At West Lake, Morning Postcard, After Visiting Tiantai Mountain

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AT WEST LAKE

A small breeze shakes the leaves
beneath a tea-colored sky.
Boats bobbing on empty water.

A man lives only inside the face
of his language.
Words are the air and the grass.

Evening looms in his eyes.
   It comes always later,
after the lines of mountains have blurred.

And the smell of rain drifts
   across the strange pock-marked
bellies of rocks that out-last

poetry, which is what cannot
be named, a breath
coming up off soon-to-be-wet

sidewalks where no one is walking.
MORNING POSTCARD

6 a.m.  I feel the gray lips of the wind
on my skin.
Most of the old frogs that sang last night
have jumped back in the pond.

A man knows that his words are like
a candle factory, a flickering façade.
A row of windows glistening across the road
through the mist.

The path uphill to the temple is slippery
smeared with streams of mud.
But can be negotiated.

When I get up I stoop over, my beard
rough as old newspaper.
My tongue blank,

The past tense of the rain,
writing its musty taste inside my mouth.

AFTER VISITING TIANTAI MOUNTAIN

What do the old monks remember of the old places?
The sheen of plum leaves against an ochre wall,
wells of green shadow?  Can anyone doubt the body
is engineered for suffering?

The trees seem foreign beyond the haze of rhododendron,
spikes of bamboo and ginko, interwoven.
The surrounding peaks like lotuses unfolded
according to Zhi Yi who in the sixth century noticed

the planes of existence are contained
not only in stones and trees, or in the many streaks
of water dribbling down the rocks into jade pools,
or in the electric hum of cicadas,
or in the shifting fleece of the sun,
but in the light that cannot be seen
except in darkness, and not even in darkness.
The sky a lagoon of milk, curdled.

Everything is a distraction; everything I wanted
impossible.  The robes of evening descending
over the cities of moss, over the cobbled courtyard.
So much time spent trying to know the outcome

before it happens.  Figuring the odds
for happiness, as if the rain itself were a calculation
falling in lacy cables from the suddenly roiled undercarriage of clouds,

These words only able to describe themselves.