

The Monument

Now can you see the monument? It is of wood
built somewhat like a box. No. Built
like several boxes in descending sizes
one above the other.

Each is turned half-way round so that
its corners point toward the sides
of the one below and the angles alternate.

Then on the topmost cube is set
a sort of fleur-de-lys of weathered wood,
long petals of board, pierced with odd holes,
four-sided, stiff, ecclesiastical.

From it four thin, warped poles spring out,
(slanted like fishing-poles or flag-poles)
and from them jig-saw work hangs down,
four lines of vaguely whittled ornament
over the edges of the boxes
to the ground.

The monument is one-third set against
a sea; two-thirds against a sky.

The view is geared

(that is, the view's perspective)
so low there is no "far away,"

and we are far away within the view.

A sea of narrow, horizontal boards

lies out behind our lonely monument,
its long grains alternating right and left
like floor-boards—spotted, swarming-still,
and motionless. A sky runs parallel,
and it is palings, coarser than the sea's:
splintery sunlight and long-fibred clouds.

"Why does that strange sea make no sound?
Is it because we're far away?"

Where are we? Are we in Asia Minor,
or in Mongolia?"

An ancient promontory,
an ancient principality whose artist-prince
might have wanted to build a monument

to mark a tomb or boundary, or make
a melancholy or romantic scene of it . . .
"But that queer sea looks made of wood,
half-shining, like a driftwood sea.

And the sky looks wooden, grained with cloud.
It's like a stage-set; it is all so flat!

Those clouds are full of glistening splinters!
What is that?"

It is the monument.

"It's piled-up boxes,
outlined with shoddy fret-work, half-fallen off,
cracked and unpainted. It looks old."

—The strong sunlight, the wind from the sea,
all the conditions of its existence,
may have flaked off the paint, if ever it was painted,
and made it homelier than it was.

"Why did you bring me here to see it?"

A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,
what can it prove?

I am tired of breathing this croted air,

this dryness in which the monument is cracking."

It is an artifact

of wood. Wood holds together better
than sea or cloud or sand could by itself,
much better than real sea or sand or cloud.

It chose that way to grow and not to move.

The monument's an object, yet those decorations,
carelessly nailed, looking like nothing at all,
give it away as having life, and wishing;

wanting to be a monument, to cherish something.
The crudest scroll-work says "commemorate,"
while once each day the light goes around it
like a prowling animal,

or the rain falls on it, or the wind blows into it.
It may be solid, may be hollow.

The bones of the artist-prince may be inside
or far away on even drier soil.

But roughly but adequately it can shelter
what is within (which after all

cannot have been intended to be seen).

It is the beginning of a painting,
a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,
and all of wood. Watch it closely.

Paris, 7 A.M.

I make a trip to each clock in the apartment:
some hands point histrionically one way
and some point others, from the ignorant faces.
Time is an Etoile; the hours diverge
so much that days are journeys round the suburbs,
circles surrounding stars, overlapping circles.
The short, half-tone scale of winter weathers
is a spread pigeon's wing.
Winter lives under a pigeon's wing, a dead wing with damp
feathers.

Look down into the courtyard. All the houses
are built that way, with ornamental urns
set on the mansard roof-tops where the pigeons
take their walks. It is like introspection
to stare inside, or retrospection,
a star inside a rectangle, a recollection:
this hollow square could easily have been there.
—The childish snow-forts, built in flashier winters,
could have reached these proportions and been houses;
the mighty snow-forts, four, five, stories high,
withstanding spring as sand-forts do the tide,
their walls, their shape, could not dissolve and die,
only be overlapping in a strong chain, turned to stone,
and grayed and yellowed now like these.

Where is the ammunition, the piled-up balls
with the star-splintered hearts of ice?
This sky is no carrier-warrior-pigeon
escaping endless intersecting circles.

It is a dead one, or the sky from which a dead one fell.
The urns have caught his ashes or his feathers.
When did the star dissolve, or was it captured
by the sequence of squares and squares and circles, circles?
Can the clocks say; is it there below,
about to tumble in snow?

Quai d'Orléans

for Margaret Miller

Each barge on the river easily tows
a mighty wake,
a giant oak-leaf of gray lights
on duller gray;
and behind it real leaves are floating by,
down to the sea.
Mercury-veins on the giant leaves,
the ripples, make
for the sides of the quay, to extinguish themselves
as softly as falling-stars come to their ends
at a point in the sky.
And throngs of small leaves, real leaves, trailing them,
go drifting by
to disappear as modestly, down the sea's
dissolving halls.
We stand as still as stones to watch
the leaves and ripples
while light and nervous water hold
their interview.
"If what we see could forget us half as easily,"
I want to tell you,
"as it does itself—but for life we'll not be rid
of the leaves' fossils."