Arts & Humanities

Poem: "High to Low"

By David Yezzi '95SOA

Winter 2012-13

It’s cringe-worthy yet also pleasing
when our host at lunch — someone I don’t know
and whom I’m only meeting the first time —
sends back a bottle of expensive wine,
for no real reason. It’s not just to show
his seasoned taste, a hard-won cultivation
taken shape
over a lifetime studiously teasing
savors from the grape.

A total creep, in fact, this guy,
a boor — he clearly doesn’t give a rat’s
who gets burned. (The waiter seems amused,
since after all these years he’s gotten used
to jerks like this, and every bottle that’s
returned he sips in secret at the back station.)
This guy won’t stand
for it: when life offends his nose or eye,
he takes the upper hand.

His victories are mostly Pyrrhic,
but so what? Sure, he’s obtuse but not blind
to the ways his huffy, prima-donna poise
is oddly winning, even as it annoys.
Decorum is a thankless double bind,
a game for schmucks, an over-complication.

Who ever bothers,
when no one cares for him (so goes the lyric),
caring about others?

And would it make a difference
if he did? Not terribly. So, after lunch
he strolls down 43rd Street to Times Square.
A crane shot pulls back till he’s barely there
amid the horn-blasts and the traffic-crunch,
a worker ant lost in an anthill nation.
And from a window
ten stories high, another man makes sense
of all the to-and-fro.

In his lofty, godlike view,
the city assumes a manageable scope.
The air conditioning hums. Pressed to the glass,
his forehead feels the cool as people pass
beneath him, each one with a private hope
of getting his, by market calculation
or avid reach.
He, too, will do whatever he must do,
each self for each.

Pull back again and there is me
and you, watching this guy as his eyes light
on the man just come from lunch. His mild disdain
for something — jacket, hat — is what remains,
after he casually blinks him out of sight.
And who, by further ghostly iteration,
takes stock of
us, is gauging us? And can they see
us only from above?

This poem appears in David Yezzi's 2013 poetry collection, Birds of the Air*.*



Guide to school abbreviations