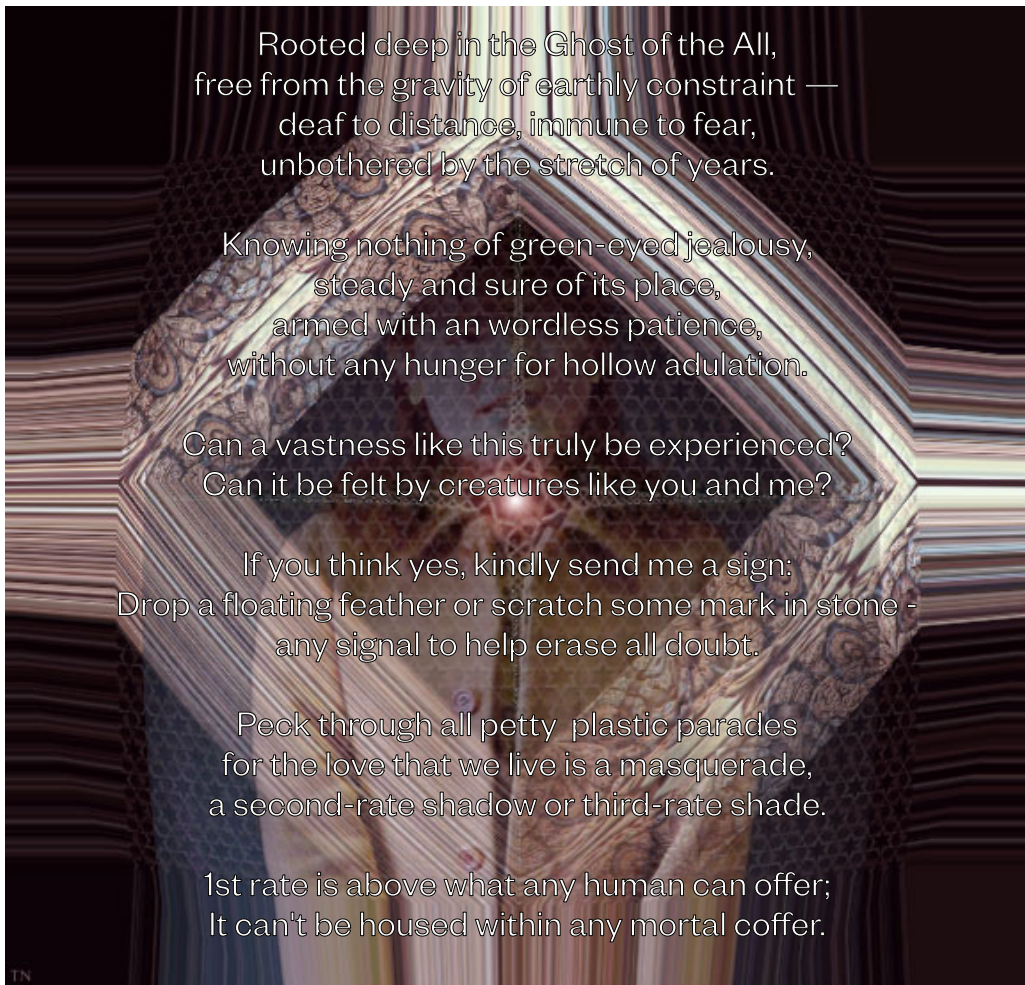


1ST RATE LOVE: Why we need the Divine



Rooted deep in the Ghost of the All,
free from the gravity of earthly constraint —
deaf to distance, immune to fear,
unbothered by the stretch of years.

Knowing nothing of green-eyed jealousy,
steady and sure of its place,
armed with an wordless patience,
without any hunger for hollow adulation.

Can a vastness like this truly be experienced?
Can it be felt by creatures like you and me?

If you think yes, kindly send me a sign:
Drop a floating feather or scratch some mark in stone -
any signal to help erase all doubt.

Peek through all petty plastic parades
for the love that we live is a masquerade,
a second-rate shadow or third-rate shade.

1st rate is above what any human can offer;
It can't be housed within any mortal coffer.

The neon sign of the coffee shop, a frantic, flickering violet pulse, cast a sickly strobe over the glasses of a handful of weary souls. Outside, the rain rendered the asphalt a dark, distorted mirror; the reflected world looked, without question, profoundly diminished.

Cindy stared at the poem scrawled on the back of her damp napkin, her thumb tracing its words. "No human love is like this," she said, her voice flat, drained of any romantic illusions. "It's too clean. Too... unchained. Humans are nothing but chains." She released the napkin; it slumped onto the counter, sodden and heavy.

Bai-Luo leaned back, his silhouette framed by the steam rising from the kitchen alcove. He looked like someone who had searched for that first-rate spark in all the wrong ways. His eyes were calm in the way that only exhaustion or wisdom produces, and sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference.

"Of course not," he replied softly. "That's why we reach for the Divine. We need a North Star because we're so damn good at getting lost." He turned to watch the neon lights pulse and stutter against a rain-streaked window, regular as a heartbeat, irregular as hope.

Then Aiko laughed — a sharp, sudden crack of sound, dry as a struck match, gone almost before it registered. She didn't look up from her phone. "God?" she asked, drawing the word out into something between a question and a verdict, the sarcasm falling off it like rain off a tin roof. "You're really going with the 'God' card?"

Bai-Luo did not flinch. He did not reach for a clever retort or a defensive wall. He merely watched the violet light breathe against the dark window, and when he finally spoke, his voice was quieter than the downpour.

"Yeah," he murmured, his eyes reflecting the rhythm of the glass. "Isn't that where the journey begins? And isn't that the only place where it can finally end without turning everything into a mess?"

Nobody answered. The diner hummed with the electric drone of the night. The rain continued its patient, indifferent commentary against the glass.

— T Newfields

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