

Sisyphus on the Penrose Stairs: Meta-Reveries

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i. The Rock Itself

Pilgrimage

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks – who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived ‘from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *a la Sainte Terre*,’ to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, ‘There goes a Sainte-Terrer,’ a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander.” – Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

On our neighborhood, the streets are broken up after they put in new tunnels, precaution against flooding. Metro Manila is sinking.

I walk to the train station, unable to roll the car out. Thoreau would be proud, champion of sauntering, a word he had romanticized, making

the case for walking as an end in itself. He once lived in the woods, memorializing a pond (which was just like any other in New England,

sky blue in summer, flecked with shriveled leaves in autumn, solid ice in winter, and in spring – his triumphal season – translucent

with tears of transition). I imagine him on his daily four-hour walk, staying in the present, about which he loved pontificating, spotting deer

camouflaged in foliage, knowing more than thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. I myself am no saunterer, though that does not mean

I don’t see my city’s beauty: no quaint verdigris on our buildings. Wafer-thin tenements are festooned with lines of laundry. No gondolas

plying the canals; here instead, rainbow flotsam of plastic bags, tetra-packs, and bottles. Julie Andrews spun giddily before the Alps.

We have our mountains of trash. On the walls, city-sponsored graffiti to cover the vandalism of gangs. And watch out for the Sarimanok,

Maranao bird of legend, perchance emblazoned on the shiny armor of a jeepney, hurtling down the highway in cacophonous brilliance.

To the Beggar Boy Handing Out Envelopes in a Jeepney

I am sorry none of us gave you any money.
Most of the passengers averted their eyes,
but I adopted a scientist's pose, puzzled

at this specimen of modern life –
in this reclaimed area beside Manila Bay,
connected now to the airport terminals

by a network of flyovers, for the passage
of foreigners on their way to the new casinos –
a barefoot child, wearing a shirt that had

actual holes in it, a costume fit for the play
being staged at a nearby hotel, about a man
who goes to jail for stealing bread,

in another country and another time, set
to rousing music that makes the audience cry,
a genuine moment for which they're all too willing

to pay the ticket price. At the next stoplight,
the still-empty envelopes found their way
back to your scabbed hands. You hopped down

to the scorching asphalt, silent as you had first
come in, swinging into the jeepney's open back,
unwelcome as a scar. Your feet, naked but for

indigo bubbles of dried blood and pus,
scurried past the front tire of a black SUV,
disappearing from sight as our vehicle

lurched forward, leaving behind us
the forest of half-constructed buildings,
steel necks of cranes supplicating the sky.

Serendipity

My foot slipped on the stair step.
After too much wiping, the wood gleamed
with the worry of attentive labor
by the well-meaning house help.
I am teaching her to write. Her brows
knit each time I see her these days
as I await her book report
on *The Little Prince*. In a parallel world

as privileged accidents go
I tumbled down, broke my hip,
spent the rest of my days bedridden
fractures of self gathering
toward each other, possessed
by the memory of original unity.

In the wisdom of Leibniz's monads,
in this best of all possible worlds,
my fingers caught the railing in time.
Writing lessons are connected
to the traction of perspiration,
to the choreography of instinct:
that constant buzzing beneath
the river of language, to which
we owe our perception of grace,
our imagination of what the fox saw
when he said what was essential
was invisible. I think of her bent head

as she mulled over my questions,
about her favorite planet
in the little prince's itinerary.
What serendipity – look up this word –
put him in the stranded pilot's path
at exactly that spot in the desert?
In that other universe, I could be
unconscious at the bottom
of the stairs. Perhaps I never
went to college, and this poem
was never written.

But I'm not, I did, and it was.

ii. *The Way Up And The Way Down*

Hope Chest

“It is typical of these cases that an indeterminacy originally restricted to the atomic domain becomes transformed into macroscopic indeterminacy, which can then be *resolved* by direct observation. That prevents us from so naively accepting as valid a ‘blurred model’ for representing reality. In itself it would not embody anything unclear or contradictory.” – Erwin Schrödinger, “The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics” (1935)

Have I told you of the cat in a box,
both alive and dead by a certain
interpretation? Quantum physics seems to say
it is our knowing that gives it a story:
a retroactive past in which it waited an hour
for nothing at all to happen, and the lid
opened to a pair of unblinking eyes.
Otherwise, an electron triggered a hammer
and the cat perished by poison.

Some days there is a demand for boxes
to be opened: occasions when surprise
is always good, as when you hear a bird call
and it could be any type of sparrow. I like
to open them and watch the ballerina
dance to Mozart, twirling on her tiptoes.
Other days, the forbidden is too compelling
and some obstreperous woman eats a fruit
or opens a box. You see, curiosity
is always a killer and the cat
dies in this version.

But who says we have to do anything
to disturb the perfect superimposition
of happiness and sorrow? I do not even mean
the strange ampersand of twilight,
some compromise of dark and light
that pretzel of “and”/”or” in which
through half-opened eyelids,
we say goodbye to dreams. I mean
the whole of having you
and the whole of not having you.
Two truths I refuse to choose from,
the only way I live with love.

The Ontological Proof

“... there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality.” – St. Anselm, *Proslogion*

As to what a poem means, there are many theories. Confessions to the wind, rumor of serif fonts. Bars of falling code. Today I gave a lecture on Anselm’s argument. I drew a thought bubble, inside of which was “God.”

Suppose what it denotes does not exist: puff of smoke, cloud, breath. Absence feels like a concrete nothing. How to measure the space between thought and incarnation?

There have been accusations that poems

are difficult to read, that they require a special hermeneutics of the mind. I am not a mind-reader and “truth” remains as slippery as entrails. From the slashed belly of animals, the poet portends the future, imagination an organ

no less than kidney, liver, heart. Either that, or what you put inside quotation marks can be contained by attribution, hearsay can save you from an invalid argument and you cannot deduce existence from a poem.

Butterfly Metaphysics

“Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly. What fun he had, doing as he pleased! He did not know he was Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and found himself to be Zhou. He did not know whether Zhou had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly had dreamed he was Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is what is meant by the transformation of things.” – *Zhuang Zhou*, translated by Patricia Ebrey

My dreams have been so vivid lately
as though the distance between conscious
thought and that other realm were walkable,
some ten minutes between the doorway
and the bus stop. Such concreteness
that grounds, this city on the other side
of waking. Last night, I was in college again,
obsessing over someone. So of course
when I woke up, I had to stalk him on Facebook.
Another time, we were under siege
and the flaming pieces of a helicopter
were falling on the football field (the one
that had in fact been paved over
for a new building). I was happy to wake up,
thinking I had been reading about Syria
too much. The real world pivots on
disaster. That each day is a nightmare
is a story I tell myself, like the man
in Zhuang Zhou’s reverie who dreamt he was
an insect, winged, though it could also have been
the insect that dreamt it was a man. The wise
allege that life is sham, that the meta-
of the narrative is real, that we wake up
an infinite number of times. I shall not
lose sleep over the notion that we cannot
know, at least not until that morning
when the cocoon shall open
to iridescent unfurling.

But Death is Not an Optical Illusion

On my way out of the parking building,
I look up at the open stairwell stretching
twenty floors above, thinking of the jumper
who fell through just before All Souls' Day,
breaking an outstretched arm on a railing.
I crane my neck and the void goes on, the starting
point of her death magnified by nestled squares,
a tableau straight out of M.C. Escher's *Ascending
and Descending*. You never know what's going on
inside someone. Coiled pattern of guts, skein
of nerve and muscle, obeying their daily marching
orders. It is not for the body to ask why.
Some phenomena are difficult to fathom:
boredom, the porous border between tragedy
and comedy. There comes a day when up
is hard to tell from down. It is the precise point
the steps lead to infinite regress, forever delayed.
I suppose it is not unlike the journey of souls,
if these are things we can have, or are.
Art's deception is perfect. But she wanted out
of the frame, even at the price of falling to pieces,
breaking the promise of asymptote.

Silverfish

And there you were when I turned
the page of a book I left too long
on the shelf, your minuscule carcass
a yellowing dot, the sort of thing
people mistake for a stain: small
impurity, some besmirching
to blame on the manufacturer
until closer inspection shows segmented
abdomen, wisps of antennae and cerci jutting
from tapered bottom. Flattened, desiccated body,
you disrupt my reading. I want to magnify you,
sudden milestone smaller than the font, once
a living mouth that crawled into a biography
of Socrates – too small to be discerned by those
not used to reading between the lines. I try
to nudge you off with a fingernail, but you stick,
like a remark I swallow in junctures
when conversation moves too quickly,
then is forgotten. The page was to be
your graveyard, lone devourer of the book.
In the end, you were not enough
to consume it all. Take heart in smallness,
in what you cannot know; for example, the idea
of your place in the universe, or where you are
in the bookmark of time: your fossil the story
not of your loneliness, but ours.

Commitment to Orange

After *Impression, Sunrise* (1872) by Claude Monet

When night's retreating hair
slipped through the love-damp fingers
of dawn, you knew you wanted
to be a recorder of nuance, as when Monet,
looking out his window, committed the moment
to orange. You wanted proof
of how one tint bleeds into another
but the brushstrokes are jarring

the way someone leaves in the middle of a lecture,
reverie ends with the sound of clapping
and pigeons are startled into flight. You see,
abruptness is the illusion. If you look hard enough,
you can imagine the bridge where then
becomes now. For example when you notice
the season has turned, or the coffee has cooled.
Revenge of the forgotten, you think, or whatever
is missed when you are absorbed in one thing.

When Monet painted the sunrise,
he wasn't thinking of sunset, slices of time when light
is identical. He wanted water and shipyard emerging
from the mist, expecting the inevitable. Meanwhile
ambiguity stole in, the way a word is not what it is
and you wonder at the meaning of applause.
Agreement or relief. Love or fear. Beginning or end.

Consequences of Procrastinating About The Batteries

“The idea of desolate shores was much in Dalí’s mind at the time and he had been painting the empty beach and rocks of Cadaqués – without, however, a theme. The blank was filled in for him, he later recounted, when he saw some Camembert cheese which had begun to go soft and flow over a plate. The sight of it brought a subconscious image to the artist’s mind and he began to fill a landscape with melting watches, thus creating one of the most potent images of our time. Dalí called the painting *The Persistence of Memory*.” – Edmund Swinglehurst, *Salvador Dalí: Exploring The Irrational*

Allowed to lapse into lateness
long ago, the clock in my bedroom
is now ahead of true time, at least

by a certain interpretation. Left
to its own devices, it now points
to numbers with a logic known only

to itself, like a secret sun before
the advent of telescopes. Its ticks
punctuate day’s silent labors,

the Fates’ hands at work: Clotho
spinning thread, Lachesis allotting
length, Atropos dealing death.

One of the clock’s own hands, thin as
an eyelash, moves more slowly than
a real second. Some afternoons

feel longer than others, as when Dalí,
waiting for his wife, saw the melting
Camembert and took to painting

limp timepieces draped like pizzas
on the desert of existence. How go
clichés? Time stands still. Time waits

for no one. Time passes, like the scenery
outside car windows. But the present
is inside. Why is now the best time?

Thoreau and Thawing

This morning I opened the freezer
to spring thaw, broken ice plates
fallen on the ledge. (Their crash
sounding like furniture
toppling over next door.)
I knew last night's defrosting
has done its work,

this deliberate wait for icicles,
tears wrung from the hours,
a quality of concentration
distilled from the effortless:
ice cubes webbed by cracks
neural as lightning, presage
to thunder. The first time

I had read Thoreau, I knew
I had to see Walden for myself,
scrape the melting bracken
with the heels of my boots
on the still-frozen sandy shore.
Open his book, open a freezer
to Language's detritus,

accumulated silt of Nature's
self-observation: The genius
of a leaf preserving itself in snow.
I didn't know until this morning
I would return, again and again,
to a form that always tries
to equal a hidden force

shattering the ice.

By The Third Mojito

The genie is out of the bottle and I
don't know who is speaking for whom—
puppet or ventriloquist, clasped hands

or shadow dog on the wall, fingers spreading
to become dove. I'm speaking in tongues,
huddling with apostles, licks of flame

taking the place of speech bubbles. I am
the brightest candle at the party,
talking philosophy like Plato planting

rumors of sunlight in Socrates's mouth.
I smile serenely beneath the ice, imagining
people imagine me as Ophelia

of the Pre-Raphaelites, a floater
contemplating the transience of clouds.
My professor says the Self is less like

an avocado than an artichoke. We'll get
back to that. I'm enjoying myself too much
for the instruction of metaphor, reciting a poem

by popular demand. *In the sudden silence,*
she unravels herself like a well-read scroll.
They listen raptly for the final verse

awaiting the big reveal, the core of story
or the point of peeling. I can only
tell you how the striptease feels like

from the inside, astonishing archeologists
digging in the ruins: Freedom is knowing
that under the last layer lies so much nothing.

iii. The Imagination of Happiness

Ode to a Scorpio

He knows the many ways that pleasure
announces itself, tinctures of it coursing on skin
like the little teeth of sun
just after emerging from sea. He knows
we are made of salt. He can name whatever is broken
by its contours: Starfish, shell, seaweed
and I imagine sand feels cherished
in the junctures of his toes. He likes tickling
the piano keys, or they like to be tickled by him,
their sharp sighs knocking from behind your eyelids.
He is a walking disturbance of dreams.
Connoisseur of coffee, he knows that the best espresso,
if it could be heard, would be a world-class Italian aria.
Did I tell you he loves massages, because so much begs for kneading?
Tense shoulders. Gooseflesh like a field of porcupines
huddling in the wind. The sight of a lover crying. He knows
even heartbreak can be exquisite, as is the ritual coming
and going of waves, the terror of the shore
when overwhelmed by something we call feeling.
He knows the only way to live is to sting.

Operation
(A Valentine)

On our street, I saw a dog,
one of the neighborhood strays,
favoring her right hind leg. I turned
away, not wanting to picture
careening car, shattered bone,
high-pitched howl. It was the 14th
of February, a day whose violence
few would want to think about
like the legend of its namesake saint,
beheaded by an emperor, or massacre
of seven men in gangland-era
Chicago. The only wounds we want
are thorn-pricked fingers, for roses
are allowed their pint of blood.
When we allude to what is broken,
we mean that which can be repaired.
I have in mind my uncle's bypass
surgery, how they extracted
that clogged muscle, the chambers
of his life pumping on a steel tray,
how they put it back inside his chest.
By survivable cuts we mean
reaching inside for the gift
the receiver can choose to mishandle,
the part that oozes and splatters
but which, by some miracle, can be
restored in time, imperfectly
like a Christian martyr cradling
his chopped-off head by his side,
like a limping cur with her hind leg
tucked carefully under the hip.

Sisyphus

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” – Albert Camus

He stands watching the boulder roll back down,
as he must feel the cracks webbing his heart.
Before the gods, his crime's of some renown
so they have sentenced him to this strange art:

the endless, futile task. The x-ray chart
that shows a tumor. Winter's shriveled leaves
on frozen lake, starting to break apart.
Here, all the little lies the lover weaves

in casual talk. Here, all the dead to grieve
and we ourselves, lost in a sea of stars.
To push with all your strength, and to achieve
exactly nothing; to have come this far

full circle. Yet happy, he must still be
O stoic champion of absurdity!