

A Compass for Ariadne

1

To true the walls, we put a drib of oil
in a shallow cup

and lay on top an olive leaf
and on the leaf

a flake from off the Anatolian
hammers we use

to set the lintels and split beams.
Those shards

lay everywhere, peppering the floor,
like beetles

scuttling in the dust. They would
recollect,

each to the others, in a clot.

2

You hear princess, you think some child.
She was not young.

She lived a life apart at Gortyna,
away from palace

things, more like a nun almost,
to tend her brother.

She spoke to him like others
couldn't,

calmed, perhaps, by the tea-scent
of her hair,

her nails on him, the gentle way
she poulticed mud

to salve the wounds he gave himself.

3

Suffice to say the suitor who appeared
that year in autumn

in his dark-beaked galley took
her by surprise.

Her father sent no herald. But she liked
his plumpish

northern face. He gave her splendidous
non-promises:

*I've come to make these things all right again
and I come to you*

*with mercy of the gods for him
and thanks to you*

the sad fellow will at last be free.

4

So the halfmoon past his coming she
made gifts of sage

and beeswax, tallow soaps and stones
to tell the gods

her eagerness (she never could do goats
or even birds)

and told him secrets one-two-three
and showed him threadwork

from her girlhood. With confiding hand
she traced love plans

upon his chest and abdomen of meals
they would share

and abundant teeming garden hives.

5

I know you think you know. But I am
just the beam

and chisel guy. I built a portico
as would befit

a prison. Full stop. The rest are fairy tales
told by swindlers.

This much I can tell you:
No magic ball

of string or ball of magic string
what have you

rolled forward like some schnauzer
snout-down

de-vermining the cave.

6

She was the magic. She herself. And when
the day came, she

tied onto the high doorframe a hem-
thread of her bleachwhite

gown and danced him forward, unraveling
until at last

the dress was gone, and they stood where
he sat in cowfilth,

allayed to hear her breathing near, she now
naked to both.

Then it was one-two-three and afterward,
spindling the thread

around the bludgeon, he walked out.

7

The desolation calls are hard to tell.
The cave could not

contain them. The insects stopped their
kittly hiss.

After some time alone she must
have found one of the cups

with olive leaf and hammer shard
and learned its art:

However she might turn amazed
in gyral darkness,

in frenzy pandemoniac, bereft,
it trued her dismal

course and pointed her the other way.

8

As she emerged, I found a painter's tarp
to wrap her body in.

She was from head to foot enameled
in cattle blood.

She had torn her tea-scent hair in sheaves
and plastered it

with gore along the cavern walls. I gave
her water from a skin.

She tightly held the little cup and went
its unremitting way,

the leaf and shard recoiling by degrees
and pointing her

through Knossos to the Cyclades.