

White Out: *to become impaired by exposure to sudden bright light.*

“I used to think, as I looked out on the Hollywood night, ‘There must be thousands of girls sitting alone like me, dreaming of becoming a movie star, but I’m not going to worry about them. I’m dreaming the hardest.’”
- Marilyn Monroe 1926-1962

Mercy, Marilyn. Once they decided to make you, they had to almost erase you. Blot, lift, and lighten every ripe inch of you, beginning with the hair: *Pillowcase White*, iridescent angel hair, like spun glass. Perfect for pillow talk. You then learned to lighten yourself even more: the skin, the nails, the teeth, and your eyelids – swiped white before the dark liner went on. Nearly every photo of you shows those lashed lids, trained to stay at half mast, as if in prayer or, finally, off to sleep.

Mercy, Marilyn. Once you were finally *up there*, moved onto the silver screen from mere pinups and “cheesecake shots,” no one came close to you and your illumination. Reeling in all that light in all that white - your favorite color - furs, pearls, bathing suits, stilettos, gowns, and *Oh, Daddy*, three wedding dresses! You, effervescent you. All diamonds and champagne ‘s bubbly shine, until you could no longer let go of the night. Ever elusive sleep.

Dim the lights now, Marilyn. You dazzling dreamer, ethereal schemer. Sleep, perchance to dream more. More than enough Nembutal on your nightstand. Indeed, those mighty, nightly “knock-out drops” for the world’s biggest Knock Out. Oh *Something’s Got to Give*, Marilyn, and it turns out to be you, exactly you, face down on your white bed. The naked starlet, unlit. White out.

(Note to readers: this is an acrostic.)

When I consider your body

I consider
what other women who knew your body
never considered:
the hollowed place
behind your knees when they
bend into the mattress, the place my fingers
and mouth find each time expecting
water or wine. How your folding knees
make cups only I know,
like the cups you once scooped
out of the sand so I could dip
my breasts in and lie
on my stomach next to you
on your back.

Those lovers who loved you fast
never knew
how the smoothest curving
of your underarm
slides like an "S" down the flanks of your
torso that I have wanted three thousand times
to sculpt or lick,
how the sunken spaces of your collarbone make
two tiny caves for my chin only
how quickly you toss pillows overboard:
four abandoned lovers flat on the floor.

Even the mother who bathed your new
skin couldn't have loved what she
couldn't predict.
How the hair at the back of your neck
makes ringlets one week before you need
a haircut,
and how my fingers are ten birds
combing through the nest of it:
Don't cut your hair yet, my love.
Let it go a while longer.

Forgiveness and Banksy and Me

So many forgivenesses are bigger
than mine. The black cat, for instance,
the one at the shelter yesterday, the one
with two ears and one tail sliced off by

his previous owner, the very same feline
that pressed his most fine and silky head
into my open palm. Or today at the hospital,
the woman who showed me her magenta lotus

tattoo, inked into the puckered scar where
her right breast used to be. ("I had to ease
this disease," she said, "before it took more
than just my breasts.") And how about almost

every ironic Banksy painting? The young boy
placing a yellow daisy into the snout of the
soldier's rifle. The *Pulp Fiction* dudes dressed
in their black suits and ties, each pointing

a yellow banana at someone, out of frame, some
guy they no longer want to kill. Or yet another
militant thug dressed in all black with a bandana
tied over his face. He cocks his right arm far back,

ready to launch, you guessed it, a bouquet of
flowers! To whom, I wonder. The mother
he no longer blames? The driver who jumped
the curb and almost slammed into him? A new

lover after their first spat? And look just once
at that sad, lone zebra, standing idly by as a woman
peels off and hangs more than half of his black
stripes on the clothes line. She seems absolved. Mostly,

though, I can never forget Banksy's "Suicide Girl"
who blows off her own head in an explosion of red
butterflies. Forgiveness in bright wings. Forgiveness.
We are such stuff. And me, right here and right now,
in this poem, where I have not written your name,
not even once.

When We are Finally Gods – a Sestina

My friends think it's a bad idea, but I'm dying
to pair Emily Dickinson with Marilyn Monroe in heaven.
They will room together and, starting now, forget
how we failed and ruined them. They will become two
entwined icons, reaching and teaching each other - the Myth
and our Sleepy Hollywood Waif - telling their truths, slant.

Norma Jean begins, admits that she trained herself to slant
into becoming the pet 20th Century Fox, shows Emily how to die
for the camera, not cower from it, gives her ocular proof of the myth
that women are only beautiful on their backs, naked, gazing at a heaven
they'll never have. Together, they study every picture of Marilyn, too
sizzling hot in print and on the silver screen to ever be forgotten.

Emily's eyes burn with disbelief and fear - but then fire. She forgets
that poetry was the only art that stunned her, that made her slant
closer to the flame. All these sexy glossies – flesh impact - let her lean into
the heat of herself. That night, Emily finally sleeps and dreams of dying
her hair a currant-wine red. She unties her knotted locks, and they fall heavenly
over her white nightie, down her straight back. She begins a new myth:

Em – she knows her own body now and wears mythological
white. They both wear only white again, share how being the forgotten
girlchild derailed and nailed them. Norma Jean confesses she traded a heavenly
father for countless father figures. *Oh, Papas!* She loved you all, slanted
and perverse. Wallop her, fine. Misdirect her, fine. Insist she play dead
in the bed for you, fine. *Keep pelvis up, Marilyn, eyes shut but mouth open to*

*let your watchers know that you're ready and eager for bed. Just two
more weeks, and then you can sleep.* But Norma Jean commands mythic
alertness now. She meditates while kneading the bread each day, dyes
the linen napkins to match the flowers at their table, lets her roots forget
the Bombshell Blonde, wants only to read poetry by females, to slant
into the evening with Em, who plays hymns on the piano, bent heavenward.

You two Sister Girlfriends, as united and unstoppable as heaven,
we apologize and are ready to hear your real voices now, to
read and see and hear you anew, watch you slant
toward each other: shoulder to shoulder, one mythological
head atop the other, pilgrims in prayer. We ask for forgiveness:
for how we ignored, or explored and implored, both of you to death.

So you're in a singular female heaven, a gleaming myth
of like-minded and like-bodied icons, to remind us to never forget
that when we press women to only slanted truths, we push them to their deaths

The Last Time We Talked

(Hamlet's final words: *The rest is silence.*)

When I found you alone, Mother,
you were babbling like an unbroken
brook in your bedroom, sitting upright
in your reading chair, your hair rising
like drowned Ophelia's. When I found you

that day, you were center, the iris
in a huge circle of stacked books at your
feet, as if you were holding court. Your
subjects? Sixty-four hard-cover books,
on the floor, at your feet, piled into columns
of seven or eight or nine. You looked happy

with the impressive fortress you'd built,
happy to be inside those literary walls, a bibliophile's
blockhouse. And I was finally glad that you were
finally sorting through it all, getting organized,
cleaning up, clearing out. You go, Mother!

To your right, on the end table, was a vase
as white and smooth as a polished skull. And in it?
One handful, a complete dozen dandelion-yellow
pencils. A practical bouquet from Dad, all sharpened
and new and ready to go. Before he died,

Mother, Hamlet was filled with bile, and
the noise in his head was chronic. He couldn't
stop the hissing and scratching and static,
and so that's what some folks think
his last words mean. That now, finally,
the poor sap can get some quiet. But I wonder, Mother.

Maybe *the rest* means the hereafter – that's it's complete
silence there. (In which case, there is no *there* there,
right? Hamlet as Atheist?) Or maybe Shakespeare means
that the *rest*, that final big nap we all get to take,
is a peaceful one. Not fitful at all.

I'm babbling now, Mother, like an unbroken
brook, and I'm still asking *you* questions!
Dumb. What I mean to say
is this:

I sat on the floor next to you that day, and I
opened a book, and then another and
another and another and another,
and I saw that every letter of every word of every
line of every page of every fucking book
- *of all 64 books* - was underlined
and underlined and underlined and underlined
and underlined.

(The title pages, the indexes, the prologues,
the epigraphs, and all matter in between. Thousands
upon thousands of straight and strong gray pencil
lines marched under the *words, words, words,*
and through the pages, paced through the ages
until the edge of doom.)

This, after years of you teaching
us to only underline the important stuff. Oh,
you had undermined me, Mother. You hadn't
been reading or clearing out, after all; but you had been
busy. And what I mean to say is this:

I have buzzards in my head, Mother. A battalion
of buzzards working with chainsaws. And the noise
thenoise thenoise thenoise is deafening. And though I wanted
to run to the river to drown myself that day, Mother,
we cannot both play Ophelia in this scene, because
unlike that dumb drowned girl, I am capable of my own
distress, and I am capable of yours too.

So hey nonny nonny non, Mom. Hey nonny
Mommy. I will leave you to it. I am dismissing
you, and I am missing you, and
what I finally mean to say is this:

your last words to me were both
coherent and mad. I was halfway out

the door when you held up one new pencil
and yelled, *Hey You. Lady. Sit down!*
Take a pencil. Help me!

But I exited, stage right.

And though yours is sure to be a muddy
death, Mother, I hope your final rest is filled
with music, music as lush as a lazy river in new
spring, or a book of sonnets. Just the important
parts, right? As for me?
The rest is silence