

TWILIGHT OF NIGHT

*Hamlet speaks to the ghost of his father
for advice to avenge his death*

I want you to tell me how to live. It is twilight —, again I am without you —. I used to hear footsteps, the echoing tremors of a bare foot stepping on a wooden floor. The house still, as though it died, holding its breath waiting for you to arrive. I want you to tell me that it matters that I am waiting.

I am the observer of all observers. The book of sonnets you left before you left, I have committed to memory —. I have started rereading Shakespeare's sonnets, I am stuck on Sonnet 97.

I need you to tell me what they mean.

I am leaving a line as you leave a single wall /up to a house
Before (it is) demolished

Maybe I / imagin(ed) him / my lyric / my flesh / my obsession
My holy subject / my sole / certain destroyer

Papa's *Raketa* wristwatch / alloyed
Thinly rests on the nightstand

Beats & coils of time / against faces
On coins of the state's statesmen

If only / If only / I imagine

I climb inside the oak wardrobe
Like the fastest fox in a forest
Looking for coins loose change

My hand falling in one pocket & another
Of his electrical engineer suit made
Of Soviet military-weight wool

Each night refilling pockets with coins
For me / It must have been for me
My hand in the dark(ness)

On the cool(ness) of the lining
Meeting the last coin

He held / in lyric flesh reformulating our time
Together in a room he is mine

[I go from room to room]

I go from room to room taming dust,
gathering a corner looking you up

The rooms gather me into their walls
smoothing out hard-to-the-touch nostalgia
the rooms I see are in a no-place

I remember overhearing a philosophy professor
on the subway instruct his son on *utopia*,
he said it was from the Greek,
a word that is no place
because it is nowhere

I am refound in light —

The walls' plaster hardening
like an artery

I put myself inside a family
I keep telling you that, in sleep,
no one can hurt me

DEATH OF VENUS

I had to shield myself
from beauty to survive it.
Waywardly, we made our
way to Rome. Did I mistake
our pause for a holiday in Italy?
I was a girl, I went everywhere
she'd take me. On Saturdays
to the Vatican, Rome's main
post office to collect letters
from my father & mail our
letters to him. After we left,
he moved in with my maternal
grandparents in Kyiv, for what
felt to all — palliative / urgent care.
Across the street, the 12th century
cathedral kept to itself, shy in gilded
theology. Her father, a decorated
officer in the Russian red army.
Her mother cooked like a Michelin-
rated chef. The three of them
eventually, ghosts in gold leaf.
After dinner, my grandfather
playing Schubert on the baby
grand. My afire dangerous
memories. Three objects
Of beauty.

On the train back
to our practically-priced apartment
for Soviet immigrants (30 minutes
to anywhere), my mother read
his letters like Pushkin's love-sick
Tatyana, on that fevered night she
wrote Onegin her youthful, foolish
love letter. I looked on & on, on
moving grottos, occupied by livestock.
Italianate pastorals. Train travel bores &
pains me. First: the monotony of thuds,
jumps like the needle off track on
a Vinyl, skipping its way back
on track. Second: *The violence of parting*.
My father waving us off on
a hill forever. Third:
my entry, through the train window
to banality of family suffering.
Doing nothing especially special.

Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Inside the Sistine Chapel (in the
archipelago of theological &
administrative buildings) in
Vatican City. Encountering
Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*
ceiling fresco, up the steps
in the vault, on our Saturday
visits. My mother reassuring
me that the suffering of the
damned is a creative project.
In the right corner, Charon
ferrying the dead to the
underworld. Would he take
my father away I wondered.
Denying a dying man's wish.
To be with family & friends.

Was my mother
hopeless? Did she believe it to be
our only time together in Italy?
As I have been back a handful of times.
At twilight, my Margot just two, in the stroller
facing Rome (the Roma like bats above us
navigating down for prey) drew out.
Behind the lip, Margot, untouched
Safe with me.

Was my mother
afraid I would be stolen in plain sight,
in daylight? How would she report me
missing in hysteria of Russian?
She held onto my hand everywhere
we'd go. Like a pearl diver holds her
breath far underwater. My wish:
to be back with my mother on our
Roman holiday. While she still had
the letters, while she stayed alive.

It was on a trip
in Florence —
I was in love with my father.
(I am still in love with him)
His love letters for us. My mother,
in step with me —
I dressed in flared denim, Roman
gladiator sandals, my own copper
hair at a standstill when I saw her
rising out of the Uffizi's marbled
floor. I saw her as Botticelli
(her maker) — intimately, in
Birth of Venus. She invited me in,

tenderly at 10. I could see myself
in her. Alive. Away from adult
problems. *Beauty* saved me.
A maiden before the mark
of puberty. Small breasts
on the rim of beginning of skin.
'The shell, her permanent room —
porcelain & compact
like that of a woman's
mirrored pressed powder
case. Her dead hair,
depressed down. Her
voluptuous belly, before
puberty, before marked
as someone's again. Before
the fall. Her copper hair,
covers her navel. The dream
the museum visitors could
not make overnight. She would
do away with sleeping,
Let her hair fall heavy like water,
dripping from a rarely used faucet.
The self, unmade overnight,
stubbornly clinging to symmetry
of stanzas. Moving us away
from that overnight train
from Eastern to Western
Europe. Cutaways of train
platforms stretching out before
the eye, like sunburned skin.
From wheat fields to cities.
'The private sleeping car
my mother procured,
rocked us to sleep as in cradle
to a hum of parting.
Moving in & out of
memory. I wasn't old
enough to live for myself.
'The Uffizi's made-up air,
smothering her visitors —

PAHA (noun, Russian)

AT THE BEAUTY SHOP WITH MY MOTHER II

She loved hair. In strands, cutting her off from poetry
She loved more. She knew by heart from grade school.
Recited at evening salons at home when she married my father.
When they argued about the work being beneath his station in
Society, she declaimed that *it's like making poems, or teaching
Russian*, her university studies. *It is what she did for more money.*
Women came & went on Saturdays & Sundays. Lacking tension,
She performed hair miracles under four 50's-style hairdryers
(The only ones on the market) that lined the long corridor
Of our (single-family, non-communal) Brovary apartment.
Women left with *Mireille Mathieu* silky night-black (short &
Long bobs; hair wigs, artificial hair colors, textures, lusters,
Proclivities-of-the day, rustled in her hands like book pages
Of books she re-read nights.

In summertime, a terminal
Wind from the kitchen, terminated inside their hand-made
Cotton dresses, they copied out of Soviet home economics
Journals. Faithful to each cutting. Worn without a slip.
The hardness / stiffness of new cotton, snared the heat
Between puffy thighs. By day *comrades* of industry (space
Engineers, Math teachers, classics professors) alongside
Men; by night, my mother's customers metamorphosed
Into soft-skinned, small-waisted, soft-spoken, wives &
Mothers; seeking — Pathos / Love / Palliative
Care. *Sex was the new opium of the people. Free love
The currency.* 60's sensibilities infiltrated the U.S.S.R.
Abortion opening to (hope & sin)
— free / fecund — controlled the state's birthrate.

The women shared their troubles
& sold each other black-market, Western contraband. Lancôme
(Smuggled in by Bulgarian businessmen was the preferred skincare
& makeup brand.) Each tool achieved its object. Packaged in night-
Black-glossy-lacquer. Soviet-red lipstick & nail polish, night-black
Mascara that curled up the upper row of eyelashes. Night-black
Eye-pencil lined the top lid. Pantyhose in naked & night. For each
Exoticism, they saved everything they earned, inadequate annual
Salaries, & overpaid with anxious joy. My mother gleaned me from
The oval mirror that stool like a person in the corridor. Mornings,
She applied the routine of beauty to her face; hair teased, night-black
Brows plucked to rash-red thin. Her body overflowing with the body's
Misses & regrets. Her hair creations filled her so much,
She stopped her evening wonderments. Night poems.

My mother was mortally
Afraid. Talking in a downed voice. After supper she read
The Berlitz Russian-to-English travel-size dictionary.
Maybe she told herself, it was just a trip, abroad.
She started dieting more & more. Yogurt days, fruit days.
She stopped listening to music. Each night she wrote coded
Letters to my father, narrating America. Hair in a net, her single day
In an inner-city school cafeteria job, plunging food trays down
A depressed conveyor belt. *I am qualified in hair*, she lectured a counselor.
The Chicago unemployment office procured her a job as a shampoo girl
In a neighborhood beauty shop, when the year (on unemployment) ran out.
Divorced / Single / Middle-aged / English-free / Woman
With a child in a foreign country. (One of multitude of humiliations,
For us to leave, they were made to split up. A divorce on paper.)

On weekends, for extra money,
My mother & I cleaned that beauty shop. Adeptly, in its oversized
Windows, it occupied light & hope. Glimmering in mirrors of the
Stylists stations. In rubber gloves, I felt like a housewife in a Comet
Commercial. Wielding my toilet brush in victory over human waste.
Plunging its prop bristles forcefully down & around the porcelain
Bowl of the prop toilet. My mother mopping the floor like an ocean.
My mother obscured. My mother incandescent. My mother restrained.
My mother's paused mind. I keep wondering. Could my mother
Confide in herself. (Beauty to beauty). Reciting poems to herself
When I'm not there to overhear. In sleep's demise. In love's
Companionship. In human unhappiness.

Washing grief out

Of hair

Before I could hold her