

## On Reading a Blank Page

*David Clark Knowlton*

I once sat on a plateau's edge  
It began on my back, with updrafts.  
They rose along the white escarpment.

No relief, my eyes  
Could not grasp its on and on.

I felt the filling of a sandwich:  
No mustard, no lettuce, just me.

So I sat. Wind rustled up my shirt,  
Brushed my face, and snarled my hair.  
At least there was difference.

"Young man. Yes. Please come in.  
This room with books and papers  
Overfilling chairs and couch  
Is my study. You can see I have  
A great light from the north  
Burning through that window.  
It makes words stand out from the page  
Like trees against a cliff.

"So, yes. Please tell me about yourself?  
Why have you come from Utah  
To this town in Bolivia  
Where it seems the miners  
Are either on strike  
Or dancing in bejeweled  
Masks of the Devil and St. Michael?  
Please, please sit down. No, just move  
Those books off to the side.  
The maid will bring tea presently.

"Now, young man. Tell me, tell me  
All about yourself. It is not often  
Blond boys come to my door,

"Especially not dressed in suits.  
Although I must confess you  
Could use a better tailor.

"Tell me what brings you here  
So far from home like a  
Migrating butterfly. With that tie  
You could be a monarch.  
What brings you here  
So removed from the paths of your kind  
Like a blue and purple insect  
Blown by a hurricane  
From its flight path?

"No, wait. Before you open those pamphlets,  
I know something that will break the ice.  
It is the best way to know someone  
Deeply and profoundly in a short time  
Yes. Young man. It will work  
Please, please tell me what vices you practice.

"It is always best to know the dark things  
Of a man's heart and mind  
In contradiction is light and truth."

How do I know a plane,  
When I sit and sit  
Where it breaks into space?

I want to know it, but there are no stains,  
No tears, no rips in its reflecting surface.  
How do I make a map to return?

"I don't get this reading.  
It makes my head hurt.  
Why can't they write  
In simple English  
So everyone can understand!

"I am a simple person.  
I do not plan to think  
Complex sentences.  
I am straightforward,  
Literal, and pragmatic.

"What does he mean  
'there is nothing but difference'?  
I mean you should just  
Say what you mean directly.

"Life is a straight line from birth to death.  
If you just hold to that stainless steel  
You get to where there is no  
Contradiction and only peace.

"I am tired of this prose.  
It goes nowhere.  
What does he want?"

Like a winter fog, this gleaming plateau:  
If I drive into it, how do I know  
Another car in my lane won't be going slow,

And we'll crash? Maybe one comes up fast  
Hits me in the rear and  
Throws me into another plane.

I need perspective,  
I need to break the plane apart,  
To know its sleeves from its collar.

"No vice! Harrumph! Even one as young as you  
Has had time to cultivate a vice or two.  
Maybe you think impure thoughts. Maybe  
You relieve tension in a burst  
Of shaking in the night. Maybe you like sports  
Too much or maybe you hide in books.  
I think you must not  
Tell yourself the truth. Surely it is a pretense,  
This vicelessness of yours. You are like a poem  
That speaks of love and passion but means  
Enmity and death. I must read  
Between your words to know who you are.  
You obviously do not know yourself.

"You are a strange being, Mr. Blond Uahn.  
Your words make no sense. Life is to be filled  
With vice and pleasures before the long,  
Trackless plane of death."