Manuscripts

To Illustrate a Point

Take, for example, a test tube; its long body
Straightening up for science, the tight curve of its bottom
Under lab lights, and the slender clarity with which
It conducts itself in all matters. It knows nothing
But the utmost propriety and etiquette,
The need to be exact, dutiful without question,
Devoted. And yet it is infinitely happy
To be a test tube, flaunting simple graces,
Its struggle, the feminine struggle:

How to be recognized as both
spirit and intellect, rather
than as an object of beauty?

Then take Dr. Kornberg of the Nobel,
Biochemist, who tunes in to the world
Of DNA and enzymes, listening for the voices.
Who loves the test tube, who asks it daily
To hold in its womb those fantastic concoctions
Of Dr. Kornberg. His large hands
Move across its surface at play, a slight shake
Or a swirl, and its insides begin to dance...

No more doctor, no more doctor! whatever it is,
It is growing inside me and I can’t take it, the electricity,
The populations of enzymes going to work at last,
Like so many migrant workers on the railroad,
Laying down tiny tracks, one molecule at a time.

Where does it lead, where does it lead? Is this
What they call the Westward expansion, doctor?
I can see them bringing in the railroad ties
One by one, the sweat on their brows
Their Latino smiles. A group of Chinese
Are driving in the spikes; the Irish
Are resting. I think they are singing, doctor,
Can you hear them?
“Quiet now, quiet,” says Dr. Kornberg.
“No chit-chat during the experiment;
I am trying to hear what they are saying.”
In a moment, the scientist
Holds the test tube closer, gently strokes
The long back and whispers to it,
Half expecting the thing to smile.
Cups his hand over the mouth of the test tube,
And inverts it, admiring the vessel from every angle.

Such objects, crafted with technological perfection,
Make the good doctor feel young again! The river inside him
Begins to flow, and the girls
With their soft cheeks from high school, and the young noses,
Return to him as pictures, voiceless, attractive.
His memory begins to moisten.

But doctor, your experiment...the enzymes...
They have chosen a leader and are organizing.
I think that they are dissatisfied. Is this
How you will be remembered, doctor?
As being unconcerned with employee welfare?

But those young girls, suspended there in his imagination,
So far away now, and discussing politics in the cafes
Of New York. Not the way he remembers them,
As figures with bright smiles and shine,
Their posture, and if you could only touch them,
Then the thrill of discovery. Not like here,

In a micro-world, where Dr. Kornberg, his scientific mind,
Calculates and contains himself, remembering at the end
Of each work day, to close the mouth of his test tubes
With a tight cap, and place them on the storage rack,
Like so many objects of his affection.

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