

## **SHAPE OF A WHISPER**

The shape of a whisper?  
What else do these bones promise?  
Lying in wait of some body's love,  
stretching thin arms, twitching thin nose,  
withholding kisses with a halting hum,

why, they are growing instant shadows!  
They are developing twisty leaves!  
Here, in the ground beyond the world,  
they are dancing a rat dance, they are twinkling a beat!

The shape of a whisper?  
The flesh of a kitten's sweetness?  
Here, in the ground beyond this world,--  
breathing a fondness for sun-sung thingness,  
dream-calm, dew-pure, moons away.

## **WAKEFULNESS**

The left hand of darkness is light walking backward.  
The absolute is the runaway smell of an ancient rain.  
The mouth we kiss is not the mouth we stake our fate on.  
Look: the throb of light is the cool breeze of years to be.

The shore of detachment is away from the sleeping seaweed.  
The fists are open for the air to smile them away.  
Nothing is less our own than the ashes the wind is keeping.  
Look: the sun and the body both rush to a destination of light.

Wakefulness is a familiar dream of the dry face of canvas.  
Wakefulness: the longing so filled with the gestures of light,  
it no longer knows the border between word and silence  
and cuts through it calmly like a swimmer into a hypothetical wave.

## LIFE WITHIN A MUSEUM

To see faces of men, remote and deep,  
remote as in a listener singing without words,  
singing and seeing the processions of thousands  
waiting for the picture to drift and sing  
organize into prismatic perceptions  
the unkempt indifference of their wish.

To see the wish grow ripe in the images darkly golden,  
darkly painted as the whole stands darkly seen;  
desire golden the aura of centuries painted real,  
recollected within the shadowy clearness of a mind within  
a sea of images, a sea of birds, a birth within  
a sea, foam like wings, new birth, new air.

To see the images unravel life within life,  
fertile and thickening at the edges--a defense  
against life's awkward movements to dislodge  
its seed; to turn it limp, and damp, and swarming  
with images of the past again--a star, an axe,  
salt on the axe, and in the throat.

Music will be salty, too: overwhelmed  
with images like sounds, shadows dissolving into song,  
shadows conversing in unreal tongues, unreal echoes,  
air drifting words in voiceless paraphrases, painted men  
under a painted star fishing for the future nestled in the sea  
like in a womb, the safest citadel of singing

birds flapping wings imagining alarm:

*"The womb has lost its power to create!"*

without voice, without words, these golden faces  
sing of the past--the salt, the axe,  
the air drifting in while they stand frozen--  
the guards, the public: a museum still.

## DREAMER

He dreams his way up to being,  
quietly, with unhurried breath,  
as though breath were a blossomed staircase  
leading to a perfect sky  
where kind-eyed gods themselves  
with slow, sinuous movements,  
ancient skin and immaculate hands  
would greet him kindly: "Friend!"  
As though the net to catch human souls  
were masterfully spun of poetry,  
and nothing but the sound of words,  
not even the sense--the color...  
Where are now the moon-lit woods  
standing up darkly and strictly  
in the soft, thick mist of his longing,  
now that he has constructed his perfect staircase  
and burst through his blooming sky.

## THE FLOCK

See how the black flock  
of quietly fallen birds  
stares, swallowing air,  
at the air staring down.  
Their minds become wings,  
their startled dreams  
of the sky insidiously sawed  
down to its very blueness--  
the black flock falling, without a sound,  
into the soundless blades of grass:  
the alloy of the hundred-eyed earth  
and the seeing sky.  
Look inside the face  
traced with the world's moist stone  
into the mirror of every kindness  
gentle bones and a hundred glories

could neither imitate nor efface;  
see the white mingle with gold,  
the gold with dusty tracings,  
the foundation become weathered red,  
and the stone remain, alone,  
a salvaged monument to the faith  
shared by men delighting  
in stone's saraband to time.  
Naked leaves sifted nightly,  
gathered, fondled, and stored  
in long sheets of black fire,  
nailed firm to stars,  
free of feelings' clatter,  
freed most of all from the earth  
whose fingertips touched fire, arms  
steeped in the sickness of its craving:  
the earth's love is persistence; rust;  
time spread over wide pastures; weeds  
perpetuate the difficult love;  
leaf over leaf, thuds of jealousy,  
black, over the shapeless earth.

## **SHADOW OVER THE TOWN**

Helen's shadow on Trojan rocks  
still threatens the Greeks,  
burdens them with the highest taxes  
the loved exacts from the lover:  
middle-class teashop warmth forsaken,  
adding machines count the killed,  
a scarce spring, a fruitless autumn,  
quiet markets and barren cribs:  
see the wretched pass for the mad,  
the mad for the licentious  
shoadows creeping after the main  
shadow over the town--  
see her blank eyes  
washed clean of mercy,  
memory of the guilt reflecting

future centuries' blood.

## **LINES (I)**

Stone words hard to wield,  
smooth as the moon washed of night,  
shape me into a weapon no man can see  
except with the eyes of his bones.  
Words tight as skin in a fleshless space,  
worn thin in a cage of a promise,  
design fast the leap into the air  
no man can follow, see nor stop  
with the scared silk of nightly kisses  
or daily prayers in his expectant hand.  
See how nothing  
keeps out of Pluto's gorge,  
silently drifts  
towards it, waits, sinks  
into the thickening dark,  
the unreflecting water,  
grave made of mud and stones:  
this way--to hide lizard shadows,  
here--to rob of flesh;  
though mercy's an unprofitable profession,  
save me from too much death.

## **DAPHNE HERSELF**

I will grow myself quiet leaves  
in the difficult silence of chastity.

I will hide in the immense namelessness  
though each tree murmurs to him my name.

I am the bed of leaves he can never scorch,  
not even with his eyes of fire.

I am the naked face of the flower; a cross.  
He cannot escape by reaching me.

The god and the goal; the lover and the loved;  
the pursuit and the flight, entwined.

Though a god, he will die in the depths of my bark.  
I will glisten his face on my leaves.

Every eagle will have his eyelids.  
Every event--his speed.

Each one of the thousand suns  
will pursue me as he has chased.

Each one of the symbols of silence  
will learn his name I refuse to bear.

I am he: the sun, its immense bowl  
pouring out selves as from a fount of chastity.

He is I: the ever-green song in flight,  
the sun forever pursuing me.  
*"... he was troubled in spirit, and testified,  
and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you,  
that one of you shall betray me. Then the disciples looked  
one on another, doubting of whom he spake. He then lying  
on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it? Jesus  
answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have  
dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to  
Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan  
entered into him.... He then having received the sop went out  
immediately out: and it was night."*

*John 13:26-27 (King James Version)*

## JUDAS' REPROACH

Handing me the bread  
*dipped in the dish--*  
not saying.

It was your look.  
In your hand:  
my shame.

*Judas the faithless,*  
*Judas the weak,*  
eternally.

Forever to regret  
not saying  
*"I will not touch this sop."*

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David Curzon)*

## EROS AND CHAOS

Eros's castle  
of seven red stones

(seven on either side,  
seven behind )

built for the Soul:  
she lives in the ring

of flame. Four  
trees shot up

after the stones fell.  
Four blue flames

leapt up,  
their heads touching.

The duplicity of love,  
daimon,

you, who obscure the imagery,  
neither divine and human,

Babel of our minds,  
Chaos of our loves,

--I will step into the fire myself--  
Tell

Phanes, the light-bearer,  
Hermes, the envoy;

when the fiery ring vanished,  
it disclosed

Eros and Chaos, brothers.

*"Wishing to gain Cassandra's favors, Apollo*

promised to teach her the art of prophecy; she learned  
the art but refused her favours; hence Apollo deprived  
her prophecy of power to persuade."

*Apollodorus, The Library, III.xii.5 (tr. J. G. Frazer)*

## HOW CASSANDRA BECAME CLAIRVOYANT

So. You are Apollo. Well, that's a new one.  
As good a line as any to get a girl.

A godhead must be like a flowering tree,  
open in every pore. But you

are closed in upon yourself.

Devious god, I see right through you.  
You guard the image that protects the space  
in which you hide, aloof and conscious godhead.

Grant you your desire?  
But I'm only an image in your dream,  
an inverse reflection of yourself,  
a bit of instinct, a bit of soil...

Love you?  
Foolish god, I'm a mortal girl,  
I cannot love a consciousness,  
perfection of a mind that is god.  
Besides, I'm not a starry-eyed virgin from a story-book,  
although I may look like one to you  
as I stand here discoursing with an emptiness,  
the disembodied space that claims to be a god.

We trade?...  
Lord of the lyre, master of song, lord of prophecy,  
king of praise and of timely whispers,  
prove now that you are you,  
and not an empty cloud begging for a shape.

My wish?  
To have the future at my fingertips!  
To have the power of your priestesses, Apollo,  
but without the laurel-chewing nonsense, if you please:  
I'd get a headache from all the chewing.  
Measure the price of my body in prophecy:  
how many foresights am I worth? Ah! Now!...

Grant you your desire?  
Now that I am a goddess as much as you are a god?  
Who do you think you are kidding, lover?  
The scales of the future are eloquent, delicate, quick.  
A kiss, only one, don't ask for more.

I must go. To Troy, to tell them.  
I owe you nothing, lord of good manners,  
god of frost and diluted dreams.

Back to your void, Apollo.

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## IN HIS FINAL DREAM

The stronger evidence of a cloud which carried him  
into the paper-strewn lot of a magnified dream  
no longer his own, no longer here, no longer alive,  
as it was when it used to entrap him. As it was,  
it was no longer a cloud that carried him.  
He, on a string of his dream, carried it,  
and no longer to a place of exact destination  
where purpose bloomed darkly, its petals lips  
to feed the desire of morning air, the final air  
in the final dream, where he himself was the cloud.  
Or, he was what he was. The desireless shadow,  
proudly calm, proudly insouciant  
at desire's death. He dropped it off like a coat,  
this second skin, this disease, this signifier  
of the serene and the feverish,  
the true and the false--the prevailing guile.  
His confusion resolved and his purpose realized:  
he in the sky, he sans his cloud, he sans his human shell.

*"After Agamemnon returned to Mycenae  
with Cassandra, he was murdered by Aegisthus  
and Clytaemnestra; for she gave him a shirt  
without sleeves and without a neck, and while  
he was putting it on he was cut down....And  
they killed Cassandra also."*

*Apollodorus, The Library, Epitome, vi. 23 (tr. J. G. Frazer)*

## CASSANDRA TO AGAMEMNON

I've warned you of the bloodbath:  
a bath, with your blood in it, literally.  
But there you go, blundering right in,  
no hand of fate can stop you,  
the hand that wants you dead.  
And I, who will be killed soon after you,  
why should I care--when, or of whose hand.  
So don't stall--go on, go in,  
step blindly into your matron's trap,  
hero of the great war, great murderer yourself.  
Before I die, I'll see you flounder,  
like a fat carp, in the fishnet of your queen.  
But what is this water in my eyes?  
My eyes that have seen my brothers killed,  
My city razed, before and after.  
Nobody here weeps for you, therefore I will,  
I, Cassandra.  
A bomb said to a city:  
*"I'm falling."*

The city asked:  
*"Whose side are you on?"*

The bomb said:  
*"I take no sides. I'm falling."*

The city said:  
*"Look around you."*

The bomb said:  
*"Too late."*

The city did not say anything.

Marina Tsvetaeva  
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Marina Tsvetaeva  
Translated from the Russian by Nina Kossman

The Lord has rewarded me  
With a light-filled and iron heart.  
With a gift of singing, a tearful gift.

The Lord has protected me  
With a white flag.  
The Lord has passed me by  
With the carnal flame.

Hold higher the flag!  
The Lord above us!  
Heavier than stone--  
The carnal flame!

May 1918

Marina Tsvetaeva  
Translated from the Russian by Nina Kossman

I said, and another heard,  
Whispered to a third, who understood,  
And the fourth, taking his oak staff,  
Went into the night--to a heroic deed.  
The world made a song of it, and with that  
Song on my lips--O life!--I meet my death.

6 July 1918

Marina Tsvetaeva  
Translated from the Russian by Nina Kossman

## TO GENIUS

They christened us in the same tub,  
They wed us with the same wreath,  
They tortured us in the same jail,  
They branded us with the same iron.

They will build us the same house.  
They will cover us with the same mound.

5 August 1918

Marina Tsvetaeva  
Translated from the Russian by Nina Kossman

My light tread  
--A sign of clear conscience--  
My light tread,  
My ringing song--

God placed me alone  
In the midst of the great world.  
--You are not a woman but a bird,  
Therefore--fly and sing.

19 October 1918