

Four Poems

Hotel California Revisited

I've enough bones in my foundation,
the Spanish Missions call me bandit;

when the Wine Days ended and the bodies
burned their spirits, cured their pores,

and the desert dust claimed their barren,
salty residues, a cool dry receptacle

was needed and the heavy cellar door fought
the stench beneath the new guests' feet.

Understand, I never sought a soul
but merely kept the rooms and courtyard

as clean and free of fingernail dirt
as the finest syringe or palace;

if such care entices a lost or broken
compass-seeker, my only crime is keeping

the casket pillow fresh should he arrive
earlier than unknowable loved ones expected.

The girl's name was, of course, Maria.
We had no contract save the same I offered

her every victim—she no more desired
to leave, however, than the young men

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she befriended with *colita*-scented hair,
a grazing brush, warm as close, shared breath,

and the promise of a moment's envelopment,
pouring herself like hourglass sand into the space

between their sinews—until their mad eyes
reflected in the dinner knives went cold, dull,

somehow more open than in the horror heartbeat
flourish that played soundtrack to a closing,

coughing breath. No one ever leaves me.
Each night is the Captain's inspection

of the cellar/sepulcher, the air tinted yellow
as his jagged teeth, home in hue and stink

among the piles where those he'd loathed lay
indistinguishable from whom he'd loved.

Even now, my halls the quietest
they've been in decades, inspection

remains the ritual spark before
the courtyard dances where Maria,

as young and dark as her lovers' smiles, offers
the desperate remnants something to smell,

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to assure them—no, remind them—
it's all worth the slaughter.

Even I had to learn that. The Night Man,
the only dangling chunk of flesh here

older than I, taught me. Chaste and sober
as a silver razor, he came to the doorway

back before sunshine and love were just lyrics,
cool words in warm skin, and asked for work.

My last sunset whimpered away and he took
post at what can now only be called

my entrance. She smelled of poppies,
that first one, with a bag light as music notes;

they traded smiles like until she crossed
the threshold, met course darkness outside,

and stumbled back, awash in night. His fingers
kissed her throat with all the force of mercy.

Afterward, he reached a hand outdoors,
recalled it singed and whispered,

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.

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Eulogy for the Funeral of Pop-Eye the Sailor

As I stand before the lot of you,
fans, adorers, and what I understand
to be the descendents of longtime friends,
now given to dust like salted coughs
from an old sailor's lungs,
I realize just how alone our old friend was.
I called him *Pops* because it was
as far I could get in addressing him
before stuttering my thoughts
like a fallen bag of coins.

We first met on my father's fishing boat,
me, a guppy with mizzenmast lenses
and seasickness persisting
through my veins like a shark in motion.

I was the only one onboard without a tattoo, beard,
or childhood dream of you;
maybe that's why we grew so close.
To them, you were senility wrapped in rusted tin,
your former glory worn like medals of honor
crusted in the salt air.
Some had forgotten you'd been a military man,
lost in the Technicolor newness
of the mid-twentieth century.

After syndication set in like malaria
and royalty checks meant that rum
need no longer be won

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in arm-wrestling
battles between anchored artillery guns,
you resigned yourself back
to the only life you ever really knew
how to live:
one of ropes, salted tack, and dark clouds
meaning the difference between life and death.

While the crew hardly understood you or I,
our quiet recognition for one another
was perfect.

You gave me my first drink,
a bitter dreg of septic water;
I chewed tobacco leaves with aching jaws
while you gummed spinach leaves
and told stories when you felt like talking.
You spoke of your neighbor's heart failure,
how your nephews don't talk to you anymore,
and how Olive ran off with a plastic surgeon.
You told me your last friend was
an obese former war buddy;
I muttered Alan Moore quotes
about flowers and enemies,
and you offered to top me off.

The day before you died
you gave me your old side arm
and held my hands in the deformed hooks
that were left of your fingers;
you told me to quit smoking,

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find love, and learn to swim.

The body in that casket
is a mosaic of broken memories,
stitched through holes pre-cut
by needles of private desolation
using threads of chained hatred,
and wrapped in an indifferent film
grown like windowsill flowers.

Pops, you taught me
the meaning of the sea, of empathy,
listening and comprehension.

You told me your favorite book
was *The Old Man and the Sea*
because when you lose the fish
you broke your back to catch,
all you can pray for is
a young shoulder to carry you home.

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Comets

She looks at me with eyes that never ask
if I would catch two comets one-handed
in either fist, but when her cheekbones crest
like waves a mile off the shore, I want
to box sunsets in shiny golden paper, ribbons
drawn from the spools of my shoulder blades,
tags cut from the tender gum space
between my bicuspid, and beg her forgiveness
that it must fade to nightfall in minutes.

I wear hours without your skin like scars
from where the doctors might've cut my tail
were I born with the chance of being anything
more than human, I'm afraid
you'll find me sickening, but my arms
crave to catch your tears like the earth
swallowing dead bodies, enveloping them
like a love letter, secret admirer verse
strewn like fingerfuls of browning grass
from care-stained children wondering if the green
going dark has something to do with them.

The cavalier tail mind-flapping behind me,
bridging to my brainstem, cackling freakshow,
head-warp bully-whip coils in your palms,
an injured bird, or sweeter still a dying serpent
whose only sin was wearing scales and legacies
that could only be shed when dug deeper than living.

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Please, expose my blood to the air, sling
my veins across your torso, build a shelter
from my flesh, hammer my ribs into dirt,
guard against the storms, but leave a door,
fashioned perhaps from the crook of my elbow
or my shoulders' curve—on clear nights,
put your head through it, listen for my heartbeat
while distant meteors remind the earth
that it splits as easily as we do—

and if a comet glows across, tail flailing
blind and oblivious to its future of dewdrops
and dustflakes, don't try to catch it.

Just let your eyes and cheekbones conspire
to keep it flying a few minutes longer.

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Supro Ozark

I still remember the first time
your long dark fingers fumbled around my neck.
Thankfully, your father was there,
laughing and apologizing,
again forgetting that you were a South Paw.

You had practiced so hard with that broomstick,
But were still too young to realize
witchcraft is not in the footwork;
it comes from stamping fingerprints
in tattooed constellations

you taught yourself to recognize.
In time, you learned my touch
like your mother's drunken hand along your nappy scalp;
I saved your life
by giving you control.

By the time our nightly practice would end
in my body laid across yours,
I was used to resting upside down,
our vocal chords inseparable.
When we danced to Chuck Berry

you duck-walked
with the Lonely's characteristic lack of shame.
That tip about using your teeth
changed our relationship forever.
Jimi...Jimmy...

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When you called music your religion,
did you think of me as a priestess
or your first communion cup?
Was I secondhand salvation
or a colored Seattle boy's Crash Landing?

I never forgave your leaving me that night;
the cold, backstage darkness, the silence.
Someone nearby realized how hard it is to scream
without being caressed;
I went with him without a sound.

I never did learn musicians weren't meant to love;
as I rested dust-riddled in a corner of
a room filled with television,
I watched erotic ritual sacrifice
of every lover to follow me.

I fooled myself at night,
thinking it was all because no lady's tap could match my own.
In worn and rusted age, I've learned;
you went nowhere without a replacement—
we were abundant as London-morning haze.

On bad days, I still wish I'd strung
asphyxiation round your throat
before you'd had the chance;
most days, though, I'm content as just your first,
First Rays of the New Rising Sun.