

Snow Country

David Brooks

after Spencer Finch, '56 Minutes (after Kawabata), Spring' (2004)

A woman's eye floated up before him. He almost called out... But he had been dreaming, and when he came to himself, he saw that it was only the reflection in the window of the girl opposite. Outside it was growing dark, and the lights had been turned on in the train, transforming the window into a mirror.

– Yasunari Kawabata, *Snow Country* (1934-48)

I

Nine photographs, each taken seven minutes after
Finch has hitherto exhibited two sequences each
the previous, a total of fifty-six minutes in all, starting
of seven photographs of the same view entitled
with bare trees in a darkening landscape, closing
42 minutes, Winter and 42 minutes, Summer,
in upon a door. Happenstance? A mere flirtation
as if there were not just a sequence but a
with a whim of light? But why mention Spring? Why
sequence of sequences and something within them
'after Kawabata'? Is the sequence itself a mirror? And
would not let him go, adding eventually another two
what then? And when is a door not a door?
images like extra carriages heading through

I thought, straight away, when I first saw,
a bare, late-winter landscape toward a dark tunnel.
of how, on a train in China twenty-seven years ago,
Freud said that to board a train is to abandon all
I found myself over and over imagining
control of one's life, and the history of the decades

walking out, at some unscheduled stop or another, on one
following him has only confirmed the link. Can we
of the long paths between rice paddies, toward
keep such things at bay? Can Finch? Is he trying
a distant village, into another life. What
to tell us something? That it's all metaphor?
was *that* about? or When is a train not a train?
What is the significance of an open door?

II

So here is time, for those who want it, time
His father died when Yasunari was three, his mother
and the theory of time, parallel time, quantum
a year later, his grandmother, with whom
time, forked time, time paused, time
he'd gone to live, died when he was eight, his
sidelined, wandering, a poet in Australia
grandfather when Yasunari was fifteen, and his older
writing of photographs taken by a man
sister, whom he'd seen only once in several years,
in America sixteen years before in response
when he was eleven. Mishima called him, as Yasunari
to lines written by an author in Japan
already called himself, the Master of Funerals.

seventy years before that, each approaching
No surprise then that he presided
with their different pasts and places – to be read
at Mishima's, or that, in the weeks
or viewed by different audiences each
before his own suicide, Yasunari went back
responding from *their* pasts and places –
one last time to the work in which, eleven
the simple image of a window, bare tree, door:
years before he met him, he might have seen himself,
multiple, opalescent, symphonic, a layered
in naming his dying character Yukio,
time perhaps not seen quite so before.
to have brought about that death too.

III

When you stare so long through the window of a plane
'This finger', teasing erotically, 'This finger
or house that the light outside weakens and the light within
has remembered you', but this was only not to say,
grows stronger, there's a time when you begin
in a gesture that could represent the way
to see the world through your own face, or, rather, see
in which the early photographers would prepare
the face through which you view the world. So, anyway,
a sheet of glass to reveal the shadow there
it may have been when Shimamura, in the window of a train,
so that the dead might linger
saw Yoko tending to Yukio and so took up once more
amongst the living, or love, let's say,

that process of cold, exploitative flirtation
maintain its desiring gaze long after
which saw the young Komako's transformation
its own erosion, it had been with that finger that he'd
into geisha, Yoko's eventual death by fire,
wiped away the mist on the carriage window to display
and Kawabata, the novel's author, come again
another's, Yoko's, gaze. 'Remembered
and again to the story, as if, all along, it had encoded
me!' Komoko exclaims, 'You have
something about himself – a regret? a failure? a desire? –
remembered me!' before taking his finger,
he could not in any other way explain.
leading him away.

IV

Kawabata speaks of the afterlife, the nowhere we all go

The nights drag on, and the days

(*nowhere*, he says, *now here*) forty-eight years after

aren't long enough

walking into the bathroom, closing

one is forgotten

the door and turning on the gas. *Two hundred*

but cannot forget

nights, he says, concerning the death of Yukio Mishima

desire absconds

who had committed *seppuku* two years before: *two*

then returns like a winter storm

hundred nights I had nightmares. When the second

and there is no salving

spring came, a cruel ghost, it promised nothing but time. The master

crows lament, sheep

and challenger, mentor and protégé, fatherless

implore from the bare fields, yet the sun

father and surrogate son, victor

breaks through cloud

and the man he'd beaten to the greatest

creating such mountains, yet the birds

literary prize of all. *At seventy-two*, he says,

whisper secrets beyond imagining,

I could hardly breathe anyway, all those cigarettes,

even rats

and then the Parkinson's, and, relentlessly, regrets.

know the hidden pathways of the earth.