Constantine's Dream

Patti Smith

I dreamed a dream of St. Francis who kneeled and prayed For the birds and the beasts and all human kind All through the night I felt drawn in by him And I heard him call like a distant hymn

I retreated from the silence of my room Stepping down the ancient stones washed with dawn And entered the basilica that bore his name Seeing his effigy I bowed my head

And my racing heart, I gave to him I kneeled and prayed and sleep That I could not find in the night I found through him

I saw before me the world of his world The bright fields, the birds in abundance All of nature of which he sang singing of him All the beauty that surrounded him as he walked

His nature that was nature itself and I heard him I heard him speak and the birds sang sweetly And the wolves licked his feet But I could not give myself to him

I felt another call from the basilica itself The call of art, the call of man And the beauty of the material drew me away

And I awoke and beheld upon the wall The dream of Constantine The handiwork of Piero della Francesca Who had stood where I stood

And with his brush stroke The legend of the true cross And he envisioned Constantine Advancing to greet the enemy

And as he was passing the river An unaccustomed fear gripped his bowels An anticipation so overwhelming That it manifested in waves

All through the night the dream drew toward him As an advancing crusade He slept in his tent on the battlefield While his men stood guard

And an angel awoke him Constantine within his dream awoke And his men saw a light pass over the face Of the king, the troubled king

And the angel came and showed to him The sign of the true cross in heaven And upon it was written "In this sign shall thou conquer"

In the distance, the tents of his army were lit by moonlight But another kind of radiance lit the face of Constantine And in the morning light the artist seeing his work was done Saw it was good in this sign shall thou conquer

He let his brush drop and passed into a sleep of his own And he dreamed of Constantine Carrying him into battle in his right hand An immaculate undefiled and simple white cross

Piero della Francesca, as his brush stroked the wall Filled with the torpor and fell into a dream of his own From the geometry of his heart, he mapped it out He saw the king rise, fitted with armor set upon a white horse

An immaculate cross in his right hand He advanced toward the enemy and the symmetry The perfection of his mathematics Caused the scattering of the enemy agitated, broken

They fled and Piero dela Francesca, waking, cried out All is art, all is future, oh Lord, let me die on the back of adventure With a brush and an eye full of light As he advanced in age the light was shorn from him

His eyes, blinded, he layed upon his bed On an october morning, 1492 whispering Oh Lord, let me die on the back of adventure Oh Lord, let me die on the back of adventure, oh

And a world away, the world away On three great ships, adventure itself as if to answer Pulling into the new world And as far as his eyes could see, no longer blind

All of nature, unspoiled, beautiful, beautiful Such a manner it would have lifted The heart of St. Francis into the realm of universal love Columbus set foot on the new world

He witnessed beauty unspoiled All of the delights given by God as if in Eden itself As if Eden had opened up her heart to him And opened her dress and all of her fruit, gave to him

And Columbus so overwhelmed Fell into a sleep of his own All the world in his sleep, all of the beauty All of the beauty entwined with the future

The 21st century advancing like the angel Advancing like the angel That had come to Constantine Constantine and history

Oh, this is your cross to bear Oh Lord, oh Lord, let me deliver Hallowed adventure To all mankind in the future

Oh art, cried the painter

Oh art, oh art, cried the angel Art, the great material gift of man Art that hath denied the hungered pleas of St. Francis

Oh thou, artist, all shall crumble in the dust Oh thou, navigator, the terrible end of man This is your gift to mankind This is your cross to bear

Then Columbus saw all of nature aflame The apocalyptic night And the dream of the troubled king Dissolved into light