

Minoan Elegy

*Starting with Europa and with Zeus,
the flowers and the beach, the rape and rapture.
All the sordid excesses of gods
that lead us, in the end, to what we are.*

Torches flare
and break into the long, oppressive night.
The labyrinth walls, the floor, the vaulted heights
are tortured into hardened shapes
by leaping blades of light.
The glare wounds eyes pulled wide
by timeless time in lightless dark
and Minotaur recoils (a move he instantly regrets).
The brilliant feast is crumbs now snatched away
as darkness falls again,
broken by false ghostly shapes
that dance across his eyes.

If we could see him now what would we see?
Skin bleached white by life in constant night.
A massive taurine head perched on
a lean, hard-muscled, naked frame.
A body fitting of the offspring of a god.
And sadness...
So great a sadness the beast in him
must bear the whole.
That, too, worthy of the gods
if ever gods showed feeling for
the sorrows that they wrought.

In darkness he listens.
The first low moans come
mixed with whispered bits of speech
as the acrid smell of fear reaches his nose.
The voices are new. The ritual is old.
He doesn't know how old for
he cannot say, awake or in his dreams,
how time goes by,
the calculation linked to long ago
when light and dark had equal weight.
Their alternations ticked the passing days.
Now, like the only tick of some great clock,
the torches flare and unseen hands thrust victims
to their final night,
to Minotaur a signal that

the senseless dance of humankind
continues just above.

The moans grow more despairing
as these lost souls slowly move apart.
Each thinks to find a way back to the gate
through which they came,
but all are wrong.
Fear and darkness confound every sense
as tortured angles of the labyrinth
do their part to trump the unaccustomed ear.

The Bull-man's nostrils flare.
His ears keen to each separate, novel sound.
He moves easily in the inky dark
going toward the gate.
He knows each scruple of the stone-strewn floor,
each crevice of the chiseled walls.
His hands trace knowing patterns as he walks.
He knows already the fate
of these sorry pawns of sacrifice.
They, like all those come before, will stumble
through the labyrinth's twisted gut
first thinking to discover some way out,
then hoping to rejoin their doomed companions.
Finally, failing all,
just moving, moving to out-pace
the brutal fear that eats at their insides.
Perhaps a ravening monster would be
mercy measured by this bleak prospect,
but such a one will not be found
within these damp, dark walls. Instead
each will find a separate cul-de-sac
among the labyrinth's countless halls,
there to wait upon the cruelest beasts
of hunger and of thirst.

A hundred twisted steps before the gate
The Bull-man stops. There's something different
in this group, a novel hint that slices through
the spreading cloud of fear.
There's one who has not moved.
Minotaur smells the strong odor
of a male
and hears the even breathing, calm
without a hint of panic.
He senses the repose of one at easy rest.

Then torchlight flares anew
 and burns his eyes
 as voices rise, a woman's, then a man's.
 He knows his sister's voice
 though he's not heard Ariadne since a child.
 "I have your sword and here, a shuttled thread
 that you'll unwind as you go on.
 The other end I'll fix here at the gate.
 Be careful.
 Daedalus himself was nearly lost
 among these walls," she says and
 fear adds its harmonic to
 the quaver in her voice.
 The man replies, curt words of one
 intent upon a task.
 The light withdraws.

Here the moment dreams foretold.
 He wonders if his lips will form a word.
 "Theseus," he whispers with unpracticed tongue.
 "My brother, come to take my life."

*The Pantheon is littered with the spawn
 of venal lust. Poseidon's whelps, these two.
 Though innocent they bear the tragic stamp,
 cursed to be clothed each in the other's fate.*

He waits unmeasured time, unmoving.
 In Theseus' stumbling, halting steps
 he hears no plan, just blind wandering
 marked here and there by muttered curses.
 He moves to intercept the human's course.
 "Theseus, you have come at last."
 "Who speaks with such strange accents?"
 Surprise quickens Theseus' speech.
 "You are no Greek who calls me thus."
 "I am the one you seek, Theseus.
 The one that you call Minos' Bull."
 "A monster who can mimic human speech?"
 "I am cursed to have a human part,
 to be not wholly one thing or another,
 but I speak."
 "You speak? Then tell me. Where are the bones?
 I thought to find it strewn with bones.
 You keep a tidy house."
 "I do not disrespect the dead
 that others choose to kill.

I've honored them as decency
and circumstance permit."

For Theseus the hunt is joined. He reaches
toward the voice. His outstretched hand
meets only rough-hewn stone.

"Honor me and tell me how you
come to know my name then, Freak?"
"I have dreamt the smallest detail of this day,
although I laugh to call it day.
But, tell me, is it day or is it night
beyond the gate?"

"There was darkness everywhere when I came in,
but why this talk?

You could be feasting on the flesh
of my compatriots."

He moves with care,
His fingers on the clammy wall.

"You and all your human cohort
forget who I am.

The beast in me is sickened by
the thought of eating flesh.

You press the worst of yourself
into a mold and call it 'Monster'
but it is you, just you.

A mirror works as well."

"I do not eat the flesh of my own kind."

The Greek's response is clipped.

He wants the beacon of that other voice
To light his path.

"On this day you will kill your own brother
who you call Beast and Monster.

Do you think the goat or lamb,
the wild bird of the field, the mountain stag
are any less your brethren than I?"

"Brethren? Bah! Your talk is babble, Beast.

I have no brothers.

I am my father's only child."

The Bull-man laughs, a strange and fractured laugh.

"Your father cannot keep his girdle tied.

His progeny are spread from Attica
to far-off Tyre.

His blood informs a mighty, ragged tribe."

"Your pointless riddles bore me, Monster.

Tell me something plain." His tone is mocking.

“If you do not foul your virtuous lips
 with human sacrifice what do you eat?”
 “There are roots that break through from above.
 I graze on them and...” he hesitates
 and wonders at the pain of speech that plods
 so far behind the lightning of his thoughts.
 “I am otherwise provided for.”
 “By whom? That fornicating beast-lover
 you call Mother?”
 “Do not provoke me, Theseus, with
 your market-place vulgarities.
 Poseidon raped my mother
 just as he raped yours.”

The voice so close it is as if
 The stones beneath his fingers speak,
 And yet his way is blocked.
 “Aegeus is my father!” Theseus shouts.
 “Poseidon is your father
 as he is mine.
 You forget I am a beast of those
 who smell their kin and love them.
 We do not stalk our kin and kill them.
 Your nose is plugged with fairy-tales.
 Breathe for once and try to smell the truth.”
 “Enough talk!” The air is hot with Theseus’ rage.
 “I’ve come to kill you.
 Let me be done with that.”
 “You’ve come to set me free.”
 “If death is freedom, freedom you shall have,
 and so will I the Greek bones here avenge.”
 Theseus’ anger makes him careless
 and he stumbles once again.

“Your sword is poorly aimed for that blood-task.
 The blame you would abate lies higher up.”
 “With Minos and his copulating cow?”
 “Higher still, my brother.”
 It is Minotaur who moves this time,
 bringing new acoustics to his speech.
 “The gods spill all this blood for their dark sport,
 then goad us into spilling more and more.
 The killing will not end
 until you make yourself. Throw off the stamp
 of petty tyrant-gods that you call fate
 and recognize your own will is your power.”

*Gods tremble when they hear these words.
Their power hangs on ignorance. If such
a tool as Theseus learns to choose his fate
their temples built on faith begin to fall.*

Theseus has turned around.
He loses contact with the walls,
trying to assess the vector of the voice.
“Your poetry is touching for a beast
but empty babble to my ear.
What meaning can it have to make myself?
The gods make everything.
We are but their thinking turned to flesh.
Just as now, I think I hear you talking.
This talk I seem to hear from you
is but the crazed imaginings
of a mind twisted by this curséd dark.
I’ll be glad to see the end of this.”
He tries to get a hand on stone
but even that is gone.

“The end of this will not make you glad, Theseus.
Your life, however long, will be for its
full length cursed by what you do this day.”
“Cursed? By what? Killing you?
I’ve killed many in my life.”
He grips his sword hilt.
“You will be but one more.”
“Cursed with truth, my Brother.
Surrounded by the fantasies of others
you will be cursed with truth.”
“So, Beast, you know, too, what is to come?”
“Here in the labyrinth time is naught to me,
past and future all the same
and equal to imagination’s sight.
I see what was and what is to be
with equal clarity.”

Theseus, forced to crawl, has recovered
the comfort of the wall and moves again.
“Entertain me, Beast. Give me some bit
from your vast store of prophecy.”
“Men always wish they knew the future
‘til they see it writ...”
“Come, Monster, just a sporting hint?”
The Minotaur draws a great breath, a sigh,
and says,

“Before you see your Attic soil again
 Ariadne, who loves you
 beyond all reason, will be left by you,
 abandoned on some bleak stretch of beach.
 And, too, the one who calls you son will die
 because of your own thoughtlessness.”
 “You say these things but to provoke my wrath.
 I’ll not leave Ariadne!
 I have pledged myself to her.”

“Think of the snow that caps
 your sacred Mount Olymbos (here
 Minotaur stops to savor that
 one word so fitting to his tongue and lips).
 Your pledge is like that snow,
 beautiful to see but try to hold
 it in your hands and it is gone.
 You will leave Ariadne.
 By the sorcery of your own mind you will hear
 my voice in hers, my imagined touch
 in her touch. My hideous face
 will spoil her beauty.
 And you will see my death in her eyes.
 You will see in her the brother
 you have killed. That terrible vision
 will haunt you long after
 you have left her on the sand.”

“A pox on your stories!
 Your mindless rant torments me. Leave it off!
 You who’ve spent your whole time in this maze,
 what can you know?
 Leave me, phantom voice, that I may find
 that curséd beast and end this sordid farce.”

*Theseus thinks his string will lead him home,
 but there’s no turning back from his black deed.
 This violent thread, once peeled from the spool,
 will not rewind. Its trace is sealed in blood.*

Minotaur obliges this demand
 and moves with slow deliberation
 paralleling Theseus’ stumbling gait
 with his sure-footed pace.
 His bare feet are his eyes in this dark hall
 and quickly find the object that he seeks.
 “How fares your clew, Theseus?”

“Leave off, Voice. I told you once,
you’re but an ill imagining.
I hear you not.”
“And this? Is this imagination, too?”
Minotaur picks up the thread he’s found
and gently tugs it taut.
“Tell me, Brother. Does your thread dwindle?”

Theseus is silent long
and when he speaks the first dark wisps
of fear invade his voice.
“Do not call me brother, Beast. It is
your thread that dwindles. You’ll regret
that you spoke thus to me.”
“It is you who will regret who come
to slay a dumb monster and instead
will leave soaked in your brother’s blood.”
“Ariadne wants you dead.”
“Ariadne knows not what she asks,
but wishes only that you live.
She, too, will know the luxury of regret.”

Theseus, his fear near panic, has begun
to gather in the thread that he’s paid out.
He stumbles hard into the unseen walls.
“Whence flew your courage, Greek?
You are right to be afraid
for I can break this thread and end
right now this thing that you call farce.
But, hear me. I will not. Not yet.
You see, Theseus, in far-off Athens
people bow to Aegeus as their king
while, above our heads, in Cretan lands
and on the seas, Minos is the sovereign.
But here in this piteous realm
I am doomed to rule.
My power is not so easily usurped.
You are, my Brother, guest in my dark house.”

The Minotaur relaxes in his place.
He knows that Theseus’ searching nears its end
and harvests comfort from that thought.
“Another thing, Brother, I would have you know.
My mother called me Little Star and
suckled me when I was born,
but later fled in horror from
the signal of her shame.

I have known love, however brief,
and I love you, Brother.
I love all humans though they are a band
that I can never join.
And, too, I pity them that they should fall so short.
I have no place in this world save here.
I will love you more that you deliver
me from this cruel solitude.”

As the Bull-man speaks he senses
his kin drawing near.
He lowers himself to hands and knees
and draws himself to Theseus’ side.
His great horns tangle in among
the folds of Theseus’ robe and gently pull
then slide away as Theseus spins
with wildly swinging sword.
The sound of Theseus’ thundering heart
fills the Bull-man’s ears he is so close.
“Show some courage, man. You mark the lines
of ritual where others not yet born
will step in ages hence. Show them some grace.”
Theseus flails again, his weapon cutting air.
“Do not beat at me like a frightened child.
I am already bled by years of solitude.
You need but make the final cut.”
The Minotaur has bowed his massive head
and Theseus, with a desperate lunge,
thrusts his sword between the down-curved shoulders.
Plunging through hard-muscled flesh and bone
the knowing tip seeks out his brother's heart
as Theseus collapses to the floor.
His quivering thighs are bathed in blood as
his brother’s massive head sinks to his lap.

In Minotaur’s exhaled breath the smell,
sweet-sour, of fermented grass recalls
to Theseus a childhood vision of
a flower-strewn field and a sand-rimmed stretch
of passive sea. A sharp pain grips his heart
as he hears Ariadne’s voice
praying to the gods to save his life.