

SLEEP

These days sleep comes
to me only through
the aid of three white pills.
Every night
I repeat the magic
words aloud—melatonin,
magnesium, ashwagandha
root and leaf extract
plus magnolia bark
extract that contains
honokiol and magnolol.
Pharmaceutical lullaby.
Charm to conjure
sleep's sure
pure white oblivion.
I sleep so soundly
I don't remember
any dreams. Except
the recurring one in which
my brother lies dying.
Jennie, his care provider
for the past seventeen years,
FaceTimes me so I can say
goodbye from nine hundred
miles away. His gaunt
drawn face. A doe's mute
brown eyes. White skin
against white pillow. His few
strands of stray hair fine
as milkweed silk.
His head a split
dried pod whose seeds
wind will scatter.
"Michael, goodbye."
I cradle him
between my palms,
brother the size
of my cell phone's screen.
Brother, you
who have only
a handful of words—*yes, no,*
garage, that's right—
to get you through
this life and die,

you say nothing.

You smile to see me
on Jennie's cell phone.

My eyes well
salt water. Michael, be
my recurring
dream. Sleep long
and hard. Wake
at noon in another body,
one without
inoperable ulcers.

Keep dreaming
your dream within
my dream. I must
wake soon in this room
without you. Here
by sliding glass doors
sunlight pours down
on the gigantic geranium.

It lifts up red blossoms,
palms open to the sky.

Donald Platt

(first published in *Paris Review*)

BLACK PRINCE

Dead brother,
you've become the black prince that Paul Klee painted
on a square foot

of canvas mounted on wood. You're the sovereign of the dead,
black silhouette
of an African prince on a black-brown background so it's almost

impossible to tell
where your body ends and the surrounding night begins. You wear
a crown that is a thicket

of gold thorns. Your eyes burn, jade stones that glow
radioactive green
in the dark. Their half-life is forever. Your nose of pure gold—

a reversed capital *L*,
sans serif—angles left. Your lips—two horizontal bars, one gold,
one red—are

speechless. You wear a heavy gold collar carved with hieroglyphs
no one can translate.
You're this black-on-black icon I come to pray before. Black prince,

ruler of the full moon
that shines in the upper left corner of Klee's painting like a golden
Russian Easter egg,

we are your people. We all shall walk death's middle kingdom
and bow down
unto you. But on the other side of death's continental

divide,
you were my brother. You had Down syndrome. You put on
a crash helmet

that buckled under your chin and learned to ride a white donkey
named Billy Boy.
The equine therapist led you on Billy Boy by the halter around

a circle of orange traffic
cones in the sandy outdoor arena. She raised a wooden broom handle high
and asked you

to reach up one arm, then the other, stretch as far as you could,
and touch it.
You did. Billy Boy is still alive. You liked to say, "That's right!"

In this life you needed no
other words. Today the sun is shining. "That's right!" I had a bicycle
crash and could

have died. "That's right!" Brother, you died on the eighth
of January.
It snowed. Now it's mid-July, sound of a distant seven-gang lawn mower,

smell of mown grass
borne to me on the west-southwest wind. "That's right!" Brother, be
my black prince,

my mystery, sign of the world I'll never understand.
In your four-fingered
hand, you hold out to me a lemon, a live and golden hand grenade.

Donald Platt

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CLOUD STUDY

I keep returning to John Constable's *Study of Clouds*.

Oil on cardboard,
six by seven and a half inches, it shows purple-gray

thunderheads,
one patch of blue, above low hills and two small trees flanked by shrubs
in the left

foreground. A sketch *en plein air*, a half hour's worth of work at most,
it catches
exactly one scrap of sky and shifting sunlight on a blustery

day in 1820.
The year King George the Third died in Windsor Castle, blind
and insane, the year

50,000 Scottish weavers went on strike and printed a proclamation
calling for a new
"provisional government." Their leaders were caught, hanged, and then

decapitated
for good measure. This cloud study survived that history.
Two minutes later,

the clouds would have taken on a different cast of light and shape
just like the thunderheads
now piling up above the Liffey. I hobble out of the Dublin City Gallery,

take a bus to the river,
sit on a park bench with a Ziploc bag of ice on my swollen knee. Its wet cold
makes the joint

ache. My body is breaking down, bone spur under the right kneecap.
At fifty-eight
I watch young men and women in black sweats run along the River Liffey—

Abha na Life,
Anna Liffey, river that crosses the plains of Life. I envy them.
Once I too could run

over the asphalt, almost without knowing I inhabited a body
whose knees might seize up
and swell. I will not run again in this life. Cirrus and cumulonimbus

scud across the blue
escutcheon of sky. Sun's blazon through rain rampant, my life is a cloud study
for some larger landscape

John Constable never got around to painting. It hangs in a gilded frame.
People stare at it
before passing on to more important canvases, to Renoir's

Les Parapluies, women
and men opening shiny black umbrellas in a Paris park.
There a mother shelters

her two daughters under an umbrella meant for one.
The younger daughter
holds a wooden hoop she has been rolling along tamped dirt paths,

whipping it with a stick
to keep it spinning, before the rain settled in. Renoir painted
this small family

in his lush, impressionistic style. Five years later, after visiting
Italy and studying
Piero della Francesca's frescoes, he came back and finished the painting

in his new "manière aigre"
or harsh style. He handled the gray silk folds of the auburn-haired woman's dress
on the left as if they were

granite to be sculpted. She carries a market basket filled
to the brim with shadow.
To approach old age, one needs a new harsher style. Here, by the Liffey,

mothers push screaming
infants in strollers. Five teenagers in blue jeans and bright yellow or green raincoats
walk by, joking, texting

on cell phones, smoking. One girl and her boy hang back, embrace, French-kiss
a long ten seconds.
Another boy shouts over his shoulder, "Get a room!" A pair

of mute swans
preens and swims down the River Liffey whose amber waters mirror
how the clouds pass,

avalanche of cumulus that hangs forever on the burnished
unrippling surface
of my memory—vast sky surf, cloud after cloud cresting, breaking

to be washed
away to blue nothing. Each of us—lovers, mothers, runners, me—no more
than windblown swansdown.

Donald Platt

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STAR MAGNOLIA

You will survive
the cold snap that's flattened all our daffodils and left
the crocuses limp

as purple and gold noisemakers thrown on the dance floor
and trampled
by Mardi Gras partygoers doing the Stomp. You keep

putting forth
buds with silvery green, velvet casings that break
into the hot pink tips

of lipsticks, which scrawl messages across the gray sky's
beveled
bedroom mirror—SUN, COME HOME, LET'S PARTY! I'M DARK

WITHOUT YOU.

Your still folded flowers emerge like a chained dog's hard-on when he scents
two blocks away

some bitch in heat. She howls and howls all night.
Now, now, April cries out.
Lower, more on my right! Touch me there! Spring spasms

mud and tulips,
ejaculate of jonquils, floodwaters. She gets hot flashes, cold shakes.
O star magnolia,

you're our backyard galaxy. Kick up your petticoats,
do the cancan
with all the other chorus girls—apple, pear, and cherry.

Flounce down
Lawn Ave. and over to Vine St., shock our staid
middle-classy

neighborhood. Wind gropes you. Squirrels sass us from the sassafras's
branches. Take off
your clothes, petal by petal, spring's long striptease. I'm your

voyeur forever.
I'll watch until the drag show's over and you leaf out
and leave.

Donald Platt

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EROS AT THE YMCA

Panting after forty-five minutes
swimming laps, I'm
feeling

my age, sixty-one, as I pull myself
up out of the pool by
the tiled

edge, throw one leg up, swivel,
hoist the other
onto

the deck, and straighten from a crouch
into standing position.
By the next

lane, a thin-waisted, broad-shouldered
young man stretches, leans
forward

until his fingertips brush the white deck
tiles, flexes his buttocks,
smiles

at me. I see Antonio Canova's
gleaming statue at the
Louvre,

Psyche Revived by Love's Kiss. How
winged Eros bends
forward

on one knee to raise the sleeping Psyche,
one hand cradling her head
thrown back,

the other her right breast. He wakes her.
They are about to kiss.
Such marble

tenderness. The young swimmer's firm
ass has the same smooth
hemispheres

as Eros's bare buttocks. From a leather
strap hangs his phallic quiver
of arrows.

For this one moment I am Psyche,
want to grip his curly
head

with both hands, arms making a stone
O, pull his full lips
down

towards mine until they graze each other.
The sign behind Canova's
statue says,

Ne pas toucher les oeuvres. Don't touch the works
of art. Eros has woken
me. I

would touch him. He dives, does the dolphin
kick underwater, surfaces,
hurtles

the length of the pool in twelve butterfly
strokes. His flashing arms
are Eros's

wings. They beat to the erratic music
of my jump-started
heart.

Donald Platt

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