1999

Destination

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Bradford saw them descend across the silver sky. He held his camera toward the scattered points of white, arriving on the barren field. He kneeled down on the frozen mud. 'Three snowfalls in the mountains comes snow in the field,' a farmer had told him. The sun had never appeared in northern Japan since his arrival."

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The swans were busy picking up leftover grain. Their necks inclined from their bodies like birches bearing the heavy weight of wind. “What the hell am I doing here?” Bradford thought. But he knew that he had met at home—the woman who had posed for him, had loved him for a moment, and had left him for her husband.

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It was not the first time for Bradford to shoot a female nude, but he was holding his camera more tightly than usual. She did not hesitate at all before taking off her clothes. It made him nervous. She acted no differently than when she had her clothes on.

“Do you see what I think you see?” she asked, returning his gaze through the lens. Bradford saw no sign of guilt in her brown eyes. She stood up, sat down, and stretched on the floor. Bradford shifted downward along with her motion.

“I have a cat,” she said, “she misses me terribly when I leave her alone. I can see her rushing down the hall when I get home.”

“I hope she will survive the loneliness,” he said. “Oh, yes, she will, unless she is too curious to know where I have been.”

He located the strobe lights and checked the light carefully. He brought the meter up to her body. She closed her eyes and heard the meter click by her ears, in front of her nose, and by her breasts. She posed for a few hours. The studio was isolated, with a curtain drawn to shut out the daylight.

Bradford never touched her while shooting; he touched her at night.

“Artists fall in love too easily,” she said, “and they keep falling in love with different women. That’s how you are, Michael.” He had never gotten into an affair with his models before. He needed a good reputation, but moreover, his object of gaze had never quite become his object of love. She was the first exception.
The swans were still busy gleaning the grain. One of them caught his eyes. The bird was straying away from the rest, step by step, searching for more food. He slowly moved his focus to the swan’s beak, neck, and to her soft feathers. He kept shooting. He felt his body chilled down to the same temperature as the swan’s. By the time some of these photographs would appear in a national magazine, bearing his name, Michael Bradford, the swan would have returned to Siberia with the rest of the flock. She knew where she belonged, and the travelers from the North would never lose their destination.

--Tomomi Tamura