

V.B. Price

**FIVE
LEAST
FALLIBLE
PLEASURES**

Christmas 2001

“Pleasure is not an infallible critical guide, but it is the least fallible.”

–W.H. Auden

I. INNOCENT MERRIMENT

A whole biology of beautiful smiles,
winters calm as ravens shadowing through the pines,
Santa Claus finds his way to your beautiful heart
in the dark of the Christmas light parade. “It is a pleasure to see
so much confusion.”* We sleep the sleep of the blest
on the rim of the steepest decay.
“What does peace mean?” he whispered
remembering a hand on his wrist long ago,
so warm, so deeply kind, he minds nothing now
of the crumbling life he leads. As long as blood
is the nectar of thought, and the mind still blinks in its constellations,
there is more to a memory of love, of even the slightest
welcoming smile, he thought, than to all the inconceivable
loss of the world. How practical happiness is.

*from Marianne Moore’s poem, “The Steeplejack”

II. OTHERWISE CAN'T BE

What a relief. Sense is out of the question.
What isn't just isn't. We're hated. We're loved
—no matter the explanation. This happened,
that didn't. That's it. Nothing can be otherwise.
Acceptance is not resignation.
“What does peace mean?” a dying child will ask.
Holding her hand is a way to say “certainly the means
must not defeat the end.”*
But finally we must answer: To be fearless means to be
unafraid of your own worst fears. And we will think
the words are not enough. And they're not. But in our arms,
the child will know with us what she already knows,
our deepest desire too, the rooted calm of being at home
with whatever is and whatever is not.

*from Marianne Moore's poem “Values in Use”

III. “HUNT-MAD HUBERT STARTLED INTO A SAINT”*

It doesn't take much. Vile catastrophe
is more than enough. There is a best
and a worst. Conduct measures them.
The best overwhelms us every time a person
opens to another's truth, or need,
or yields in strength. The best is there
in the soft, cool night of the mind
when we feel with all we know that nothing can
go wrong, or is wrong, or ever will be wrong. And yet
the worst won't disappear. The wise woman sings
through her tears of pleasure, “What does peace mean?”
When she laughs, so patiently free, we know what she knows:
that helping is so clean it is life's secret joy
that the worst can do nothing to destroy.

*from Marianne Moore's poem “Saint Nicholas”

IV. THIS IS NO TIME TO BE VAGUE

Purpose is a pleasure, the sly sage smiled.
This is no time to be vague. The whirlwind consumes
even the hands of the infants. We can't wait
for pain to get out of the way. Our whole world aches.
An old man screams, "What does peace mean?
I'm afraid of losing my self-respect.
There's no safe time to know my mind."
What's the purpose in waiting for truth,
when it haunts your bones late at night, terrified
you'll have to say, "I inwardly did nothing.
O Iscariot-like crime."*
Clean your mind and know what you know,
the hidden sage demands. Caving in just isn't an option.
Kindness is a freedom always worth trying.

*from Marianne Moore's "In Distrust of Merits."

V. THE SATISFACTION OF IMPOSSIBLE TASKS

What does peace mean? It's not beyond us. There's just
so much debris to be carted off, so much dust
to be polished away. It's there, though, just as we're still here
under our wrinkles and luggage of fat. "There is no unsuitable smile."*
Polishing a mountain's just too hard
when you want a definitive shine. Peace is what it is
when it appears; and you have to be there, polishing
and polishing. Devotion is the question that answers can't resist. Of course,
force ruins everything. Comets won't come when they're called.
The impossible isn't a thing we can know. It's unsuitable to think so.
"What does peace mean?" We're not too jaded to say
that the least fallible pleasure is
what every child can tell you— infallibly— with the gift of those
free, unburdened smiles they're smiling to themselves.

*from Marianne Moore's poem "Style"