Ars Poetica

David Kann

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, dkann@calpoly.edu

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So I said to Rosenberg—
my Jewish Transcendentalist friend—
“Rosey!” I said, “I’m stuck in a hole.
Suddenly writing poetry is like
carving granite with a butter knife
or trying to find beauty in literary criticism.”
“Bubby,” he said,
“Bubbeleh.
It’s like pastrami and corned beef.
You can slice corned beef
any time you feel like it.
It’s easy to find.
It gives of itself easily,
paper-thin and pale baby pink
and shining with rainbow juice-drops,
ot too fatty.
It should be nice and lean.
You can slap it down on
any old rye,
gild it with yellow mustard,
and it will make you a little happy any time.
Cold. Hot. Who cares?
You sit in front of the terse
conversation of bread and meat,
take a bite. It’s pleasing. Okay.
But pastrami—ah, pastrami!
The rhythms of pastrami
are the rhythms of the earth.
Try to slice it and feel
basalt crust, crackle,
quartz-shiny with
fat peeking through,
opposing your knife.
Pastrami is not easy,
does not give of itself right away.
Insist gently. Give it time
and it submits, revealing
the lovely soft crimson coarse-fibered meat.
Pastrami sings in your mouth
with many voices:
the darkness of the earth and time.
Brine-soaked it speaks the sea
under hot pepper-black nights,
autumn-loam-brown nose-pinching cloves
bring hot tears of memory,
sweet spring-scented marjoram
bring slow tears of hope,
piney bay in its wintery green
brings remembered
bright short days,
long nights and sad endings.
It serenades the winey rye,
grainy with cornmeal at the crust
and seeded at the pith.
The enamoured rye croons back.
Liebchen, this takes time
to cure and become itself
and not just corned beef."

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