

David Southward

Sunday at the Carpet Emporium

The showroom walls of Shabahang & Sons shimmer with rugs: prismatic tapestries whose dyed-wool hues and petaloid designs serve as a backdrop for the heir, Behzad, to ply his trade. Sporting a merchant's smile, he greets us with a manicured handshake and summons an assistant with his eyes. "Functional works of art," he deems his rugs, beseeching us to feel their thickened pile brushing our palm-flesh like a camel's hide — to rub our hands across their matted nap and watch for dark reversals in the sheen. He points his helper to a waist-high stack of tribal 6 x 9s, at the ends of which the two men stand — turning rugs like pages of an ancient manuscript. In perfect sync they grip the corners, peel the fabrics back to reveal, slice by slice, a Persian fruit as fathomless in its geometry as if it were the sum of one's own life. "You like?" Behzad pauses, noting our taste for saffron twined through blues and burgundies. "Go on," we urge. We want to see the whole of his inventory; we won't be satisfied until the last persimmon leaf is flipped.

When the last is flipped, the men start turning back the inventory, firmly satisfied we want to splurge; they know how far we'll go sorting through blues and twining burgundies before we pause. "You liked this," notes Behzad, tapping our rug of choice — the sum of life fathomed in its geometric play; a slice of Persia densely veined, like fruit peeled in a back corner of paradise. We sink our hands in its plush manuscript: a page on which two men might stand or turn their chairs at the end of a tribal 9-to-6 —

their china stacked with helpings, points well made
or meeting with reversals in the dark.
We rub our eyes: across this matted land
where camels never ride, nor palm fronds brush
beseechingly one's pile of thickened dreams,
can a rug redeem? The function, the work of art
is a summoning of vistas like the sky's —
its handsome greeting, one of many cures.
The sport of trade, the smile of merchandise
serves Behzad, who drops back in thin air;
as wooly petals ply their dyed designs,
our shimmery Mastercard's prismatic chip
suns the showroom walls of Shabahang.

Mornings with Sammy

He used to barrel out the sliding door,
careen across the deck, vault and soar
over the steps to crash at the maple's feet.
He'd lunge toward its boughs — as if to eat
the squirrels who paced the branching world above.
Sniffing the ground-scents like a drunk in love,
he'd track each odor to its source and lick it —
then bound into the border garden's thicket,
his white tail whisking hostas, ferns, and mint
like a fur tornado. Anxiously, we'd squint
to watch him slalom through our lily wands,
drape slobber on the rhubarb's giant fronds,
or brave the rosebush, thorny hackles raised.
Sternly I'd call his name; he'd look back, dazed
for a moment. But noticing how sparrows
alighted from the sky like hostile arrows,
he'd spring to action — chase them off the fence,
start barking with a clownlike vehemence —
as if to show me no work was so hard
as proving oneself master of one's yard.

These days his routine is more sedate.
He'll breakfast, nap till seven (maybe eight),
slide off the couch and glance up, mucus-eyed,
to let us know he'll have a look outside.
A few steps past the threshold, there's a pause.
He sniffs the air. Nostrils tensed, he draws
decaying fumes of everything that grows
into the laboratory of his nose,
sifting the wind for signs of fresh turf wars
with ears blown back like little semaphores.
There's no more need to trample leaf or limb.
Now the garden's treasures come to him —
sensations once so hurried and erratic
becoming denser, marbled and chromatic.
It's comforting to watch our grizzled scout
stand rigid on the deck, almost devout,
savoring — like a book too good to last —
the stirred-up fragrances of summers past.

Staying at Dad's

Picture a house so quiet, you hear time
absorbing each day's measure of the sun,
and through French doors, the tinkling of a chime
(to indicate that happy hour's begun)
links day to day, to week, to month, to year.
Now ask yourself, *How long have I been here?*

Neighbors carrying cocktails walk their dogs
on retractable leashes, while round the cul-de-sac
a ten-year-old in training blithely jogs.
You sit in the driveway, watching squirrels snack
on birdfeed meant for woodpeckers and doves
to fortify their hurried, hungry loves.

Out back, a filter roams the burbling pool.
Beyond Dad's lot, a steel-wire cattle fence
tempts cows to wedge their heads through barbs — and drool
into his birdbath font some common sense.
Their shrubby field, hemmed in by pine and palm,
cushions the freeway's roar. That keeps Dad calm.

Come in. This shrine of white and cream and bone,
whose lofted ceilings store forgotten prayers,
is tranquil — save for the infrequent tone
of casters on the wicker dining chairs
rumbling across stone tile. In rainy weather,
a jigsaw puzzle slowly comes together

on Carol's tabletop, while Dad reclines
to watch the news, his finger poised on MUTE.
At four, she'll crack the ice; he'll pour their wines;
they'll raise a toast to show how resolute
the leisures of retirement can be.
Heroic, almost. Have a glass; you'll see.

David Southward

Swimming in Walden Pond

My suitemate at the conference rapped my door
at five a.m. Through darkened streets we ran
in trunks and T-shirts, allied in our plan
to beat the tour groups. This was '94

yet I still see the clearing through the trees:
its granite glint, a mirror to the sky.
A crow's caw scours the beach as Tom and I
wade into Walden's stillness by degrees,

till a last plunge swashes its cold caress
against our necks. Hushed voices — all we know
of Alcotts, Hawthornes, Emersons, Thoreau —
swirl through our fingers. Steeped in sacredness,

we try not to disturb the moment's power;
our circling pathways ripple and converge
while, through the pines, we watch the sun emerge
with its full blaze intact. For half an hour

we drank that sunshine, as our bodies drew
inscriptions on the slick of its white beam,
knowing too well our dream, like any dream,
would end soon. Gooseflesh drying, what to do

but brush sand from our feet, pull on our socks,
run back to Concord? Chilled and soggy-toed
we hugged the shoulder, passing on the road
a school bus — slowing, sighing like an ox.

Tree Swallows

Leaving their nests to feed and fly and play,
the swallows begin
 hovering over the river at midday:
 white bibs with black wings, weaving in
and out of one another's wakes, they call dibs
 on mayflies as they graze
 leafing willows, glide and swoop
upward in a corkscrew loop-de-loop
to an aerial summit, where they pivot
into a death-defying plummet
 toward their shadows in the dappled water.
Back and forth, they flit and tease;
frisky tacticians — no warier
 than fighter pilots scrimmaging
 in formation above an aircraft carrier
 finishing a mission.
You love to watch the scamps
 mount pretend attacks, as you wait
 for a precious, flyby glimpse
of the turquoise on their backs.

Those streaks of blue! — those sequins
 glinting like abalone shells
 embroidered in coat tails;
 those dragonfly neckties
skimming the surface of the afternoon
 with skipped-stone frequencies;
 sound waves
 splashing one's body
in the *plink* of piano keys; coruscations
 like knife throws — minnows fleeing
 from cavernous reefs. *To swallow*
 and be swallowed: oh, how
this planet has made us
 idiots for beauty! Pawns and purveyors
 of aesthetic (if not artistic)
accidents of mutation, we fall behind

David Southward

in making of the swallows'
 half-balletic, half-ballistic
 circus routine, a tune
 or dance — a mural, a romance
of language linking mind to mind. Is this
 why, hours from now,
 you'll sit in a chair
 and stare at a desktop screen, repeatedly
asking, *Is this? Is this what I mean?* Too aware
 of the danger (while people live at odds
 in the rising smoke
 of half-extinguished gods)
you'll create through the night:
 feeling your way
 to a river where even the blind might see
 the passerine
advancing, tree by tree.