

A.K. Ramanujan

Elegy

a grown son's tears in a restaurant mix their salt
with a colleague's long-awaited sudden
death in Jodhpur

the breath of garlic as we enter
the elevator suffocates me
for this colleague

chewed on twelve garlic cloves every morning
as a cure for cancer after
an amputation

quoted Keats on the sparrow in the sun
the grape pressed into his palate
believed in homeopathic

doses of cowdung Shelley's chemical
experiments and the calcium deficiency
of his high-pitched verse

how native doctors had little white pills
for homesickness abroad how they
diagnosed your liver

and kidney by seeing whether your urine
stream was one or divided
in two did you know

it was not Wordsworth but his sister
who heard the solitary reaper
by which time

the elevator had reached the eighteenth floor
and I'd to get out and sign a health
insurance form

unable to shake off the whiff of garlic or
the taste of the grape now round
now crushed

in the mouth of Keats in the mouth
of my friend who had mixed them
into my breath

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Butcher's Tao

The butcher in China
looks long at a bull till he sees
the bull and how

the beast is jointed,
then moves his knife
in the spaces

he has learned
by heart with his hand
moving on the bull

and the bull
is now sirloin,

tenderloin, prime rib,
dogbone, two horns

for weddings or combs,
sandals for the pedestrian

peasant, saddle and rein
for horse, thong and head

for kettledrums to scare away
eclipses from the sun,

ghosts from processions,
or summon cities

to banquets, friends and
enemies to battle,

the blood in the bucket
ready for sprinkling

on children with polio
and village borders.

The rest is batter
for blood puddings.