

Herbert Morris

How to Improve Your Personality

When, in June, you are driven to those suburbs
where the dark is just beginning to fall,
the air burdened with roses, where the wind
suggests only the echoings of absence,
where, through the years, trees have arranged themselves
at the sides of the road in avenues

where whisper after whisper takes you deeper
into the landscape of your destination;
when they usher you into the great house,
the car left in the driveway, the lawn crossed,
after the wait, the brief wait, in the dark,
someone coming some distance to the door;

when you follow into the panelled study,
find them picking at watermelon slices
at a round table, curtains not yet drawn,
lamps not yet lit, darkness now deeply falling;
after the introductions have been made,
after each of three daughters, wearing swimsuits,

blonde hair, white teeth, fierce suntans, practicing
into the darkness how to be cheerleaders,
into suburban darkness and beyond,
how to improve their personalities,
enters, where the dusk takes the turn to evening,
enters, one more beautiful than another;

when their father has asked them if they feel
cold in their costumes, darkness falling, falling,
and their grandfather promised a new car
to the eldest, next year, at graduation,
and when their aunt proposes tours of Europe
as her gift to them on their eighteenth birthdays,

you seat yourself, when asked to, at their table,
permit yourself, at last, to be seduced,
even perhaps assist in the seduction,
exchange flirtatious glances with the one
who looks at you with every word she speaks,
each blonde, white-toothed, fierce suntanned word she speaks.

Their father draws a curtain, lights a lamp.
Their mother passes watermelon slices.
And you, you feel the darkness closing in.
When, in June, you are driven to those suburbs
where the girls practice how to be cheerleaders
into early June darkness and beyond,

over and over let the cool night air
ride their long legs, sweep their backs, take their arms,
rehearse, time after time, the perfect stance,
gestures one senses sum an education,
the grammar of the wrist, the ankle's syntax,
over and over beat, inflection, tone;

when the talk at the table turns to cars,
to tours of Europe, to accommodations,
darkness all the while falling, closing in,
there is nothing, it seems, you find to say,
nothing you can offer of cars, of tours,
least of all, perhaps, of accommodations,

prepared to wait the dark out, and beyond,
without a curtain drawn, without a lamp lit,
needing to work on what must be improved,
ready to hear your wrists and ankles sing,
ready to have your life break into flame,
ready, even, to speak, if somewhere pressed to,

speak of the tours conducted through the mind
of those who wait, of those who cannot wait
because they do not know what they should wait for,
of those who will not see Peru again,
though one need not yet quite define Peru,
say what it may be to be late, too late,

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come, at last, to the strangeness closing in,
whether it be darkness or education,
embark on longing as though it were music,
implying what can only be implied,
the matter of the air burdened with roses,
the grammar of the wrist, the ankle's syntax.

They look to you, you know, for more than this,
this silence in the dimness of June suburbs,
this weight of darkness slowly closing in.
Better, perhaps, to join them in the sweet grass
where the lawn slopes off gently past the house
into the dark of evenings still unfathomed,

evenings for which, as yet, no name exists,
the smell of roses burdening the air,
the avenues to what is possible
lined on both sides with trees sending up rumors,
with the wind right, enough to deafen you,
whisper by whisper, wave by leaf-drenched wave;

over and over practice the right stance,
if not the perfect, rage with wrists and ankles
until, imagine, bone begins to sing,
one by one learn the cars, pronounce the tours,
time after time rehearse accommodations,
the long, slow, arduous coming to terms;

night to night work on personality,
know what to say at evening, in the suburbs,
something all the while falling, closing in,
the watermelon slices deftly served,
a curtain drawn, a lamp lit, you in darkness
seduced by darkness, saying nothing, nothing.