

## The Sea-Cucumber

for Ray Crooke

We'd all had a bit too much that night when you brought out  
your painting,  
the new one, you remember, over Scotch in the panelled kitchen,  
and my father talked about waiting. Well, he was doing that,  
we knew,  
or it could have been the dust you'd painted, the way  
you'd floated  
a sfumato background almost in front of the canvas  
so your half-dozen squatting dark figures couldn't see it  
that moved him in that moment softly, in damp stone,  
outside time.  
He was as garrulous as ever, of course, but somehow,  
in a time of his own, it seemed that he was pressing  
every word-drop, like the wine of a harvest not quite adequate,  
to trickle in brilliant iridules across the stained table:  
what sorts of eucalypt to plant—so that they'd grow quickly—  
art dealers, metaphysics, three old men he'd seen  
at Lerici, playing pipes and a drum under an orange sky.  
Memory finds a nexus, there in your image,  
people just waiting, not even conscious of it,  
or of ochre and sienna pinning them in an interstice of hours.  
None of this, you see, will really go into writing,  
it takes time to leech things into one's sac of words.

The bloated sea-cucumber, when touched, spews up its entrails  
as though that were a defence; my father's old friend  
the gentle little poet Wen Yi-tuo, who collected chess sets  
and carved ivory seals in his filthy one-room hut,  
is gutted one night and flung into the Yangtze.  
The dark river runs through your dusty pigments.  
Ferns, moss, tiger-coloured sun beat at the window with banners  
but the dust ripples between trees, and among the waiting  
glints of earth and metal are wiped from the fading hand.  
These people of yours, Ray, they are that evening  
when we first saw them, or the other one when my father  
planted nineteen saplings in our backyard, or when you looked  
at them  
later and said, They're coming on, and his fingers  
drummed a long nervous question on the table, though  
he agreed.  
And we were all waiting, though not in your style of art:  
more of a pointillism in time, disconnected moments,  
a flash of light over an empty glass, a half-finished volume  
of Borges,  
the cabbage palm stooping at dusk into the chimneys,  
certain paintings, Corelli, or a morning like the fuzz  
of a peach,  
all bright and disparate. But I think, remembering that painting  
of yours, that if one could step away, ten yards, or twenty,  
or years,  
at an angle perhaps, a frame would harden into cedar  
and through a haze of dust we would see all the brilliant dots  
merge into a few figures, squatting, waiting.