

DUNGEONESSE

The worst part about being the guy in the cartoon hanging shackled to a dungeon wall is the mirror. It wasn't always here, like back when I was young and sure of rescue, hurling curses at my jailers wherever, whoever they were. I was vain enough then I'd probably stare for hours, mugging at my reflection, sucking in my gut. But no. They slipped it in one night last year as I hung sleeping. When I awoke, both I and the haggard old man across from me screamed ourselves hoarse. Or is it as I hanged sleeping? If I could shrug, he'd shrug too. Xylophone-ribbed. Hair and beard an inseparable, lice-ridden thicket. I know it's just a mirror, but I also know he watches me as I sleep, or pretend to sleep, dreaming that instead of being stretched by time here in this god-lost dungeon, I'm somewhere in the Caribbean or South Pacific maybe, just me and a lone palm tree, no one who looks like me. No one at all. One day if I'm lucky a bottle washes up, a little rolled note inside that says only, "Look." And when I do, he's there in the glass surface of the bottle, hollow-eyed and screaming at me loud enough to wake me but not to rouse my jailers. They wouldn't come if he screamed all night, the way he's planning to do.

THE MAGI

The alpaca seemed resigned to the vultures
that ringed it where it lay in the mud.
The black-headed birds stood sentinel,
not moving a feather, just watching
as the alpaca's chest rose and fell
and rose and fell again, rapid, shallow breaths.
The vultures waited. A soaking rain
had fallen for hours, only stopping
when the birds arrived. The alpaca lay
sunken in the black and deepening slop,
the stillborn cria beneath her breast
all but concealed, only a pair of legs
motionless in the mud. The mother panted
and tried to lick her child's wool clean.
The cria disappeared into the muck
under its mother's weight. The vultures
stood in a ring, watching, waiting.
The low skies promised rain.

THE MAXIMIST

When he thought he loved the human race
he wrote novels, brick-sized monuments to lives
in chaos, filling the holes in those lives
with every word he could. Then he fell in love
with days that certain people lived
and wrote short stories, road maps to guide them
through the intricacies of 24 hours in a life that
as a whole he could never love. Then he became a lover
of organs: heart, brain, liver, the generous lock and key
of penis and vagina. At last he was a poet,
scribbling 15 minute odes to love and loss,
drunks and other philosophers, and he would
stand up at a microphone and read them,
like a man fellating himself in public.
But now he is a hermit, more wisdom than love in his life.
He writes maxims in the sand, and when the tide comes in,
in the water. The wise man knows,
but tries to love nonetheless. A single fist
contains more truth than all the libraries in the land.
This is the sand. That is the sea.
Try to tell the difference to a word.

SOMETHING ABOUT A SUICIDE

Something about a suicide makes us
tread more lightly as if the ground
once trod by the voluntary dead
grew spongy and unwell, as if to move
might send distress signals like a fly
in a web to whatever hungry mouth
might be waiting to eat us.

We make a thousand secret shrines
we think no one can see, but pass another faithful
on the street and you know. The bowed head.
Eyes looking straight at someone no longer there.
Every one a reliquary, bearing pieces
of the one true do-it-yourself cross,
ready to nurse doubt into belief and beyond.

THE EDGE

Go to the edge. We have always gone to the edge,
to the place where the land becomes the sea,
where with one more step we become something less
solid, less substantial as well. This is why we can't stay,
why the edge compels us to take a bit of it away.
A handful of scallop shells. A bit of sea glass
bluer than our memory of the sea itself. Perhaps
one larger shell, one with an obstruction
like a concrete seal, no way to hold it
to the ear and have the imagined sea remind us
of the edge. Take it away. Take it into your home.
Forget it for a day or two. You will find it or
it will find you, the way the wrong breeze
from the salt marsh finds you: by the nose.
You will find the obstruction was a living foot
that dragged its spined and sacred safety
out of the closet and onto the bathroom floor
to its final rest on the rough, sea-less tile.
The edge never comes to us, and this is why.
We know no better than to think we have control,
that the edge will bow to us. We go to the edge
with our shell-shaped ear, a sound like the ocean waiting.