

Writing Class

(For Vivian Smith)

NOEL ROWE *

Sartre, so I'm told, defined imagination
as the ability to think of what is not. If this is so,
I hope these writing students haven't heard:
I've told them metaphor is based on observation.

I could have said it was a gift (and still, perhaps, a grace?)
for passing through the needling eye of difference.
I could have said it happens when the blood, taking its chance,
too quickly turns a corner in the soul.

But I wanted words that were direct and plain
to save them from their own imperial inventiveness,
and give the patient world its chance
to take them, turn them, with a longbreathing hand.

So they are sitting now along the one line of desks, each,
with the curled edge of the lower finger, making smooth
the way of the pen, so purposeful and shoulderforward
they might be filling out a claim for Medicare, a Tax Return.

Later on, perhaps, they'll learn to play with words,
to let each poem make a mischief all its own, but for the moment let
them listen for the mighty stillness till it broods, while I stand
beside a window, looking out at nature scribbling away in gums,

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and remember how another eye, a strict, surprising eye,
looked so long at a man fern near the bus stop that it curled
into the incomplete circle and straight drop of a question mark,
then a creature from the sea, swaying long fibres into voice.

Above the class electric fans are turning humid air
into a speech of sorts, a shape, almost silver, that seems to hang about
where blades mislay the tiny dust. Somehow this makes me think
of Thomas Merton, who considered poetry to be
a matter, not of cleverness and calculation, but 'ingrained innocence'.

Merton left the cool Cistercian hermitage that spoke
the language he preferred, of forest, bird, and rain ('The time will come
when they will sell you even your rain ...').
Edging up against the war in Vietnam, he went to Bangkok
to meet the Buddhist monks and talk of nothing.

There were rumours, at the time, that he was murdered
because, believing poets had the right to be completely useless,
he spoke against apocalyptic technocrats
who hoped to rule unnoticed the world.

Officially, and as far as anyone can tell, it was an accident: he stepped
from the shower, stretched his hand to start a large, electric fan
only to find it live and falling, down, across his chest,
killing and making him at last completely useless.

Merton, who wrote a book he called
raids on the unspeakable,
and, elsewhere, made reference to
'the dry catarrh of Sartre'.