

The Coming of Age

Poems by Denis Johnson (b. 1949)

[2] Upon Waking

at the far edge of earth, night
is going away. another
poem begins. slumped over

the typewriter i must get this
exactly, i want to make it
clear this morning that your

face, as it opens
from its shadow, is more
perfect than yesterday; and

that the light, as it
hesitates over the approach
of your smile, has given this

aching bed more than warmth,
more than poems; someway

a generous rose, or a very
delicate arrangement of sounds,
has come to peace in this new room.

[3] The Dry Dry Land. Here

the dry dry land. here
and there from the
rasp and muscle of its flatness
a tree gushes forth. i

have seen trees, have
heard them at night being
dragged into the sky.
i know they are very
real. i know they know.

lover, i am not
a tree, you would
never mistake me
for one, my arid movements

for its flowing coolness. but
sometimes in the dark silken
air of this room

i feel that we are
a liquid jumble of trees
falling interminably away from
the land, its dry infinitude.

[4] Poem

Loving you is every bit as fine
as coming over a hill into the sun
at ninety miles an hour darling when
it's dawn and you can hear the stars unlocking
themselves from the designs of God beneath
the disintegrating orchestra of my black
Chevrolet. The radio clings to an unidentified
station – somewhere a tango suffers,
and the dance floor burns around two lovers
whom nothing can touch – no, not even death!
Oh! the acceleration with which my heart does proceed,
reaching like stars almost but never quite
of light the speed of light the speed of light.

[5] The Coming of Age

Outside the spring
afternoon
is occurring, my love,
just as our voices
are going home from us
to the plains, and the shapes
of ourselves, as we impose
them on this one, prepare
to blend with other
afternoons, possibly in
this very room
as tiny dusts uplifted
in the bands of sunlight,
or in other still chambers.
I don't want you to be afraid
as we stand here losing
our lives, unable to speak,
soon to enter the dream
of once having touched
this portion, that smoothness
of flesh now buried dead
and having heard the lovely
tones ascending on a voice
merely speaking; there is
the chance there will be
the singing of the voiceless,
unraveling into the unenclosed
emptiness a silence
drawn taut so
slowly its
high music encounters
us before
it begins, and we are dancing.

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