

Hush | Harbor

HUSH HARBOR

*Colored people who left white churches built invisible institutions
Sometimes called hush harbors. – The New Yorker*

Of all the things to have: the blues.
A man plays a chord, two in the morning.

There's a Gospel hurt in him
that gets you thinking, there's more than

a woman he's telling on, but there isn't:
You know I don't want you, little girl,

if you don't want me, goes the song,
and out the door goes the woman,

suitcase in hand, into the road,
without so much as a by-your-leave.

There's a reason he doesn't ask her
to stay, of course, and it's so he can sing

the blues: *Have you ever loved a woman,
O man, better than you did yourself—*

and those who stay to listen
hear only the good woe; shake their

heads and hang their hats: Amen.
When he says, *Have Mercy,*

he doesn't mean show some
compassion; it means he's touched

by something. Holy ghost
or hard angel, only he can tell.

It's been said white preachers
used to skip over Moses in Sunday

sermons; couldn't let the coloreds
in on scripture whose one straight

point was *let my people go*.
But no one's letting go of anyone

tonight who hasn't already left;
no one here who hasn't made

hard noise from the rattling
hollows. And if it isn't Jesus

in the dirty kitchen, it's a gone
woman who takes you to church.

CRUST OF BREAD, AND SUCH –

Neither the risen dough, or the plush
Square with its savory load, drip
Of marmalade or butter – I want the morsel,
The plate peppered with crumbs, the crust
Of bread. I want the edges, jagged where the knife
Kneads its urgent imprecisions, the scrawny
Bit on precious China. I want a small heart,
The color of old quartz and burnt rust.
Let stars do their work on an opposite sky,
Constellate the impossible shape
Of a far boy. Which is to say, I'm through
With want, as a cleaver to his crust.
I'm done the way rain is done
With its tinny shudder crossing glass;
The way the heart is done doing time
In a hard place – a clear shimmer of sky
Begging the same question, *What,*
What do you want?

MAY PANITIKAN BA ANG MGA PUTA?

Or: Is there a literature for whores?

– from a misread line by National Artist Rio Alma

This isn't the first you've heard of it, or the last:
Paris, Brussels, Lahore. Across stadiums
And parking lots. They open skin
So it evens out outside and within. When I read
Of flush evenings ending in crushed flesh, I know
This is true literature. I know the irony
Of the passing tourist making the wrong stop
At the wrong time; the local hanging an Open sign
On paneled glass before a human blast. I know
The onomatopoeia of boom, the snake-like hiss
Of a lit fuse. The mother crying for a child
White from debris, the American in a foreign city
You wouldn't know from a passport picture,
Only that its flipped pages reveal a Smith
Or a Jameson. Such literature achieved here,
Enough to put our masters to shame. I know
The contrast red affords on monochrome
Cities, the ink of human flesh on white-washed
Walls. Is there a literature better than
The literature of whores? Is there another way
To know my beloved than by this fear,
Another way to hold my child
Than so near, he moans in pain.

EVEN WHEN I HOLD YOUR LETTER IN MY HANDS,
I AM NOT TOUCHING YOU

-Jan Brevin

Night folds and folds itself
like envelope seams to some
imagined center. Like envelope seams,
night folds and folds. I want to be

slit open and not sealed closed.
You tell me Desire is epistolary.
It isn't the poem but the distance between
the address and the addressee.

Dickinson wrote poems on envelope flaps,
in a script so small, one critic likened it
to the fossil tracks of birds.
Three letters addressed to *Master*

present some possible amours.

In a flap edged like home,
Dickinson writes: *Hope builds a house.*
Higginson thinks Emily
is a scared little mouse:

I must name my bird without a gun,
He writes, *like Emerson.*

The first time I held you close, I felt
how human skin is paper thin,
how contact isn't touch, it's skin so sheer,
you can feel the heart beneath it.

*One note from a bird is better
than a million words,* Emily writes,
on an envelope flap the shape of a wing.

Which gets a critic thinking
the shape of paper can determine

what gets written. Birds fly out of fear.
Some birds sing notes too high
for human ears to hear.

Emily writes to Higginson,
"You saved my life."
He's only certain
she'll withdraw on close
inspection, like a shell.

You tell me how your mornings
fill with slow amours on stolen beds,
how your lover's body folds into yours,
flap and peel. I slip my heart
into an envelope I cannot seal,

Instead I spill into the paper folds,
as numbers to a ledger. As Emily
to Higginson or Bowles,
her brother's woman, Susan.

That no one knows to whom
she wrote, or why our Emily
goes unkissed, we cannot posit
more than this: how needless

is tenderness —
pencil lead on a grid of squares,
an envelope that goes unposted,
however quivering the script —

*We spoke to each other
about each other
though neither of us spoke —*

Who will make of our desires
such gorgeous architecture?
Who will account for how brave
we were, you and I,

building cathedrals
out of paper.

SEVEN KINDS OF STORIES

Nothing tonight but the lovesick churr
of sudden crickets. I sling dark thoughts
across the room, see where they fall.
I do not want to sleep. I flip the pages of a book.

A woman strings bright threads across a loom,
trusts piety to bring him back.
In wavering light, silence answers: *Soon*.
Cinderella scrambles for lentils on the floor,

Empties each grimy handful in a pot.
I do not want to sleep, I scramble
for a point in an unusable plot.
Penelope unravels a thread

Because the tapestry suffers from
too much red. A boy is plunged
headlong into a river, dry at the heel
where his mother fastens her hand.

Cinderella cannot *forgive*,
but knots her brows to *understand*.
I do not want to sleep. There are plots
I think I know by heart, but I can't tell

who left, or returned, or broke the spell.
They name the boy Achilles and bind the heel
in leather, calfskin, the barks of ancient roots.
He wonders at the godly foot, warned against

the smallest harm: a stone, a bramble,
a stick. In Messina, Benedick
outwits Beatrice and wins the scene,
calling her his Dear Disdain.

She makes a pact with the god of wit
to win the play back.: this is only
one scene; there are four other acts.

You sleep and do not read,
you sleep while I turn page after page
in dim light, follow a plot I can use
to know your mind.

A Pumpkin does not a carriage make
In real life, but it will do in Cinderella.
She eases a foot into a glass slipper
Bright as stars and cold as ice.

Midnight, She promises, *Midnight*,
Paris shoots an arrow clear through that coral
skin. Makes a moral out of human flaw,
as if the flaw meant human failing.

Penelope fixes her gaze in disbelief:
The olive tree so carefully pursued
turns on the loom into a map of Ithaca.
The odyssey isn't *his* return,

it's how her world extends without him:
beyond tree, or garden, the threads
on the loom. *Try*, they say, the slipper
on the urchin, and Cinderella

wins the world, the story, the Prince.
Seven kinds of stories and that's every
book we know, in a thousand variations,
yet I've missed one –

the stoned-eyed, impossible monster
we're meant to overcome. Was it Perseus
who told it first, was it Ishmael,
the snake-haired woman, the slippery whale

in an unruly sea? And what would you say
if I asked you tonight, say you found me
in this room, hunched over a page in dim light.

There's a boat and a whale and a sea.
Let the narrative tell it, and let us be.

REPORTLESS STATES

Even the phrase seems odd, like an anchor
Without news, hands married on the desk,

Gaze straight as a grid on a ledger. Only:
I have nothing to report, he says, no word

To get in edgewise. In a park, the peck of birds
betrays nothing more than the usual hunger,

old as the past, young as tomorrow. You ask
How are you? You send a picture by a window.

On the sill, roses too scant for a vase;
Leaves churl for water, but do not taper for space.

Reportless states. In city after city,
we locked arms, downed gin from a shared glass;

Knew the interior wasn't a room, it was vast sky,
the blue rim a moth takes for the moon.

Dear One, once we breached the rigid spaces,
bound at the hip, bone for bone.

What's distance to us but negotiation?
We hang a sign on paneled glass,

see how far the odds are with us: Love,
come in, sit down, I'm open for business.

PHOTOTAXIS

It's all the same with fire and flame,
The yellow rim of the brightest
candle. See how they hover and start
in wild flight without cause or aim,
pursue the yellow folly. A woman tells me
love is buckle on skin, whisk of a whip
at its hardest shake. The bright blue gash
on her inner thigh as he presses her
against the wall, saying *sorry, sorry* –
give to any plum wound
a dark arithmetic, and it evens out love.
Two moths swirl around a hollow shoot,
lit by a thin saber of light. Science tells us
they think it's the moon, but it won't be long
before the low plummet down.
Like moths to a flame, we say, but we call
only half the story. It might be the light
we know is the light by which we fall.
It might be. Come here.

CELLOPHANE

It wasn't like this before the fall.
If anyone knew you at all, it wasn't by
Aiming right on target. Dead center

Between the eye, or the thin
White line on your torso, dignified
By a downy fluff of hair.

If anyone knew you at all, it was by
Knowing how to miss: aim for the button
not the heart, aim for the fabric,

Not the skin, the flutter, not the beat.
You teach your husband how to be
Imprecise, because you rely so much on science—

Tell him how your father flew planes
Made of cellophane and wood,
How that little red propeller whirred

Against hard wind, how he wound *lift* into it
With a hook and a rubber band.
And he'll know that this nostalgia's

The hurting kind, your father gone
Six years now, your heart as straight and level
As only dead weight can make it.

He'll ask how your old man could ease
The cellophane into each plywood frame
Without the wood breaking—

And the trick, you say, was how he'd dip
The thing into liquid film, and wait until
It leveled so lightly, you'd barely

Think it was there. Daily, he'd approach
His burden, steadying the hand
Against its weight. On film so sheer, a breath

Could tear it from its frame.
You speak to keep the pain even,
It has to stretch across the years,

Length by heft.
You learn to break only as far
As there's still breaking in you left.

AS BLUE IS TO DISTANCE

*The world is blue at its edges and in its depths.
This blue is the light that got lost.
-Rebecca Solnit*

Of all the things to lose to air: blue.
Entrapment of clouds before it finds

Its way to you. Silhouette of mountains far:
Blue. And should I cross the looming

Far: the farther blue. No cure for the hard,
Hurt stain. No remedy for the ghost.

Even as I know to keep good house:
Know each till for its measured cure:

Salt for wine. Wince of lemon on the linen.
Fluoride for blood. They come off easy,

I loved you hard; as obsidian
in the slippery dark. As blue is to distance.

ULTRAMARINE

Someone knows someone who's seen Alice.
Someone knows from your chignon

There are diamonds in your hair, milky
Sapphires, forest-green emeralds.

You want to know facts and dates
And whereabouts. You pull, from its nesting

Strand, a tortoiseshell comb: *Last we know,*
Her house went up in flames in Intramuros.

Two marquise diamonds:
Someone saw Willie Fernandez pulling her

Out of a burning house.
And the child?, You ask, tucking

Behind an ear a mess of hair.
Gone, like the husband. And Alice?

No will to go on, had to be yanked
By a boy half her size into smoky daylight.

Manila's a thing of gorgeous ruin:
Genteel houses felled to the ground. Black

Facades pocked by bullets, shelled
By little more than a spark and a fuse:

A town like Alice.
On ivory keys, she made of her hands

Two mandarin fans. Blowsy Mozart
Afternoons. Chopin, as you dozed

In the *azotea*. Then early marriage,
And a boy she named, of all the things,

Bayani. Nowhere an Iñigo or Bastón.
There is not much now to go on:

Two lapis lazuli ear bobs,
Bought on a whim from a needy cousin.

Kohl-blue like the eyes of a princess
In older times. You can barter them for rice

Or powdered milk. Whisky. Tobacco.
But for you, there is only Alice:

*Santo Tomás is where she was seen last.
Burned beyond belief.*

Michelangelo would have killed
For this blue, That godly hue the masters

Reserved for saintly hems; the turbans
Of luminescent girls. This is the sheen

Renoir went into debt for: costly blue,
The blue to end all blues, most blue,

And most Alice, who doesn't know you
When you kiss her cheek on a creaky

Cot; who wouldn't know sky from this
Lustrous Blue. Whose meaning

Is lost on you, in your utter joy.