

NEVER FAR FROM WATER

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

LAST NOTES FROM DR. LOY'S RESEARCH LAB

The jar of reprieves is empty.

I have entered the complex process

called death. And my dear colleagues,

(who labeled me loner, prima donna, bastard)

despite all the times we've seen it, heard it, caused it,
we don't know much about it, do we?

If all my calculations are correct, my time will run out
near midnight. Till then I write my thoughts like a poem:

No more late hours to haul my heaviness up the ladder
to inhale library dust, mine the only fingerprints
at those heights since my old professor's.

No more mornings to peer through the lighted shaft
probing the mindless obscenities feeding on healthy tissue,
nor afternoons to breed and stalk

the seething child-killers in glass cages—

(Having defeated one of them, I am driven
to destroy others, but now my demon, destructive
as any virus, has come again with the fuel bill.

Unpaid, he is evicting me, shutting my shop.)

No time left to isolate the mutant entity

I suspect lay each day beneath my eye

imitating enlarged innocence. My life's goal—

to expose it to world attack, to unlock doors, to stand
on raised portals and throw Messianic lightning
down the corridors of science; I would deal with the devil
to do it. But the dream, steeped in my sleepless adrenalin
and sulphuric tongue, must be delivered by someone else.

Almost midnight, and the devil is disinterested.

I move away from my cells, from magnification
and atomic rhythms, to culture my notebook in starlight.
What do I know of poetry? Yet the minutes allow
for nothing else. My molecules must restructure
to pass through ancient walls. Now is distilled sediment,
vitro-essence of failure, sealing my cloudy siphons
with unanswers. And no life
will be better ^{because} /of an eleventh hour poem.

The clock parts slow. Faint ticking. Heavy hands.

If only my other theories were as flawless
as this forte for human horology.

So much waste. Great strides to standstills.

Unless— That one! That wire-drawn pupil
who yesterday challenged the godsmith,
and turning to face me in the color of discovery,
ego-lashed and laid open a moment, gave me a glimpse
of the bright burning edge of a demon I know.

To that damned and holy host, that one pupil,

I leave all I have:

The harsh shine of my keys,
and my only poem.

A DIFFERENT ROAD TO SUN-UP

My mother would have muttered a certain chant all day.
All the omens were there: Sickly sun
plunged wide shafts into the ground, sucking it dry,
giving no warmth, only taking, leaving a swath
of cold-parched earthworms and rock/clay crumbs.
The first wind pried shutters, crashed my lamps,
spilling all the oil far from my green firewood.
Alto afterwind was discordant whispers,
slaps of chill, wavy scent of damp animals.
Half of me gathered wolfsbane, racing decaying light;
the other half swallowed a drugstore ball of sleep
then centered together under the blanket
woven and dyed with my mother's mystic patterns.

Awakened by blackness darker than sleep, heavier
than night, I tried to surface, swim up through it
like a cave fish looking inside its head
for its lost eyes. Night pushed up
from all the world's old graves, smelling
of all the world's old sins. A wolf night,
diseased and howling. A night to grow everything old.
I lit a trembling candle. Morpheus had fled,
leaving me an empty bottle, floating me in vertigo.
But Pluto was there to breathe out my frail flame.

cont.

The charred moon smoked, reversed itself,
revealing a death's head just as she always said,
withholding its down-shine, dripping
ice sweat— wolf sweat— grave sweat—
Black was nebulized violence and violation. Black
stained walls and air, seeped into books to lie in wait forever.
Trackless black where the wolf walked,
bearded reeking black, silhouette of hills not there,
of beasts clanning moonward, necks fletched like arrows.

I said my mother's name, her part of me
clutched the stems of aconite, flung them over the bed;
she rose in me like ether. I groped beneath fear
for the incantations drummed into my childhood,
stumbled and skidded over roots my father planted;
some trailing tendril snagged and held.

Weed essence opened the flue; friction made a spark.
Still sneezing, I relit the candle,
snatched up the wolfsbane for a funeral pyre
crowned with a hand-hewn table. Leftover night
was stilt-legged shadows on a hearthlit stage,
the usual cast with known names. I am
no part of her or here. Tomorrow,
I announced to the snickering flames,
I will move back among my kind.

TORERO

Incarnadine dawn came before Santos slept.

Day of the corrida!

A dark mountain sprouting stiff red and yellow flowers
and reverberating thunder waited behind his lids. Always
he must strike lightning into a certain crater
between the damp ridges before thunder passed him through.

Early to the rites of preparation, steeping
in the vow to avenge his brother Miguel.

Early and long before the Virgin.

Hot laughter with his comrades, fear cased in brocade,
superstition buried in colors of scorn.

He had even looked at his bulls and learned
one was kin to the hooking horn-wise brute
who routed Miguel's soul with a splintered bayonet.

Last notes of La Virgen de la Macarena flared from trumpets,
edded through his heated head, followed by shrill corkscrews
pulling the cuadrillas into the circle of ferret eyes.

A thousand prisms on his shoulders ignited.

The circle hailed his name, caressed it. Something—
treble breeze pitched to the trumpets perhaps—
hissed his name.

The two flashing semaphores flanking him

were silent, fierce-smiling their aficionado faces.

His name wound back in the bell of a horn or the wind's mouth.

The musicians played with too much pathos today;

it was better when they blasted, ponderous and bawdy,

like pompous heralds of Caesar.

"Dios, we have a gale," growled an assistant,

"we will have to drown the capes!"

The wind examined the folded colors, the hair of men and horses.

"Please, Santos, don't work so close,"

his banderillero pleaded, "don't get bull blood

on your belly. You're here, it is enough."

Layers of eyes probed Santos's pores;

the wind stuttered his name.

"They'll get their money's worth," was all he said.

Santos did not hear hoofs pulverizing sand,

sounds of the watered cape, the olés.

His bull was a mountain, an armed freight train,

blood-mate to Miguel's damaged and devious one.

Santos heard only wind instruments deciding his dance,

heard distilled energy humming his mind like wires,

then the racking thrust of his will arcing the ring, entering

the pic, bracing it against picador temptation to twist

and steal the best of his bull.

A trilling time jam, a man unhorsed,

then he heard the blessing, the God-lonely bugle

retiring the picadors, trailing the man-animal cry

of all who live awhile in the center of the centrifuge.

He placed his own banderillas, planted them close,
claimed only shallow blood and hide enough to hold.
Santos watched the adorned idol raised from a Minoan frieze
size the arena, bobbing yellow bouquets against his blackness,
already knowing there was talent without latent flaws,
already certain this bull would not covet the quarter
where he quenched his horn in a picador's horse.
He saw him suddenly a handsome pander, tantalizing,
parading— saw himself the same, the two of them
in irresistible collusion, peddlers
of a nebulous puzzle, some dark matching piece
for the small jagged niche behind the ferret eyes.

Santos took the sword and muleta for the last act, the faena.
Wind snatched the cardinal cloth, exposed his hiding,
but this toro chose greatness. Waited. Shared.
The pase de la muerte fed the rising circle of fever,
flared the ferret eyes. Santos designed a new pass:
Slow ballet of cerise wing and silver pivot—celebration,
black muscle mass, turning, winding wide
to spare his partner's spine. The pimping wind bared him,
bored into a brief shimmering hate for Miguel
and his curving tricks to crimp his bulls' backs.
The wind gasped, held its breath, puffed away thought,
gusted between passes, reeled around the circle gone hoarse.

Let no ears or tail be taken from this bull;
if the other ubiquitous beast wished to bestow trophies,
nothing less than a trident of horns

and the point of his maleness would do. Again Santos heard his name; the bull smeared by, redding his spangles, honing his primal senses on horn, the memory of it stored in his scars, stench, bone-rattling sideswipe. And the bovine voice of another avenger.

For all his years of bulls only Santos spoke, his fluent muleta commanding the charges, punishing the pale-hearted, persuading the worthy ones of their chances to paint their eager points, telling them at length to bow their heads for the offering, the ritual communion. Veronicas ago Santos would have laughed. Or called it a prank of weariness or wind. Did Miguel's bull declare aloud his name?

Santos spat dust from his mouth. He must not succumb to overawe. This was el toro de bandera every true bullfighter hoped for— measuring the man, rationing his rage, keeping his courage and form to the end. The matador could do no less. Nostrils and eyes streaming grit, he sculpted the short cape, made it vault, caress, made it flow. Signs shredded off the walls; he defied the blowing, moving to the brass song in his brain. Perfect parones, spinning, people-thunder, levitating.

Pase de pecho. Perfect. Bull dancer and minotaur.
Time reverted then raced back. Stumbled. Coiled.
Santos sighted down his sword.

A bull to take recibiendo— the ultimate tribute and risk,
waiting like a figurine, committed to that stand, waiting
for the deified charge to sink the espada,
holding down the triangle head with serge on a stick,
leading it past his sledging chest, trying to remember
the kill would be for Miguel.

The cloth swung forward, beckoned.

The bull came. Santos leaned over the horn with a name cry,
rescued his lungs by a sequin, feet still as stones.

A flawless execution

except steel and bone collided; the blade bowed and sprang
out of its hot sheath, out of crazed thunder.

The withered flower patch bloomed with new crimson;
the bull mastered desperate legs, stilled
his flailing tongue on the taint in his mouth.

Santos refused to heed his wrist, the shrieked advice
to descabello. He retrieved his sword, cursing.

The centrifuge screamed and silenced unheard;
the air churned rabioso. He made himself calm
in his bowl of sweat and whiplash chill.

"We will have total perfection, eh, Diablo?"

A bugle played in his head, an aviso.

The bull summoned him,
waiting like his bronze kind on the parapet,

posing his invitation low and silent.

Sun-flashes along the edge of the estoque, rolling
images, icons of the Virgin, faces of his brother,
el toro his brother. Santos moved to the blossoming spot,
light with new speed. A bright swatch
of last Sunday's poster of Miguel
spiraled into the matador's eyes.

Triumphant horn raised and steel drove down,
compounding the arch. Santos heard
the wind, heard them fall together, heard time unhinge.

DRAGON BOAT RIDE

Unpracticed, oar-clumsy,
I knew better than to board a strange beast
In a strange land. Like an unriden stallion
Wanting only to be rid of me, the wading creature
Recoiled when unleashed, the red prow reared, bucked,
And spurted after the river.
Flaming comb and hackles trailing fragments of sun,
My unbroken mount ignored the faulty extensions of my arms,
Aimed its head at the curve of rumpled sheen
And beyond! To a trough of froth and roar
Where its cries of freedom from myth
Mingled with battle-thunder of rocks and water.
It shook with conviction, dipped its fangs
Into spume once tasted, never forgotten,
And filled itself with all the magic it was heir to.
Shivering its song into my numb arms, swaying me with how
It knew the path around the boulders,
It claimed me fully,
No longer a rigid rueful barnacle
On a foreign monster.
I, a pale spike on its spiny back,
A small muscle of its wings,

cont.

Listed in harmony into the next bend
Where the river unclenched, sailed shinily
Erect onto fast underunning olive silk,
Content to chase whatever the secret current chased,
Waving at the watching world,
Waking the surface with our gilded ribs and tail.

THE INTERLOPERS

Beneath inverted black fir jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving my hidden bayou,
my diver's lamp the only hold with my world,
I disturb a concert of stripes: hundreds
of inch-long tetras silver-slanting right or left
as my hand directs. A king-size mud cat
like Genghis Khan eyes me from the olive drab floor.
And overhead! My secret boat! Impounded
since last summer, clamped listing in a wet/dry vise,
sun-half of bulbous green vases feigning
innocence with flowers. Night-half of fringe
and garland chain, propeller upholstered in velvet.
I rip away the slimy grip and feel
hairy stalactites grow closer, determined
as topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might
thresh one yard before losing. A new spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the spreading perimeter above. Here,
the mighty Khan shares guard only with turtles.
And I, slave to light and lungs
must fight myself free.

SONNETS 2020 A.D.

The strangers watched their clustered homestars fade,
Their engines overriding pull behind.
They spun through corridors of shine and shade,
Adjusting life to match each different kind.
The chosen emissaries prayed their risk
Would somehow save their desiccating shore.
The daring design of their nova disk
Prepared it for probes never tried before.
They were after water, they would pay in gold
For hydro-knowledge or wellspringing source.
Scholars and chemists outfitted their hold;
They needed answers, a guaranteed course.
In time to quench their blistered asteroid;
In time to stop a new galactic void.

SONNETS 2020 A.D.

(2.) THE RIVER

The travelers disembarked and checked their chart;
Was this the mighty stream they came to see?
A warp of rotted vines, a rheumy part
In gray Medusa hair on death's debris?
What happened to the scenes deciphered books
Described? The strangers searched the fossil land
For shards of hope, for hints of inglenooks.
They found the poisons lurking in slime-sand.
One took a crusted rock and turned to go,
Then saw scratched words the nodule held in wait:
"Within this case beneath corruption's flow
A primal spore survives to germinate,
Evolve new plants, food crops, and someday trees—
But rivers need more time than Pleiades."

BUTTERFLIES AND OTHER NOBLE THOUGHTS

What about those that wobble wet and wingless
on the torn flap of the chrysalis?
Born too early or late, too much, not enough.
Some do soar via bird beak and maw;
most fall unknown in the ragweeds
to be savaged by ants before flying as dust
in the jaws of prominent winds.
Do their glistening granules return
to incubate again in more fertile capsules
or must they wander wasted
forever looking for their missing colors
and a womb?

Tonight I found these fragments.
Recall all the good atoms and let me intend
harder.

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, dresser scarves, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened
back of the neck, they string out
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes, paying
out advice no one needs, paying
out the slow twine, enlarging the old designs,
straining fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths
used awhile by knife-voiced kin
who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

(1.) ON MAKING A RIVER AN OLD MAN

The river was an athlete sprinting south,
A whistling boy with rhythmic summer stride.
The settlers drew cool sweetness from his mouth,
And made themselves spectators on his side.
Efficiently he handled rain and thaw;
He grew their wheat and cotton into fame.
His flanks became a city; those who saw
Desired to stay, and daily others came.
Pure drinking, mallards, trout were not enough.
Machines re-routed him. They built a dam.
They stole his power, dumped their poison-stuff,
Then cursed him for the filth where once they swam.
Now reeking, limping past a factory,
He seeks a nameless burial at sea.

(2.) HOPI GIRL TOUCHING WATER

Blue Corn stared at her hand—a glove of slimes
And evil smells that made her back away.
Her mother had related smiling times
Upon this bank where she had dug fine clay.
Blue Corn was glad she couldn't see it now,
For potters love the earth, this was a sin;
This hand was from a horror film. Oh, how
Could people kill their river? He was kin!
A cousin to their kind, their ancient dreams—
Now host to noxious networks spewing scum,
Receiver of those social structured streams,
The dregs of greed— depraved viaticum!
Someday they all must answer to a judge...
Perhaps unknown mutations bred in sludge...

RUWENZORI!

Bright Africa

Some still say "Dark Continent"—unenlightened strangers
who look at old sepias and read one page—strangers
who land then leave and never need to shield their eyes.
You see the dripping corridors of berserk green weaving
always dayless, faces and feet in samples of night,
pits and cages of customs, storm bags like herds
of hump-necked wildebeest hanging on the horizon.
You see black dust driven across the sun by hoofed pistons,
places where ignorance is pure and evil is innocent.
And if you looked no more you would call it a dark land.

But after savage sudden daybreak on the veldt
exorcises each shade lingering behind your eyes.
you begin to know bright Africa.

For the last learning, you must climb. Far above
the thorn trees, through the temple veiling—they are there—
the Mountains of the Moon!

Continental beacons of ice and silica and lakes of opal
catching fire—Ruwenzori—the Mountains of the Moon!

Great glistening Titans headdressed in Ptolemaic pylons,
Cold-faceted obelisks that fell from a lunar pedestal.

Hot-cut crystal domes that heaved up whole
from Hades, ignoring Vulcan's spewing funnels.

Frosted deserts and frozen dunes,
altars of alabaster, secured, sacred, beyond
terraced moats arc-lit with scimitars of sun.
Wet-shiny skin of the guides reflects
the unblinding blow.
No one can remember dark.

SMALL ENCOUNTER

Behind the rain I waited with the mountains
for the sunset, my esthetics primed for grandeur.
Suddenly, something burrowed in my bangs, tangled,
made me shiver. Some alien crawling thing!
Revulsion raced my arms, tingled my fingers,
switched on the electrical network in my spine.
My hand tore through my hair,
pulled out a tiny broken form—
Green silk wings, finer than royal lace—
And the eyes—minute garnets that took and held
the light. Even now they would glow scarlet
until they crumbled. I wanted to plant them
like pomegranite seeds,
and reweave the iridescent wing loops.
The west rumbled. Late breeze and wet leaves shook
with the weight of the sun. My palm filled
with hot-vivid tears from all the creature's kind.
And mingled in for something maybe kin
were mine.

ONLY SAND

When I was twenty, I believed John Donne:
"No man is an island entire of itself..."
But he was wrong. I wept, and the mass pool
failed to rise. I bled, and it didn't redden
one small grain of my neighbors' beaches.

I grew up. I shrank down, and became an island.
I wrote a play with one brief role.
My song is just a single perfect note.
And now no man's death can diminish me
because I am not involved in gross mankind.
Soundproof fog surrounds my ears;
secession is secure. No one probes.

Why, preacher, would I send to know a thing?
I rubbed my eyes with night and polarized
the currents and tides of my sea away
from my placid thighs. And here I sink
and die. And no bell tolls. Or ever will.
None knows.

Repeat: None knows, none knows, none knows.

"WHEN EVERYTHING THAT TICKED HAS STOPPED"

...Emily Dickinson

Come, Sir Knight of the Frost, of the Dust,
 Or by any other name. My ink flows bitter,
 And I have found more outrage and imposition
 This side of the balance sheet
 Than calumny ever entered on your long ledger.
 Forgive me, Sir, I who debited you with infamy
 And indignity, who often listed error,
 Grow solicitous.
 You grow old, Sir. Are you able?
 Nimble and fast? Can you still
 Slip up the stairs without creaking and
 Down again without stumbling or mussing
 My petal gown? My hooded cape is woven
 Of repentance, and see, Sir, I wear Adamant
 And Whetstone—you can pause to hone
 Your worn scythe. Don't wait
 Until my trousseau browns and my hair
 Breaks like dried tendrils in wind—
 How sad yesterday's daylily posing in an urn.
 This is between you and me. Even God
 Must admit it's time once I'm there.
 He won't send me back
 Through all the black machinery
 In that cold clock.

COASTAL COLLAGE

Mason Sonnet

We breathe silk fog that strokes the beaver-run,
Then climbs the day to flee from spears of pine.
The lowlands blue again with twilight's rise
Describing sueded negatives of sun
In secret brakes where deer and heron dine.
From fir-napped hills we watch as moonshed vies
With nimbus rings in new-ginned cotton skies.
An artist rain will bleed the clay and sign
The shore in red, accenting dimpled sand.
We bloom in this kaleidoscope design:
Sweet-salty mix alive with seasoned fun,
Where puddled whitewash opals our fruit stand,
Ourselves new textures on this ancient strand
Infusing us in patterns just begun.

REPARATION

We came from cliffs where threadbare limbs are patched
With scraps of ice to moss-plushed cypress knees,
The pile worn smooth by shade and shuttling tides.
Thick sun-bleached yarn festooned and thatched
In awnings custom-made for wading trees,
Gentles ocean glare; our long gaze glides
The uncommitted folds of foam and rides
Green fringe as unresolved intent may please.
We learn to swim where gold-finned flash appears,
Learn, at last, the water will not freeze;
We learn to smoke and sell the fish we catch,
To troll new warmth for mending sharp-edged years.
Far from our bony land of frigid tears
Our raveled seams are sewn with hope, now matched.

THE ENLIGHTENED ONE

Fujiyama:

Haunting as haiku, mine to see
only in misty colors on silk.

Three weeks I waited for audience with its majesty,
fastening my fortunes to Japanese cedars,
hiking the Hakone hills to knock on the doors of clouds
while red ferries stroked the lake below.
Once, struggling up Fuji's flanks, I touched it
like truth, held it hugely—
unidentifiable.

A Shinto wind urged me to Kamakura,
beyond the ignorance of intimacy. But still
the mountain sat coveting privacy like a fat shogun
enshrined in smoke from a billion censers,
unmoved by my petitions,
contemplating old crucibles beneath his throne,
considering a show of power, screening his conclusions
from earthly eyes.

My home flight began with empty layers
in my lacquer memory box. Then off the starboard wing—
a Bodhisattva!

Pedestaled on ermine and lapis, Helios-haloed,
caped in white lotus. Bodhisattva Fujiyama.

Electing to stay this side of heaven, giving a glimpse
inside the meaning of light. Forcing shut earthly eyes.

My gilded box would never close.

CHEETAH

I've released you in full color
from my camera, from my sketchbook, even uncollared you
from dark Egyptian tombs. Now draining my sienna palette,
you refuse to keep your paper context;
unhampered by layers of super-polymer
you complete your spotted streak across the papyrus
on my easel. Your dissident design brushes past
my stroke, tracking shadows in my studio,
haunting the old passageways, hunting
the presiding Tomcat, the drab native mouser
who may not submit to your dynasty.
Shoulders knotted like Osiris's fist, your precedent
pushes into dimensions not dealt with
in pigments or even the bas-relief of kings.
I warn benighted Tom of your Isis eyes coming,
your speed matched with light, and hope
he hunches himself in a small niche of time
you can't enter with your leggy serpent length,
your heathen haunches and expletive head.

Confrontation comes spitting sudden:

Arranging himself on a vacant pedestal, Tom bristles
his long lineage, his black leopardship. Smoothing
the smug cap of Ptah he arcs down sovereignty
from ankh eyes.

Below, the grudging cheetah, frieze-groomed,

cont.

slow blinks and tail-tips

distant recognition to her high flown kin.

It is the artist confronted: You've both made your points.

I close the paints and reach for the sculpting tools.

Proxy Tom translates hieroglyphs of motion and muscle,
transmits himself to my clay, rehearses me augur and clue.

At last the main event:

Cheetah, you're free— but mine!

FOR IROQUOIS WHIT, RED MAN WITH A WHITE CANE

To him our metaphors are worse than trite;
Most modern terms are troubling to his brain
Where long-gone wispy hunter's trails remain
And only childhood images are bright.
When man transcends his bone-imprisoned night
To touch shore's gritty Braille or taste fresh rain,
His lengthened grasp can snatch the key from pain
To open what mere language failed to light.
I read to Whit, then he became my gauge,
My guide for measures I could seldom find
To pace the dark, to pacify the rage.
For I, far-sighted, young and keen of mind,
Was often trapped inside a blackened cage—
Till life re-lit with vision from the blind.

SONNET FOR HIS NAMESAKES
(DuPage County and River)

Some nights when fog crawls up the river's flanks,
A sleepy mallard sudden-turns its head
As cycling waves soft-smack the muddy banks:
Recalling rhythms from an age long dead.
The water holds old songs in many keys:
Stacatto notes from flying hoofs and paws
Or dancing moccasins and tune-slapped knees,
The drumming, humming steeped in every clause
Of time. Tonight a Frenchman called DuPazhe
Inspects his traps for beaver, muskrat, mink;
He moves with shade and bough for camouflage,
Then squints at streetlights, lingers at the brink
Of bubbling passage, doffs his hood at fame,
And disappears once more, leaving just his name.

THE WINNERS

A wisp of scilla pushes past old snow
To sound the rally for all bulbs and corms.
New-found recruits appear in many forms;
A crisp platoon of green begins to show.
A lisp of southern breeze attempts to blow
Two rounded buds about-face as it warms.
Through browned-out grasses and recycling storms
A whisper fills the earth from things that grow;
It swells each day with rhythmic upward thrust.
The din below moves nearer surface heat,
And tells each tendril, each unfurling trust:
Begin your forced march to the solar beat—
And yells when yellow trumpets pierce the crust.
We win their campaign's triumph at our feet.

A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS

When I was ten I heard her called a whore,
The sentence fletched with barbs that stung my spine.
I'd followed her through years of phlox before
That word bored itching in my brain. Define
The user of a hoe! But that could not
Account for scorching tones of voice that fell
Like spattered ale-foam on my father's hot
Hearthstones. Unfitting with her bouquet smell.
I later learned the meaning of the slur,
Through tears watched twitching suns explode with lies.
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her,
While rage enlarged to learn what to despise.
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers—
Quicksilver dropped on knife-edged granite stairs.

THE WINTER BRUTE

We must have slept through his breaking and entering
our gates, a cerebral Christmas sleep,
a high levitating sleep of orderly snow.
Then we didn't wake clear,
our edges didn't release clean
from our cracked molds, and we were blind slow
groping through his stiff polar hair.
By the time we caught his beast scent,
great albino paws were slapping us like mice,
snarling us under ubiquitous feet,
barring our cages with fangs.

His ravenous white warps the horizon,
and in our pale vertigo we pay ancient tribute,
beseeching his heathen names,
inventing invocations of smoke.
But he is heedless; this Siberian mutation
ratcheted us to intractable flanks
then settled into hibernation. And now
with our fevers lining his den
we are afraid he has died here,
leaving his monstrous carcass
to cover our uncounted graves.

LONG WAY TO MORNING

Every night after the light,
after the meaning and memory of light,
it closes in slow, thickens, tall,
making prison around my bed. Impenetrable
something. Nothing. I see it
by what I can't see because of it: no more
thin dark-on-dark blazonry like goblins rampant
posing for half-reared children, no draped rectangles
or bars sinister on the ceiling. No more
wet marigold smell, tire whisper,
small wind balls banked off my headboard.
I am contained totally like once when I crawled
frown-first into my father's down-filled sleeping bag.
This Now I don't touch— I know I can,
know it won't burn, draw back as if.
The only sight is echoing haloes of pyrotechnics
I explode behind pressed lids. My bones sweat,
breath halts, marrow melts, runs, short circuits
my overstrung guitar strings. A Rebanna drum
bombards my bed, beat for this big exercise,
this long rehearsal. One night I'll reach out to it,
embrace it whole, hard. Only
sleep is the final fear— what I've never met eyes open,
all senses pricked like a wine connoisseur's tongue,
and examined layer by layer eternal...

I, IGNOTUM PER IGNOTIUS

Diabolus is overthrown and dead. My kingdom is secure.
Truth is my favorite emissary, and pious pulpits.
Hail! you strong young minds with ripe walls; I have
no need of sophists, atheists and false prophets.
I was born from the wick of an atom, the womb of woman
in labor for centuries of science and civilization.
I had a hundred native sires whose sometimes-names are passé—
Odin, Ares, Thor— (few would recognize the rest or care
about the hymeneal hieroglyphics of my conception)
they all merged into a traveling salesman-god
who never dreamed his wedding and rape of Mortal Mind
would bear anything but vitriol and violence,
a misbegotten ogre-heir without a crown.
And my father went his way sure of his throne
in the amnesty of Belial's reign.
In my prenatal wisdom I had my mother destroy
my paternal parent, the bumbling satrap,
still strutting with a naked sword and drinking blood—
no match for her battering ram of reason and religion.
No matter that convulsive cults still worship
his now-and-then ghosts. The masses perform the old rituals
for me!
Homage! Human sacrifice! On a scale so grand
the devil almost died of envy

cont.

before I poisoned him with practical sapience.
Globe-guardians, pew-sitters, earth-squatters,
custodians of humanity shout me noble names
as iridescently I rise, my monolithic ideal
pointing up to Heaven. Aimed at Heaven!

Ah, the righteous rationale, the Gnostic good,
the Savior syndrome. Satan merely quoted scripture
to his ends; I write it. Burn it into liturgy,
purge the prayers, torch their spirits with the flames
of dedication. Addiction follows like smoke.
People shall have magic and machines, citadels
in Draco's outback. They shall have miracles and medicine
and solutions for death bastioned beneath earth's privy.
Let them find out life, let them make it, let them have it—
but never discover what it is they have!

I will lend them power, I will feed them with it;
I wear the wreaths of honor, sing the odes of simple service.
I wash myself in love then pass the drippings,
unbiased cups, recycled drugs.

In God's name the pose is priceless!

In God's name they worship me!

I show the holy colors and the visions they look for
and the signs. Who will notice the road is paved
with slowly sinking marvels? Who will guess
the compass point is magnetized and mesmerized
and time is just a tyrant mother idol?

Yes, I have challenged God

Who lets man fight His duels.

And man is such a fool...

THE BEST THING MY FATHER DID WAS LIE

People, all the pretty people lie so well and tell
truth like amateurs in little threadbare theaters;
it all comes out damp and gray, slurred and slurried,
going away and coming back.

Where do you dig for truth? Out on the parallax, deep
in the center or in the middle? There's a difference—
one is this fence I'm on; the pickets
are cut and dried, alternating black and white,
scratching fact sore but not much truth.

People climb here out of context
to reach boughs of that old tree, maybe the Eden tree,
but wormy to the core the whole crop. And my father
said conqueror worms were final ONLY truth.

He polished his lies like jewels, wore one in each eye
mounted a ruby in his tongue. His skull rattled
with others stored for special events and Sundays.

When some went out of style, he re-faceted,
and none wore dim before him.

He mined the world for his rough material
mine polished was dull beside.

We inlaid his coffin with his favorites;
he willed the rest to me, never to go

cont.

with fence-climbing, fruit-picking clothes.

I keep them here because I don't know how to get rid

of them. Worms have started on the box

but the gems are still gorgeous and whole.

I planned to sit here until all were devoured

but it won't happen. Worms tried

to bite the big ruby, sprung their jaws and died.

Only harder stones can make dust of these,

or some marvelous ray. Until unequivocal then,

the beasts will eat boxes and bones,

the jewels will glitter, each its own irrelevance,

and I am tired of watching.

All the real ore is down there in either-sided sludge.

Quasi-I must jump off right or left

and grope

for nothing absolute.

If only some almost holy wind would push.

REFLECTIONS OF A SEASHORE WEEKEND THIRTY YEARS PAST

Unwilling even then to serve their sticky eyes,
normal THEY perched high on the hotel veranda,
peering down like dark buzzards at his differentness,
making buzzard sounds, snatching him up with grainy tongues
to volley him like a hare hide between them,
flinging him down to those on the beach sharing sameness,
secure in naked nonentity enough to peel him
with unskilled questions and clumsy pointing.
No matter now if that day that eight-year-old
had taken off hot anonymity and gone ignoring
to the ocean's feet, felt wind and foam,
played with sand and periwinkles. Instead
he clutched his artless camouflage closer and ran
back to his parents' room where other children's winged joy
attacked walls and windows, where he wished
his flawwere deafness, invisible, unstrange,
or something worse—from which eyes swerve
quick blessed look-away and let-alone— anything
to keep their curiosity and distaste from surfacing
like sweat dripping down on him, caustic in his pores.
No matter now that he owns the old hotel, the beach
and some of the people. A man leached out inside a man:
One in patented laminate coated with success.
The other, unwhole and unholy,
no one has yet seen.

DON'T EVER COME WHEN I CALL

Forsake day

Fold yourself in night and turn to me

You must choose

Night doesn't plunge and cling brittle-harsh
between us. I can push night aside or glide
through its loose layers. I can't cross
streaming moats of hot-icy brilliance

Shaded and contained, illumination is still
the betrayer. Even here we can't escape diluting
feelers of light. Blind, I could feel it,
hear it, know its frequency like a pulse
The nemesis impales us on vivid points: You
in your narrow spectrum I cannot enter, I
in the streak of lightyears of ugliness
you should not

Forget we almost met. I see too well
my hand would stain your whiteness

PILGRIMAGE TO BLUE

A ripe moon mounts agate steeples
like an ageless mystic hailing the appointed time
for celebrants of some ancient rite
my cells seem to remember,
here in the high blue watching places.

A summer-shedding coyote flings herself leanly
into the chase of shadows
silent as a star shooting.
Rampant tollways vanish
in the ash patterns of a potter's cold fire;
custom-made cacophony is buried
under the humps of hogans
listening to Venus rising.

In the morning I will inhale turquoise horizons
unscaled by stacked containers
shoved together by corporate cliff-dwellers;
I will move slowly through wood and granite halls
enclosing nothing but swatches of light,
posing for the centuries, staging endless similes
under the direction of wind and water. I will touch
ocotillos, pintos, and malachite rocks, then turn
and stare back at pronghorns as I leave.

Undiluted azure anoints me now, my mouth tastes of royal.
And the crimped mass of springs and wires within me
loosens like a resurrection plant in rain.

NIGHT BREAK, COUNTY HOSPITAL

Wilderness witch-man my far-off forebear,
Mystic motions against ancient moons beneath my lids,
Jade-leaf jungle tuned to cabal chants
While brother devil-doctors dance with fetish fang and feather:
My pulse takes up the secret rhythm,
Systole—diastole, an alternating tom-tom,
Forgotten incantations, major—minor.

We are not strangers, shaman,
Minus our masks in this breeding dark;
Atavistic heart, disrhythmia unchecked,
Wild harsh cadence, current beyond blood
Quickens with the questions, with unknowns in the shadows,
Alien kindred tom-tom, minor—major.

How great the gamut, Aesculapius?
Sorcerer, healer, leech, how far through the gauntlet am I?
Sharp stone incision, humble herbs and purifying fire
Begot a sterile lineage
Of wizard steel, bottled nostrums, licensed magic!

Past shade-brooding forest, far down in the covenant breed,
Some conjurer's conscience defied endemic demons,
Some holy heathen swore by aboriginal Apollo,
Sowed it deeply in the seeds of evolution.
The beat has wandered, broken—the tangled cord remains.
Skulls and scarabs dissolve on the walls of waking.
Sure shadowless light supports my hands,
Anointing my sacred scalpel.

POEMS BETWEEN THE WARS

Glenna Holloway



Ernest Hemingway

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1. Roses in the Woods
3. The Interlopers
4. A Vase of Pink Plum Blossoms
5. An African Synopsis: The Baobab Tree
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18. Butterflies and Other Noble Thoughts
19. Old Wives the Tales Come From
20. Dragon Boat Ride

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