space, of particles.
It is to write an operating manual for a toaster,
a lab report, a Petrarchan sonnet, wedding vows.
It is the text of an Act of Congress,
a note passed in sixth grade. Chemistry. You are seen.

The authors of “Alchemy” in Diderot’s *Encyclopedia* note
the subtlety of their subject, the way it compresses
life, time, the spaces in between, enacting the unseen.
An unacceptable nearness: proximity that is blinding,
Moses in the cleft of the rock. Words that act
rather than react. Alchemy.

It is what Wordsworth meant when he wrote “we see
into the lives of things.” Not into things
themselves, but into the new spaces
opened up and drawing together into words that
shatter the still air and expose the darkened room,
existence rushing inwards.

The truest things are the lost. Not misplaced like
last month’s electric bill under a stack of papers but
the invisible, the doings beyond memory,
words that created light, that ordered time and distance.
It is the nearness we are after with every genuine statement.

Duets

1. Vamp

She put her ear to the doorframe to listen
to him sing through nine feet of gleaming brass.
No soul should be able to speak like that, she thought,
unwinding meter and harmony like
Picasso dismantling the face beautiful.
Her music stayed silenced, never summoned.

2. Adoration

Joy Spring is a series of colors in his brain, not
notes, not dots and flags on long horizontal lines but
splashes of cardinal red and a deep gold,
aquamarine flecks glimmering here and there.
Paint on canvass can't shine like this, these drops
stopped midair, mindless of gravity.

The trombone doesn't vibrate, doesn't ring
in anyone else's hands like in his. Almost
magic, almost an enchanter raising serpents:
not the hokie kind in a cartoon, but real,
ribbons of bright scale flashing as they rise
much harder to swallow than pen and ink.

3. Practice Room

Hearing genius through the practice-room walls
dulls the air. Sheet music never looked so much like
iron bars over a window. Walls stay a bland,
innocuous white ignoring the gray, gray dust
piling in the corners. Each minute feels like a thousand
slow clicks on a metronome with never a page turn.

“Why don't you practice more?” She couldn't tell
if it was him or just her guilt complex speaking.
She couldn't swallow her chalky beiges and
off-whites for another half-hour. She'd rather
listen outside doors, waiting to catch the glitter
spilling out around the edges of the frame.

4. Rehearsal

It was him speaking. She hadn't practiced enough
and the bass player, the drummer knew it too.
Afternoon rehearsals with the jazz combo
never went well after morning excuses in the hallway,
making up reasons to dance through the paint in the air,
washing off those fiery hues before they'd meet.

She couldn't keep track of the changes and gave up
halfway through her solo, reverting to the crayon-box
pallet of a major scale. It was all just a jumble of
honks and missteps anyway. Pack up the horn,
watch him flirt with the pianist's short skirt and
fluorescent hair. She couldn't match that color.

5. Performance

On stage, he looked ridiculous, too lanky for
even the trombone, eyes screwed shut while Van Gogh,
Dali came tumbling out in the highs and lows.
Stage lights struck the mellow brass, shot off in
sparks like his growling, circling, pouncing on
the remnants of the tune he's painted over.

His solo finished, they dove back into the jazz duet.
Playing harmony, she felt like she was only following
but still feeling the buzz of that startling fuchsia and
tangerine seascape: surreal, impossible, not her own.
After the show, the light faded, inside and out.
She couldn't find him in the rooms—only gray.

John Donne

It took me several years to learn your name
rhymes with run, doesn't break like the dawn
of your melodies to an eye just discovering poetry.
I tuned to your music in the Holy Roome,
even as I struggled with extra Es and antique science
that matched the ruffled collar and pointed beard
in your portrait by Isaac Oliver, aged but still gleaming.
You preach, gesturing to a flat map where
language is always returning, circling with no beginning.

In college, I met you anew in a textbook, traded
glances with your 1595 portrait: collar open
black hat tipped back above those eyes looking
modern, at ease in the present, speaking of the
before, behind, between of discovering anything new,
dying to reach it and rising unchanged—proved mysterious
by metaphor. Mysterious but never distant you turn
touch, discovery, delight into the colors of prayer
rising, spreading with each new sun.

Stiff twin compasses are never only themselves,
become lovers parting and drawing near
in a thread of perfect language running across the page.
You meet me forever with paradox: purple blood of Christ,
two bloods mingled in a flea flowing from the same source.
Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down
to you, to cast into images; slowly, I unravel them,
eager always to feel east and west mingle
in the ink and blood that flow from me.