The Island of Moss and Snow

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English 109S Pope
A poetic response to the Zeigler Papers, a rare collection of letters between John Zeigler and Edwin Peacock, two men in the US army, stationed separately in Alaska during World War II, who were very much in love.
Introduction

This poetic project was inspired by extensive research of the John Zeigler Papers, a collection of letters between John Zeigler and Edwin Peacock, two gay men serving in the U.S. military during World War II. The relationship between Zeigler and Peacock is nothing short of extraordinary—they were homosexual lovers living in the conservative deep south who were later enlisted into military service and stationed in different Alaskan towns. The John Zeigler Papers contains the correspondence between these two men spanning 1927-2011, with the majority of their letters occurring during their separation throughout the war. Due to the insurmountable intolerance of homosexuality during this time period, the two were forced to disguise the nature of their relationship. For example, they signed their letters with “Your Cousin,” in order to avoid suspicion regarding their closeness and affection. Despite such direct efforts to hide their partnership, their adoration for one another rings vibrantly in every singly letter. Among the mundane details of their day-to-day lives in the army camps, both Zeigler and Peacock are able to subtly convey their passion with short poems and discreetly loving lines. The artistic strength of the letters is undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that Zeigler and Peacock were both men of literature; Zeigler in particular was an immensely talented writer who would eventually publish two successful volumes of poetry, Alaska and Beyond (1984) and The Edwin Poems (2007). Thus, their skillful writing masterfully conveys the utter intensity and depth of their unthinkable partnership, as well as the heartache of the prejudice and separation they must face. As a result, this stunning collection of letters creates an enchanting love story entirely unlike any other. Their correspondence is an absolute treasure and it is my deepest hope that my poetry, in response to this breathtaking material, is able to effectively capture and convey even a glimmer of the remarkable ardor between Zeigler and Peacock in the face of staggering adversities.
The Heron Comes Again

I’m told this is a paradise of snow and sea and starlight.

The mountains burst out from the frozen loam then tumble to the cold dark water like a silent white explosion, reaching up to brush the golden sky. But its sound is swallowed in the vastness like a whisper or a violent kiss.

I’ve heard there’s beauty in the bareness, in the sparkling glacial graves.

The snow falls softly when we’re sleeping, pushed downward by the endless sky, to cover all the earth’s black dirt and fill the spaces in the pines. It quells the motion of the world underneath its icy glaze, like a calm and quiet death; all is noiselessly ablated in the bitter beauty of the rime.

And now the sun is melted on the hills like nectar and the evening murk starts seeping through the trees. But something holds me by the water underneath the lights in the sky that are stars, and then the heron comes again.
Your Letters Like an Aria

The moon dangles in the sky
like a frost-bitten smile and I miss you.
I sit beneath the silver moon, hanging
in the cold summer sky like a smile
and one more time, I read your letter.
Your words leap up from the page
like giant moths that cannot land;
they flutter towards the sky, and then
like a soaring aria, I follow
running through the lines
of your letter, underneath the moon
like a smile, naked and singing
your aria—it has no beginning or end
like a glittering island of moss and snow. I miss you.

I was always running for you
like a long-legged boy, tumbling down
the grassy mountains of his hometown,
like cascading cypress waves. Not even so much running
as falling headfirst, into you
like an avalanche, trying to engulf you
in my irrepressible flood. I was
always running for your touch
like a cypress flood, rushing towards
your cornflower gaze, your face
slender as the moon, your skin as a soft as soapstone.

Your letter rests softly in my open hands
like a thousand white moths
that flutter but do not land, and then
your words flood right through me
like waves, bursting my heart open like a moonflower,
the whole world suddenly ignited in your aria.
You drench me in your lovesong and I miss you.
After Edwin

The summer slipped away again, washed away in heavy rain, turning itself over to a burnt October.

The pear trees slowly slumped beneath the balmy weight of southern sky and finally they bore their swollen fruit.

Now the mild autumn days roll by calmly, slow as summer thunder. This house is very quiet.

And the world blooms gently into auburn color, flooding through the kitchen windows where I am baking bread or reading novels.

There's a stillness in those afternoons when the soft song of finches has long since fallen silent and the darkened glow of twilight starts to settle in.

Even the bees drift lazily among the fallen pears which ferment in the golden sun. I watch them start to fly then float back down to the sugar-bruised fruit.

Surely nothing is more silent than steam escaping hot bread broken alone, than black tea going cold.