

[JOURNEY]

~~When I entered the room, it was like entering a painting.~~ It was widely known there were problems with the lyric, as it might be known there were problems with a marriage.¹

¹ A loose translation might read: My mother wanted me to drive her to the sea.

[FIRST TAXI]

I stepped off the Greyhound into a **light** rain, streetlights **slurred**, just **shy of the border, a line** of taxis at the curb,

waiting, right where my mother said they would be.²
I had never gone anywhere alone in my life. And I guess

I thought I was supposed to bargain.³ “How much to ride **through** the slow rain of my whole life?” Twelve dollars.

“How much to step inside a painting that has waited **since** the day of **my birth**?” Twelve dollars.

Twenty-one, just out of college, the high school genius with no job or prospects—afraid to talk to people⁴—

If I looked **half** as lost as I felt, I was sure I’d be fleeced.
“How much to tell her that I have **forgiven** her?”⁵

Twelve dollars. “That I have not, but I will.” Still twelve.
That was **America, everything** a fixed price. He didn’t say

“Empty your pockets, **empty** the pail of blueberries
you picked with her when you were five, empty the beaches

where she swam, sand by sand.” I like to imagine
I asked last, “**How much** to go to the International Motel?”

and he said ten. But, really, I just quibbled,
then checked with each cab in the queue. All said twelve.

and I got in. This was America. And that was me.
Bargaining **for a taxi** to go see my dying **mother**.

[ORPHEUS]

It was **widely known** there were **problems** with the lyric. Orpheus **came** into the world singing because he knew nothing of the world. As for me, I'm no different **from every** other person you are liable to meet and be held responsible for. The way a **flower** is a little like a mountain is a little like a flowerpot is a little like the deer on the side of a flowerpot who, startled by this talk, retreats, while her baby pauses at the edge of brush, and looks back, not yet fully schooled in fear. **Like** the **girls** at my high school with corn rows and strollers who said "That will teach." Or like **trying to swim** back to a moment when the current keeps pushing you out to sea. Like trying to plug a leak in the wall of earth you drilled **through**. Or trying to pile as many people as possible into a cell phone booth formed by the word "you." Like **plastic** that can be molded into any shape; at daybreak, at dusk, we melt the words down. There was something we shouldn't have done and we did it. Now if I could run forward, now if I could run back, I would I would. She was pounding on his chest, the whole thing must have taken just a few frames up from the cutting room floor. As if it were a genie or a snack machine that wouldn't dispense. **Eve** came to this world naked because she had **never** been **touched**. The one wish she thought she'd paid for. And they say Old Hank sang because his back hurt so much he couldn't do **nothing** else.

1 A loose translation might read: My mother wanted me to drive her to the ocean.

2 The image of linemen blocking downfield, although unstated here, requires further explanation.

2 **We had all** been sheltered by her but I had **needed it** the most, or depended on it, or that was the myth. **Maybe she** had needed it **the most**. I say all meaning my sister and I. She made us seem like everything.

2 Later it became a source of embarrassment, something to avoid disclosing, the fact she had nursed me until I was four, which was not a fact, but **two nipples** and freckled breasts poking into the concave day, **pointing toward** my sun-stroked life.

3 My first taxi ride, a year before in **the Holy Land**. My girlfriend had negotiated the price without vowels, but something was **lost in translation**. The driver grabbed my copy of *Steppenwolf* and chased us through a bus depot and **a** city park. We changed clothes in a public toilet, walked out disguised as our best selves.

4 Turned down from the lowliest jobs at book stores, cafes, health food stores.

5 Should one be forgiven for making one feel like everything. I walked the streets all day while she worked. While your mother worked? No, my girlfriend.

6 How easily her **red dress** came off, as if it were **engineered to melt into** a rose. Then Summer in a distant land: (flashback) "Are you raping me?" she said inside **a tower**, "Who are you?" Tower, please fall with all of history inside. Crest-fallen, I watched the waves, walked past transvestite streetwalkers, stood before the sea that **gave birth to all the Gods**. Zeus given power over the air, Hades the underworld, Poseidon the Sea. And what about Demeter?

[ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN REMEMBER?]

Oh I almost forgot—

A wall so tall it stretched to heaven.

A woman in a blue and gold dress, hair done up
like **a** monument

and a Mexican **man** who looked like **an imitation
of the** last cowboy on **earth**,

mustache, Stetson hat, and dungarees,

proudly walking the American side,

his arm **around her waist**—I see them so clearly still

as if emblazoned on **a golden urn**.

[THE AGE OF POSITIVE THINKING]

Rain rain sweet petrol rain and **a mist of high beams**.
I stepped from the taxi and paid the man twelve dollars
then **rifled through** my pockets for the folded paper.
When I entered the room, it was like entering
a painting—a scene of gravitas such as Picasso’s father
might have arranged for **the** boy genius to win a prize—
my grandfather at the foot of the bed,
my uncle at her side, pulled-up upholstered chairs.
A **painting** in which no one wanted to be.
Grandpa’s golf shirt was already gazing out the window
of a scotch, and my uncle’s light blue weekend oxford
would fly away in the morning. In the center,
small as a wish, propped against the headboard,
sat my mom. She didn’t want to be there either,
but, of course, she had no choice. As in any painting
the scene derived its timbre from the light,
and in this case, the bedside lamp was
of an unusually high wattage, a bright ironic glow.
And then the painting began to talk.
It was my grandfather, saying how great he felt
about **the doctor** they had met that day
and I knew before the words **grew** cold on his lips
that he was lying. I could taste the lie inside the room
like **a cold spoon in everyone’s mouth**,
and he went on repeating it, as if to convince,
with his **bright** insurance, barber-shop, golf-swing cheer,
at least himself. Like a man in **snow**, shivering
trying to light a fire with a pack of wet matches
afternoon sun out of sight behind the mountain
violet sky streaked across the broken ice.
~~A painting that would never hang in a motel like this
above the bed. Below: my mom was a painting
in which no one wanted to be. And that’s when I knew . . .~~
~~It’s a true story, too: After Picasso won that prize,
his dad—a frustrated painter, a teacher of high school art,
gave his son all his brushes and never painted again.~~

[TO TELL THE WHOLE STORY]

My mom wanted me to drive her to the ocean
but that was only after we rented the Saturn
after three evenings lying around watching the Winter
Olympics in an interstate Motel, shades drawn,
trucks idling in the parking lot, comma
noun participle noun preposition adjective noun.

And before that, I took the bus, but none of this
could have happened if she hadn't gotten cancer,
which might not have come to be if she hadn't
met my father, or had left him in time
to have time, her anger building itself like a city
or the afternoon cumulous thunderheads I waited for.

And I never would have been within bus range
if I hadn't driven as far away as I could
from this woman who loved me more than anything
in the world, who came into my room
and sat beside me on the bed after their fights,
I remember the distinct, vaporous intention forming

to not be like him, to be what she wanted
more real than the weight machine and roll top desk
her pounding her fists against his chest
as if it were a broken genie lamp
or a vending machine that wouldn't dispense
the one wish she thought she'd paid for.

[STYLES]

Matisse wanted to paint paintings in which everyone wanted to be. Pools of **color**, **fountains your eyes** could swim in new each day. Even the goldfish desired to spend eternity dancing around that glass bowl, **confined to** the joy of life. Matisse it seems had never been to hell, or if he had, he didn't want to talk about it: **newspapers** piled up unread outside his door.

Picasso, on the other hand, was adored in hell and couldn't get out of bed. First, the maid would enter with toasts and jams, whatever he had complained was missing the day before. He'd fuss a while over the arrangement, and she would stack and restack it accordingly as he wished. Then, Francoise would enter, curl up beside him, and he would start his litany:

"If you only knew how miserable I was, you would not even ask me to live another hour. I've got stomach trouble, I suppose it's cancer. And nobody cares, not even my doctor. Least of all my doctor! What does he do? He pours me whiskey and talks to me about first editions? What do I care about his first editions? He doesn't care about me, only my painting.

"Why should I get out of bed? Who is there to talk to? Nobody. Nobody understands me. How can you expect them to? Most people are so stupid. Of course, there's my painting, but my painting's going very badly. Each day is worse than the last. And how could it be any other way with all the family troubles I have? Little Paulo's in trouble again, and look, another raving lunatic letter from Olga, she doesn't miss a day."

And the whole time Francoise is petting him like a cat, like a minotaur with a prickly pear in his hoof, saying "Come on, it isn't as bad as all that. Sure, you have some stomach trouble, but it really isn't that serious." Saying, "He thinks it might make you happy." Saying, "Your painting is magnificent, and about that everyone is in complete accord."

This goes on for more than an hour. Finally, exhausted, spent, she's ready to bring a gun, whatever he wants. And he starts to perk up. "I suppose it is rather nice out today. Maybe, you are right. But, are you absolutely certain about what you say?"

So, she musters herself once more. "Absolutely! However difficult things may seem, you can achieve real work."

Finally, he gets up, talks with visitors, eats lunch, then gets to work, like a train slowly starting up, and then painting until late into the night.

But the next day, the same thing all over. "I have stomach trouble, I suppose it's cancer..." Picking up the paper, "Look at this! The reefs are dying. Christ, people are so stupid! There are not even fish left in the ocean. What is an ocean without fish? Jose

Antonio spends his life in that boat and can't catch enough to feed his kids. And look, another letter from Olga!"

"Oh, it's not as bad as that . . ."

Was her art of waking him worth less than his paintings? Her style?

Meanwhile, Matisse is painting fuchsia. A green line, a purple zig zag cloth. He's not bringing anyone back from the dead. He's painting no one has ever died.

[WIKIPEDIA, OR THE LATE STYLE OF ORPHEUS]

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, also **described** as the Pacific Trash Vortex, **is a gyre** of marine litter in the central North Pacific Ocean located **roughly** between 135° to 155°W and 35° to 42°N. The patch extends over a very wide area, with estimates ranging from an area **the size of the** state of Texas to one larger than the continental United States; however, the exact size is **unknown**. This can be attributed to the fact that there is no specific standard for determining the boundary between the “normal” and “elevated” levels of pollutants and what constitutes being part of the patch. The size is determined by a higher-than normal degree of concentration of pelagic debris in the water. Recent data collected from Pacific albatross populations suggest there may be two distinct zones of concentrated debris in the Pacific.

The Patch is characterized by exceptionally high concentrations of pelagic plastics, chemical sludge, and other debris that have been trapped by the currents of the North Pacific Gyre. Despite its size and density, the patch is not visible from satellite photography since it primarily consists of suspended particulates in the upper water column. Since **plastics break down** to ever smaller polymers, concentrations of submerged particles are not visible from space, nor do they appear **as a continuous** debris field. Instead, the patch is defined as an area in which the **mass** of plastic debris in the upper water column is significantly higher than average.

Some of these long-lasting plastics end up in the stomachs of marine birds and animals, and their young, including sea turtles and the Black-footed Albatross. Besides the particles' danger to wildlife, the floating debris can absorb organic pollutants from seawater, including PCBs, DDT, and PAHs. Aside from toxic effects, when ingested, some of these are mistaken by the endocrine system as estradiol, causing hormone disruption in the affected animal. These toxin-containing plastic pieces are also eaten by jellyfish, which are then eaten by larger fish. Many **of** these fish are then consumed by **humans**, resulting in the ingestion of toxic chemicals. Marine plastics also facilitate the spread of invasive species that attach to floating plastic in one region and drift long **distances** to colonize other ecosystems.

[I TRIED TO TELL MY STORY
BUT IT WAS THE STORY OF THE WORLD]

~~She banged on his chest~~ as if it were a genie
or a snack machine that wouldn't dispense
the one wish she thought she'd paid for.

•

Or, like the woman striking the metal door
of a monastery that has closed its gate
because it's **winter**, and nearly dusk,

and the soldiers at the edge of town
are lawless and drunk. She knocks
first with her knuckles, then harder

with her fist, then **open** palm, then just the heel
of her hand, sliding down, collapsing
into her dark-blue, almost-black

dress. Behind the door, monks scurry
with candles. Outside, night falls on **her dress:**
a pool of blue wax on grey stone.

•

~~Or, like Orpheus banging on the gates of hell,
as if clamoring for admittance to the underworld
where the man she thought she'd married
had been carried under by the man she married.~~

[WISH]

The man in the next room wouldn't stop coughing.
All night, terrible hacking bursts. "God," I said,
"I wish he'd stop." My mother and I
lay awake in the motel room in San Ysidro
stretched out, side by side, in separate beds
like coffins in which we couldn't stop turning.
Each morning a shuttle picked us all up,
supermarket doughnuts open on the counter
in the glazed lobby, and glided us across
the border to the experimental clinic
in Tijuana. Around four, it brought us back.
Engines idling for hours to enter America;
women and children lining the stalled highway,
selling Mexican blankets, dolls, noisemakers.
When we reached the front of the line, all we had
to say was Yes. Each night, the same coughing,
machine gun spitfire broken by a lobbed grenade.
Each day, three rooms, patients like a ball of gnats
whirling in slow motion, pushing metal crosses
like coat racks on wheels, weaving through each other
from the dining room to the waiting room and back,
a yellow liquid dripping into their arms.
One day at lunch—I still remember the sickly taste
of unripe papaya; shaving the green-orange flesh down
with my spoon, trying to eat—my mother
told me she heard someone had died in the night.
That night, there was **no coughing**.

[INTERMISSION: ISADORA]

Picasso was never told he could bring anyone out of hell. Yes, he was allowed in, to paint the place, given his run of the women. Maybe given a furlough on the weekend, but it was always understood that he would be back, and certainly would lead no one out. If he looked back, there was no consequence, no one to vanish or restrain.

Isadora, meanwhile, was not allowed to visit hell—and so she wanted nothing more. American girls, Mick Jagger sang, want everything in the world you can possibly imagine. Isadora had wanted to visit England, France, and Greece, to perform for Russian princes and African queens, but most of all to dance inside the gates of hell. And only hell was barred from her.

A dancer should not need to see hell, the devil explained, in a carefully worded reply on letterhead. The dance should be only beautiful. Not sublime, not wretched or grotesque, not abysmal. The devil it seemed was something of an aficionado. The dance was his one refuge where he went to escape his work, and he was absolutely adamant, some would say irrational, that the two worlds should never meet. His one time when he could recall what it was like to live in a hut beside the Lord's stream, before he had, like Judas later, obediently agreed to disobey. Judas, at least, had been given a place in heaven for his sacrifice.

In the drearier, monotonous moments (it wasn't so much the fire and brimstone which bothered him; the Lord had been right to spot his fondness for pyrotechnics) when he struggled with bitterness over his duties, the devil would go watch the dancers and feel cleansed. In a few hours, he would be **purged** of all the responsibility he took upon himself for the pain he inflicted on men and women—who were, after all, not exactly innocent **of** their actions—and the stupid acts of destruction he ingeniously lured and herded them toward by the thousands every day. He watched them and, remembering his **innocence**, was renewed to aspire toward new levels of ensnarement and degradation, all in the name of his great faith in the Lord's work.

Sometimes when his henchmen boiled on the edge of mutiny, he had to explain all this to them. “Do you think if this were not the Lord's will, it would take more than a smithereen of a second for all our evil deeds of retribution to be wiped clean from all the earth?” The thugs did not have the subtle mind for mystical philosophy, but the explanation went on long enough that they became confused and distracted. At first, the devil himself had not understood the system into which he had been drafted. **The** Lord had had to train him like a small dog. Bring me that stick, the Lord said, and the boy **angel strode** happily **forward**, brought back the stick. “No, no, no,” the Lord screamed like a wide-eyed theatre director, “No, when I say bring me the stick, you are to not bring me the stick. Now, don't bring me the stick.” Lucifer sat still, obediently. “Jesus Fucking Christ,” the Lord said, knocking the back of his head. “When I say don't bring me the stick, you must bring me the stick.”

Lucifer began to cry and went looking for his mother. Finding he had none, he wandered into another myth, or several: one where he was eaten by his father, one where he was not evil but simply morbid, and then another where he was in fact his mother, like a series of nightmares. Finally, he drifted **through** a myth where there was only a heart beating, nothing else, and he curled up beneath the tree that was the heart's leaves and branches. It took the Lord a long time to find him peacefully sleeping there, but eventually He completed his training.

Fuming, Isadora railed away and assembled her companions, determined to storm the gates of hell by any means necessary: bacchanals, orgies, love triangles—even shoplifting, if necessary, was not beneath her. “Clearly, she doesn’t know hell in **the 20th century**,” the devil said, **putting on his sunglasses** and again **stamping denied** on her application. Isadora opened the envelope in disbelief. Heard the mockery of ballerinas tiptoeing in heavenly music boxes.

Consumed in rage, she conceived her new act. Before going on stage, she placed a bag over her head, torture me she said. They placed her upside down on a 1x12 board, plunged her into water, then released her and she’d dance. Dance of the three day interrogation. Dance of the head in the toilet. In Europe, audiences were moved to tears. In America, they sat dumbfounded. Two minutes **in**, a fat man stood up with a tub of pop corn and yelled, “She’s pissing in the beer.” A third of the crowd followed him out **the** door.

Whether by fate or ill-fortune, or her own secret dark desire, the devil happened to catch her show one night in Vienna—it was as if she had struck his chest with an iron candelabra. The next day, he agreed to meet; she rose elated, determined her time had arrived at last for dance to descend to the depths of all the other arts and therefore heights.

She sat down to negotiate with the devils, let fall the strap of her sundress from her shoulder. She talked about falling as the essence of dance. Falling in love, falling as a **red tide**, as a business cycle, as an autumnal wind in which leaves covered with written words fall from the tree **of the Lord’s book**. Falling to the floor. To leap is easy, she said, but to fall, to fall with grace, with an open heart, with natural motion. Six weeks in the colony of hell would be instrumental to the development of my art, to the mastery of falling. I would be forever grateful. The devil’s secretary rolled her eyes.

She had two valises packed to go and had booked a train to middle earth when she got the call. As we all know, for even the most spotty accounts tell this part of the story, her children were in the car when the chauffeur got out to fix a tire. It seems he forgot the parking brake. Or, maybe it had been loosened by henchmen earlier that day. Or was that even the real chauffeur? While mysteries remain, one thing is certain in the book of facts: when the car rolled into the river, both her children drowned.

For two weeks, she canceled every show, not all at once, but one night at a time. Then, one night, to everyone’s astonishment, she appeared, wearing an evening gown, but she could have been wearing a star trek uniform, an apron, or a slab of meat. Not one person in attendance ever attempted to describe what was seen that night.

Others began to go every night, and still no one spoke of it. Those who did speak of it invariably had not even seen it and provided outlandish claims: copulation with rhinos, for instance, or an anaconda and a flying trapeze. After a week, a few began to speak in oblique fragments. “The dark chained down.” “Each breath I Isadora.” “At the instant a door.” “Grief, our limp puppet.” “Her eyes amniotic.” Finally, the story spilled out:

“We were chained down. She didn’t move. And she didn’t move. And still she didn’t move. For over an hour, she didn’t move. Not an eyelash. Not a twitch of her toe. She could have been dead, but a feeling filled the room which seemed to come from her like a scent from a bruised flower. We could feel her breathing. And with each breath, she entered the room, entered each one of us, and with **each breath we entered** her. I remind you, we’d been **chained down** in the darkness before the curtain lifted. **We entered** her completely, **every last one of us**, and after the last of us **entered** I swear I heard a door shut behind him, and **in that exact instant** she blinked one single eye. As the lashes touched, I heard the door slam like a gunshot.

“And then, with all of us inside, so that it was our own arms filled with her **grief**, and our **own** grief animating her **limp puppet** body, she **began to move**. And, I feel I will be struck down for saying this, but God help me I speak the truth, then, then we began to move. Chained to our seats, shackled we began to move, and each of us saw our life dance before our eyes, or our afterlife, or our prelife amniotic shadows written over the stretched dome of our mother’s belly. But, no two of us saw the same thing. This is why no one spoke. Because when we met staggering in the restrooms, each one’s stuttered words were unintelligible to every other person.

The devil had heard enough and interrupted his informant. Without pleasure, he issued the final orders in writing and signed his name. Even his aides thought there’d been some mistake, checked back with him twice. He refused to talk, said he didn’t want to hear about it again. His aides found a handsome devil to purchase the scarf, suggest the ride, and hiring the wind was always easy.

Some of those who carried out the orders were never able to work again and had to be reassigned. Lucifer himself did not seem very much affected and soon returned to his club seats, though he was perhaps more distant. The Lord did not mind this turn of events that seemed to groom his apprentice to be a better fit for the job he had been given.

Her body severed from her head, rose up to heaven—without her,
her mind sank into hell. Her only punishment
was to have no body. For some it would have been a paradise.

[THE DANCE]

At my first college party, **I asked** six girls at **once** to dance.
Sounds embarrassing, but that's not **the** embarrassing part.
Six separate pairs of jeans, six brands of antiperspirant.
Magnolia trees near the limit of their Northern range,
bloom stink, as if the moon itself was, petal by petal,
rotting or **giving birth—to** more moons beneath our feet.

And not the gregarious, "Come on, let's all **dance!**"
but with the intimate shyness of one boy asking one girl
directed to the whole group, or really to no one.
They looked around, a couple beats, confused, their faces
like **slot machines** rattling through involuntary
expressions, and then out **of kindness** or confusion,

or because unknown to me, they were fools too,
of a lesser order, perhaps, they **began to move**,
starting up like trains in a yard, an elbow, a knee slowly
clicking into place, holding their beaded Yuenglings
and Rolling Rocks, looking back at me, my face
filling with horror, as I realized **I could not move**.

[ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE: AN ARTIFACT]

They've just met, and they are **lying** in bed now between acts.

The kiss suspended that they will never taste
is marriage. But, they don't know that yet, the waste
to come, as **aglow in words**, as in the flesh. An adobe shack,
a futon the only furniture, a hot, dusty yard shared
with a constant stream of addicts from the duplex next door.

"I feel like I can remember fucking you on the beach,
but we've never been to the beach, how can that be?"

"It must have been when I was a blacksmith in Galilee
and the sand there was all we knew of the ocean.

"And then there was the time in the vineyard in Italy
when we had been tasting wine and went for a walk
and you laid me down between the rows of bursting grapes."

"...and we smothered them over each other's bodies."

"and you fed them to me as you fucked me." She pauses.

"You ploughed me. I was like the earth, and the sun beat down
baking my legs, and the pebbles beneath me dug into my back."

"That of the pebbles pressing into your back was too much.

"They were too much. They pulverized me."

"And there was the time in the pitch black new moon
on the old creaking bridge with the roaring river beneath you.
It had rained for two days straight..."

"and was the only place no one in the village would hear me."

"Yes, and do you remember the boat?"

"You mean the ship coming over from the old world
carrying your great grandmother as a girl
crossing alone? And, she saw us sneaking into the pantry,
and she knew what we were doing and she also didn't know."

"Yes, but I meant the fishing boat?" "Ah, the fishing boat."

"We had returned into the harbor and had just finished
unloading the fish, and we pretended to follow the others,
but then we snuck back **after everyone had gone**."

"And there was one fish left still flopping around
on the deck in the moonlight amid the glittering scales,
and it was also my pussy, and your cock inside me."

[RETURN]

On days I didn't go
with my mom, I sat
in a whirlpool, overcast
and alone, in a square
of fenced-in concrete

between the motel parking lot
and the strip of fast food joint
that faced the highway
and mooned their backside vents
our way. I remember because

I held a little notebook
out of the water and was
writing things down
from the charred smellcloud
of fryers and the morning

dew burning off semi-
bumpers, trying to make
a poem. It would be interesting
now to know what then
I wrote in the hamburger steam

while my mother sat in a room
of waiting strangers under wall-
mounted 13-inch TVs
that played (on days I was there)
college basketball. The water

was hot and reeked
of chlorine that can bubble up
years later. I'm not sure what I am
more amazed at now
the blind faith in my mind

as a receptacle for lightning
even in the absence
of significant love
or that I viewed art as
a suitable alternative

to the relationships of life.
The jets pressed into my back. I
watched the housekeeper appear
out of one door, make a transaction
with her cart, and disappear
into another. All housekeepers in the world
speak the same language
with their bodies, the sense
there's no hurry, and no sense
in slowing down either.
I watched her go in and out
the doors, almost better
than the clock she is tied to.
More beautiful certainly.
Closure is not exactly
the word for it. The truly wealthy
might own such a clock. Cuckoo,
the sky opens, and a house-
keeper changes the bedsheets.
Probably, her life is better
on this side of the border.
A painting like that would never
hang in a motel
like this, but it might
over a tree melting, or in a glass
gallery in New York. I don't feel
any guilt about this now.
I've already gotten to the end
of this poem. I am walking back now
with my arms open, spilling the gold
desert from my sunglasses.
Having seen not only
California,
but the bright maraschino cherry
at the end of the world.

[THE APPRENTICE]

When Orpheus was dying alone in Brooklyn State Hospital, a young man visited him, a boy really, not much at first glance: short and thin, round cheeks, maybe nineteen, nasal voice. Orpheus couldn't sing at that point, and everyone had abandoned him—the gods, the girlfriends that could never measure up to his untouched image of Eurydice, his brothers and sisters, bastard children. Even his old singing pals only came around once every few months. No one wants to attend death, to travel that deeply in the mirror.

He could no longer sing, but he still loved the songs he had written, and as the youth played them for him, the ceiling fan turning above, he thought them again, felt himself through the youth inside them.

When the youth returned months later to Duluth, his old friends were astounded by his transformation—his fingerings and commanding inflections, his virtuosity. Rumors whispered that he had gone out to the crossroads, made a deal with the devil like Robert Johnson.

But he hadn't seen the devil. He'd just seen death. And he carried his death now in his suitcase, which was shaped like a guitar, carried it with him everywhere he went. Soon, he began to resemble Orpheus and changed his name; it was not long before everyone simply called him Orpheus.

[I WAS GOING TO THE SEA]

My mother wanted me to drive her to the ocean
but we didn't know the way. **Why am I**
telling this to you? **A foreign city**, San Diego.
Or you **to** me? Because I want **to** die?
Because I want to live? This was pre-google maps,
I think I got the hotmail account the following year,
so I just drove West, and when there was no West,
turned Northwest, Southeast—this could be a hundred cars,

this could be a thousand eyes, little moths aflame,
—until we dead-ended at an indoor mall
or outlet strip or gas station. Each time I'd jog—
in a car, we'd jog, with our two car feet and our two
car feet—north or south, until we could again
turn West. My mom had always loved the ocean.
But I told you that already, didn't I?
Sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown,

that was my mom, I guess, but freckled, shy.
Was she shy? I don't even know. Not socially,
Not professionally, but sexually, romantically,
Maybe. Why are you thinking of my mom this way?
I is another asked **myself**. Didn't I? Didn't you?
Alright, yes, I've had the dream. Maybe twice.
Woke up slightly sick, repulsed, the way I felt
once crossing her musk in the naked hall.
The beach is nowhere now but memory.

I'm trying to take you there, but we keep hitting things,
a park bench, a Bank of America, everything
between me and it, between I and you. I'm driving
for the sea of her—because I want to live, I want
to die—but we keep hitting the Office Max
of her, the housing tract of her—this could be
a hundred banks, this could be a thousand hers—
I remember hearing her tell a story once of doing

I was young to hear it and barely understood
something to a man in a car in California while he drove.
At the time, I was unsure and embarrassed.
Now, what I notice first when I play that clip

is that she seems too proud, how commonplace
for her to take such pride. Maybe I need
to consider more her time, what was being escaped.
But, why is she telling this to us? To me?

To you? I remember her playing in the waves,
body-surfing, rising up streaming happiness
and then, with years, a false note like a dead key
on a piano. Then two dead keys, far apart,
three, and so on. Like a dead fish,
a dead seal, a dead coral. A symphony of ghosts
underwater. Why am I telling you to all of this?
I was going to the ocean. Because I want to live.

-Aren't you worried? This text upside down, they might not understand it.

-They'll need to keep reading.

-Why should they?

-To know what you did to me.
To know what I did to you.

-I like to imagine them like an army of readers in military jeeps speeding across the desert.

-In search of water?

-In search of water in the shape of figures in the sundial of human involvement.

-I made a choice to address you. I could have addressed the readers.

-They aren't readers.

-What are they?

-Voyeurs. A myth.

*

*

[ARS POETICA]

It was widely known there were problems with the story too,
but the problems with the story were different

than the problems with the lyric. The problem with the lyric
was that the moment changed. The problem with the story

was that what happened was a lyric.

[HOME]

1985.

I stood there before the doors that would years later be blown open, the hutch and mirror behind me, in the dim foyer, the **darkened vestibule**. My mom at the door, her purse and keys in hand. I told her she must not go. I said it was very important and that I knew this. I knew what was right, and she needed to **listen** to me.

1975-1995.

Ecology: from the Greek word Oikos meaning house, home, same root as economy, its modern enemy. Our house kept moving: 43rd St, 62nd St., 104th, 128th, 178th. First, it was a place of love, then it was a place of fear. When we were small, they were so in love with us. You, little girl in the Groucho Marx glasses. You, little Babe Ruth, pillow stuffed under your pinstriped shirt. Once returning home—I must have been something **like** a duck in my idea of warmth and safety—I entered twenty feet in front of mom and found **a stranger standing in** the kitchen— intruder? thief?—at ease, leaning on **the** counter, drinking a beer, because dad had shaved his beard. He wore more **shadow**. The numbers went up, we got a TV, then two TVs, **and** then a third. For Christmas, someone gave me a ghetto blaster with a four inch screen, I hid beneath the sheets watching **the glow of** WWF and Saturday Night Live: Jon Lovitz saying “I’m Picasso” and blowing **his** nose as onlookers dived for the tossed off tissue art. This now is the **afterlife**, the creation myths for this particular eternity already locked down. More TV each year, I was afraid all the neighbors could hear the screaming of our house, but since we were the best family, what was inside the walls must only be inside of me, and I needed to make sure that no one knew. Hiding thus grew into a full time religion with an underworld built upon the God of the best family. I needed to make it stop, so I took mom into **my** bed, and you, sister, took our **father** to Winn Dixie to buy flowers and ice cream. One makes it sound more sinister, the other too innocent. He bounced from room to room like a pin ball, or a chess piece, silent, and she **followed**. I can’t say who was more cruel, who more tragic: **My father** sitting on the floor of the double garage, sorting through his records, half-crying, unable to look up, when I tapped him on the shoulder, I wanted to collapse **a shot hummingbird** of contrition in his arms. Or my mother in the hallway **pleading with** him to say the words I love you. Ecology is largely the study of relationship, the interconnection between things that seem different. Like my mother and my father. Like my mother and father and me. You don’t know what love is, he once shot back, borrowing **the voice of God**, strange tone I recognized even as a child woven out of possessed mystic silk that claimed sole access to a secret, wordless scroll. I had asked him earlier, yelled maybe, borrowing the will of my mother, to sell his records. I didn’t understand why anyone wouldn’t say any three words someone begged to hear. I eat diarrhea, I would say it. Oedipal rye pelican, I would say it. The breast milk of Inuit mothers has mercury levels so high it would be considered hazardous waste by the Food and Drug Administration. **Gazing out at sea won’t change this, though** your gaze might enter the bloodstream of the earth. **My blood is awash with** gazes I’ve never met, many of them hazardous, toxic, carcinogenic, a few baptismal, vernal. 84% of male salmon in the Columbia River had reversed their sex. And, 60% of fish in the Potomac had mutated into hermaphrodites with the born males growing eggs inside their testes. At the time, I didn’t know any of this. I was born before the data, but the data was gaining. When

~~I found my love, we were both already on the run.~~ **For a moment it did seem** ~~like the stars~~
would be born again ~~inside our body.~~ **And then a crack of earth opened underneath her feet.**

1985.

I told her I knew what was right, and she put down her purse. She put down her keys. She bent down toward me, as if watering a plant. Pouring into me her whole life that was about to walk out the door. I was nine years old.

[HENRY: THERE OUGHT TO BE A LAW
AGAINST THE TRUTH. MR. BONES: THERE IS.]

The myth of best, popular in **America**,
as in most countries, is **executed**
exactly the same way whether for
country, family, religion, or self.
It's one size fits all, unisex.
It's a knife and a screwdriver.
It's pancake syrup and floor cleaner.
You can slap it on anything.
It's best to apply several coats daily
until the truth is unrecognizable,
itself a myth, confounding, chimeric.
Until the urgency of all that's wrong
becomes the fervor of believing
and defending what was never true,
all passion focused **like a laser**
upon a single idea, pure
because it has no referent,
and bears no burden of reality.
It is, in fact, a lock on reality.
Like a lock on a shed in the back yard
that holds **your real feelings**,
or that holds the illegal people
who every day, cleaning and mowing
and plastering, see and feel and hear
what is really going on.

[EMOTIONAL INCEST]

Hard to wake up as a twenty one year-old insect. I cradled the phone between my front legs. I needed to make her understand what she'd done to me.

This is not a portrait of my mother, who was a kind and loving woman. I hold the imprint of her suffering, a thing we press upon those closest—it's like our signature.

She pressed into me. Like a flower in a blank book? No, like type. The type said: I love you, I love you, I love you. But, this book meant nothing in the world. It had no currency.

Artichoke dip, blue floral print, scorekeeper's book, dimpled derriere night swimming a few years before the REM song came out.

In the months before, I had tried to tell my mom this thing. I tried to carry the word over the long distance of the telephone cord. I found if I carried it, I could not balance it, and if I balanced it, I could not carry it. I could not push it through the phone firmly and gently enough to penetrate the myth,

without severing the heart it was attached to.

Hadn't it been done just as much by my father, by his absence striding before me, his shapelessness, so nothing molded my plastic into the shape of a man?

My mother looked at me as one might look at Van Gogh's sunflowers, or like Van Gogh might look at sunflowers. When I gaze down at a lover now, sometimes I still feel that I am pouring from her endless pitcher.

[ORPHEUS]

Orpheus resented Keats for what he'd done.
There the lovers stand, emblazoned, forever about to kiss.
But, give the urn—like earth—a quarter turn
and in the next panel, Eurydice's dragged down
in the arms of a satyr, bitten by a viper's nest.

Give a further twist, and there's Orpheus in hell,
arguing his case, offering a song to border patrols,
and when that doesn't work, a bribe, drugs or alcohol
or cold hard cash. But, the higher-ups—or lower-downs—
already living large, have finer tastes, a weakness

for this honeycomb of memory, melody,
and plain desire. And now the Gods are charmed
and she's coming back above, a smile placid as a lake
glued upon her lips. She's **his again**, and **yet**
behind him, he can hear **no footsteps**

and when he stops his song to turn around and check,
it's empty as a subway tunnel a train has just escaped.
Now, how does he feel—very simple instructions
he has just botched—he's lost her twice,
forever. Go ahead, ask him. I'm sure he'll tell.

~~Beyond, the borderguard, now drunk, watches with a smirk,
his fingers stroking the bow of a tiny air violin.
He has his story too, his own childhood. And, of course,
here comes the crowd (as time gets back on track) thousands
peeling their way to that open wound, that pearly gate.~~

[WHOLE]

My mother wanted me to drive her to **the ocean**.
Why am I going back? Why going down?
You should know that I no longer live here.
We **just made love** twice this afternoon,
exquisite music of the spheres and ages
raining down upon us—Holiday, Bach
Cohen, Joshi, Tallus, Prince all gathered
in this room **with** us—then **silence** and the rain itself.
Bread and olives. Chocolate, wine.
It's good when a room can un- hitch itself from time.
It's because I'm whole now that I return
to this land of forlorn shadows.
like a lottery winner making pawn shop claims.
There, beyond the table, you can see
the ruins through a hole in the plaster wall
that's painted on, not really there.
Flaubert said a room is a metaphor
for the heart. **It's optional** at this point
for me to kneel beside my mother.
And, it's not so much that I want you **to watch**
as that I would like to kneel beside you,
you who could so easily have been my mother
many times the Dalai Lama says.
I want you to be my mother now,
to watch your son dance upon the shore
through a hole in your heart
that's no longer there
that could reappear any moment.
I want to step back through that hole
that hangs on your wall
and kneel beside your bed.
I want to spread myself and you upon the world
like love, like paint, like coiled tubes of snakes,
and say "Hello mother," I have not
forgotten you.