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Susan Luther

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Old House Festina

(Remembering Howard Weeden)

Summoned to tour, our feet hesitate on the murmuring threshold
of this house where the shimmering fanlight, like a transparent butterfly,
just barely out of reach--but its light, mellowed by old glass, marks faces
inside the door with the dim familiar lambence of a lost time
long past, so distant now that even the oldest citizens alive
must imagine memories. The secret tales

we tell ourselves, each on the edge, are fascinating tales;
and, crossing the promising threshold
in turn, all the characters of our animated imaginations come startlingly alive
under the scroll-trimmed stairs, and we walk into our silent multiple vision
over oriental carpets worn blue and faded by time.

How many of our faces

resemble old portraits of the once-living blue-veined faces
who were the breathing originals of fabulous tales
unrecorded, having somehow eluded us in time?

What were their thoughts upon this then-recent threshold--

did any guest command a vision

of old trees, soughing overhead, branches at neck-craning height, anachronistic
as Ripley specimens and hauntingly alive?

Did they know that those trees and their memories would be preserved alive
at this museum; that late faces
would search nail-holes and door-facings for a vision
of their lives, seeking in mantels and firebrick hidden incommunicable tales--
did the poet who once lived behind this threshold
foresee that she would become an artifact in due passage of unfamiliar time?

But new visitors arrive. We are guided; it is more than time
to pass through hall, out to porch, where old recipes are kept alive
in heritage cookbooks, hawked just beyond the back-door threshold
by women whose faintly eager, heat-dewed faces
summon us to read of puddings and eye one or two reproduced tales
by the departed artist whose vision

was of simple people, simple lives--a vision
grown oddly antiquated to a time
whose tourists, instead of her productions, prefer tales
of the real facts of the real life of the real artist when she was still alive
in the sight of those impassioned, venerable faces
they imagine crossing her lighted threshold

and telling her tales of what the world was like when their dead grandfathers
were still alive,
when they were young and there was untried vision in every lineament of their
faces,
when time was transparent, when they came to a new world vacant from sea to sea
and the world too edged its toe hesitantly
up to the vanished threshold
now forever lost in realized time.

susan luther