

I Go Wandering Inside My Head

alone. At the gate of my head: a bull the color of hot tar

on yellowing paper. He ignores me, chews the perpetual grass.

Beyond the gate is a scape like the moon. It is not a known moon,

nor of poetry. It is a red moon, and subtle, and I walk
backwards to see where I have been. The gravity here

is the weight of an apple on the highest branch.

When I try to catch the apple as it falls

I am inadequate as a pebble-hued moth.
Slim as a coin, the moth makes holes so great whole

empires fall through them over and over. Let me return
to the civilization whose god is a sunfish, flat as a palm.

There my hands are nonsense: I just wave them around, astonished
by their disobedience. They draw only the bull, its face the face

of a heart that has seen itself, and walked through its halls all the same.

Sonnet: Introduction

I must have had a mother. I must have had
a hat, and then given it away, upside down,
so that someone would be compelled
to fill their head with crocuses. I must
have seen how golden the moon
appears to a virgin of Demeter, wreathed
in glowing wheat, betrothed to dirt. I come
from a village accessible only by boat; you can see
how the heat clings to me, how from my ankles
dangle netted glass, blue lobsters, pieces of kindling,
four tamed crickets ready for circus life.
Sweet hedge maze, verdant under every planet,
I will show you what the center is made for.
Here is my hat. Something has to change.

In a Past Life

Tell me what you're married to and I'll tell you the book to read to get out of it. Tell me which of these pet store fish you're most attracted to and I'll tell you that most likely you were a peasant in a former life, hundreds of years ago, in a valley that looked up onto the lush expanse of baronial wealth you served. I'll tell you about grief. I'll tell you where they've hidden the pigeon babies, sickly and alien, valentine-pink. What do you want to hear? I carry this cheap pennywhistle in case of a request on the wind. About grief: let me tell you: it's an oil slick in winter in a parking lot next to a frozen lake where men drill holes in the ice to get at the flesh beneath. Over time you get used to that cheap song. Cleopatra splintered into many souls. There is an explanation for everything.

Your Life in Art

Unlike the living, the dead tell you when they are tired of you. They make endless pots of wedding soup, and oil their breasts in the moonlight, and ask what the tides are doing, and the rhododendrons. Wardrobes awash in green silk, blackberries tucked behind their ears, they will nod when they would like you to pack up your red pail of sea glass and take the sun away. How easy it is to talk to the dead. I have a standing appointment. We lunch in the old ways, pretending to our great estates. The sea rattles beneath the earth, and we turn our eyes to one another. We talk of Bruegel and his winters, though here it is spring, and the bathers down by the rocks feel only an occasional gust. There is no plague, and when the sun dips behind the beech trees, and the sandwiches, light as foam, are all gone, I walk back up the drive, and feel the magnets in my blood like ancient hands pull me toward the dirt.

Origin of the World

A night sow chews the flesh of a peaching moon. The moon, through the flickers
of prehistory, sings to its adopted children, the daffodils. Daffodils sink

into the muscled earth, shoots
jawing with the worms. The worms
know several languages badly, and often the shade

of their feelings—chiming, goat-
smelling, witness, braid—goes untranslated. A goat
eats an accidental worm in love
with a nettle. The nettle has loved before, but not in these colors, not with this exquisite
reckoning. The planets know only this music. The sun watches everything like a crocus.

Drosophila melanogaster

Drawn to the *sparkling clarity*
of Heinz's apple cider vinegar
three fruit flies have given their lives

in my house for their love
of ripe death, three—
let us say it—emissaries of light, tiny

zooming angels, sent by life itself
to shepherd this banana
into its afterlife, and once

in the Vatican I, like an ant, thought
about my wobbly
insignificant things, about the Pope at night

pressing Athena's cold cheek, or lying
on his back in the map room adrift
on approximate seas, or lifting a rusted breastplate

from its subtle hooks and clasping it,
flaking, to his own breast.

Outside, the sun
does its hot starry thing and the wind
wrests water from a cloud

and drops it on the earth.

The Puzzle Monster

Francis Bacon, "Three Studies of Lucian Freud," 1969

Thousands of eyes are roaming
around. The cage demarcates
only the cage: unhappy ape, praying
for everything, museum-ache zinging
his whole spine. Such velvets and golds for living
through the worst. *There is nothing else*, says the ape. *Eat!*
Flowers bloom on his skin. We scoop
up the deep reds and purples of the insides
of meat, of fruit: blessed be the monster
who made you, who makes you still.

Dead-Color

I had just finished painting the still life when it began to move, which in truth

it had been doing all along, and at once I found I had been doing great violence
all along the seams of tulips, the dusky grapes who sang to the bats outside,

the lemon-sized body of a bird who lobbed herself at the window, and both I
and the painting began to rot like a cantaloupe, that is to say from the inside and with temerity,

and holding the painting to my softening body I saw that garden that spends its life
open-mouthed in jungle increase, in the biblical work of unguarded heat—

My Death is a Rose-Apple

and sometimes the green of paint under a tree
where the artist has decided to capture
this field and its cow and the sun in her festival dress.

My death looks humbled by the flowers in a painting,
or by the red hat of a politician's wife. This red hat,
my death says, is like all the flowers in one, as reflected in her face—

the politician's wife has been dead for a long time, and knows what my death
is talking about, and even now is dying in a painting.
A rotting purple fig on the table under the vase of tulips

is an exercise in the perpetuate afternoon. I try to follow
what my death is saying, but sometimes I drift off and about this I feel guilty,
because really I should listen but O

how I would like to touch my death's hand to my face.

An Elephant Man Lives with the Mirror from Francis Bacon's Studio
after B. Catling

Watch me in my stripes tonight. Watch
my fingers crack an egg into a vase,
candled and shivering. Here is the real
horror: the house swims away like a gnat in milk
from my body, like the middle
of the night it is. My brain dark
as bread. Oh, these? I've been collecting pond
branches, they eat their hearts
out for the moon, don't you agree?
The mind is a bone fruit, don't you?
Have a simple shout, as from behind
a painting. Let me speak plain: the Lord
does not quake only the beastly. Believe me:
I have cradled my own waxen head like a ship, like a woman.