Cruel mistress| Poems

Charles N. Blakemore

The University of Montana

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Cruel Mistress
Poems

by
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A. B., Dartmouth College, 1981

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for the degree of
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Cruel Mistress

A Professional Paper

by

Charles N. Blakemore, Jr.
# Cruel Mistress

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A long time ago all living creatures had perished. The world was no more than a sea — a gray, misty, icy swamp. One man remained, all alone, spared from the devastation. His name was Markandeya. He walked and walked in the stale water, exhausted, finding no shelter anywhere, no trace of life. He was in despair, his throat taut with inexpressible sorrow. Suddenly, not knowing why, he turned and saw behind him a tree rising out of the marsh, a fig tree, and at the foot of the tree a very beautiful, smiling child. Markandeya stopped, breathless, reeling, unable to understand why the child was there.

And the child said to him: “I see you need to rest. Come into my body.”

The old man suddenly experienced utter disdain for long life. The child opened his mouth, a great wind rose up, an irresistible gust swept Markandeya towards the mouth. Despite himself he went in, just as he was, and dropped down into the child’s belly. There looking around, he saw a stream, trees, herds of cattle. He saw women carrying water, a city, streets, crowds, rivers. Yes, in the belly of the child he saw the entire earth, calm, beautiful; he saw the ocean, he saw the limitless sky. He walked for ... a hundred years, without reaching the end of the body.

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1 From The Mahabharata, a film by Peter Brook; screenplay by Brook, Jean-Claude Carrière and Marie-Hélène Estienne.
Water Works
Left: you come to the crossroads.
If you find a goat’s head on a pole,
close your eyes and lick salt.
Then piss in the ditch: the snakes
smell the salt
and stay away.

Right: you find yourself
back where you have been.
Do you will recognize it? No.
It’s older. All the houses
are new. Your school chums
are school chums again,
but not yours. Your grandfather
is painting eyes on his boat.
The phone is ringing in the canteen —
it’s me, calling from New York
to ask about the weather and the winds.
Don’t answer.
Don’t go back.

My last night we stole a skiff
from below that big house on the hill
looking over Savana Bay on Gorda.
I watched you wave from the dock,
growing smaller and less distinct
as we rowed away. Antony
rowed an hour to the West Dog
where we shot rats with your pistol.
Someone had the same idea—
Antony heard the first report, the crack
from across the channel on the little Cockroach.

My other shooter,
my lefthanded reflection:
his hair parted down the middle,
carrying a small conch in his pocket
painted with angels and cats
for luck on moonless nights.
I call out my name to him.
He answers.
Odalisque

Say I was a sea captain in that life.
Say I sailed a barkentine, the Eloise, on the Azores run out of Lisbão.

I was a sea captain in that life.
I sailed a barkentine, the Eloise, on the Azores run out of Lisbão.
I found a green disc under my bunk and instantly knew its use.

You have taken my books.
You're no sea captain.
The color you paint your toenails is that of weathered brass. The salt on your neck and in your navel tastes vaguely impure, like spray — delicious.

Say I was a sea captain.
Say I had a dinghy named “Alouette.”

I was a sea captain.
I had a dinghy the crew called “Woody.”
She sang when the wind stroked her ribs and the spars rattled. Never mind.

Never mind the night breezes off Mosquito Island, the roll of the berth as we lay at anchor in North Sound plotting our run to Anegada so you could see Pomato Point and what the chart called “numerous coral heads.” That morning, with Fallen Jerusalem to port, you said four prayers, one each to your Gods and a last one to Sunday, which you had neglected for years.

The swell in Drake’s Channel is rising.
It will rise all through the night, and if we are not too drunk on this fine black rum we will rise with it.
Off the Invisibles

How could I see you?
Even then,

your reflection in the sea:
stars loose in your loose hair,
your lips part and fill
with phosphorescent creatures
from Virago's delicate wake.

And only that.
She vomited in the cockpit
on the coiled main sheet,
a spicy red ragoût of conch fritters,
fried plantain, blood and Ting.

The wind lifted the acid citrus smell
into the luffing canvas
and across Drake's Channel
trailing the storm
toward Tortola.

At night cats prowl all these islands,
and fruitbats kite between palms.
At dawn I heard your voice
in the waves on coarse sand

as I lay, anchored offshore,
perspiring beside her
smelling the salt that is your sweat
in some hotter future,
dreaming of fish and langoustines

and tar and mopeds and a reflection in pooled rain.
My Life For You!

(Love for Liesl)
Somewhere in all this motion resides a thing,
a perfect moment of clarity solid as a nail
but only you can see it. I can’t —

at the moment of seeing, a spider
crosses my plate and spoils
the perfect sunburst of egg yoke

and my appetite. Is this
universal signing? Your eyes glaze over,
your fingers thrum, and

unless you’ve coined a word, it’s not love,
not a gesture of binding and forgiveness.
How many legs do spiders have?

As many as the veins of an oak leaf,
an imperfect modesty to be sure, and no coy smile.
You have teeth, Love, you have tendrils.

The day has done waxing, the waters
move as waters will, filling gaps, soaking
and spoiling paper and ink. Are we surprised

by the quiet of the last hours of daylight?
The neighbors have gathered their toys.
The girls are even now locking their bikes.

I look up "gloaming" in your dictionary,
— I wanted to say "lexicon"
but someone has torn out pages

to roll cigarettes. Now I will never learn to say
"kiss me" in your touching language.
Eternity

Go all the way.
Turn the brass doorknob that reflects back into this room
a bent image of three hoses
and a pan of cream for the cat.
My kinder shadow stands outside the window,
one thin hand with bulging knuckles grasping the jamb,
the other pressed against the pane, smearing a rainbow
of oil between him and us.
Before you go, lend me your compact.
I must find some distance—

some tool to split light from shadow,
a way to fold my reflection
and stash it in my wallet between Nat's snapshot
and my bogus i.d.
Love goes on forever, doesn't it?
Like the air, like the sky,
like a snake swallowing its own tail.
Eternity: the mountain kneedeep in knapweed,
the number of pages in a book you've just begun.
I have been reading, though the scent
of wildflowers distracts me, the sweetness of violet
essence on your neck, the sound of kids fighting
in the playground and the rising light
as the sun burns off the morning haze.
I have been reading
the same line over and over.
How Bad is Bad?

In what particular manner ought we to continue?
The orator has lost the third page, yet
he will flip
from the second to the fourth
without breaking,
even for breath.

He is touched, you see. The stillness of the morning
after a night's rest throbs in his head,
yet he still longs for stillness and fury,
as if the earlier fury
did not sate him. As if.

They wake tired. Liesl
aches in muscles used solely
for satiety. The coffee has no kick but a liquor bite
back of the tongue,
the swollen tongue prodding
thin gums for a taste
too much like chalk to kiss through.
They struggle to learn how to shut up.

We say, from here:

A walk might suffice
if they find a shady avenue of box elders
that neither knows
or can recall.
Afterwards, I rolled devil’s food crumbs into black balls between my fingers. We talked about famine. I was hungry again after all that talk.

Your voice sounds so distant on my little machine that I cannot see across the street any more. I cannot make out purple, not even the flicker your dress makes, moving off your hips, cannot see the flame which lights the cigarette.

I see black spaces in my dreams. Every space is empty, every patch of light just a hole in something else. I’m hungry again.

This was a house with you here. It is still a house. I am still a man. I open the pages of the book you left me but it makes no sense. For a moment that’s beautiful: the cream page flecked with tiny, precise black shapes like tadpoles. Isn’t that the trick? To live in the house? To drink the tea that’s steeped too long from a coffee mug? Today I used an ice pick to punch a new hole in my belt. I sit at the table. The light has caught your hair just... there. Wait for it.
Ecstasy

She soon loses her tiger skin.
Fronds remain for modesty.
A satyr chases her,
the prospect of ravishment burning in his eye.
And hers. She’s coy,
she can’t be caught. Or can she?

How to do things here?
Submit the proposal for consideration.
Discuss its pros and cons.
Shake on it.
It’s mine,
more than I had hoped for.
Mine to polish with lemon oil,
to box up and bury in the attic for my own daughter someday.

Be indiscriminate. Please.
Ignore the tapping
my toe makes against the headboard.
I’m only thinking of growing up.
I want to kiss whoever it was
chose this pattern for sheets.
No, I don’t mean your mother
but the designer at the textile mill.
He seems to me to be
the last original thinker.
And what a shame to wrinkle them
with this passion.

I carried this thing
that’s now become my one support.
My god, I feel old. My hands and feet ache.
Let me shut my eyes for a second,
I promise I’ll be right back.
I hate to disappoint you,
but I’m not all you’re expecting.

Sleep now, my dear. Wake when the earth’s lit again.
When you can see what you’re looking at,
or for, or into, or away from.
Down from this hill, in the streets of the city,
when the light is right, you can see
the wild dogs running in single file.
I feel so rich, so full of blood.
My telephone rings constantly. I refuse to answer.
When I do, there's nothing, just
the hum of a tuning fork
I feel in my teeth,
where I feel most things.
My hand is open.  
See the veins bulge  
over wrinkled knuckles.

I open the door of your old Zil.  
The snow is falling  
somewhere — not here.  
Here we sit behind flowering shrubs in terrace cafés  
opening letters from exiles in Brooklyn,  
sipping lattés spiked with slivovitz.

‘Temperate,’ you say. ‘Mediterranean weather  
so suits St. Ullu’s Day.’ Oh, oh,  
it’s irresistible, my love. Listen —  
You snort, drag your monogrammed cuff  
through a puddle of coffee.  
Listen, or I shall spank you:  
The plaster has come to grief in Venice.  
Could there be some connection with Chernobyl?

My sister Tika says they burn the forest for fuel.  
She says the quince wither on the limb  
and Catholics kiss openly in alleys.  
What will you do, Tolya, you old queen trop triste  
now that the oomph is out of omphaloskepsis?  
The Institute of Socialist Studies is blank and boarded  
and your catalogues line some hag’s birdcage  
on Eisenstein Prospekt.

You slurp hideously.  
I love you.  
Two cats watch us from the balustrade.
My hand is open.
See the wrinkled knuckles bulge between the veins.

Liesl comes toward me out of the mist, white teeth and eyes, dark skin bleeding into the night. The Black Sea soughs and the sand scratches my right eye behind the lid.

The clerk at the clinic called it a 'floater'—a corneal scratch that follows my glance as I shift focus like a gnat on a spyglass—no grief. A simple procedure. I’m not covered.

Her toes are slightly webbed. She barks in her sleep. I spy over her mons to the moonlit sea. I swear, from this vantage on Saint Botolph’s Eve I saw three hundred fifty miles to the Bosphorus the lap of Europe the globes of Istanbul

Pour me another absinthe, I’m already more than half wormwood. I see shapes of moving clouds in the cracked plaster overhead. οἵεν ἡλικία ὄρεω τοὺς ἑαυτοὺς βουνοῖς.* This shrub? Pluck it out. Squeeze it dry. Feed the cats clotted Devonshire cream on the Customs House steps.

*when holy were the haunted forest boughs.
Extase, extase!
Drop a plumbline and strike
three scriveners with poised quills
watching the subtle shifting of her hip
as it obscures the patterns
of a Zapotecan cushion:
Whistle-clean, Pistol-hot and I,
Tepid-tea, leftover from a tournament
of contract bridge.

A metaphor is like a road,
like the track she left down the mountain
after rolling through the dry beargrass in high summer,
like a rubber ball’s trajectory from one poem
to another, like
a Rosetta stone for ley lines: an answer,
not always affirmative, to the simple query.
Is the term clichéd?

Touché, quotha. Dig the ball, watch it ca-
rom, india and nothing but. A poem. A ball.
A ‘like.’ Nothing but. A track
to follow too late no ball, but broken grass
and a round lack in the air.
Description remains, suggesting
everything and a fat girl at once.

Extase! Odd’s bodkins!
Her engineer’s still talking to his engine.
The mistress pouts for her pound of flesh,
for ounce for ounce she can’t confect
sufficient supplement to fill her.
If only feed were nourishment,
if only balls rolled backwards.
Il Fait Trop Chaud, Mademoiselle

1. Dans le metro, entre Neuilly-sur-Seine et Concorde

He gazed through the glass partition,
past the ad for Liberation
and the blue baseball cap,
into her grey eyes successfully resisting a smile
while staring past him into blue grey dusk.

There will come, he prayed,
an hour when his ears will unstop,
when he will speak with the voice of a barrel-chested man
in an empty room
to this frangible circumstance
in its ripe moment.

Until then, canceled tickets swell his billfold,
his keys flicker in the inconstant light of the hallway,
dogs’ barking registers as a fear
of love and of barren spaces. He can hear
her breath piercing all the other sounds contained in that car
with what might have been his name
in the voice of his mother.

2. Clocking fat lightning

There are clouds. There are clouds.
Bright lines of lightning cross the plump sky,
momentary latitude and longitude scratched
on an inverted hemisphere.
One one thousand, two.
Florid seeing.
Waiting for rain.

First, a tapping on the leaves.
The moment may be drawn out,
the sole possible moment to speak
of love and lightning in one breath.

Silence, waiting for a thunder roll.
It's too hot, Miss, to show those teeth.  
I am too timid, and you, Miss, too hungry —  
ravenous, dark as an inkwell.

But we will spread the table. Yes.  
Lay out the bleu trout,  
the sweet cream and sweeter liquor,  
fruit ripened to preposterous richness.

We eat as we've been taught to eat,  
with our fingers,  
with a studied insouciance.  
Lick the juice from your lips? Oh Miss,  
tender Miss without lack or surplus,

you smile so wide to swallow me,  
a seed lodged in the gap between your incisors.
Being Done To

In a dark room
I sit watching a box of light on the far wall.
I hear sounds come
from the beautiful woman in the box
dressed in basic black and grey,
herskin aglow with grey accents,
herredd lips grey,
depending on the light.

Is it as easy to fall in love here
as anywhere?
I am essentially the same,
the central difficulty.
Another is breathing in this close room
surrounded by a sweating, whispering,
antsy humanity sharing
none of my grey longing.

I grip the sticky arms of my seat.
Try not to think of grey.
Imagine a world that hard,
soft, and weak—
jello for supper but no dessert;
a long line of lights rushing to be bigger,
knees giving way, joints buckling, muscles flaccid;
Shakespeare, quoted in a movie.
Carp

Last night we were together again.  
You moved into my house,  
flooded the living room  
and stocked it with giant carp.  
I watched orange and black fish  
twist, swirl and peck each other  
through water dyed brown  
by the hardwood bottom.

I am in a city of wide avenues  
and boulevards with island dividers  
all pointing to the west,  
where the sunset casts angular light  
across the stern facades.  
A few tall trees die  
of dutch elm disease.  
Most of the sky is stolen by rooftops.  
One thin figure  
paces, scratching his scalp, leaning  
to sniff for wind, tossing  
handfuls of meal  
to hungry pigeons.

Sometimes I forget your name.  
I will always know your face,  
your white spiked hair,  
the blazing morning light through white drapes,  
how clean it all felt.  
Your sweet sweaty nape frightened me.

The night before, we’d rode an hour on the subway.  
Ocean Parkway, you said. I remembered that.  
Now I’m back. There’s still no traffic,  
like a Sunday morning, or an August evening  
when everyone in the world  
is at Coney Island or Jones Beach.
In the Round
Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny

In the odd, cherry-colored sliver spoiling the blue of Liesl’s otherwise faultless iris, floats a cone. The same forces as molded the rhinoceros horn cached beneath the counter of the Chinese pharmacy. This is not coincidence; any more than the dust on the racked jars of roots and bark. The streets and choked gutters smell of fish and gunpowder. The trumpeting taxi horns rebound from Mott Street’s brick facades as the india rubber ball caroms off the wainscoting, through the swinging dog door and into the dull, taxing wash of August sun on the grass. What place is this? And does it differ significantly from that same place we make love, Liesl? The plain stained-glass heart suspended in the fan’s breeze may be your world — red and transparent — without giving a clear answer. My job is to watch, to shiver sometimes, to cut a page in each old book you rescue from a dead aunt’s cellar. Yours is but to do, or do not, the straphanger’s dilemma: to step off into space in Chinatown and be reborn.

Can you hear it? The sound is unimportant. When struck, the spheres simply vibrate here in this windy house beyond the clattering almond grove — here in this loft with three fixture fees, a phalanx of light shafts falling through streaked windows, an ancient aroma of subgum and tea — here rolling down our hill through the sharp, compliant timothy and the chlorophyll-soaked air,
down forever in afternoon light —
here, down here, up here, into
the twisting heart.
The fan drones.
Eclogue to Corncats

I asked the rocks, and was told
this is certain: the gold piles
of corncats the muezzins stack
for brides burn white in heaven.
My father’s barber, Patrick,
named for a killer of snakes,
insists the fresh widow’s torch
burns attar of roses.

There are no physics of love:
any savannah oaf can
build a green box from needles
and tree sap. I asked the rocks
to make me a byre, open
to the zephyrs and stars. Now,
I fight with vermin. Lovers
rut in the sump. They yodel late

and plan chess moves in the loft.
Carmen’s armory’s empty:
her eye isn’t the same since,
the color’s changed, the large glass
throws rhomboid boxes of light
across your fields of rye. Still,
she leaves it to hang, to twist
with the wind. Her metaphor —

let the friar Marcel have
his hosannas and his mushrooms.
Carmen, deflowered by the
bottle rack, keeps Lotto stubs
impaled on its spikes. You ask
the rocks: when do green fields burn?
Will we see a wicker man
where lombardy poplars stood?
Charles Fournier, the watchmaker, has found the bent gear. He lifts it from the works with jewelers’ tweezers while the hunched man in the alley beats a copper bell calling the cats home. Sad, Charles thinks, pouring kerosene into a glass ramekin to cleanse the damaged wheel. But the hunched man has two francs in his pocket. The cats have even less. When they return, he will gather them in a jute bag still smelling of potatoes and damp earth, he will tote them across the Pont Neuf then return, and repeat this until morning. Because a young apprentice draftsman commuting from Neuilly to the Seventh heard a pennywhistle on the subway and thought of his bachelor uncle in Normandy drinking calvados with a red-haired woman in the barn east of the orchard. His uncle sets down the bottle, a wheel of hard cheese and some windfall apples, quartered, on an overturned eggcrate. The boy can hear their laughter from his bedroom as he falls asleep. He checked his uncle’s pocket watch, which kept perfect time but which he frequently forgot to wind. He was early. He dropped a coin and watched it roll several meters then retrieved it to buy the morning paper from a sidewalk vending machine to read while he waited for the shop to open.
Thanksgiving

The pilgrims came to town that morning
beneath a cloud of dust and music.
They made a rare parade
in their hairshirts, chanting psalms
and laying on the cat.
They arrived early, refreshed.
I suspect they slept somewhere close by
to make the best impression.
They rang the doorbell. I hid in the kitchen.

I found a prom dress in their fire ring
on Mount Sentinel:
pink chiffon, one strap loose,

the other flung a foot away.
Where did they write with the brown spraypaint, and
what did it say?
The cloud of flies behind the bush
made me nervous.
I thought of an old carport,
stacked cardboard boxes all about,
with one gap wide enough
to roll a ball through.
It is not fun when done for redemption —
No Ferris wheel will woo a prophet
or roll us all home.

Pilgrims, sitting up straight in airplane seats,
tear pages from magazines.
They play games with each other:
pointing out fairgrounds from thirty thousand feet,
cursing gypsies,
answering “Because.”
Because they’re pilgrims.
The Unprogrammable

Let us imagine the gardener
who planted the palm tree in this backgarden
off Divisadero.
He had chewed the flavor from his Beemans
sitting in the breakfast nook in a darting sunlight
ruminating unemployment.
He picked the gum off his tongue with thumb and forefinger.
The puce face of the building across the fence
insulted his eye
so he looked away, back to his deal table
into the patches of light on the tablecloth.
They moved as the clouds moved, as the wind
moved the oak branches.
He thought, Why am I here? And then,
Where else?

A woman from upstairs
had wedged a coconut between her thighs under her skirt
and waddled bowlegged to the bus.
The husk scraped her soft skin raw.
That night, after supper, she gazed out
into the backgarden
and dreamt of the South Seas.
A palm tree there! where she could always see it.
She whacked the top off the coconut
with a cleaver,
mixed herself a piña colada
with the milk
and ate the moist white meat
with a grapefruit spoon.
She threw the shell in the trash.

This palm is not a coconut palm.
The gardener moved to Bodega Bay after seeing The Birds.
The woman took out the trash next morning,
when it began to stink.
The sunlight that escapes the oak
strikes palm fronds.
Praise the Lord.
Dose the Old Man (In Gold Letters)

When they had thrown away the map
and turned the asses loose to find their own gorse,
the Company inscribed their names
with brown spraypaint on a grey stone growing
to one side of the trail. Then it was theirs,

all of it. Period. Yet the next step came hard,
to dose the old man. Their instructor
in kite design. And Antony,
sitting in his wife’s parlour six years later
found his eye drawn
to the word “radicchio” in a how-to book
on gardening. He preferred not to cry

but just this once..... Edward the Younger
smelled frying sea bass in a restaurant
downstairs from a Pell Street apothecary.
He stared back glassily at the waitress
delivering gwo deh and hot and sour soup.
A whiff of vinegar woke him. He asked

for “dusk sauce.” Older Edward
died in a couloir on Kanchenjunga --
or so they all supposed
over buttered tea in Nancy’s studio

the night they planned the Company reunion.
Nancy, as hostess, felt
she was being watched.
A flock of moths flicked their wings
on the iron fire escape where they had settled
just beyond the band of light.

She shivered. Edward the Middle-Aged reached for the sash
to stop the draft of autumn air off Armitage, detected
the pale bugs and trapped some in a cup.
The others lofted outwards like a hand of bridge
then fell back.
“Too much commentary,” Eddie said.
“What do you feed them?”
“Light,” she answered, and changed the subject.
The Intolerable Sweetness of the Waterglasses

A certain moment arrives
when filled teeth begin to vibrate
in g-major, just so. For a moment. Then the glass

loses focus, the colors
change, the patterns in the carpet
reveal themselves differently
and their little god answers,

rhetorically. Now we know that the skin we touch
is not the skin of desire, that Sangre de Toro,
served room temperature, makes the eyes water.
The Kaballah calls tears a distillate
of all other fluids (milky, clear, gelid).
The tongue stumbles, the fingers
clamp the stem so tight to try to palpate

slivers in the seamless whole.
The blood. The meat. The light
piercing her hand now,
the bed pierced, and the earth
pierced, opened, unstopped
in her raptures of rotation. The first sweetness
of gravity lost
in the deafening rush.
The Shock of the Constant

New Eloise she called it, this crossing from here
to there, this town invented by her animus
to paint rainbows above battlefields.

Three slender lines, three hands fixed at noon.
She found a watch on the sidewalk,
returning from an African dance class:

a pocket watch so like her grandfather’s
that sat on Dad’s dresser for years,
awaiting repair. Open the golden front

and its cream-white face smiled back
with more gold and blue digits. Its moon
chasing its sun defined her childhood —

a lovely worthlessness, a
treasure of inutility, her salt
for the bland consistent light

falling from heaven. Falling
like a poled ox in winter, as a rainbow droops
from the clouds into mucked earth

requiring the intermediary of an island,
a floating city and she Flash Gordon (never,
no never Dale), Lord of the Interstices,

master of creole and pidgin
and all she could survey through
a backward glass. A new Eloise,

midstream,
lodged tight between who she was
and who she never would be.
Call me Hieronymo. Call me
with blood still singing in my ears.
I will throw what is most handy
where you were — quick on your feet,
like Fred Astaire.
Call me Ophelia,
Queen of the Hesperides,
the voice behind the fence
muttering maledictions and threats
against trespassers from the appley garden.
And sometimes shouting, to be understood.
Call me
and I will call back, an obscene echo
with its own story:
one stinking afternoon in August
I bit into a tomato and found a quarter. The pearl also
begins as an irritant.
I bicycled to town .... The rest must remain
secret, its connection to tomatoes and spare change
sealed in my head until such time
as the Sultan demands a tale for my life.
He can bite me.
Peace
No ear to the knothole can winnow wisdom from raving.
Anyway, I don’t know peace. All I know is apples.
And isn’t that easy? A, B, C ...
Sticky, In Preparation For Spiders

Hours move now as if shoved,
as if you overwound the watch
and set it down in the hot sun.
The other little boy,

the one with shorn hair and a bleached-out shirt
spilled cola, then ran
away from the calling mother,
over the green hill

and down, into the trees on the far side:
the avenue of beeches hissing in the summer breeze
which brings no relief from spiders —
surprise and the involuntary swipe

around the beveiled face, the nose, the clotted
eyelashes. It has become my longing
to move with him, walk his spoor,
track the child’s track, stalk him

to the vegetable garden and beyond.
Out the iron gates, into the field
of lilies gone to seed, into the bulrushes
where the basket lay hidden

when I was the other
and could wonder, frightened, if
my longings for baseball and a longer hour,
a shorter Sunday,

resulted from being Jesus. And why
must I suppose the answers
lie with him, in him, in
the ignorant, small heart?
Sweet Parade

I roll a marble down Market Street
from the hillside
looking over the dusty city
while the sun sets.
It finds a central channel in the cobbled street
and rolls beyond my seeing

past the Kurdish boy on the curb
plucking a tick from his stiff
homespun trousers.
The boy chews a sliver of wild onion grass
he has picked from the feral garden
behind the abandoned mosque

my marble passes now. Across the street Kastorides
stamps the tin lids on liter cans of olive oil
bearing his name.
From the corner of his eye, he sees the flash of my marble
like a wet pea, wonders when they will pave over Market Street
in macadam. He shouts for Andrei,
out of earshot,

marking cards in the alley behind the coffee shop
downstairs from the flat of the student
who glances from the yellowed wall clock
to the Swatch watch on his wrist, then tenderly
lifts the flap of his haversack to peer inside.
He has smoked his last cigarette,
is poking through the butts in the ashtray for a long one
when the phone rings — only once.
The student pulls a sweatshirt
over his bare torso, grabs the haversack

and dashes out. In the street he sees my marble,
almost slips on it in fact, and stops to watch it
running down its course toward the fountain in the square.
The driver of the truck, distracted by fears of his wife
and blinded in one eye
by a speck of dust which was once a dog’s skin,
takes the corner too hard,
the left front tire giving imperceptibly
over the rolling marble.
When the dust settles, as we know it will —
wind is never constant, it moves
in eddies till it butts a mountain
or some sea, rising steadily and steadily dying —
we'll see what remains. He thought
it would be warm enough

to sit under the tree and read
just anything on a spring day,
a random magazine snatched
from an allergist's
waiting room, unidentified
through watery eyes. Was he
a sufferer, or did simple humidity
affect this itch, this uncomfortable
clutch and heft to clothing?
He left after learning
it did not matter. He could not pin it down.

The wind agreed. The wind would
have its druthers: flip a half-read page;
pitch red dust into his already unfocused
field of vision; sound like a voice
beyond the corner of the house
calling one of his names. He thought he knew
it was the wind. But always there was a

suspicion —
a chance somehow that the name was his,
the voice not a stand-in for the liquid timbre
of an odalisque. It:

the warm body, the firm flesh, the vibrating
cord that bound him to that tree, around
and around, a movement, a bedspring, thought, love
— a leaf descending upon
a table in the wood
in the wind
of a spring day not quite warm enough
to lose oneself.
E.P.
The Twins

I went to sleep in darkness.
I woke up in darkness.
There was a breath of wind last night,
the first in two weeks, from the south
and soggy with the sea.
It set the cage swinging
and roused me.

I remember the sound of a penny whistle
and the sun setting behind a tight group of black trees.
A figure leans carelessly beneath them
watching me learn to do cat’s cradle
with my shoelace. I cannot
for any money remember who taught me
but I can see her eyes
with their epicanthic folds.

He talks to me
when he sees I am awake.
When he catches me looking out across the plain
he takes his long shepherd’s crook
and pokes the cage —
not hard,
not jarring,
like the wind:
enough to turn me away from the sun.

This afternoon his dog rooted out truffles.
He roasted them with red sweet peppers over a twig fire
and fed me two.

Tonight it rained.
First the air grew too thick to swallow.
Then the rumbling came down out of the hills to the west.
Then the rain fell,
releasing a woody musk from my bamboo bars.
Diluted sap ran from the branch of the oak,
down the chain
to leave sticky patches
like spilled ginger beer
on my forehead.
The man under the tree got wetter than me.

A woman came after the third watch.
The sentries were writing letters home describing the silence
when she slipped by
carrying luxuries like licorice
so rare out here on the plain.
I knew it was a woman by her whisper,
by her scent of flour and vinegar,
by the glint of gold where I guessed her nose must be.
She was gone before the sun rose
and he turned my cage.

We saw the first fires this afternoon.
Little flashes of color against the flat dun of the prairie.
The man saw it
and nervously hiked up his trousers.
"The scouts are burning their garbage," he said.
Did he believe himself? Did I?
Somewhere it must be written down
what must be believed. The rich and powerful
preserve such things
so that their memories cannot be questioned.

If I finish here,
I will find that book. I will hold it
across both palms and let it fall
open where it will.
I will breath deeply
and know my future with all its wrinkles.
I will know what Maggie said
that night as she stood in the doorway.
I will taste the cardamom she chewed
to sweeten her breath,
her earwax on the tip of my tongue.
I will hear the rattle of old windowglass
as the night local headed south toward the front
carrying young, sleepy conscripts and a band
of spectators with camping gear and mouth harps.

I ask the man sitting below me,
does he know how to build a birchbark canoe?
I can figure out most of it, but
how do you bend the ribs?
He offers me a roast acorn
and turns my cage.

The first was a lark.
It was a boon, we both thought.
There was one shallot left of all the food she’d brought.
Then three grackles fell onto my cage
from the overhanging branch
where they had been bickering
since yesterday morning.
They were not as tasty as the lark—
too much blood, and the bitter black skin
made me queasy, though I did eat.
Birds are falling all around us now
bouncing off my bars,
piling at my comrade’s feet: crows,
nuthatches, hawks with voles still twitching in their beaks.
I can see the stars only at intervals,
though I can’t identify them.
My fastidious comrade
has clipped his nails
in anticipation of digging.
He wants to do mine. I toss
my long golden hair, just so, like a young girl.
I feel giddy,
and if I close my eyes to slits
the stars bleed into lines.

I wake smelling peppermint. I lick a film
of pollen from my front teeth. I smiled in my sleep
as he is smiling, lying at the foot of the oak,
his head resting on an ant hill, his protruding tongue
stiff, thick and black with ants.
The morning wind has risen again, swirling feathers
and butterflies in and out of my bars,
in and out of my mouth,
into my hair. And, it appears,
I have the gift of prophecy.
I know so much:
I will be sick again;
the sun will set in splendid color;
the night will be the longest of the year;
there will be no more fires on the plain,
but the drifting smoke will catch in my throat
and the puddle under my cage will catch
the full moon’s reflection.
I won't see it.
Already there's a hissing of sprinklers in the distance.
Our red car has pulled up
in front of my mother's yellow house
and the twins have trundled out,
each carrying a silk orchid and
a moon-shaped slice of cassava.
The melon juice has stained their identical
sky-blue pinafores identically, in the shape
of an Islamic crescent. The jays bicker in the pines.
The twins smile, having come from the dentist.
Their teeth, so white,
blind me.
Markandeya's Breakfast

The Song of a Spoon

Consider this offering: milk
in a teaspoon —
shaky hands spill
perhaps more than a drop
onto the mossy stone at your feet.

What's the cost of perfect beauty?
The edge of a circle cut from ancient rice paper
yields with a deceptive softness.

Jasmine scented joss smoke rises for the dead.
Despite decrepitude, I can still find words
for the horror of youth revenant,

a ghost, a world
inside a gut
inside a boy so beautiful
he brings tears to the eyes of the enlightened saints.
And he has asked to swallow me,

me, the ancient no-one.
Lady Shiva, skin the color of burning copper,
so hot to the touch,
the lady of the dance,
the several-armed, the lithe,
the loathsome,

tell me what awaits me
in the underneath. No place
colder, certainly, than this stony emptiness,
the outer mud,
the black, malarial water beyond.

A worm gazes up at me,
another terrifying chunk of landscape,
an indefinable "not-worm," not mud brown
but pale, not sleek
but shaggy, not blessed
with the limitless bounty of this paradise.
Oh, the paradise of worms,

the enclave of elephants
standing knee-deep in milk,
abathe in milk and succulent
as Cleopatra in her asses' stables.

I will go down.
The boy will wash me in his milk.
We will see, Shiva, that place
where the elephant swallows his trunk.

Shiva's Song on Departing Heaven

Om mani padme hum
The jewel in the craw of the lotus
The scripture of antelopes
The burning lights of the city
The many-spoked love of Atman
rolls ever about the rim of the sky
sows stars as the grain of the householder
Our blessed home
washed over by the love of Brahma
drowned by the prayers of men
My love for the small ones
My pity for those on whom sentience is wasted

Om mani padme hum
The filth in the heart of the mushroom
The scripture of birthday cake
The heart of the work
The many worlds spun off Atman
whir across empty time
This meager form
adopted for the love of Brahma
I leave our place of winds and light
Deliver to the undeserving
the cold solace of otherness

Escort me, my lord,
that I go not blind into the wilderness

Under the Magic Fig Tree
After ninety-nine years in the boy’s belly, Markandeya was no longer old. His muscles rippled, his laughter tinkled like crystal, he ate with both hands all things which had once lived except the blessed cattle, Krishna’s most precious. His wife pleased him immeasurably. Her veils clung to her as to a virgin, though she had given him twenty sons. Her hair shone without oils, her musk at day’s end intoxicated him, her breasts gave sweet milk which he gorged on after lovemaking.

In his ninety-ninth year in the boy’s belly, Markandeya sat in the sun on the first warm day of spring at a cedar table beneath a fig tree in his front garden.

The tree, grown from magic seeds, fruited year-round. As he split a fig between his fingers, Markandeya thought of his son traveling over the eastern mountains where men walked on their hands. He had forgotten the wind and the boy’s gut. He had forgotten everything.

Markandeya examined the glistening pulp of the fig. “What troubles you, Markandeya?” the elephant, Ganesha, asked, plucking fruit over the garden wall. “Your life is lovely. You are rich. Your sons are rich, and their sons. Your palace is the Palace of the Moon. The water in your well flows from a spring in Heaven. You trust your friends. You grow each year younger. What can you lack?”

Markandeya slurped “Nothing. I lack nothing. I know the known world. But you, Ganesha, you have known all the worlds from time’s beginning, and before, in the other times.”

Ganesha laughed. The serpent in the fig tree laughed, though not so brightly. Markandeya, ashamed, squeezed the fig till its juice ran
through his fingers. Ganesha said: “Behind my ear you’ll find a palmetto leaf.”

The young man found the leaf, and on it a black ant. “This ant may know your answer, Markandeya. It lives everywhere at once, in all times and places. It’s God’s ant.”

The impatient ant held a rice kernel in its mandible. “Exaggerating elephants are God’s own trousers. They hide the truth, and give less help than hindrance. And then men. I must ask God one day what he was thinking of. So greedy. If only they knew how loud the universe was, they would not be so curious.”

The ant stared at Markandeya, who stared back.

The Ant’s Regrets

A prayer rises. This man would not dream of selling his children. This man dreams instead of running water, of the sea and tides, leaving on ships.

This man makes an effort to see behind him, to know whose footsteps he hears. He takes his children to see the tiger. The children laugh. The tiger yawns, stretches herself. The sun has bleached her fur a pristine white.

This wife worships in the ordinary way: above the magic picture box an icon of Kali, in the box sparks and noise and an unsatisfactory odor of burnt frangipani — devotion on this latest spin.

— whose footsteps he hears a soft pad but not the tiger whose? Streets echo here, especially after a rain. The husbands have sought out comforts in colorless rooms,
offering glass cats to ladies.

The child stands at her window
counting stars through a tube.
Their distance makes her cry. The pressure
of the tube blacks her eye.

— whose footsteps
— whose scratchy indrawn breath
— whose jingling purse of coins
— whose teeth, milky in the artificial light,
phosphorescent, clean and hungry
tearing, to swallow and vomit again.

Whose?
The hand falls upon his shoulder.
It is soft.

The Tale of the Empty Hand

Imagine an overused sickroom,
an army hospital in a war zone:
sulfur and saltpeter overpowering sweet rotting meat,
the periodic shocking light of casual bombardment
reveals brass-colored walls.
And, and, and ...
the noises — too many to catalogue
or differentiate.

A fever feels better,
opening a dream flower —
transfiguration follows death, we know this,
now. We know colors, liquid figures
so familiar somehow.
Isn’t dying a familiar act?
The nurse lavin ice water
on my puckered brow should excite me (bedraggled,
hair loose, lips slightly parted
from fatigue or an indisguisable loathing for decay).
Think: in this given moment
five billion people are doing something else.
Even those also dying are dying in a different way
without ice water. “Quel dommage,”
you’d say, Liesl,
making the bed of a morning. "What're the rich folks doing?"
The sun hot and blinding through the east windows
The room so white, the sheets green, your brown eyes
never averted
aromas of grass, exhaust, drying cum
where is it all?
where does it go?
what brings it here
this polluted room
this anti-place
this hole
where a stomach used to be
resides a memory of a stomach
remembering hunger
as a good thing to be assuaged with pleasure
Nurse, close your mouth before your soul escapes

The Passing of a Needle Through the Eye of a Needle

"Look closer, father of men. That nail
is not just chewed — it's jagged. That spot — can you
make it out?" "A bit of dirt," he said, blowing
to dislodge it. The ant somersaulted.
"From my perspective —" began the ant.
An island. A soaring peak." "A bit of dirt, man,
is still a bit of dirt, no matter the angle. Wind
is wind, milk milk, sex the grating of two ignorant
fleshes whether you are ant or astronaut.
It is what you make of dirt that matters. How you love
determines how you sing, or come. Is that blood?"
"I chewed too far down .... I was nervous."

"No weakness, Markandeya," said Ganesha. The ant
said, "Blood is the forbidden fluid — tainted,
impure." "Purity?" asked Markandeya, holding the ant
closer. "You're her ant. Queer
I never noticed your resemblance to a burnt rice grain."
The ant, suspicious, said, "I have a grain
held in my mandibles."
"No, no. You're rice-shaped."
"If rice had legs and segments." The ant's concern rose.
"Rice-sized, then," said the man. "A perfect
little capsule of God's heart."
Before the ant could answer
Markandeya swallowed.

A Dream Song of Shiva in Her Flesh, as a Lover

I dream I am a carnivore,
 wild and hungry;
 the sand beneath my feet hot;
 the grasses sharp, unyielding;
 always in my side a pain — my life
does not alter from day to night.
It all persists.

I dream death is sweet in my mouth,
 blood and saliva forming nectar
 of piercing sweetness
 and sweet the hours of waiting,
 sweet the stalking, the hunt
 sweet.

She appears as an antelope,
clean-limbed, the color of straw,
her eyes black, deep, unresponsive.
I pounce her, pin her to the earth. Now,
Gods, she is wet,
lathered, her legs
arch, her trunk shudders.
She is wet, she clings
as though I am her prey,
as though the answer were not addressed to me,
as though somewhere beneath those rolling eyes
Brahma set spark to the dry straw,
his bellows breath fanned it,
the chickings of the shafts lost themselves
in the rising voice of the fire.

Can this be my answer?
Is perspiration the response of God to desperate need?
Is this utter fullness the way of milk?

Something surfaces in her eyes
at the moment of eruption
when we both drown in fluids.
The body twitches,
the mouth smiles,
the eyes fear.

The Consequences of a Diet of Milk

"Again!" he cried. "Again!
It's in the eating!" Suddenly he knew
why the blue sky flecked with clouds
the unborn great-great grandson's name
the nearest star's distance
the necessary hunger

The wind rises
Her voice singing in his ears
his gut
his bowels
his loin

Again! he cries. Again!
It's in the eating —

not even the elephant can hear him
over the rising wind.
[Markandeya] walked for ... a hundred years, without reaching the end of the body. Then the wind rose up again, he felt himself drawn upward; he came out through the same mouth and saw the child under the fig tree.

The child looked at him with a smile and said, "I hope you had a good rest."

— From *The Mahabharata*, a film by Peter Brook