



MOONLIGHT IN THE
REDEMPITIVE FOREST

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SOME HISTORY

DARK TIMES

My wife says it's dangerous I turn out
the lights, bump into door frames, book cases,
kick the dog by accident, twice,
but I like finding my way to her,
fingertips along smooth rosewood she shined,
my scarred hand sliding over a desk.

To walk in the dark is to move without body
or mirror. Often, when I was young I would
grope my way back to the cabin on the bluff,
in flight— I tumbled in twigs and thorn,
shivered at the pinched sky. I was young enough to rave
at the salt dark wind shifting the boughs for hours.

My voice found thunder in the spindrift trees.

Druidic Orders emerged to swallow me.

My head squeezed out of the mouth of mythology.

On a path my feet believed in, I would have crawled
the dark wood—I did, by the middle of my life.

Spine bankrupt, head tilted to the waving tips
of forest, my feet read the brailed tracks of beetle.

In fallen yew, a branch slashed my hand.

Queen Anne's lace, fern and rosemary clung
till the ground stopped throbbing,

the sky crashed onto the bluff

and I smelled the sea's medicine, my sweet cabin
a hulk in the dark—naive and regretful, I howled,
splaying fingers over the bare splintered counter,
and scraped the wooden match into light.

GOD ARROGANCE

She is holding the telephone up to the wind,
a licked finger searching true north,
so that I, hours to the south
in a dark eleventh floor bathroom, might hear,
cell pressed on my ear,
rude frogs awakening
down in the draw,
guttural blooms of first spring.

But I don't.

Only her raspy "Goodnight, I love you."

Then the dead phone.

Memory collapses beneath memory.

Stillness is pretense.

A thirty-storey edifice screeches upright.

Impolite water falls through the hotel's pipes,
unbidden the growl of a heater
stutters to silence.

Love is the surprise of flame to the gas jet.

Convoys of dump trucks

haul off the treasure of our top soil
to plant a new slab.

After New York,

the superstructure keeps collapsing
floor onto floor.

A north wind kills the power.

Fireplaces smoke up the living rooms,
and by kerosene's singing light we make do.

Humility is forever,

the frogs crouch low.

CURVED WINDOW

Streams swollen after headlong rains, late

Light caresses a tree's waist. Tu Fu

I always thought the trees stood still,
but, awakened from my nap, after travel,
my eyes tricked me: a young fir was an old woman
who swayed from hip to hip, to songbirds,
the arch of each foot barely flexed,
rocking, rocking as she waited.

I always knew that John Muir,
high up a sequoia in a coastal squall,
in shorebird squawk, must have felt
the shallow root hairs slip and tear
below the sandy duff, whipped back
and out over the steep moon-flooded bluff.

But, trying to better understand,
to get beyond this bulge of glass
like all the others in the sociable hotels,
now I see she is the wallflower
who wishes to be moved by a merest breeze,
by phoebe's song or vesper sparrow's whisper,
but whose shy sashay, though it mimics us,
the dancers, is really just a tease.

COYOTES ON THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE

White Writing streaks a pitch-black backdrop
moonless mid-September nights
like clockwork after ten,
a tangled net of song, stitched thread of dappled tones.
Perhaps they're down among the poplars
where a curling creek emerges
and in March bloated frogs boast—
once I heard them cackle there at four a.m.,
a tribe passing through the pasture
laughing all the way to somewhere else,
shy version of Creator recurrent as grass,
shotgun useless against sound dancing—
firefly dervish, that happy.

MEMORY

A swan rushes me in the tall grass, in cattails.
In her open wings a death angel's embrace,
her beak snapping an inch from my fingertip.
The tousled fluffs of cattails drift onto the wave.
On the water three others parade,
Vatican envoys for whom the Korean orphans
will spin the guttural Polish anthem into honey.
What coast was I on? Which war was then?
Crawling a bluff with friends, footholds tumble away.
The sun scorches the sand, in and out of our clothes,
cutting reeds, high on a dune.
My mother smiles up the splintery stairs
under the bald light of her Quincy cellar,
a wave of hair against the quarried walls,
scrubbing the white dog with tomato juice,
foolish, foolish Beauty sprayed by a skunk.
Granite ledges in Pennsylvania crumbled away.
Staring at your boot laces here where you were little,
it is days after I ruined everything,
though you don't guess yet. You tell me,
a life sentence forty years later,
"I could never live the way you want me to."
Granite surfaces, dust weighting the leaves,
the cities where you've lived, a smear of blue soot
as if by art's genius swirls the toe of your boot.

TO BE

I worked all day, erasing everything,
pencil shavings and bits of eraser
swept into the hollow of my palm.
Dusk unfurled from the ceiling
and floated down concrete walls.
On the curb the bearded finisher
swaggered before his art
then bicycled home with the trowels.
Deep in someone's kitchen,
within the stone he smoothed,
a bare light bulb came on and
chased me back to the shadows—
the spine's sudden chill is the cliché,
but for me it was a gust ripping a sail,
my lungs flooded—
splinters were on a wide sea.
The saint who's paid to watch me,
snipped cement from his beard as I drowned.
Not a breath shall be lost, not a drop wasted, not
a hair of my head is safe, not one.

TO LIVE ON THE SUN

Hravatia is a pretty girl everybody even

old men want to have Antei on the porch with Croatian wine

To live on the sun is to live in Dubrovnik.

Moat tipped by moon, drawbridge shut, nightly the Prince
received the keys on a lavender pillow.

A marble church wall baked by Roman light
since thirteen hundred saves swallows whose shadows
collide, twirl, plummet, and veer from the stone.

Each roof tile was shaped on a woman's thigh.

Though the ancient city is now secure,
heat invades the walls, waiters loiter.

In awning shade, mothers stand beside columns,
children in fountains. Upstairs, a bathtub cups
the voluptuous girl as in the palm of its hand.

Later it cradles auntie—the branch of her wrist
dripping on clay. Watched over by granite peaks
where swallows loop the choicest bugs and speed.

Above crannies in a turret, a flag sways
like the girl who tossed off her skirt. A man shuffles
along, redundant academic with white dreadlocks.

He circles the Taximan's Bufe,
and grins into the jumbo cup the waitress,
his daughter, gave him, topped off with ice.

THE DEATH OF DANTE

*In Inferno, Canto III, above the gate to hell: “Lasciate ogne speranza,
voi ch’intrate”— give up every hope, you who enter here; over the
gate to Auschwitz: Work will make you free, “Arbeit Macht Frei”*

The frayed line loops the dock’s worn cleat,
the whitest face in Tuscany emerges from a skiff.

One son, lifting notes to *Il Paradiso*
in a bag red as tomato, never leaves his side.

Thread after thread, his rasp trailing to whisper,
dangles in the swamp where malaria perfects his exile.

No paradise without walking through hell.

But I examined blueprints of efficient crematoria,
spent one minute where Mengele ravaged the gene palace,
and even I know where hell was. His line

broke loose and drifted toward heaven, a tonsure
of dust clouding the temples. The monument

in Piazza di Santa Croce, righteous dragon,
stares into hell, and hell stares into heaven,
and literary afterlife, angels of the empyrean,
pages rippling, sing into the wind at Auschwitz.

TEACUP & COOKIE

*All this wasn't too painful; it was part of the series of
life's endless little sufferings. Franz Kafka*

Under their boots the snow crackles, Christmas
shopping weeks before the wedding in a medieval city.
“I bought you the saddest country,” he teases, “but you laugh,”
crown and cape afloat above their ample shadow.
Even the trees can't resist them,
shriveled brown hearts
flap on the birch in a breeze,
too much trouble to leave.
A child's truth: she won't remember
so it won't be sad on Mount Desert Island
where she owns the gulls and anchored sloops.
No more will weathered tongues on icy trams
quiver their disgust in agglutinative soups.
No panhandlers prostrate, no proud
underdog waiters in stale white shirts
to serve up evening portions
of the Holy Roman Empire.
No one eye beggars' cheap peach palinka.
Eleventh grade “Embassy girl” on a Budapest tram,
vomit coated a seat near the driver.
A handsome man's grin floated
above the two elderly bitches she pushed out of the way.
Boyish smiles mixed for years with that stench.
She was the girl from Bar Harbor,
who rides a bus to her wedding.
“When we lived on the Peninsula,
we knew no purity of emotions,”
said her Irish nun's black gravity.

“You’re in love at last with a grown man for once.”

Enter a store or café: —inside the door, *now*
we look at each other, I open this book.

At a cash register, a window,
lives change, my eyes lift from a shelf of poems,
fall in the havoc of love,
never come back.

He decides against the freight to Maine
for the enormous oil in nouveau frame,
an oddity he tells colleagues—
posed by the artist, five men stand
behind a grand piano round their leader,
Joseph Stalin, incongruous in tux.
Nostalgia for the beloved Budapest,
but he recoils, recounts decades, eras:
Fin de siècle fantasy, Pearl of the Danube,
avenue of porous statuary, voluptuous bridges,
soot caked courtyard a clutter in invaluable trinkets;
Mother of Corruption, junkie sister of the Ottomans,
whore of Hapsburgs, swill hole of Nazis—
Andrassy Utca Utvan still detestable—
shit-pile for Communists, mistress of graft.
All night traveling and he slipped on ice
at a Castle become hotel after The Change
where he slept on a hard—he kept muttering—
pig of a mattress. He noticed her two tables away,
bare arms and shoulders, eating breakfast, smiling
to herself at a word from some other American’s child.
“Cookies.” Was it funny, that word?
They made her plump? Lovely bones of her Slavic cheek,
her glazed skin. His a cracked tea-stain,
he had a decade on her of shifty regimes,

instability, proto-capitalist plastic.

Spying on himself in the hall mirror:

I put them in the sack of her body,
all my incompetent loves, shadows
on headstones, a gravedigger's chipped mug
where the dust stunned me.

He saw her at dinner behind a curtain
with a bald gentleman—*too old*—he should talk—
was she nearsighted? *I squint*, he said
when he knew her better. *A lot. Am I shortsighted?*

Improvident, his father would say, inadequate
citing population decline, and Cookie
disinclined to mother. She stares so directly
across time and in spite of Europe, finally
she can *change my life so late* on a narrow lane
between Inns giggling and hushing the dark Castle hall,
“You smell like cookies,” raising her skirt to the plump moon.

In the sixties he hitchhiked to Istanbul.

He loved lithographs on dusty walls.

Yes, he could travel once a year. *Of Course*,
he liked to keep saying, not to imply
as to her Yankee ear, *only a fool would ask*.

His face was a map citizens from Prague snowdrifts
refolded in slow trucks, careful not to tear,
handing one another, lines as blurred as cracked
bowls of porcelain sloshing mull wine.

Goobyehallo, they waved him on across the Eastern Bloc
where Ady Endre declaimed marriage vows
the morning after whoring,

where a hundred-fifty year wave

Suleiman rippled through the Baroque skyline
shocked the language of bilingual Romanians,

where bone structures of former hero warlord Huns
look on Transylvania befuddled through bifocals,
half-attentive in suburban headphones,
where illegal tongues caged even in matrimony
were shouted down by clergy
who declared the couple and impudent Magyar
null and void, and cuffed him for the monolingual police.

What a lie a map is.

The night before the wedding
she followed the tilt of rock
and the Vltava's rush over ice
into the 9th century, or 10th, 12th,
wherever serfs fished the lord's own carp
as if nothing were more senseless or desperate
than slip to impending vulnerability
and eat the bony fry with geniuses of the trades
under lit stones in Bratislava
where they hobbled to wedding practice
in Wenceslas Square and took grog too sweet
to resent the death of a babe
starved by an improvident one-eye craftsman
working the hot wine tables for placka.
Though she would throw up in the bus
on the way to the Castle,
his red bandanna washed in snow
under the seat where the next passenger
meekly asked for a hose, a sponge and bucket,
now she was radiant, and he,
swimming in five languages,
mistook refined gossip for travelers having their say
unlike him, tough street mug, chummy, oafish,
clumsy grin, a sign she loved him staining his tux cuff.

The Catherine Wheel at the Museum of Cruelty
made her wince, then the photos:

Hlinka Guard smuggling eighty thousand Czechs.

“In cattle cars over the Vltava,” he added
as if she might miss it, “to mad calm
of the Gaskammer.” She didn’t want to know
“Ustasa renamed ‘Croatia’ by Nachtizall Battalion...”

Her long legs gaining on his stately pace,
she clipped past under moonlit cobblestone.

“Ukrainska Ponstanska took my neighbors’ children,
my best friend.” He had a different name then.

The square, the street, and earth itself renamed
by his father’s own Arrow Cross—“six hundred
thousand to Auschwitz of our own people

in eighty days. By Iron Guard, sixty
thousand Romanian,” his voice rising
as she trotted ahead, “French Police,
Lithuanian, American Bund, Endecja,
Armiya Kracowa, Polnische Polizei...”

The world renewed by one sentence.

It begins: ‘Today Poland...’”

At the Jewish cemetery the puppet seller,
in Christmas sudden freeze her knuckles raw,
alarmed when young American women
cough so in the street, called these headstones
the oldest chiseled rock in Europe.

“Why do they charge just to see? Who gets the money?

We can’t pay back their dead. Ever.”

She sneaked in when the porter wasn’t looking,
had a smoke at Kafka’s grave.

In every window she looked for signs of health.

Even Euro-pop from open doors would do;
he swallowed his pill just the same
to assuage his shriveled heart.

Late the night before, in the bathroom at the Castle,
his face already fallen to disuse inside the mirror,
the bridegroom aged as worn teacup,
he worried how his brows have bushed and thickened,
a cracked and wayward face, a minefield with loaded eyes,
pale filigree in black holes where nightmare flesh drew fire,
his father's petulant lip dimpled by scrutiny and self-defense—
a strong chin was never enough—pained judicious umpire,
vein marooned on the cheek, a wild-haired face
too wide-eyed to look the other way.

In each photo the bride was smirking at waiters.
Their weathered cheeks touched her fresh skin,
one side then the other, a kiss beside the ear.
His father refilled the festive champagne—
a few glasses with his shaky hand,
then gave up, his military eyes gone into stones.
She was the biggest thing in the room, a figurine
in the noon white lace, bare shoulders glistening
while she waltzed to the edge of the balcony.
“Romeo Romeo,” she called back to him for luck,
a wave slowly lifting her up, traveling sedately on,
a shrug of eternity. “I won't remember,
it won't be sad, but if this were the end,
if this is the end of the world, my dangerous Teacup,
I will crumble, if I watch you shatter.”

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