

World Diverted

Earth takes us in awhile as transient guests;
we live by habit, which we must unlearn.

Anna Akhmatova, “There Are Four of Us” (translated by Stanley Kunitz)

The river where the Sioux boys dashed the carp
upon the rocks because they were trash fish
was dammed up and diverted.
The boys I feared and envied
not because they were Sioux boys
but because they skipped school, fishing irreligious all day long
while I, timid as a chapel mouse, dared not miss an hour
beneath the towering eyes of black and frowning nuns,
are dead in gunfights, parched with thirst from type 2 diabetes,
cirrhotic in the penitentiary,
reading Zane Grey pulp with yellowing eyes.

The house I lived in as a boy
in the South Dakota town of trains and steeples,
came down in a maul of clattering hammers,
clutter of grey plaster, laths, and horsehair,
a house so broken by the generations
of Irish bully-boys and coal-haired shy colleens long-dead
I doubt that anyone even noticed
the hole I bored with penknife in the bedroom wall
to watch my virgin aunt Peg in the bath
while the world took turns,
a peephole moon cast shadows on the snow,
and icicles wept out their days upon the muntins.

The cathedral school in which I learned my Latin and long lessons
closed when the young priest
with the shock of chestnut hair
whom in my genuflections I tried so hard to please
but whose eye always narrowed
on my pretty little brother,
was sent for some mysterious reason back to Flandreau,
with the last tall nun on the last day
when I slammed down the lid
of the long-suffering wooden desk
at the last 3:30 bell and raced down to the river
to watch the Sioux boys dash the heads of carp
upon the rocks, the shattered orange-pink scales,
the cloy of fish-slick stones and slip of mucus,

tangled filament and hooks, sad, broken lips.

If you look for the old cathedral school, the house, the boys,
you will not find them where they were
in their accustomed places in that northern town.

If you look tonight for the cold winter moon,
you will not find it where you left it,
shining on the trainyards and the roofs of rooming houses.

And if you look for me tomorrow,
you will not find me who I was.
The world has unlearned all of its long habits.
I never was the world’s guest; the world was mine.

The Fault, Dear Brutus

The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars
but in our cells, ghost ships shuttling our wills
upon the busy enzymatic tides
to the far outposts of the bone and nerve.

My cunning and my hatred of smug men,
that balding, simpering queen of Bithynia
whom Nicomedes pinned down on his couch,
a despot lubricate with Asian spittle,
the great man twittering like a conquering moth,
were stitched into my chromosomes at birth,
a hate so great that even as a boy
I took on Sulla’s brat in fisticuffs
and would have kicked his shins and blacked his eye
if our tutor had not separated us.

And now while we fret idle, driftwood fools,
this ponce plays pretty at the falling sickness,
foaming at the mouth, when it’s convenient,
knowing that a strapping young centurion
will force his sword between his yellowed dentures
to keep the prick from biting off his tongue.
And this is Rome?

Friend, the things that we might do together,
I, jackal-headed, dangerous, and you,
a handsome man born in a wicked world
where beauty cruelly tyrannizes men;
I, busy in the history of knives
while Porcia stabs your palate with her tongue
and twists her fingers in your glossy curls.
This temporizing will no longer do,
for scheming with slack nerve is impotent,
and beauty has responsibilities.

Let’s make this despot his own haruspex,
his final words not et tu Brute but
my uncoiled entrails tell me that I’ll die
of daggers here upon the Senate steps.
(His self-reflections never trawl too deep.)

I know a vates who is serviceable,
has ominous dates at hand for any month,
and falconer for hire who’ll let his birds

out for a nighttime shrieking. We'll consult
the almanacs to find the perfect day
when the moon blot out the sun in an eclipse;
the comets, bloody rain, and all the rest
we can manage easily with lasers.

Our will will find some willing conduit,
a scruffy earringed small-town English hack
who'll make a shilling on the London stage,
and if his Cassius is pimply-faced,
his Brutus snuffling through a crooked septum,
and if we cringe when they fall clumsily
upon their wooden swords, at least they play
at our brave deeds—but only if we act.

Sure, old kings will still go mad upon the moors
and drunken porters piss on Scottish doors
because they do, because they always have,
but if our fate be stranded in the cells,
the blackamoor won't suffocate his bitch,
those dago teens won't feel each other up
and kiss themselves to death in the cold tomb,
that moping Danish prig will fail to act,
resort instead to Prozac for his moods.

So, brother, if you find your will is stalled,
a trireme stilled in cytoplasmic seas,
if you don't have the requisite $x-y$,
I know a woman who is man enough
to make her point by stabbing her own thigh,
a manic virago who understands
the hate of tyranny cannot be quenched,
as you must certain find out when she snuffs
the orange coals of her tongue in your pretty mouth.

Astyanax

Hiding in bellies of airplanes, the wicks of their eyes soaked in petrol, the Argive terror come once again with the dawn bloody-fingered and wearing white helmets of tusks stitched together like dominoes made out of shiny-toothed boars, the blind killers, to topple the topless two towers in a frenzy of fire the city of commerce and industry, boulevards, subways, and tony boutiques in an orgy of butchery, huge broken knuckles of gashed stone and spears of plate glass tall as Trojans, the vast bloody cakes of red flesh raining down in a glutting of swords while the knees of the towers were buckling, the Hudson become once again the Scamander still burning, the sacrifice billowing up to the ravening skies of Manhattan.

Those

breakers of horses some two hundred fell from the floors of the towers to graded paving stones: Some were pushed by a crush at the windows, some blinded by smoke smut too stupid to know they had come to the edge, and still other ones leapt for their lives to their deaths, choking better to drown in the air than to drown in the wash of the suffocate petrol. Some jumpers held hands as they drafted down. Friends? perhaps lovers? or two who had shared the same cubicle twenty-three years without saying hello but determined that though we must die by ourselves they would not die alone. And the pimply-faced red-headed boy from the mailroom too shy till this moment to speak to her takes by the hand the plump married young mother of two from the Bronx and through snagged teeth whispers her, “So it is time. Shall we go?”

Videos show these lost

fallers of Ilium drifting down raglike or fluttering excited, some playing at somersaults, aerialists frolicking each in performance (though one woman modestly holds down her skirt to prevent it from splaying indecently). Each of them woke by himself to the nightmare of gravity, rush of an ear-wincing wind as he tore through the awnings of sidewalk cafés, each torpedoed, and burst through the windy black pavements of Troy and to blackness forever, there fallen or thrown by the Argives debauched in their carnival killings the sirens’ hosanna from Patrick’s Cathedral, the tocsins exhausted.

But one from the clouds of the ninety-fifth floor in the office of Marsh and McLennan, professional services, stepped off the window ledge so nonchalantly he might have been strolling through doors of a lift. Of all those who fell terrified plunged from the towers that day only he understood that a falling must fatally follow the building of towers, that even the towering father whose horse plumes will frighten us into the bosoms of nurses and wives, knew that even he falls and becomes but a chine of raw ox-meat, his wounds kisses puckering from sharp lipsticked spears and the killer with Greek eye-slits drags him around and around the two

towers behind an orange bulldozer dead.

There was nothing so routine as rising that day from his desk, to collect all his papers, to walk to the window as if to remark that the weather looked ominous, step on the ledge and to fall through the atmosphere, fall without fireman’s net or the webbed net of fate fixed to catch him, he catching an image reflected in glass of the towers a boy who had fallen from the sky like a dying young god who was Troy’s other hope.

What did it matter that children are casualties, paying the tax on their father’s mad vanities? What did it matter the boys his own age with whom he had been playing just yesterday baseball upon the acropolis lawn, those two brothers Thymbraeus and young Antiphantes entwined in the knots of sea pythons because their old man had called Greeks Greeks?

What did it matter the bitch pathological liar with barbed wire hair who had screeched out that bloody Achaean hearts beat in the bellies of planes, who were hopped up on poppers, cantharides, pills, that among them the son-thirsty son of the man who had dragged the boy’s father who screamed like an eagle had vowed to avenge his own father’s weak tears in a moment of womanish sympathy, gotten of woman and woman himself but born mad to be brutal who found a new faith to give cause to his bloody psychopathy. What did it matter that she would be strapped to an altar by sweat-matted Locrians, greased with their spittle, and raped to the nub?

What did it matter that just before falling he saw in his dizzying eyes in a red New York harbor the burning of water the thousand unsettled who followed like formicant insects with purpose one man who was bent under burden of piety, man on his back like a haversack, clutching the hand of a candle-capped boy, the man’s wife left behind in the orgy of fire become a dead wick of black carbon returning to fetch her Versace hand bag, while he clutched in the other the *lares, penates*, the fond household gods of Algonquians and old Dutch patroons, Peter Stuyvesant? What did it matter the refugees willing to risk the horizon, the skyline was riven with masts while the spires of gods of that city were burning behind them, the falling man knowing that they too would build up their towers in other walled cities of wide lanes and tram cars, that they too would tumble down buildings in orgies of blood to be washed by the sea to the shores of new empires and knowing their impious jets too would cut the pale throat of the sky, that their hop-headed warriors would pry the veiled priestess to unholy shards and America forfeit its right to be tragic?

This was the man of all men who knew
falling that towers will always be raised to be razed until history
waves its last flag, its last widow dies clutching the medals her husband won
falling on alien soil in the last sputtering war until, everything
vertical made horizontal, the earth becomes flat yet again and its
gods are all dead.

Would it have mattered if seeing him falling past
stories a god interfering had reached through the greasy opacus of
ashes, had scooped him from air and then set him down gently in Smyrna two
hundred or five thousand miles away in the fields of white clover and
silos, of gambrel-roofed houses, the tilted green valley where Pleasant Brook
flows through the veins of the poets to mix with the sludge of the Tiber?

Afterwards helmeted rescuers up to their eyes in the ashes of
brokers, accountants, cinereous boys who had shuttled the lunch carts from
story to story, the tarry mascara of blonde secretaries, the
noisome black flies in the dead air of soothsaid September, men carrying
corpses upon their bent backs like rucksacks, could not find him amid all the
potsherds, the broken amphora with pictures of men running naked a-
round and around a clay track or Odysseus laying his infant son
down in the furrows before the bronze plow and the rebar of iron ropes
twisted in bold and fantastical shapes, into hearts, crucifixes and
writhing snakes flung from the talons of bald eagles, he having vanished to
vapor and atoms.

How shall we plaster the hole in the sky where the
towers once stood, shall we paper the hole that the man with his briefcase in
hand while the wind was on fire with the swirl of our contracts and folders and
pages of blank actuary reports fell so casually through because
Troy never mattered?

The Muse I Married

The muse I married, my prophetess and seer,
who once arrested lightning from the gods,
now gossips at the fence with Kathy Kuhar;
sinks to her Slavic ankles in the backyard mud,
her hair tacked up with clothespins;
whinnies out I saids, she saids, he saids
and clucks about the Devlin girl’s behavior.

The mad, divining bride who shook in fits
when random gales of gods blew through her,
now hikes up her skirts at every chance she gets
and dances to amuse the neighbor girls.

Oh where is inspiration when the crazed
Cassandra of North Sawdust Drive
who stood upon a scaffolding of stars and seas
and screeched out oracles
now snores in front of flinty television skies,
her eyes rolled back like clamshells,
while I warm coffee from the day before
and pack the children’s lunchpails?

Oh where is inspiration when the mad suburban sibyl
who, frenzied, read the flights of birds,
hair scratching like barbed wire at the sky,
now gabbles on and on and on and on
with recipes for budget-saving chicken,
bawling halfway up and down our street in self-congratulations,
giddy with the noise of her own tongue?

Or have the gods themselves descended
to shouting out the weather and trifling cures for head lice,
to recipes for scouring sinks and haggling over prices,
to meddling with a pretty girl’s fall from grace?

The gods, I know, will always speak in riddles,
which we may never understand.
But must I scribble down this silly hinny’s chatter
to catch at the divine wind?