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Starting over

by Dana Gioia

"I'll work harder this time," you reply.
"I know I can start over." Another venture failed.
Another lover gone in bitter recrimination.
The waiter clears the plates. You pour more wine,
your dark eyes gleaming.

Outside the streets fill up. We hear
the low, steady beat of music from the bars,
and the city's unending nocturnal parade—
the lovers, the loners, and the lost,
all eager to touch someone.

You talk of her and her flagrant betrayals.
You lean forward and whisper about your own mistakes.
Tonight your remorse is exquisite and excessive,
the words already polished and refined
by many retellings.

You step outside to light a cigarette.
"I really don't smoke, you know, but sometimes . . ."
You exhale with the studied elegance
of a film noir grifter as you expound
on your future ambitions.

The silken ribbon of your smoke does not rise
but drifts away in slow, suggestive arabesques.
Suggesting what? Perhaps that here
even the wind and air can cultivate
a sensuous lack of purpose.

And you will drift and dissipate like that smoke
in the streets of this beautiful city.
She is the one lover you will not escape.
Each new humiliation and betrayal only rouses you
to more austere devotion.

No drug is more dizzying than love's deception.
And you will trade anything for one
more night in her soft bed. Go. Travel.
Seek your needful redemption. Night will always
bring the old hungers.

You smile with weary but confident charm,
and I commend your virtuous resolution,
The waiter locks the door behind us,
and I watch you vanish into the midnight crowd,
younger every year.

Dana Gioia is the former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

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