

THE LABYRINTH

BOOKS BY CATHERYNNNE M. VALENTE

THE LABYRINTH

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THE LABYRINTH

CATHERYNNNE M. VALENTE



PRIME BOOKS

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BEAUTY IN THE SERVICE OF LIBERTY

An Introduction by Jeff VanderMeer

Flying doorways that “appear in the morning like dew-dampened butterflies, manic and clever.” “Latinated clams” that clatter in the water, “their vulgate symphony of clicking nails and meaningless morse code . . .” Voices “like a rustling of linden leaves, like sand becoming a pearl.” A Great hare that speaks, a “handsome golden macaque with a bodhisattva face,” a decapitated Queen—all this and more awaits you in Catherynne M. Valente’s small jewel of a novel, *The Labyrinth*.

Have we been here before? Yes and no—we’ve seen these mountains, those valleys, before (at least from afar), but that makes no difference. Every time language dislocates and damages us with the intensity of its unexpected beauty, and the truth of that beauty, we undergo a similar transformation—and we return so we can be dislocated and beautifully damaged once again, albeit in a slightly different way.

Tapping into the same wellspring of charged imagery as the Decadents and the Surrealists, *The Labyrinth* displays a confidence and sophistication of language rare in a first novel. That the author is drunk with words belies the control with which she uses them. The reader will be reminded of Latreaumont’s *Maldoror*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and Angela

Carter's more surreal fiction, but at the same time, Valente's voice is unique, her style her own. Metaphors and similes crowd the page, some literal, some figurative. Each sentence has the ability to surprise. Many have the ability to inflict damage.

Valente is certainly as fearless as any of the great non-linear, ur-logical Surrealists or Decadents—for her, language is not a balancing act, but the equivalent of flinging oneself off of a cliff, determined to sprout wings before hitting the rocks below. Most of the time, Valente does grow wings well before annihilation. Or, rather, I should say, *writes herself wings*.

But what of the tale? Is it secondary to the prose? No, not so much secondary as fused to the prose—this is one book where the story cannot be separated from the way in which it has been told, which is all to the good. Our nameless narrator navigates her way through a labyrinth as much metaphysical as sensual, as much dream-like as empirical (despite the sharply empirical nature of its many lovely descriptions).

Some works simply require savoring at the level of language. *The Labyrinth* is one of these works, best enjoyed paragraph by paragraph, word by word. So many fictions are inert at the level of language—as lifeless as an old shoe—that I found it wonderful to be reminded of the possibilities. The best analogy I can make is to a beach at low tide, rich with tidal pools. The beach as a whole is quite satisfactory, but the tidal pools, which from a distance are just mirrors of the sky, prove to be even more compelling: look into each one and you discover that each teems with life, each its own self-sufficient community. The same with Valente's fiction: each paragraph is self-sufficient and contains an entire world. You can lose yourself in a paragraph in *The Labyrinth*, which is, perhaps, fitting.

If, like me, you enjoy such literary fireworks, you will find much within these pages to delight you.

**THIS IS FOR YOU—THE BLAME IS YOURS.
WRITTEN ON YOUR SKIN
SPOKEN IN YOUR VOICE:
A GLAMOUR AND A LIE.**

All that I know is contained in this book,
written without witness,
an edifice without dimension,
a city hanging in the sky.

~**Anaïs Nin**, *House of Incest*

A human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle—and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What? And this wouldn't be—*circulus vitiosus deus*?

~Friedrich Nietzsche

CANTO THE FIRST

1. Look closely. This is not the Way.

Up or down, I could not say, I could not say. I ate the severed halves of a Compass Rose seven-hundred-and- negative-eight miles back, covering the yellow red meat with lime skins and choking it down. Now it is Within. So I could not say northwest or south, only the veil-fire *that way* and the moon-forest *this way*, this turn or that turn, round the oleander Wall rippling underwater or over the mandrake Wall salivating on my hand as I execute a three-quarters pike half-caffeinated flip over its thick shoulders. My body is bound with guitar strings, nipples like fawn's hooves strumming E minor chords and finger-picking a Path through resonant briars, redolent of the desert bellies of blue lizards. By now my feet are worn through, holes like mouths gaping and smacking in cathedral soles, pounding, thrusting on the Path like a drum-skin stretched into incandescence, finding that old comfortable rhythm that by now I know so well, that I invented out of dust and the sweat beading prettily on my own calves.

It is all familiar now, after the passage of constellations and the ingestion of the Compass Rose, holding now that flaming cross inside me, *in this sign thou shalt conquer*, north-brow south-hips east-wrist west-thigh, in this sign thou shalt walk until the end of days, in this sign thou shalt blaze and burn, in

this sign thou shalt stride tall through this Place, this happy Garden of Lies, in this sign thou shalt eat berries and lie under the moon, and let it tan your skin silver.

I carry Direction inside me like a child, a watery infant daughter of a circuit of dawns, connected by the fibrous strength of my spinal fluid and thread sun from the enamel of my teeth. She, in all her diamond gills and sunfish fins is anchored in my rich belly, wrapping her precious little Compass-form in my umbilicus like a mummy, and so I am her sarcophagus, too. Her mother and her coffin.

And the directions never change, magnetic north is always at the crown of my mercurial head, south always at the arch of my holy foot, for I carry the Rose within, growing like a Vedic moon. O serpentine I, having a tail fat with scales linked like opaline chain mail, and thus no way to give birth to this precise little cat-child, kept inside an adamant muscle wall. It pushes against my ribcage, stretching the skin of my lifting belly. Amphibious and infertile, webbed into frozen fecundity, Great-With-Child, never Birthed, never Mother. Trapped in the swallowing, breasts heavy and pendulous with milk, unable ever to feel the tug of that small mouth against them. Ever huge with the weight of oceans, of a thousandthousand mountains, halted in freeze frame like an urn. Ambrosial blood swimming between us, the eater and the eaten and the eater again, sucking at the soil of the womb like a clear-petalled lilac. And in this habit of motion-forward, I have learned:

The Void of the Labyrinth does not exactly stretch, or exactly coil, or exactly twist. But it *snarls*. A bolt of belligerent lightning-silk angrily unraveled, corded, torn, circumnavigating itself in a rattling feint, coming apart and crushing in. And it changes, like the horned moon, cycling without pattern. Walls mutate like film noir rape scenes, tearing at pearl skirts with mud-brick fingers that leave stigmatic bruises.

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Roads. Oh god, I cannot speak of it, but the Roads have filled me entirely, stuffed and crammed into every corner, oozing out of my body like icy caviar. They are my avenue-bracelets and my fat sapphire street chokers, my gold scarab short-cut armbands and my boulevard harem anklets, they are my cobblestone coin belts and my alleyway-agate earrings. Long Paths criss-cross my torso like ammunition belts, and the innumerable dead-ends pierce my breasts beautifully, hanging pendulously, swinging with laughter, slapping triumphantly against my bronzed belly.

And. There are here tremors of Doorways. They appear in the morning like dew-dampened butterflies, manic and clever. They travel in packs. At night the hinges change from right to left, or vanish completely. Some are no more than flaps of fur, iridescent in the light of the Walls, or sweeping veils of gauze and silk, long curtains like a woman's hair. Like my hair. Some are hard and ornate, carved with a fantastic code of Arabic and Greek, letters drawn in a paste of crushed diamonds and the hooves of a drowned horse, written with the elegant tip of a black cigarette holder. These have heavy knockers and bulbous knobs, brassy and baronial, in intricate shapes; I have seen a knob like a griffin's fierce mouth, open in a scream with her tongue made of rose quartz, feathers fanning out magnificently in silver on the face of the Door. And a falcon-claw knocker all of amber, the reptilian talon, the three terrible nails ending in their razor points, all wrapped about with the leather of bondage, the flying trails of a hunter's bird cascading down the polished Door, ending in a large lacquered ball with which to strike and enter.

But they are not beautiful to me, any longer. They cluster whispering and break and dance in and out of vision. And they hunt. Like sleek foxes they creep along the places where the Wall meets the Road and wait. They will glide up silently and

swallow you as you lie beneath a sighing willow, or stalk you through three dozen twists and turns of the Labyrinth, seizing you as you come upon one of the long boulevards. They are savage creatures, and hungry. On what do they open? I have learned only to avoid them, and I could not say.

I did not exactly *come* here, and I will not exactly *go*. I have always been Here, I have always been about to escape. I have never been *arrived*, always *in transit*, slowly digested by the Road with Doors snapping at my heels. I will never tell the tale of:

“One day I woke up and I was here.”

But perhaps it was so, I could not say. Then equally perhaps I shall one day fall asleep and be not here. If this is true, what came before has dissolved from me, lost like milk teeth. But I think, rather, that it has always been as it is, and there was never a *beforethis* nor will be an *afternow*. I am accepting. This is not a thing to be solved, or conquered, or destroyed. It is. I am. We are. We conjugate together in darkness, plotting against each other, the Labyrinth to eat me and I to eat it, each to swallow the hard, black opium of the other. We hold orange petals beneath our tongues and seethe. It has always been so. It grinds against me and I bite into its skin.

I accept. It is not always unpleasant under this particular cubic yardage of sky. I once (will? never?) thought in miles and leagues, counting my measured footsteps with my abacus-lips. I once chanted the low, quiet black magic of numbers and distance, of meters and kilometers like coiled snakes in baskets. I wrote over my whole body with sap, calculating how many times my feet had abused the earth, how many times the stones had gnawed my toes. No more, I have forgotten numbers. I washed the sap in a marble fountain of a serpent-woman spewing clear water from her gaping mouth, that despairing cavern. And I walked on, my pack secure on squared shoulders. I accept.

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I am not exactly alone. There are Others. Of course there are the Doors, and they are company of a brutal sort, but I glimpse now and again a flash of golden fur or tinfoil tail in a stream. And I hear rustling in the nights that is not the sibilant gliding of an impending Door. I could not say what creeps and whispers through the branches and down the threaded Road, but I hear it, and I am not afraid.

2. I have stripped myself of light.

The Wall-light and the moonlight and the Road-light and the willow-light. I have pulled it down like a pair of blue jeans, scuffed and spattered with paint. Fountainlight and shadowlight and cobblestonelight, roselight and ivylight and dragonflylight, hyacinthlight, applelight, fleshlight and Doorlight. I have pulled it all away, the yarrowlight and Mazelight and fingernaillight and eyelight. Slid off the pirate's planks of my thighs like a river of nascent rain. Waterlight. Underneath that mummification of light, underneath that other body which was so well-wrought, like Milanese leather over my little scaffold of bone, I have grown a new skin. The color of sun-heated coffee skimming the cream off of my shoulders, perforated with cinnamon and licorice, tinted with wind-etched Sea-pebbles. It sloughs down over my arms and elbows, creasing itself like the thick folds of a marble toga. The heat causes ripples; it is not yet accustomed to my frame. We shiver and slithe around each other, combining slowly, slowly.

It is not quite like a molting, for I am not quite like (but not quite unlike) a snake; more the regeneration of a limb by a desert creature, tongue lapping in and out. There was the setting of the sun red on red on red, and the sky scalding, and the new skin over my fingers like petroglyphic gloves. Sand caked my hair

into long sheaves, curling sticks of stiff driftwood, frozen fleshy-fat river eels. I am a stone Medusa sitting by the Wall, late afternoon light nosing her face like a curious wolf, knifing the supper-meat savagely, turning a pitiful hare and wild greens to jasper and sodalite. And all around her form the crackle and hiss of new skin, growing, growing, growing, covering her serpent-hair with that fabled horse-flesh. And now I walk in a body of darkness that is light, skin seething black, seeking the next sinuous trine of this Path.

I stand as I have stood a meaningless number of times on one of the long thoroughfares, lined with wild pear trees alternating whitethorn and prairie grasses, blooming as though they were planted with some purpose, to shade the heat chattering off this Road, pushing into the air with oily hands, tracing a finger-pattern into the image I see. (Though it may not be real, the Void of the Labyrinth has no shape, and thus no constancy). I have come through a considerable snarl, and the new body I have won does not make it easier; I cannot see my legs move beneath me, they blend so into the liquid night and shadow, swallowing stars into my knee pits.

When I bend to examine the Path, nebulae are crushed to glittering dust beneath thigh on the anvil of calf. It went: left left right straight left right circle back right straight through the portcullis and under the bridges three sharp lefts two gradual rights through the roundabout over the creek and seventy perpendicular left turns spiraling inward.

But it has all changed by now, of course, so that map does little good. And it means nothing, to say that I have come through a snarl or found a thoroughfare. I catch myself thinking in the old ways of distance and arrival, of a goal, of a center, of an end. And even then thinking in the ways of time and linear movement. But there are infinite tangles and straight Roads; that I have traversed one (of a multitude my feet have enumer-

ated into meaninglessness) and spilled out in my dark puddle of self onto another is less than nothing at all. I have found the Colossus and been enfolded.

A whale's ribcage is almost visible against the sky, long and bleached white. The comfort of its linearity glows in a spectral nova. And there is something comforting about the length and breadth, the Road like a woman's smooth brown leg extended into the infinite, her toe brushing the corona of the sun, heel pressing the rim of eradication. Yes, it alters and mutates and flicks through its shapes like a nickelodeon, but it cradles me and keeps me and I am defined more by Walls and Roads now than limbs and brain. It is a wide womb and I am born over and over.

It is a game we play. There is Vision here, to be stolen, seized, taken at knifepoint from the black-scaled baobab. Vision, yes, but no Will. Will has no meaning, or has lost it, under the dusty whitethorn leaves with their filtered light, no meaning behind or before the marauding Doors, no meaning in my palm or a greater one, crossed by arcane lines that I cannot read, cannot say. I move like the breath in a pan pipe, and walk as I may, but it ends in nothing, the Path determines. I am within the Colossus, within the Whale, and though my footfalls echo on its entrails and my voice stabs the lining of its stomach, I am in the fish and I go whither it swims. No meaning. I balance on a crown of babble, teetering and tottering on four-inch heels over a cobblestone Road, straps of biting black scoring my ankles with pricks of blood like decimals. The fan of four bones demarcate. My stride is weary with gin-streaked sighs. Grey sky wind in my face and breath of thorns. Swamps and marshes and crushed cellos, cracked air and bamboo beatings. There is no other than this Road that looks so linear and ever-going. Plod, plod, plod, one lacquered/unlacquered toe after another, red, white, red. Into the horizon, perpendicular I against the degreeless slope of

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hills and dales. All the paints in my boxes are ash, all the inks black. I carve my world in monochrome.

I am at the sword-point of all amplitude and fold/unfolding. I reside in voluminous wreckage. It is beautiful, the hide of the leviathan reflected in mud-brick and trellis-work, the suggestion of a thing concealed: a Queen, a Talisman, a Treasure, a Castle, a Monster. At the very least some secret knowledge to be won. The threat of an oblong head rising blackly out of the water, lake beading off its reptilian brow makes the liquid promise shine with voluptuous beckoning. I am I, can be no other, and my little mind, encapsulated in skull and void, insists that a center exists within Wall after Wall. I promise myself not to think on it, knowing as well as I do that there is nothing, that the whisper is a lie, but I slip. I slip and drown in the root system of the Labyrinth.

3. Time flickers on and on.

A half-realized body stretches out coral-encrusted fingers to seize it. Useless, of course it is useless—each spindle-moment gone before my limbs could ever escape the glassine softness of their essential corporeality, could achieve escape velocity and roar away from themselves in a bloom of fire. I walk (will walk, have walked, I told you there is no coming and going here) in the Maze, a spinning silver coin in the sky, and the names of the flowers float out of my honeycombed skin, the mystic botany I once knew when I was (am, will be) wrapped in my sanguine turban. Crocus, narcissus, chrysanthemum, orchid. I name them for the air's ears, for the benefit of the enclosing Walls, touching a thick petal with my tapered finger, one for each syllable. I walk rhythmically, battered tattered cloak folded under one arm.

Today it is warm and the sun is on my back like a peacock's fan. Hibiscus. Asphodel. I carry the Gardens with me, and name the flowers in infinite repetitions, even in my sleep the names trickle from my lips like blood, like rainwater. Delphinium, amaranthus, asiatic lily. Lotus, pennyroyal, poinsettia, marigold. Roses and opiate poppies and bluebells. The rain-washed flagstones bear the imprints of my sandaled and unsandaled feet, my pleading knees, walking the same Path again and

again. Nephthytis, larkspur, foxglove, hyacinth. I do not pull weeds or comb the soil. I often catalogue, to pass the time, though it is equally useless since the topiaries and terrariums change like a dervish spinning. I note the growth patterns of hibiscus in the humidity of July. I commit to memory the cross-pollination of red dracaena and night-tulips. I twist moorland heather in my black hair. I walk in the green shadows of tropical leaves, in a contorted Babylon.

The gold which is no-gold on my fingers is heavy, weighting me to this desert place which has no great umbilicus of river, rooting me to it, binding my body to these very shades of black-berry blossoms. This expanding microsecond now contracts so fast I cannot even touch its saturnine rim before it vanishes like the up-spiraling smoke of a silver hookah. But even to consider this pinwheeling threatens madness, to engulf the howling mind that weeps over every lost instant, crying to the rings of Jupiter to slow and remain in the center of one fuchsia-breasted moment. But non-linear travel is forbidden here, in the realm of the sternest of all gods, and I swoon (have, will, might) beneath the weight of such endless forward movement.

I arrive often in a rosemary-scented Courtyard rimmed by manzanita trees, low and twisting. I have seen it perhaps seven or seven hundred times. It means nothing, not truly an arrival. The Sea laughs and beats a drum with blue-palmed hands down past the line of my vision, (but oh, I can hear it as it foams and thrills in my collarbone!) at the bottom of a convoluted Escher-like staircase, jumping and arching over itself, doubling back and spiraling crab-wise, chasing its long helix-body down to the edge of the tidepools. Into its stony flower-boxes and hedge-creatures I glide, still wrapped in my darkbody, leaving tattered scraps of shadow on the thorns as I pass. Didn't I want to be a dark woman in some *longagoothertime*? The Labyrinth has covered every whiteness with violet petals and the dark

pollen of night-lilies. I have crushed the thousand gardens into a vial of pigment to hide myself from its eyes, painted like a pagan, chasing after deer on the steppes. I march like a good soldier on the shell of a Sea-snail. It goes on and on. The Sea is unseen, beyond the Walls, and I will never float within its blue.

4. "It snapped at her," a Thing intoned.

"Did the Door, and she fell in, *downdowndowndown*. Silly, running—why grumble, greymalkin, when there are violets about, and sweet?"

It was a pair of fat auburn haunches, chocolate and honey, fur like velvet gloves, long, eloquent ears pink as girlhood. It startled me, this new thing. An enormous Great Hare sat calmly on a patch of thick grass and wildflowers, as though guarding a corn-maiden's tomb. I marshaled language like reticent troops in my dappled head, so long had passed without another Voice but the echo of mine. Her nose twitched, staring with liquid eyes, chewing industriously on the lip of a daisy.

"Did the Door and swifter than I could. Was it a nice Door? Was it soft and delicious? Did it lead to a sweet thicket? Will you see its teeth when it comes like a hound? Silly girl-thing, why not stay and flower-eat? Wait and they will come. You will travel well enough."

The Hare stretched her long feet as though trying for a marathon. She nibbled at a toe, yawned. Nonplussed, I reached out a hand to scratch her head, and she leaned warmly into my palm.

"Where did you come from?" I touched, gingerly, her face.

"Away! Away and away and away and away! Do you know

the Way? I do, I do, I do! I am the flower-eater and the grass-devourer. I am the swift sun-runner and the apple-thief. I know the secret. What are you?"

"I am the Walker. The Seeker-After. I am the Compass-Eater and the Wall-Climber. I am the Woman of the Maze. And no Door has ever caught me."

The Hare wriggled her silky muzzle and ground her teeth in derision. A massive foot slapped against the ground as the air filled with rabbit-laughter. "So certain. So full of titles. So proud. Did the Door and swifter than I. Inevitability is the color of water. Movement is a waste. They will find you. I did."

"Were you looking for me?" I asked incredulously.

"I looked for breakfast." A sprig of heather disappeared into her little mouth. "Breakfast beckons the strange and you are strangest of all. Eat. Drink. Why punish the earth with your girlfeet? There is sweetgrass and wild lettuce and savory roses—these are enough. Why can you not let it be enough? They are alkaline, syrup-filled, fine as baker's sugar, and they will coat our throats like warm toffee, like brandy and olive oil, and make us beautiful. The Way escapes you. It will always escape you. *Downdowndowndown*." She snorted and stroked one long, brown ear. "I am the swift sun-runner. My feet are better than yours. Yet still. Still did the Door and brought me. Now I am here with the roses like buttered artichoke hearts and a girlfooted creature insisting on motion."

I drew aimlessly in the black soil with a tapered finger. Circles, one after the other, each as starless as the last. Downstrokes like bypass surgeries, heart beating like a bavarian choir. I could stay, I could vomit galaxies into this earth and never burn my throat with light, wearing scalpels like jewelry, wrapping my body in bloody togas, reciting my own eulogy with a mouthful of cat's eye marbles and agaric mushrooms, arm jutting out awkwardly into the world.

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I touched her, her softness and earthlight. She laid her head against me, speaking with a barbed intimacy. "What is the secret you know?" I asked.

"Blue Door it was," she answered, "covered with stars-nine-pointed. Hiding in the raspberry brambles. It snapped at me, clapped on me just like a farmer's big hands. It leapt; I was not swift that day. Downdowndown. I don't run anymore, I am not prey. I wait, and swallow things when they come."

She looked at me with brittle eyes, glittering full of the light of the sun on the violets. She was very big, staring straight at me, our heads level. "Stay with me and eat well. Fall through a hundredhundredhundred Doors with me. There are always roses enough. After awhile, even the falling is gentle."

By now my fingers were thoroughly tangled in her fur, sepia over onyx, swift over slow. I wanted her warmth within me like the Compass, to devour it and hold it still, to take her peace like a pretty ring. But pretty things are all beyond me.

Disentangling, I gathered up a few fallen petals, and met her limpid eyes through a forest of lashes, gently pulling back, and speaking low.

"I am the Seeker-After, I cannot. I must Go, despite the roses."

"There is nothing," the Hare assured me, shrugging her autumn-shaded shoulders. "That is my secret. There is no Way—only the staying still and the quiet. The waiting and the melting of a rose petal on the tongue."

5. My ankle has swollen apple-huge.

As though I were incubating some warm and throbbing egg between my cuneiform bones, the pinch of white hands gripping me tightly during the anointment of the Styx. Humidity sighs orchids and seasmoke through my hair, the vibration of a string bass on the westerly wind, blowing off the invisible Sea in trailing puffs. The moon like a garlic bulb scenting the sky, throwing out starry pale green shoots, glowing between raindrops.

Here am I laughing like the Hare, my girlfeet pierced with honeyed stigmata. Here am I bright as a dueling pistol in the dawn, hobbled and kept still by strange circles turning beneath the skin of my darkbody. I cover my translucent feet with the hem of my skirt, so as to expose what they contain. that perfect Greek ankle, palpitating for the advent of a Serpent, the auroral revelation of a penetrating arrow. I have swallowed the Road, I have eaten death. Hard, coarse black bread crumbling on the teeth like fallout; warmth like oak-honey clogging the cilia with its liquid sibilance. I am awake, I am asleep, I am a somnambulist who each night presses herself between the Walls, in among tiger-spiders. I eat clay and drink dust beside kings whose names I have forgotten or never knew, because we have both refused the gods and their perfumed eyes. We stare ahead and calculate the burn rates of white dwarf stars to pass the time.

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I dwell within this invisible ravage, the scald of temptation. Stay within the white wheat the silver and the star, stay within the Wall and the Garden greaves, folded into a rose like an exhausted bee, gold enfolded in scarlet, and sleep forever with a sugared violet pressed on my tongue like a coin on a corpse's eye. Oh, but it is beautiful, to sleep and to rest and to walk no more. The radiance of true nothingness set against the glimmer of its threat. It would have been a breath of gold to lie against that great leaf-shaded flank, the prickle of sepia-silken fur under my limbs, those pupilless eyes above me like secret moons for all time in the shade of aster-breathing Doors with their sulfurous hinges and studded with heliotrope. They would rise like suns over our sleeping shapes, bodies curved into symbology, and we would fall a hundred times a hundred until the falling was all that existed, the tumbling of her lucent haunches and my hair trailing like kelp on the Sea. *Downdowndowndown.*

Wouldn't it be better than this, the Road cutting vision, the Walls containing shocks of self, bolts of tawny motion? The peace of the fall, the certitude, the gentility of surrender. Long railway of silence into the depths that Doors must conceal. How everything here becomes luminous through the illimitable veils of concealment. Seduction shivers through me, the obscene, serpentine promise of what is not known, navigated, charted. Not split like the trunk of a tree into what I have walked and what I will walk. Not the inarguable vastness of the Labyrinth.

But. I accept. I pull back at the threshold, shunning liminal space for the within-ness of Here. I go up the Staircase, and the world is still pressed like a dragonfly in ice. I never touch Edge or Center, never Entrance nor Exit, but remain somewhere inside, hanging pendulously among the trembling owl-winged scales embracing all those who fall.

It is late, it is early, it is dark, it is light. How I lust for light, all light. Did I once beneath the apple trees stand scrubbed clean and pink by the sun, white flowers trailing my heels, laughter shaking the red fruit from the branch, eyes pools of August skies? Is this the *alwaysnow*, under the yew trees with violet flowers bleeding into my hair, learning desert tongues from the moon and carving whitethorn sculptures of Rabbits and Doors. But the green softness of the wood under my silver knife excites me. There is nothing in my footprints, not even dust, not even the ridges of a usual foot. One feather-fanned mark in the Road drags more than the other, the thorn in my heel pulling back towards the little patch of grass, back towards liquid coffee eyes, back towards those endless roses. The alexandrine tooth of a hare embedded in that hollow where skin is a papery wing over quivering bone, thorn-chaining me into stillness. Checking my movements—black queen to e4.

I enter, near dawn, a twisted tower of ice, of glass. The Labyrinth here has fallen into freeze, the Road disappeared beneath cream-cobalt crystal, reflecting, refracting, eating the color of sky like winter soup. It reflects the small, silent colors of sunrise onto my deepened skin, blue over black, rippling, sighing. Fountains still in stop-motion, cresting wave of water arching through the sky, a cascade of diamonds. All the earth has become a diamond, a faceted jewel pulsing like a heart. Whiteness devours. I am caught in this freeze-frame, the same few seconds of film over and over, the same cold moonlight, the same tinkling piano, the same villain in the shadows, the same ingenue. At least it is white, under the veil of silver and blown glass that admits no imperfection. That banishes original sin. In this world, my lips are perfect, my skin snowy.

The beautiful darkbody flees in the face of all this hoary paleness—the Labyrinth has stolen it. I am bloodless—snow hair falls to my waist, pupilirisall vanishes into classical eyes of

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milky stillness, though my sight remains. The jet of my tongue shrieks into the air, a mouth of chalk remains. I am a long scroll of blank paper, all color ripped from me like a gown. I stagger with the violence of tearing. The flowers are a graceful gasp under the silver Sea. The elegant bannisters of staircases, gone to blown glass and aquamarine. Shall I go up? Shall I go down?

6. *Hic monstra delitescunt . . .*

I could not say, I could not say. Whether there are monsters hereabout. I have said that I am not exactly alone, but then, I am not exactly *togetherwith*, either. I have seen things, in the shadows, but who is to say? I dance on the leeward side of the mandrake Wall and a quarter of my iris rebels into violet, the Walls march in a phalanx and my body becomes quicksilver, shining as a trout in the river, illuminating the spear-leaves and wizard-staff stems, reflecting on my rippling skin the wormwood and the moonseed, the orris root and the milkweed. Who can ever know what I have seen there revealed? The shadows know, in their depths and scrying sleek. Whether when I in a fever cross a drawbridge made for children with smaller feet than I, a troll with ambergris eyes lurks delicately beneath the creaking wood. Whether at the Center-which-is-not of all of this rests a quiescent Minotaur, his horns resplendent with blood and ash, death in an amulet around his neck, eyes like shuriken, a great brass ring in his poisonvelvet nose. Whether his volcanic heart thumps in time to mine, whether he waits for me in the geometric darkness, to wed himself to the Labyrinth forever in the sacred ritual of my dismemberment.

Will I serve as a corridor between them? I fear a Minotaur. I fear hooves tramping in showers of the white blood of lotuses,

crushing Franciscan bones under him. Hooves separating brow from skull, viscera of the "I" that is me digested through a Maze of four stomachs (for do not all we Labyrinth creatures carry the turning Path inside us. We carry so much, all of us pregnant with incident.) I fear a Lair of rattling sternums and tibia, prayer ropes and iron ore. But there is no Center to house a Lair to hold a Beast, so if one echoes in this place, he must roar his acidic throat to razors among the halls of where-I-have-not-walked, and stalks, a hunter like the rest. Some ways back I saw a pile of Doors splintered and broken like moldered corpses. They had a smell of rotted almonds and shoe leather. Am I to be as they are, cracked and bleeding in the jeweled hinges of a vengeful Gate?

"Hic monstra delitescunt. Sed puella, puella, ubi abscondes?"

Voice like a rustling of linden leaves, like sand becoming a pearl. My hand fluttered to my mouth in terror, hiding the shameful whiteness of my lips. She sat on a Wall of salmon scales, which clinked and jingled as she turned her perfect face towards me, eyes full of hawk's claws. Her wings reached back over the crest of the Wall and nearly brushed the ground, arched and pointed, of feathered ice and lapis lazuli. Her body covered in a skin of milky opals, clinging to her breasts and belly, her long arms and her bare feet. I could not speak. My blank statue-eyes were helpless, could offer nothing to her beauty. In her hands a slim rod of ash and spider-thread, she was fishing in the Road, a hole cut in the ice of a left-hand turn. An Angel of Ice-Fishing. She was smoking a long reed pipe, tobacco that smelt of cranberries and elephant-skin. And hauling trout from the Road in great silver heaps, flopping beside her on the Wall. Some leapt ecstatically towards her, not waiting for the line and bait.

I climbed up, clumsy and strange in my lightbody, full of cold and slowness. In the mountains of fish I found a resting

place, leaning against the marine brickwork. Amid a corona of smoke she pressed the rod-end into a crack in the Wall. The fish still threw themselves at her opaline body, eyes full of her form. She curled her lips into:

"Hic monstra delitescunt, cara."

I looked up into her and choked, "You speak the language of the Doors!"

She breathed her jungle tobacco into my pale mouth. "Yes," she hissed, "Do you think perhaps I am a Door?"

I could not answer, tongue thick in my bloodless mouth. The Angel leaned into me, cold radiating from her owl-skin. She began to draw on my papery flesh in stark black chalk on my belly and lunar, heavy breasts. Her finger was cold.

"The key to catching trout is the lure," she intoned throatily, tracing a horse-shape on my thigh. "Today they are biting on dragonflies smeared in my blood." She exhales, long and critically, editorializing her drawing with smoke-rings. She began on a spiraling snake, just below my left shoulder. "Tomorrow it will be roasted cicadas. They are fickle."

"Sometimes I am a cicada, hissing and singing in the leaves of a tree by the sunlit water, thoughtless and wordless, a voice that is all consonants and tribal clicks. Sometimes I rub my legs together like a string bass, and the lake quivers." She listened intently to me, as if diagnosing a tumor hiding in my voice.

Slowly she took possession of me through the figures; antelope grazing across my shoulder blades, leaping salmon on the soles of my tattered feet, dragonfly-knees, flames searing up my arms, river-belly, storm-brow, tree-spine. A fleur-de-lis branded onto the nape of my neck. And a great snail shell winding around itself, blazing on the small of my back. My lips she paints with the blood of enthralled trout, but my eyes, still yet uniform perfect white. And I lie against the silver bodies, empty within my mosaics of wounded buffalo and women

carrying water, all rock and dripping water, all darkness and sleeping bears. Claws clack on my stones.

“You see what a beautiful thing I can make of the whiteness,” she laughed smokily, “this is the dream I insinuate, this is the discontent I plant like a seed of pearl in you, that grows like a cornstalk from my throat and fills the Void of you with little orbs of gold. I speak the tongues of the Door-tribe, and though I have no hinge and no bell-rope, in a way I am the Door that catches you, I enfold and take you to the world of faith-in-the-Center, of bone-desolation, of belief. I plant in you the conviction of the Monster, the Queen, the Castle, the Treasure. I destroy your nonchalance, I take your certainty of nothing. Now you will suffer, my pretty *puella*, for I give you in a casket whose angles are swords, the desire to find what cannot be found, the dread adoration of what is not. This is my gift to you.”

I trembled under her avian eyes, numinous and desert-savage. “I do not want it. I am happy enough here, walking.”

“You are the Seeker-After. Is that not what you said? It is not for you to be happy. You *accept*. Did that not also escape your white lips? The Labyrinth does not accept you. I am filling you up with Want like acetylene semen. You have been here too long. Did you not think the Doors had a function? All things do, even you, even I. It is a present. Make no mistake, there is nothing, no Center, no Monster, no Quest. But in your proximate madness you will believe it.” She paused to trace a lion’s tail around my toes.

“The Labyrinth is all. I will make a small place in the soil of you and bury the grafted seed of *Yes*. Is it not a beautiful gift I give you?” She beamed, a blue light that shook through her skin and hair, glowing corona and belt of nebulous ice-rings.

Painted over with her hands I was frantic to escape the Angel, to continue as I had been, to Wander as I was meant, secure in the world I had delineated, whose moods and selves I knew.

“Please, Lady, I will not yield to even so beautiful a Door as

you, I will not. I am the Seeker-After. Don't you see? If I found a thing, I could not seek. Don't change me. It is illusion, all of it." I lifted myself slightly on pale palms as if to run, to escape the advent of Purpose. More terrible than the roses was this awful constriction, this assignment of identity, eradication of personality within her impetus. It would fill me up until I choked and there would be no "I" at all, only the Center-that-is-not. My breath had stopped, squeezed by her python voice, a panic of screams rising up like vomit.

"I am not quite a Door, you know," she whispered, "nor quite an Angel. You will cry out for me before the end, if an end there is, can ever be." She plucked a many-colored opal, swimming in a borealis of light, from her navel. "You do not yet understand. You do not even know your name. Keep this always by you, and thus keep me close to your skin. I will be always with you, and in you, and keep you, and guide you."

She bent, heavy with her beauty, towards me in my wriggling silver throne, and kissed my slickly star-white mouth, warmly, full and musky with the smell of ice. The Angel bit into my lower lip, drawing deep rushes of marbled blood. Drawing back, licked hungrily where it had stained her chin.

And vanished. The ice receded from the Road, with no scar where she had drawn up her subterranean trout. I wanted to throw the Stone from me, but I could not. It was so warm clutched in my hand.

In my glyphbody I ran, wailing into the night.

7. Despair.

I am blind. Still in my statue-eyes I die in my steps blooming red and black. The glyphbody flies apart, together. The Stone burns all through me. Talmudic Walls rise, recede. I dive, I dart, I runrunrun. I know the way to away and away. Infatuated by motion my feet make love to dirt, couple with jeweled stones full of corrosive oxygenblood, death of a thousand cuts executed on my own human haunches, never running fast enough to escape the threat of Purpose/non-Purpose. The Mazescape sloughs off its icy corslet as I scramble from the Angel's shade, but still I am the wasteland, white within white. Whales hunt for fat seals across the icy expanse of my torso, wolves gnaw at my ears. My septum is pierced with a barbed harpoon. I shudder in my own cold, watching my lips turn cream-blue, reflected endlessly in the glaciers of my transparent fingers. I am snow, I am stone, I am wind. I hollow myself to make shelter, scooping out shovelfuls of slush from my stomach, my thighs, my skull. I break open, holding this body together with screams. Perhaps when it is done I can crawl within the now-palace of stretched skin over the frame of icicles and become warm. Perhaps I will understand. Careening, pinwheel stride around a cul-de-sac, I kneel before a crumbling Wall—perhaps with bricklaid eyes it saw the birth of the Labyrinth in the *longestago*, squeezed from the womb of some un-

terable hundred-armed Ionic bear-goddess with screaming eyes, covered in slime and dust, shooting its arms out into geometric monstrosity, eating worlds to make its new limbs and mouths and voices, fulminating in the shadow of gargantua, suckling at its mother's shaggy body until she died—

I push its broken bricks back into the Wallbody, weeping with mortar of tears and saliva, fingernails torn and leaking white liquid, blood of pulverized moonstone flowing through me burning, burning, burning, the witch on the platform of my diaphragm, flames shooting from her mouth into my veins. Everything is fire. I grapple at the broken rock and dust, cramming it into my colorless mouth, crushing it into nothing, tasting the sour pencil-lead and hashish flavor of it, the gore of an ageing Wall, muddy intestines spilled out onto the careless Road into my careless belly. In, in, in, the tawny supper of clay, salted by manic tears, through the mash of dirt crowding I speak in tongues; Door-tongues, Hare-tongues, Sky-tongues, Trout-tongues, sordid demon-tongues, flower-tongues, snake-tongues like nooses, tobacco-tongues and belly-tongues, darkbody-tongues and white-eyed tongues, reptile-tongues and black wine-tongues, girl-tongues and foot-tongues, pummeling tongues of non-being and cadaverous tongues of lunatic frogs, O blasphemy, blasphemy in my tongue of tongues with the Wall dribbling out the sides of my wretched mouth. O holy Meal of Myself, Queen of the Center-that-is-not, babbling up at staircases that lead everywherenowhere, monoliths gawking at the clowning moon.

Exploding frenetic devourer, I eat the Labyrinth and it eats me, each grinning with stringy meat dangling like earrings from a hungry mouth. Conquering, driving it before me through my body, chasing it, knowing that time will come for

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the kill, screaming into it, filling the world with a rape of sound. O send out your Doors and I will splinter them! Sacred gibberish of Maze oracles too full of self, Road blasting through my abdomen like a cannonball, paving me flat, pushing, pushing, forward motion, reversal verboten, it is one-way, the Way of Tongues, the Way of Body, the Way of the After-Seeker. Breathe, breathe, lungs, or the Wall will strangle you like a criminal. And so I draw a rasping, shearing breath, inhaling the revelatory dust into my fishy pink lungs, maidenhair cilia, exchanging air for earth. Elementals dance in trapezoidal patterns, and always within. I will not yield, I will not let the Labyrinth trap me into belonging. I have eaten it, as I ate the compass rose, and it sits in my belly like a thrashing mollusk, throwing out the shrapnel of its hydrochloric shell into my stomach-lining, into my howling womb Walls, into the deeps of my secret throats. Of all those infinite thousands of tentacled Maze-arms I have one fleshly sucker within me, a grisly victory. In the sign of this body thou shalt conquer, thou shalt slash and rend flesh, thou shalt Devour for it is thy nature, to Devour what is Sought. I am I, and no other. On my lips the Wall disintegrates, on my lips it dies. I refuse. I refuse these mewling seductions. I am I. I move within the Labyrinth, and it moves within me. If there is madness to be swallowed, I will swallow it. But for the crashing chariots of Purpose I cannot halt.

8. I whittle the waxen surface of Time.

White crows cackle at the blackening dawn. Dewy air finds me curled in the wreckage of the Wall, liquid light hair streaming into the sky like a cloud of gangrenous butterflies. The morning so thick in my mouth, the pulverized brick on my tongue, ancient mortar like congealed vodka pouting at my uvula. Vagaries of the morning after paroxysm, ache of jaws recently frantic. (I contain an abundance of whiteness.) Still shivering in copious plagues. Penumbra lacerations and ruins of hallowed sylph-hips. I lie here, pressed down into the ground, unable to move, to pry open painted eyes and coerce action from opiate corporeality. Float in the dark, girl-creature, it isn't the sun on your limbs, it is the fire. Is there a tree heavy with peaches for your breakfast, waiting fat and friendly and golden outside the body barrier you cower in? Arboreal messiah, full of sugary seraphim, the grails of pitted cores? No, there is dust. Outside you, inside you. Dust. Toothless sky gumming your fingers like a grandmother.

I move. I have to. I am—there is no tree adjacent, of course. It would have been too docile, for the Road to have twisted and turned to serve my belly and its cat-howl, scowling empty. But it does not take long, no longer than a half-sliver of silver sun-glide, to locate a copse of cold green fruit trees. Under all

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juice flows down my lips, running the pigment of the Angel's art like watercolors. Impressionist, I stand tall and still within the sky-armed trees.

What remains when fire has filled the viscera and vanished? The oily tracks of naphtha, steaming black arteries, barren metallic smoke-smell, liver glazed like a vase, glossy and intricate. The lungs are blazed to crystal, and the long necklaces of veins strung with gleaming ligaments, each capillary popping clear of the flesh like a carnelian bead. What is left when the grimy veil of delirium has passed, with its greasy flames of green and blue? The Void, the Void only, that is the Labyrinth and that is I. When it is over, we remain, as we have *alwaysbeen*. The Others are ripples.

But I am troubled, I am haunted. Function, meaning pry at me like hungry children. There is power here, in my place within the life of the Maze. I am a terrible whirlwind, the eater of cities, but I choke on my own clouds and skirts of dust, my long ropes of sand. Wild roses on the Wallface, and the Void giggling under a veil of waving carpets of summer grass. And I, burning, falling, raw as bark-stripped pine. There is no sound where I step, for I am not really here, this shadow is not mine, I swear to myself that I am more than this, that transcendence exists somewhere, and a secret avalanche far off rumbles like the clearing of a diamond throat.

I am tired.

9. Whither and how. Shall I go on?

Do I dare to crawl on my belly through this pilgrimage of grass and earth? A pilgrimage with no Rapture at its dread terminus? Wear my knees to inkwells over endless Paths. Shaken by the spidery intrusions of words like snaking belladonna, I am not so firmly forward moving as I was. The clouds are threatening admirals, dusted in golden medals of sunlight. I have not heard the shuffling gait of a Door on my trail in days. It is strange, the ineffable silence. Do they no longer want me? Has my smell become less delectable in their nostril/keyholes? All around is barren, Walls of bare copper wire and a scalded Road, and I am the most blasted acre of this waste. I have seen scurryings in the corners, I have heard scratching feet. Yesterday a thrush shook its wings of rain nearby. But it would not speak to me, it turned its little brown back. I am verboten, nameless, null. There is a sliver in the pad of my ring finger, the reliquary of my own flesh cradling a breath of ash, tinged in blood and vinegar from lips of sorrowful countenance. In my earlobes thorns, my eyelids draped in shrouds with the imprints of a thousands faces emblazoned in sweat, a spear entering my mouth and piercing my skull at its base, obsidian arrowhead dripping in liquefied faux diamonds, the viscous substance that pools in my brain pan and slides from the edges

of the wound, thick with hieroglyphic ideation and the terribly worrying diagnosis of blood-poisoning. Oh, yes, I feel it already, marching through the byways with alkaline toes. Sad to think I am so streaked in squid-ink poverty that I cannot even be devoured properly. She was right. I do not know my name. But. I accept.

A sound fractured the air, behind a Wall of diamond and boiling pitch, spilling onto the Road in a writhing swamp-hand, reaching, reaching. My scalded eyes rolled like slot machines, pivoting to follow, sliding to wrap the molten corners. I was not ready, not ready for another thing to disturb my madness, growing like a favored son in me. I could almost see its source, spy with my little eye—

“A MAN!” it cried out, voice bleeding gasoline, slow and egg-runny, wriggling towards me.

“WALKS!”

And I could see it then, scaled knee sunk into the pitch, mouth gaping like a cellar Door. A swath of green hyphenating the Doorscape, glittering coldly and savagely in the brittle sun, still slick with the waters of some distant marsh. His great tail slapped the air, thumped the earth with enthusiasm and abandon as he, a monstrous Crocodile, clacked his feral jaw and winked, launching full force into his sermon, quivering in every green claw, gesturing with fat scaled fingers.

“A MAN WALKS INTO A BAR! Hallelujah, child, hallelujah, I say! Say it up and say it down, say it east and say it west, say it *diagonal*, child, say it *out loud*! A MAN! WALKS INTO! A BAR! A! MAN WALKS! INTO A! BAR! A! MAN! WALKS! INTO! A! BAR! AMAN, child, sing it, AMEN, glory on high, walks into a bar, and do he ever walk *tall*! A man walks into a bar, my child, do you *hear* what I *say*? He walks and he walks *slow*, he walks like *paint drying*, my friend, but he walks straight up to that bar and it’ll only be *the best brand* for this one with his

five-day-beard and better-day-seen jeans! Oh, yes, girl, surely so, a man walks into a bar and don't he have the look of a *union man*, don't he have the look of coffee and cigarette break *on the hour every hour*, don't he look like *our kind of boy*! Oh, pour him that double shot! Pour him that twelve-year old *brand name*! How many apostles on that holy mount, my child? Oh, yes, my girl! *There were twelve*! Can I get an AMEN? Oh, pour him that apostle-scotch, barman, *pour that drink*! A man walks into a bar, *holy holy, holy*! Oh, he walks *long* and he walks *strong* and don't he walk *grand*, like a boot-barrel man should, and ain't that cigarette in his mouth just as white as your mama's wash-day, child, and don't that smoke *rise up*? Oh, way up *high* it's said that men they don't *walk* but *fly* but oh, my child, I say unto you that that man *walked* into a bar and he *drank that whiskey down*! Say it high and say it low but in he walked and *lay his money down*, in he walked and sat on that red vinyl, in he walked and *tipped that barman five dollars*, hallelujah, child, *five dollars*! And ain't that green bill *crisp*, friends and neighbors, ain't it *brand new*, ain't it *mint*? A man walks into a bar, in his holy *name*, and it is nigh on *last call* but he lays his money down, he lays it down and drinks it down and ain't that *just fine*? Ain't that *right as rain*?"

I arched a kindergarten-paste eyebrow like a flying buttress. The Crocodile stamped his feet joyfully, splashing my ankles with black grime. His eyes glowed like pools of crude oil.

"Do you hear me, girl? Do you *get* what I'm *saying*? Can you *grab hold* and swing it around? Can you *feel* it in your *teeth*? Can you grasp the *sublime* and *angelic* perfection of the Gospel of the Man and the Bar?"

I leaned on one hip, exhaustion covering me like a lead shield. "I heard. I hear. It is no different than the Gospel of the Hare or the Gospel of Ice-Fishing. Everyone has another useless revelation."

"But it is different. Can't you *see it through and through*? I have heard those Gospels and they are *false prophets*. They are *cheap copies*. Truth lies with the Man and Revelation in his Bar." The creature inched towards me, his fat green body swaying from side to side, black eyes roving over me like sweaty hands. "I'm not surprised. We Crocodiles are *spiritually pure*. We can hold the Gospel in *our mouths*. Can't expect a little thing like you to grasp the higher registers. Your mouth is too small."

"I try, I try to understand the manifest and the invisible. I Devour. I Seek, I Walk."

"Of course you do, precious thing, of course." He sidled up to me and pushed his emerald head up under my hand like a cat. "No one *blames* you. It's just not how you're made. White as paper you are—well, what's paper for but writing on? And the paper knows nothing about it, can't go about reading itself. Just so, you can't be asked to know my Gospel any more than the number of my scales. If I had hands I might scribble a bit on you myself. Such sweet skin." He gestured in a friendly manner with his slick reptilian legs. "You just keep on as you are. *Downdowndown*. You haven't found your true Author yet—not like my own radiant self and the radiant Man. There is one that will cover you in ink like a hand. Until then you're just a river without a bank, *rushing* and *crashing* and *flooding* with no ocean to devour you. To gobble you up. Wish it could be me. If you could touch but the *outer rim* of the golden meaning of the Man and the Bar, the first layer like a *crystal onion*, you would be *saved*. If you could only understand that there is only one Man, and only one Bar, and they walk into *each other*, and they are *the same*. These are High Mysteries. But no! No one expects you to be *pure* like we are, pretty girl. Why, no!" He looked at my hips smugly, his marble eyes preening. "But whether you grip it in your little white hands or not, a Man walked into a Bar, *and it was a fine day*."

The Crocodile ambled away, humming a little, slogging through the sparkling pitch with the sun pooling on his back like thick rope.

10. I see.

Shoeless in the cunning morn, under sky's wet wings, blackness of the huntress-night faded to denim blue, old washed jeans hung out to dry in the rain-scrubbed air, knees torn open to reveal a blaze of dawn. Another day, it goes on and on, ever faster around a dying sun. Things have changed, they never change. Have I never seen another creature, Hare nor Angel nor Man nor Bar in the nevertime of my tenancy here? It is possible, I could not say. Memory is full of back-folds and hidden levers, my origami-crane mind, creased upon itself, blankness crushed into Form. It is equally possible I have seen and spoken and trembled before them a thousandthousandthousand times before. It flows together. I shrug underneath it, the dilated copper of the Road and the Journey re-settles on my muscled shoulders. I accept. If there is a new thing in this place, its newness may be mine. Longago but also tomorrow and Thursdaynext I lost the grasp of solid hand on happenstance.

There is something. It appears suddenly and without golden trumpets. It is not threatening, it does not speak. This is a relief. From the terrible cisterns of memory I excavate a name for this silvershimmer thing I find on the inner curve of a dead-end Wall. Mirror. Copper snakes raven each other around its polished surface, gnashing teeth like guillotines. Asphodel

twines through their tangled bodies, pike-branches piercing the thick serpent-flanks. I approach, because it does not move or hiss. Deadwood-drift I on its silvered Sea, azure ether of reflection wreathes my face. And the hieroglyphs of the Angel's hand which seemed so radiant leaping like enthralled fish under her fingers are now surly and vulgar, wide swaths of grease staining, avenues of gaping black wounds, fury of childish lizard-scribbblings biting into body, slime-tracks of some unimaginable worm, foul soup of rotten tempura tearing obscenity from unthinking skin. My flesh her possession she scrawled in wordless barnacled umbilici, each downstroke of pen a penetrating blade, spurt of reeking ink over breasts and belly, navel filled up with grotesque swirl of jet, hair streaked with toad-skins, the snowy peaks of curls hidden in sightless amphibian eyes, paints clattering over me like a kettle of festering squid, eating the white and pale with their horn-beaks, destroying, destroying.

I can see reflected her horrid watercolors seeping into me like poisoned semen, defacing the Walls of my womb with angry graffiti, splatter of mucus-paint and ravening teeth tearing bloody chunks away, like a crumbling Wall, vandalizing my uterine Wall with obscenities drawn in fouled india ink and tongue scrapings, the ravening hawk, the gaping earth. Streaking the mouth with the oil of octopus eyes. For only the eyes remain, horror-blank, the erasure of iris, pure white as rice paper and saki-cups. I wept and screeched with that ruined mouth, owl-rage filled up with razored feathers. Betrayed into monstrosity. *Hic monstra delitescunt*. Milky tears seeped from my blasted eyes like sap.

(—*Dare frame, dare frame thy, Dare clasp*—)

Mirror. Threads of voice and fennel like capillaries, invading my mind, refracted words from a beforetime I know has never been. Curse I all things. Mirror-eyes full of reptilian venom,

green scales clinking like armor, full of unanswerable ecclesiasts. Despair rises up in its terrible bubbling laugh again as I fall, head full of hammering, onto the calm silver thing, clawing with ragged hands and spouting all-vowel gurgling rivers, my mouth a goblet of ash.

And the Mirror gave way, into tumbling and pale, into watery possession, sleek of covering mercury, perfect wash of purifying silicate, hydrochloric Sea burning slicing pulling skin from bone, ramora nibbling vermin from a great grey arrow of shark-flesh, warm pain flowing clear, fallingfallingfalling.

(—*In what distant deeps or skies*—)

The rush and foam of that invisible Sea aural licking at starving earlobe, thunder a ceaseless rhythm of time irredeemable, ecstatic Seaweed strangling gleefully, leaping goldfish sparkling into waiting mouths, open icy aquamarine descent through cobalt and midnight, phosphorescent tumbling girlshape in (at last) the Void of sight-without-seeing, in the oceansmith, in the blue, blue forge

(—*On what wings dare he aspire*—)

benediction of liquid gliding half-intoxicate eternal coffin-wrappings of cerulean manuscripts, the Water Verses. Ear over heel, *downdowndowndown*. Or up. Up or down, I could not say, I could not say. Lime skins cover me like garden snails, suckling gently. Turning and sizzling in the deep, bubbling skin like fiftyfiftythousand cauldrons, jostle of newt-eyes and ox-horns.

(—*What dread hand and what dread feet*—)

My hand like a white starfish among them, bouncing among the morass, the soupy opiate snowbank enveloping. Something different, not the Road, but the Fall, breathtaking Descent, bauble-perfect and giggling, the Fall surmising the world, surmising the Maze, surmising vandalized I in its blue-black

wash. Crushed stuttering onto a silver washboard, strong
brown hands pounding into cleanliness, all of us slipping,
falling, drowning, throats coated in blue, nothing but blue
surrounding in this incubatory downstroke,

(—What the hammer? What the chain—)

filled with turquoise yolk-fluid swimming inside this cyanic
egg, swallowing the Sea obediently, fish flopping in the draft of
foam. Fast as I can, speeding through indigo waves crested with
elephants starry pale, transcendental fedoras filled with
meringue

(—when the stars threw down their spears—)

seeing nothing through blank eyes injected with oceanic
dye, deepening, deepening. I am still I, arms drawn like a bow
towards the sun.

*(—Dare frame, dare frame, dare frame thy, dare frame, dare clasp,
dare frame—)*

Down, down, down.

I fall and fall.

11. Give me the numbers of the moon, the rock-salt tranquility.

I wake with hardness, the bumps and trickles of cobblestone under my ravaged back. It has rained, I can still smell the earthy thickness of rinsed air. Still the Sea lies invisible, but it thumps loudly, much more loudly now in my breaking ears, a piano's lower registers broken and crushed to ivory paste. Still the Walls rise up, these new manifesting in streaked bloodstone, carved skillfully, not a glimpse of decay anywhere, antiseptic and darkly beautiful, springing up from a Road of polished coral like sunburned titans, draped with wilted windflowers climbing into nothingness.

Desolate circle of stone, with the Sea screaming somewhere unseen. There is a click and clatter behind me, behind me where the Mirror should be but is not, unsurprisingly, blank stone. Just a tunnel, after all that ecstatic ideation, just a passage from one sliver of the Labyrinth to another. How many times have I known it and given it voice but must remind my unlearning self: there is nothing but this.

The clicking repeats, a purposeful morse code of tapping the coral Road and I turn to recognize it, now nearly accustomed to Others and their erstwhile Appearances, and so accompanying my turning with a great, burdened sigh.

“Don’t you sigh at me, landlubber. I am very fierce,” announced an extraordinary Lobster waving a claw at me with imperious airs, a flamboyantly large crustacean snapping at the Sea air. “I sleep the sleep of manic frog-songs, reel in bright rings of my-and-your sulfurous selves, my claws click on lacquered women and sandpaper men, leave puckered scars on their pretty, pretty skins. I am a Meaningful Lobster.”

His lithe shell was aquamarine and crowned by such deeply indigo claws rimmed in copper, drumming and clacking those fabulous non-opposables.

“Sigh, ugly human? Divine madresses stream from my vermilion feelers, but only to be boiled and broiled and served to your slobbering lips with garlic butter and parsnips, followed by the delicate dessert of my soul, carmelized and en flambé, garnished with raspberries. Eh?”

“No—” I wanted to laugh at his indignation, his purpled face. But he blustered on.

“Who are you to sigh? You don’t even know your name. You tumbled through a Mirror and blundered into my Courtyard. Very rude. You’re getting everything dirty.” CLACK! His claws snapped emphatically.

I bent my head humbly to pacify the storming creature. “I am sorry, I meant no offense. Others are so often strange and terrible . . .”

He stood unmoving for some time, his stubborn brow coloring emerald with injured pride.

“They certainly are,” he said pointedly.

But with a courtly gesture of his claw, he acquiesced. “Very well, I shall not Scratch you to-day.” He clambered nearer to me, clattering on the slippery Road, little legs splaying out and correcting, until he sat next to me on a chalcedony bench. “I am the Rope-Cutter, the great Key-Maker, the Splitter of Bones and Eater of the Sea. In another life I was a Dragon, and I scorched

the face of the world." All this he laid out in a low, confidential music, by way of introduction.

"I am the Walker and the Seeker-After."

"Seeker after what?"

I had no answer, of course. "I am the Woman of the Maze. I am the Compass-Eater." At this last his scaly eyebrows raised in impressed surprise.

"Compasses are difficult to catch," he nodded. "You are strangely colored, for a Seeker. I think you have undergone Assassination. Do you know the Way?"

I looked at my hands, the lined manuscripts of my palms, unable to speak for the frustration of tears. The Lobster shrugged.

"Neither do I," he admitted. "The Labyrinth has a surfeit of Ways, and all the Ways are its own. I cannot choose. I stay close to the sound of the Sea. It is the best I can do. I am very fierce, I do not like Others. They Disturb me." There was a long, pulsing, and pointed silence between us.

"What sort of Keys do you make?" He was such a strange, sad, frenetic little animal, flashing storms on his shell. He brightened immediately.

"I *told* you I am a Meaningful Lobster. All kinds. So few take an interest—it is an ancient and refined art, but makers are few in these degenerate days. Keys of baleen and Keys of dried mud, Keys of Door-meat, Keys of fishing-cages, Keys of rain, Keys of whitethorn bark. Keys of gold and silver and bronze and ivory, sodalite and beryl and amethyst and liquid rubies. Sardonyx and cat's eye and hematite. Keys of wolf-tails and Keys of iron pyrite. Keys of gardenias and camellias and rosewood, of wine bottles and Wallbrick and Roadstone. Horse-hide and sweetgrass and priest's collars, polenta and lizard claws and king's crowns, chess pieces and cheese wheels. Keys to Castles and Treasure Chests and Queen's Chambers and Cellar Doors, to Garden Gates and Serpent Cages, Witch's Huts and Prisons, Stables and

Wax Museums, Towers and Armories, Tollbooths and Secret Rooms. Keys to Rivers and Caverns, Keys to Wind and Body." The Lobster was hopping from one row of chopstick feet to another with excitement. "Do you want a Key? Is that why you came? It has been so long since I have had an order." My vision had filled with dancing Keys, all in a paper-doll chain, all promising Entrance, Passage, Motion.

"Yes, yes, I want a Key! But I have nothing to give you in return."

He considered, cocking his cerulean head to one side. "I will take a lock of your hair. It still has some of the angelblack of your Assassination on it. I could make a good, strong Key." I nodded assent almost at the same moment he reached up an enormous casual claw and clipped off a curl about six inches long. Tucking it away under his shell, in the same movement he produced a small Key made of a deep blue green shell. If it was possible, the Lobster blushed from feelers to tail, his body flushing a deep orange.

"It is my best Key," he whispered, "I made it from my own shell, my own claws. Under the seventh moon I sautered it with my blood." I took it quietly, away into my pack, but as I tucked it out of sight, a great, indignant screech froze my hand.

"Why does *she* get a Key? I ask and ask and get nothing but your wretched shell turned against me and she barges in and you give *her* one?" A mammoth Seagull pinwheeled before us, cawing and screaming in a frenzy. "She's nothing but a *girl*. She doesn't deserve to go forward, or back, or anywhere! You cannot give her one—give it to *me*, you vile . . . *Crab!*" The bird spat this last deadly insult like a wad of tobacco, quivering with wrath. The Lobster leapt up, flushing orange and snapping his claws.

"I can give my Keys to whomever I wish, *Sparrow!* You go away! You are a rude beast and filthy—you eat rotted fish! I can smell it on you! I would never make a Key for your kind."

“But why *would* you grant this to me?” I asked, bewildered.

The Lobster shrugged his jeweled shoulders. “I sleep the sleep of manic frog-songs. I pity you. You of all creatures know there is nothing here, not even Reasons Why. Yet you keep going. *He* thinks he knows all the Reasons. Take it before I change my mind.”

I nodded and thanked him. He gestured towards the spiral Road. “That is all there ever was or will be. You have to go now, girlthing. Or the Gull might try to bite us. *Isoganakereba narimasen*. I have to hurry, so do you. And keep going. Downdowndown.”

“No! It’s mine, you can’t have it! You’ll lose it or drop it down a well or some other wretched thing!” The Seagull wept and stormed overhead.

I rose with ache in my thighs, amid aviary outrage, ignoring him.

“You don’t even know what its for—you’ll never find the Lock. Even at the Uttermost End, you won’t know,” he warned, gnashing his beak. I turned my painted back to his protests.

“You are a very odd Beast,” I smiled at the smaller and quieter of the two, who was still blushing furiously.

Again, the jewelled shrug. “I am a Meaningful Lobster.”

As I retreated from the bloodstone Courtyard, I caught my image in the receding Mirror of his shell, framed in the squealing of the frustrated Seagull.

I had gone entirely blue, from heel to hair.

12. I look out of my skull at all this inky blue skin.

Lakshmi-flesh blossom, dark-soled deva. All evidence of the Angel's work—my Assassination—vanished into sapphires and crow's feathers. To my waist sea-colored hair rolls and slips, washing foamily up onto the shore of my now azure back, now period shoulders, now violet waist. Legs stalks of skies, cobalt lips, a seabed fulminating, birthing a bewildered undone on the canvas of my skin.

But the eyes, the eyes. Still blank and empty as a well, now blue within blue within blue. Another shake and smash of noses and eyes and hairlines, another stained checkered floor of cleft palate knights and thalidomide bishops. Walls like craven rooks, bursting out of an acetylene Road. Another, and another, and another. Is this set of walking beats different because a little blue-green Key lies nestled like an infant sparrow? I do not know what it Opens, so it is as though it does not exist. It has no Purpose. Yet I know deep as Self can go that Purpose is the worst kind of trick. I am in the fish, Daughter of the Whale. My mouth tastes of old tea water, these old questions recurring, spinning like bicycle wheels over and over, that same Queen of Spades click clacking against the spokes, the same black wheel and silver rim.

I thought I had worked this unto its uttermost end, had

demarcated my world, river from stream from ocean from beam. I had encapsulated it, trapped it in my little coffins and lockets, figured it out. I did not exactly come here, and so there was no *beginningtime*, no entrance through some fantastic Gate. But it was a measurable moment ago that I was satisfied with the non-advent of nothing and its persistence, that eluding Doors had become easy enough, that I was metamorphosing into a kind of expert Labyrinth-Woman, I knew its tantrums and its dervishes. And now I tumble like a candle through the night, wax end over end. The Mirror changed me, took me in like a Door, but not a Door, a jeweled tunneling worm. But didn't the Angel change me before that? I have lost the threads. Memory is masked here, and days dissolve into ripples and smears of movement almost as soon as they pass beyond the moonrise, and so I could not say if I have been eaten by a Mirror before, but I think not.

There are advents and newness stalking me. I could be certain before that the Labyrinth shifts, but it does not change. Yet I am within something else now, a sequence of events, beyond sheer movement, pure and dazzling. It boils all around. the tiny pale blue hairs on my arms bristle like a boar. I am waiting for the portents to come. I feel them cackling around me like a cosp of witches.

The carried compass sends out trails of sickness like medieval sunbeams, lassoing organs into green grassfires. The slab of north lacerating my throat, spilled mercury and spoiled stew east roiling in my belly, south-arrow crackling in my bones like kindling. It travels through me as I travel through the Labyrinth, navigating the turns and traps, inhabiting slowly, imprinting the landscape. I have eaten Direction, and it has eaten me. Oh, the yin yang cycles of self upon self, oh zazen clay of form upon shape, oh wheels within wheels within scarlet-flaming wheels. Oh, Ezekiel, what do you see in the glabrous sky, bound with glowing spokes?

What is it searing and smoking, scalding the hermetic moon in a
boil of stone? What do you see dancing in primate patterns over
and over? *In this sign thou shalt conquer.*

How all we pretty snakes have a taste for our own tails.

CANTO THE SECOND

13. It has been days upon days and still my eyes are slates.

Crack the egg for the answer, the gold and the white. It lies within like the ascended scrap folded in a fortune cookie, malignant scrawl of notime.

Oh, Ezekiel, what do you see in the sky?

Answer: the Void. The Void and the Stone.

I have stumbled into another layer of within, the sky and its signs are covered by intricacies of stone. This that surrounds—no circular Wall but a great Temple carved into existence in the center of the Road, luxuriating in columns and steps of striated granite, studded with quartz like roused eyes. Exhales into the viscous air like a sleeping dragon. Circus ropes of thick vine lie net-like over the Walls and crumbling balconies, weeping fat tears of wet crimson fruit, which comprises my breakfast in this abandoned place. Sky like a dove's belly can be seen through vast cracks in the domed ceiling, crusted with flecks of ancient paint like flocks of birds. Copper bells gone to rust litter the floor, fallen in some antediluvian cataclysm. Mosaic with no picture to reveal, (as though any Revelation lies buried and smoking here) the stones of the floor have conquered their polish and lacquer, host to grass and occasional columbine. The wind prophesies in breaths of blades, slicing my inky skin.

In the shadows of the altarstone I chew my fibrous breakfast, savoring the musky juice, beckoning the strange. It is not long in coming. The air is stale, still, except for the cossack-wind that gallops through on occasional pogroms. Oh, the scrabble and scramble of sequence closing in like hands on a fly. Where am I going, beneath this frenzied sky? Clinging to my knowledge that there is nothing, no Center, am I blind to the wheels of fire? Oh, what do you what do you what do you see in the sky?

I see the corner of the nave move silkily, shadow within shadow, suggestion of gesticulate limbs. I swallow the sliver of fruit on my tongue, peering closer, dreading the next in this idiosyncratic parade, this sequence. This episodic hermitage so full of opiate swans and painted mouths. How will it end, if an end is ever to be contemplated under an infinite train of Bo Trees and crusted snow, skipping projector illuminating this same arboreal testing ground over and over, the ascetic, the pearl, the slanting light? My turquoise fingers are sticky with apple-blood.

It is not long in coming, the breakfast-strangeness. Obligingly a creature darts out of its sanctuary, making for my tiny Bo with determined speed. A handsome golden macaque with a bodhisattva face, clever twisting hands, his gleaming fur bristled with excitement, clapping wildly and slapping his palms on the stone slabs. He stops short an inch from my face and sniffs sharp and greedily at my shimmerings of blue. I have not moved, and how we must seem like Temple statues, the Monkey and the Deva, sea-blue and still as time.

"Who are you?" He inquires on an intake of breath, words riding air like a camel.

"I am the Seek—"

"Ssst!" He interrupts me with a venomous hiss between enormous teeth. "I know all that. Who are you?" Each syllable punctuated by a slap of Monkey-palm against Temple floor.

There is a long silence filled by a tabernacle of flapping birds over some distant Maze-territory, the slow, irrefutable crumbling of the Temple into divinatory dust, reading the future (nothing, of course) in its granite entrails.

"No one, I suppose." The answer was meeker than I intended. "I am my Wandering."

"At least you know it. I am myself, nothing more. And often not even that. I know my name, I found it in the belly of a sturgeon with a golden ring and salty Himalayan caviar. But I learned to ascend it in the hysterical ravage of the Turkish Baths at the Center of the Labyrinth."

The Compass in my belly lashed out in epileptic grandeur and I choked and sputtered. "There is no Center! There is none, nothing!"

"Silly girl with no tail, did you think there was no Center just because you had not found it? I showed it my teeth, and it was afraid. Hoo!"

The little Monkey danced triumphantly, waving his arms skyward and stamping his long feet. I could hardly speak for the pressure of sequence. How great lay the Lie of the Maze if there was a Center I had never guessed to Seek? How could I guess the shape of un-knowledge from the depths of the Road? I rasped coldly at him, grasping his golden fur.

"Where is it? Tell me, tell me, please. I have to know. Where?"

A grin of jubilant savagery seized his mouth, and he rubbed his iconic belly. "I ate it. It was afraid. Hoo!"

What relief there is in the reassurance that the world is as you suspected. His absurdity revealed his lie. The Compass calmed to its usual pulse and the winds dried blue sweat from my brow. Madness knows madness, delirium draws its own. He was caught in the same narcotic web of enchantment and counter-enchantment, trapped in the same Golgotha of perception. I knew it for a Lie and was comforted.

“All is the act of Devouring here,” he lectured, “it is how you conquer, it is how you survive, it is how you ascend. It is why you ate the Compass, and the Wall. This is a Labyrinth. Have you any doubt that its nature is *inside*? There are beyond a thousandthousand Walls. What did you think you had done by Devouring one corner of one? There are beyond a thousandthousand Centers. I ate one. Downdowndown. It tasted like a witch’s nipple dipped in morphine. Delicious. I ate my name, which was a Center of a three thousand and forty forever Centers, but mine. And so I become another in a writhing nest of Centers. You do not know your name and cannot achieve that kind of mastery—you do not know the tracks of your prey. I ascended its fish-eggs and padlocks. Now I am myself, whole. I carry the Center with me, and everywhere I go is the achievement of the Quest. With every step I conquer the Labyrinth, the world of my birth-tree and my first-milk.”

“But you don’t, really. You trick yourself. There is no end to it. You can’t leave it. So it makes no difference. You and I are the same. You just have a better Lie to tell yourself.”

His eyes glittered shrewdly. “Darlingblue, it is all a Lie. That does not make it lesser. Is it victory to abandon a thing like a wounded wolf? Is the truest expression of mastery is to Abscond? Not the vital thing, no. I choose. We are *not* alike, because I understand these things, and you do not.”

“You think you understand. It does not make it so. After all, it is all a Lie. Even you.”

“True. Even the purity of crocodiles is a derivation of moon-mother tea ceremony and a falsity. You have your Labyrinth and I mine. And I have had the Temple where you have had the Road. You have been Assassinated—it is something to see. Nevertheless, I have been waiting for you. I see the wheels in the sky and the shape of approaching. Hoo.”

I shut my eyes, heavy-lead-bodied and grinding closed. "I am weary of all this. I do not wish to listen patiently to your reed-mat ministrations and nod like an ignorant postulant. I must keep moving."

"Yes, girlbodied thing, and I am going with you. For awhile."

"You are not welcome."

"It hardly matters."

"I will not listen to you."

"I will not speak."

"The Doors will catch us both."

He said nothing. I covered my eyes with my hand. "I don't care. Come if you wish, Beast. Or stay. There is nothing new, even you."

I rose, striding towards the Temple steps like a wave. Lost, lost in *sequence*, in the hagiography of this opaque menagerie, it is, it was, it will be all slipping away. I feel the slide of earth beneath my bare and cyanic feet. The Monkey dove into my Path and planted his limbs like a portcullis. "You must do something before we leave this place."

Exasperated, I spit words like poison darts. "I do not need you."

This was predictably ignored. "You must give me the Stone."

"Why?"

"To demonstrate a Thing. You do not want it anyway, you ran from the Angel like a river from the mountain."

How weary can I become before I vanish? I handed over the Stone, because it is what I am supposed to accomplish, what has been written for me to do, what is required to silence him, to further the Road another inch, another mile, another winter clutch of nights like a basket of hissing eggs. Someone asks me a thing and I do it. I am only the object.

And into his little gold mouth it goes, sparking briefly with light glinting off his unsettling teeth. He smiled at me, a smile of perfect satisfaction.

“See? Nothing changes. I am not consumed with the finding of the Source, the End, the Monster. It was afraid. Now I Have it and it will ferment. It will drive you mad; already you are a little *loooony*. But without the blessings of madness you will not survive. Hoo. Only the mad can find anything under the sun. Now it has all begun properly, and you cannot escape it.” He rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue like a party favor.

“Why would you do this to me? I have never hurt you!” I heard my voice as from a distance, wondering tremulously at his green-flecked eyes.

“Another time, Darlingblue. Explanations are a waste compared with the metamorphoses we will find under a thousand spotted leaves. Come, come, come.” His *hoo* was soft and warm while he took my hand blue as a Map in his leathery paw and half-sings:

“Let us go then, you and I, while the evening is laid out against the sky . . . ”

14. And now we are two.

The Walls wind thickly in long, womanly curves now, covered with a fine thin bead of playing cards and syringes, sweated movement of clubs and hearts, binary black and red, down to the invisible sea. Step for step I am matched by golden feet, slide-swish down the Road at twilight, into the night, into the stars and the black canvases, into the pendulums swinging from a nervous sky, earlobes of clouds belly-heavy with listening. It is not unpleasant, to have company. He does not speak because I have not. Lunacy, if I have opened my veins to its beastlight, surrounds like a nimbus. I can eat the Center, and be whole. It is possible. Temptation has fled in her red shoes and gargoyle petticoats, ravaging through a forest primeval, drowned in a sleeping river with the Stone around her neck, to weight her to the sandy bottom. No more the grotesque desire, the terrible Lie of Purpose, the seduction of Meaning. I have wrestled with the Angel and pinned her opaline shoulders to the red, red rock. He took it from me like a tumor and perhaps there is now some hope.

But they are all Lies, even Temptation. They whisper of Reasons, of coming and going, of Time, and of the possibility of a thing that came before. Dread dark bullroaring fear of a *beforethis*, frog-sounds in the marsh of midnight, dreaming of who I might have been before I Walked. It does not exist within

me, my interior is the Mazescape of the Labyrinth, vein to vesicle to womb floating like a rough hewn-raft. I cannot locate it among the branching capillaries and smoky pneumonia, I do not believe it is there. But I could not say. I cannot say anything anymore. Once there was no new thing in the Labyrinth, and I thought I understood. I survived. I cannot say anything anymore. I am not quite myself, not quite another. I draw the stars down upon my head with a sickle blade. I think he is right, that I am going mad. I do not fear it (*hoo*) but I think it is just behind me, on fox paws, printing patterns of circlescirclescircles on the dust of the Road.

What do you see?

Oh, what do you see but the salamander's back splayed out against the sky, the fire-lizard caught in a frieze of Death, the silhouette of scorpion and desert? I see nothing, it is all black, no turns, no hiding places, no Doors with handles of gold. No cloudwalls drifting across the hooded moon, her mask of wax and spittle of cicadas, her ululations, her hair of whistling bats. Wholeness, unbroken, clay pot filled with jasmine tea, warbling in its earthen goblet, satori-sky of blossom and grass harp. When I was in my darkbody how beautiful I was, how singular, how like this perfect expanse of charcoal smeared across half of all, how hidden and cohesive was I in my sweet-smelling nightskin.

We walk and walk and walk and there is no end. He chatters on, and I cease to hear, the voices within bubbling in my kettle-body. Cycling stains, marks of wood-stamps on my skin forced to open and receive, wedged open with an ash spear, my entire form slashed and drinking. And yet—

What do you see?

Wisps of logic, penetrating like armies with furred hats and shaggy horses when the world had ordered itself without. We build our Walls high as—

THE LABYRINTH

(—the topless towers of Ilium)

We push our shield-line against theirs—bronze on bronze,

(—And will I combat)

Gates bruising the clouds—

(—come, give me my soul again, here I will dwell)

Our arrows pierce horse-hide and fire-mail—

(—yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel)

Our horses gnash with teeth like tearing steel—we do not want it here—

(—I will be Paris, for love of thee)

And the fire, how high the fire on the turrets, devouring—

(—Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter)

The dissonance, the half-knowns, I cannot, I cannot. I hold my head as though a Monster (the minotaur tossing his horns at my skull) were going to burst from my hairline.

Oh, for the blackness, the smooth and cool hand of that dark heaven on my face, I cannot disembodied drift deadwood between knowing and unknowing, I am being torn by hooks—in the gills of my seabody, the salmon silver gills breathing an air-that-is-not, slits in my flesh like gulping vaginas, *vagina dentata* and the masked knife, rifts and breaches, continental drift splitting my tectonic bones, pullingpulling apart, whispering intimations the voice within, hinting and grasping. Intimate, grave, the song, a frazzled beard brushing my cheek, and down I go into this pool of sick, this avenue of buoyant retch, heaving waves of bottlenecks and Chinese dinners, aluminum siding and bile-soured wine, bread crusts and fish tails and fulminating bananas, ox hearts and newspaper hats and diner menus, sheet music, guitar strings strangling plucked chickens, watery blood and pulp of novellas, hat-rims and shattered upholstery, shoe-heels and shoehorns and turkey livers, tomcats with semen-sticky red fur nosing in this vile flood of me through the Center of the Road, column of vomit floe of madness and dis-ease down those smug cobblestones.

The Monkey, oh, he looks at me with pity crinkling those black flickering green eyes.

(—*And none but thou shalt be my paramour*)

The sounds of that sibilant pentameter, those lipping lips worming over my throat, flickering screams of lizard-fire and the paradisiacal yammering of *truetrue>true!* His pity is a hammer splitting my skull, silver knob bursting through a fire-work display of blood and bone, spurting upwards, cerebral ejaculate, bang crash of fontanel puckering and blowing high as a whale's spume. The brain exposed, that Labyrinth of twisting pink flesh, wrinkled as an old man's belly, and it is really all belly, all gut, the depth from which it rises, madness and sublimity, from the Center, from the Devouring-Place, from the primordial swimming cauldron of murky stew-self

I claw at the Road, ripping my fingernails and chipping teeth. I have fallen, *downdowndowndown*. The Monkey moves his long brown fingers over my forehead in a tender circling motion, calming, consoling, cooling the fever blistering the peaceful azure sky of skin. His voice is soft as rain:

*"Within the bowels of these elements,
where we are tortured and remain for ever,
The Labyrinth hath no limits,
nor is circumscribed in one self place;
for where we are is the Labyrinth,
and where the Labyrinth is, there must we ever be.
Hoo."*

I slept.

15. The pancreatic morning breaks sickly and yellow.

Again, the thumping body, the hang-over from delirium. This, at least, holds to pattern, grinding millstones in my grisly head, scarlet shame frothing and gurgling like spoiled port, grapes trampled underfoot, stains of burst fruit spreading like sin. As I wake the Monkey is perched bird-like on my chest, picking expertly at my aquamarine hair, grooming me as he would a member of his troop.

“It is poisoning you, the Stone, cyanide in your pretty blue cells,” he informed me with some cheer as he mussed with my curls.

I answered sleepily. “It was just a rock. I escaped the Angel. How can it hurt me?”

“Hoo, hoo, Darlingblue! *I* escaped the Angel when I took it from you. You are still within Her. She wanted you mad and gibbering, and you are obliging. It is all going so well. You did not swallow it, so you could not master it. It licked at you like a grassfire. I took it so that you could not conquer it, so that you would follow the path that lunacy has laid out in such profound bricks. If you were your singular body, you could not follow me, tread so heavily this Road. Only the mad are Seekers-After. You are burning, girlchild. It is beautiful to see. The Stone is Doubt. It is Pernicious. You ought to pay more attention, you know.

You have lost your eyes and are changing bodies like ball gowns. Were you so malleable and myriad before She came with Her swathes of ice?"

"Hic monstra delitescunt. But she cannot be the Villain. There is no Monster at the Center of the Labyrinth, no Minotaur, no Beast. I know it. That is not the meaning of this place. And why would she harm me? Why would you keep me from deliverance?"

He nodded sagely. "This is Assassination. You have no choice. It is a game that has been played and played before. This is the Way. There is no Monster. But there are many monsters here-about, as there are many Centers. You are a monster, I am a monster. She was, and a Center, too. You should have showed her your teeth. Instead she is poisoning you like mistletoe on an oak, because you thought she was beautiful and you let her. Hoo. Now you are very sick, and you will continue to spend your nights speaking in the breakwater tongues of the Labyrinth and clawing at the earth until your bones weather to white on the wide lanes of the Road. Or possibly light blue. As for howandwhy," he shrugged wheat-shaded shoulders. "She Devours. It is the Way. Can't you trust that the tale unfolds as it should?" He was contorting his graceful fingers rhythmically, tapping my body like a piano.

"No, I can't. And how is it you know so much, Beast? Who are you?"

A long, slow smile spread across his features, widening the wrinkled face to a glowing jack o' lantern. "I am myself and no other. But nothing here is precisely what it is."

"Ssst!" I snorted, grinning. "I know all that. *Who are you?*"

He laid one finger alongside that squat little nose and uttered his syllable. "Hoo."

The air was suddenly filled with his wild laughter, leaping across the Road and careening off Walls, cavorting and thoroughly enjoying his joke. Catching his breath, he giggled, "Oh,

Darlingblue, that was lovely. If you are very, very good and promise not to strangle me during your funny little fits, sometime soon I shall show you my name, then will you know. Until then, mum's the word."

The Monkey was off on another fit of hooting acrobatics. "But you," his voice calmed, became grave, "are in trouble. I would like to help you, very much, very much. But I can't. My Medicine is not for you."

And so I was falling again, lost in the newness-which-was-not, lost in waves of golden fur and shining eyes, winks of I-know-what-you-don't and shrugs of self-satisfaction. Lost, not just strange and Wandering, but diseased and poisoned, asps worming towards my great indigo heart that very, very moment. My voice cracked like a clay pitcher: "Is there nothing to be done?"

The Monkey flicked at a gnat on his saffron pelt. "Oh, please, woman. Of course there is or I would have stayed in my cozy little Temple and let you blather on your way. I merely said *I* cannot help you. Hoo! I can't do everything, you know. We must find Her again, the Angel. And you must be entirely mad before we do, wholly Devoured, or there will be nothing to give her."

"It is a Quest," I said doubtfully.

"No, it is a sequence of events. You will not defeat Her with some Vorpel Blade, or win anything at all from Her. It is not the End, nor can we truly Seek her, as the Labyrinth carries us where it wishes, if it can wish. Will has no meaning here, like everything else. There is no meaning. There is no pagination. There is no index, no glossary. There is no first edition, no reprinting, there is only this battered, dog-eared *now*. There is no gallery, there is no photographic record, there is no grand entrance or dramatic exit. There is only the great nobody roasted in its sapphire hide, and your great seaside eyes,

widening in ineffably slow understanding, rolling weakly into darkness as you are eaten, piece by piece.

It is not a Quest merely because it has a beginning with me and an ending with Her. You are not going to fight, or act, or plead. You can get nothing from Her. She may not heal you, and you cannot force Her. But you must make a circle. You may never find Her. A Quest is Heroic, you are not. You are selfish: you wish only to Survive and Devour. It will not change the Labyrinth, or the fate of a fair-armed damosel. You are the damsel and the dragon, you are the prince and the witch, you are the captain and the whale. 'Quest' has no meaning for you, who Seek only the delectable end of your own rattling tail. You are the Seeker-After, so get on with it and Seek." He folded his arms across his chest.

"It is, really. You are tricking me into it, but it is a Quest, a Journey. I do not want it."

"Nothing here is precisely what it is."

"And I shall die otherwise?"

"Yes. You may die, anyway."

"And it will be quite awful?"

"Yes."

"And there is no other Road but this?"

"Has there ever been another Road for you?"

I paused. "But we cannot Strike Out and hunt her."

"No."

"Then how do the Doors hunt me?"

Again the slow butter-spread of a smile. "So clever, Darlingblue, so precise. How indeed? They are not like us, not our kind."

"They Devour," I remarked.

"How would you know? Hoo! You, the great Labyrinth-Navigator, the great Walker, escaping every Door like bread from the oven! Yes, they do, but not like us. The Doors are part of the Maze, not within. They can hunt you, and me for that

matter, because they are conscious of you as the Road is; you are within them/it/all. It is all one. Such the terrible instinct to run, suspecting darkness and dread on the other side. But if you will not believe in a Monster or a Castle, why do you cling to your faith in that terrifically humanological fear of fire and black on the windward side of the Door? You do not really engage the Maze at all."

"You do not go diving into Doors, you flee, too!" I protested.

"Yes, because I do not wish to be Devoured in any fashion, and I prefer a Singularity of Possibles. I run because I know their danger. You run because you do not, because you are good at being hunted. Perhaps the best. So good you have never been caught."

"You're being very serious."

"You're being very stupid. Afraid to save yourself." I bristled in indignation and frustration. He watched, bemused.

"I do not wish to die on her command. So I am forced. Will has no meaning," I sighed. "But how will we do this thing?"

The Monkey curled up next to me, long tail waving lazily, curving like a question mark. "We will be as clear as the rivers of Babylon, and the sun will shine through us as through a clear glass. We will plant our feet on this long highway and the Labyrinth's currents will take us where they must. Or they will not. You never know. But we are caught up in a sequence, and these things usually find their way. Make no mistake, Darlingblue, we are Highwaymen, in our blue velvet cloaks, we are Dashing and Brave. And we go out onto the Road to steal and Devour. Numinous, rapacious creatures are we, and when we stamp the moon quakes."

His tail wafted like a kite on the breeze, weaving into a figure-eight. "But now, by the sun and the fabled shores of the Gitcheegoomie, it is time for tea. Boil the water, dear, whilst I go and hunt for the well-known and elusive beast, the ferocious butter-backed cucumber sandwich. Hoo!"

He scampered off, disappearing behind a low gorse bush, yellow on yellow, smooth butter of fur and flower. It is all falling apart, leaving me to strike the fire in the shelter of an overhanging Wall, crushing nettles and dried roses from the Hare's Garden into a mild tea, pouring like a wife into my little clay pot, waiting for the returning pads of little golden feet.

I was saddled suddenly with a Companion and a Quest, and the witch's brew bubble of pale green in my hands. I knew now how far I had slipped since I lay helpless beneath the Angel's potent form, how close her white fingers lay to my heart, how much more quickly it beat now, now that the hooded beauty of nihilist ideation, the certainty of emptiness, the comfort of a Search without End was slowly being stretched by red-faced inquisitors, limbs pulled like taffy, plucked like harp strings. My head fills with the whipping birch-switches of that music, my arms and legs strummed roughly, that old E minor chord over and over. I can smell the simmer of the oil, molten bronze waiting for them to dip my body like an altar candle, to raise up boils and blisters like love-bites, fill my mouth with a liquid scream, gurgle of churning gold coating tooth and tongue. I will not confess, recalcitrant I, that all I have known is false, and that this Monkey is the master of all. I will not confess that I am a child and must be taught as though I sat at a little desk with a ruler and fat pink eraser, the smell of chalk in my nose (and yet where does this image come from, the twin-braided child with a heart-shaped face, staring into the wild nirvana of a blank green board?)

I will not confess, and whatever this is that grows inside me like a tumor shows me with boyish pride the rack and the thumb-screws, the eruption of nacreous fingernail and warm spurt of blood over knuckle, the melodious popping of joints on the merry wheel, crackling of bones like a winter fire. It is so beautiful to give in, it whispers, the voice of the Stone in my mind like a gilded priest, so simple and right, to let the welcoming arms of

that promised madness enfold you, comfort you, nurse you like your own mother. Bend under the leather-handled whips, back like an ash bow, yield under the hooks and blades, allow us to come inside you and purify your soul.

It is pressing me, the Stone on my chest, the great slab crushing the ribcage of a relapsed witch, splinter of bone like rotted wood. I am losing, slowly, so that I do not even have the strength to resist this temptation, the temptation of Purpose again, floating like a blood blister before me, to resist the lead of the Monkey, the Trickster, drawing me into pursuing myself over a shapeless land. Too weak to stay my own course and continue in the velvet pleasures of Wandering alone and unfettered. I am losing myself, the self that is no other. If I knew my name, I could grip it like the edge of a cliff, drive my teeth into it and never let go. I could keep hold, and not slip. But it is hidden in the Book of the Hammer, and the inquisitors will not let me see. They are preparing a vat of acid, red as withered roses boiled for tea, sour as lime leaves. I can smell it, the mescaline-arsenic, the stabbing scent of metallic greasepaint and twelve-year scotch, and the pitch they will spread over my irisless eyes so that I will not see how they mutilate my breasts with mewling hands. It will have me, in the end, the Stone wide and bright in my mind's eye like a rotting moon, I will burn in the tincture that even now simmers in whale-skull vats.

Into my reverie bursts the Monkey, turning temple-creature with geometric arms full of sandwiches. Dainty white squares from what ingenious tree. But he grinds to a halt and widens his almond eyes to perfect zeros of surprise.

From scalp to sole my body had flushed to deep red; red palms, red ankles, red nipples, red hair to my waist.

And eyes, smooth and featureless, pools of blood-shade, red as roses.

16. “Hoo! Aren’t you a pretty little rose, now!

Can’t leave you alone for a minute!” He bustled about, preparing a ridiculously proper tea service on the mottled quartz Road, now reflecting in infinite dusky facets my crimson flesh, torso like a ruby breastplate, carnelian legs crossed gingerly, fire-toned, as though one knee might inflame the other. Fire-goddess, Kali-boned, body of Martian silicate crushed to liquid glass. I touched my face, warmed under the new skin, scald of red, the still-blank eyes wide, wild and creased with fear. The Path seems to blush as it holds my image to its chest.

“It is getting worse, isn’t it?” Tears like blood welled up.

“Come now, Darlingred, it’s very striking. Drink your tea. You must not succumb yet, there will be more of this before there is less. I have brought you cucumber sandwiches out of the Wild, why do you not smile?” His own brown face was covered in crumbs. I drank with sullen lips, the bloodstone color of the Sea-Walls.

With a sandwich in one hand, held up like a pale green mudra, full of salt and taste of a watery delta, I turned my face towards the sliding honey of a late afternoon sky, light illuminating the scarlet contours of my firebody, woman-shaped flame sitting zazen on the tatami of the wide Road, knee deep in

the latticework of tea ceremony, a primal streak of red against the sky gold as a temple-creature's hide. I am the Monster and the Prey.

"I am dying, dying in a clutch of painted swords."

The Monkey shook his head at the earth. A flash of color caught my eye; in the warm black soil a little Grasshopper twitched her pale green legs.

"She talks too much, friend Monkey," the pretty insect whistled, her voice fiddle-high. The Monkey laughed and let the little creature crawl up onto the shelf of his tail. "Yes, but we must forgive her. She is only a small Beast."

"How long will you walk the Road with her? How long will you let her think that fur is yours? I have come far, on smaller feet, and I am not so worn as she. Who has been dancing in her, that the slippers of she are so tattered? She is not very pretty, even with all her paint." The Monkey did not answer, but stroked the top of my ruddy thigh with something like fondness.

"It's none of my nevermind, of course," the Grasshopper chirped, "have to take company as you can get it around here. Two's better than one with Doors about, eh? But she isn't well, not at all well. You don't want to catch it."

She waved her antennae at me thoughtfully.

"I won't, little one, I won't. There is some sandwich left, if you would like it."

"Oh, thank you, I haven't had the strength to climb the sandwich-trees lately. Getting on in years and all." The Grasshopper marched over to the crust I held in my hand and perched on the pad of muscle under my thumb, chewing daintily. After a time, she spoke again in her piping voice, this time to the monkey. "Poor little thing. Listen, and I will tell you something. We insects understand more than you, so big you miss nearly everything important. The Road does not end, everever. Count

your steps and the sum will number redemption. Like me, walking on thread, you will learn; traversing a thing you Devour it, watching a thing you move it, conquering a thing you are eaten by it. Drink from a puddle, you are rain, grip a vine too tightly, you are a Monkey, crease the night with song, you are a cricket come morn. In another life I was a Wall, in another a Rabbit with organdy ears. It is all the same. I think I can recall that I liked having bricks for bellies." The Grasshopper stopped, her tone thickening.

"And you are being tracked by a very big Door. The leaves are shaking with his progress. This is the help I can offer you, from my warm soil-bed."

The Monkey frowned and gently lifted her from my hand. "I had heard his prow, but I did not want to frighten her. Walk carefully, little sister, I have seen birds about," he warned. The Grasshopper flushed pale.

"Well enough, then. Goodbye, redwoman. Look down as you go, you will see more that way. Downdowndown."

She scurried away in a jitter of opalescence.

17. The night swells up with visions, its regular chore.

Oh, golden Monkey, *darlinggold*, Companion though I would have none, can you see it? Walk beside me and guard me against the marauding Doors, (and say what you will, I shall not be caught) but can you *see*? The gold-skinned camels sluicing through the snow-cruled Road, their breath like pale puffing mushrooms in the grey air? Utterly confounded by the cold softness of this not-quite-sand, stamping in bewilderment and fear. Mercurial rivulets trickle from their wide footprints, and their muzzles crust over with a multitude of icicles. I can see, I can see them marching upwards, over the pass, packed with Bedouin blankets and tassels, humps swollen as for the first time they know water-plenty. Their trembling cries like blown glass, trying to be brave in the midst of all this terrifying whiteness. Poor animal, nothing is clear any longer, nowhere is home with beautiful gleaming dunes and a sky like liquefied diamonds. The heat that was your mother has fled and the idea of winter is slowly birthing Revelations of Ice in your chambered heart. The mirrored glacier is playing midwife to a shivering Apocrypha of Snow, written on your long scroll-tongue.

Is it a (vision), is it *hereandnow*? I could not say, I could not say. The men trudging beside their great woolly beasts,

carrying woven leather leads covered in an elaborate wind chime of icicles. But in their left hands they hold a strange burden. Blue fingers drag in the snow, bruise the Road, covered in agate rings and hieroglyphics. Eyes show all whites, shimmering in perfection and exaltation, insensate and exalted, hecatombs rising in their lashes. They are carried by the rag-wrapped men, whose hands wrap tightly around the handles that protrude from bowed backs, black handles of painted glass, fused with flesh. Sublimity crackles in the places where slickness joins skin, that precious desert-mothered silicate sand scalded into clarity of form. Oh, where, where are they going?

They are women, women converted into carryon luggage, their curved handles as lovely as their curved hips, such symmetry and style, these ascended seraphs scrawled all from brow to womb with the Scripture of Hoar Frost, lifted to the frozen peaks to deliver their in-spined, in-breathed, in-gested prose, each in a separate language. The First in Romanian, the Second in Portuguese, the Third in Breton, the Fourth in Phoenician, the Fifth in Zulu, the Sixth in Maori, and the Seventh in English, the savage English of fire-tipped arrows and impenetrable forests. Will I find that I can speak that fire-English, that I can bear to hold it in my mouth?

The women are still bent, their noses brushing soft snow, voices swallowed by the mountain and the earth, words diving and arcing in the ground, wrapping the root of every tree in their rhythm? The camels leaping from the sharp heights into searing wind to carry the verses into the dark earth, loyal beasts carrying their burden to journey's end? Every glade and meadow that ever grows will speak with azure tongues in seven languages. Will I hear it? Will we be fortunate enough to come across the fields of violets and lingonberries that whisper of the Seventh Verse? Or will it be the yucca and agave of the Fifth,

and lost to the shell of our ears that was formed only for the last and most subtle lines? Is this my Gospel, my false prophecy, the Myth of the Carried Women?

I must Walk By. Believe if I can that it was only the wind in your fur. Believe that it is only the madness coming on, a smattering of random and meaningless images firing in my brain, fading into un-reality and darkness. But how can I when I feel the oily leather of a handle breaking the skin rising from my back like the curve of a whale in the sea?

Can you see? Can you hear?

The Monkey's fletched eyes wrinkled nervously, flicking back and forth from my blood-skin to the empty Road. They, of course, are gone, and my flesh is whole. I cannot see where I am going, night waves like a rice field, the Road is a pavilion of ash. I am grateful for his dry, leathery palm in mine, after all. My humanity is difficult to coalesce among all these writhing phantasms, I am voiceless and paralyzed, visions of frostbitten camels trampling through my paved-over eyes, my breastplate of arctic hare, face of a spread-winged roc, laminate fire

*(—which here, in this most desolate isle,
else falls upon your heads)*

Oh, but they were there, and I heard the voices like feet crushing clouds into blue wine, I saw their hair brush the snow and their mouths hanging open, vomiting light into the earth

*(—I have made you mad;
And even with such-like valour)*

No, I will not believe it, I am still whole, I am still myself. They came to the mountain, the mountain accepted, I accept. The Verses came— staccato notes, and they spilled over the peaks like the ecstasy of caribou, they sand and spoke and it is only that you cannot hear

*(—Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices)*

But where do I achieve these slashing words, slantwise through my mind like a magician's swords into the magic box, terrible and alien—from what black place could they issue if there is no *beforethis* to remember and reanimate? I could not say, oh me, but I must be I the central I, the lodestone, the trinity, the tripartite division! I carry the Compass, I know north from northwest (north lies the head, the kingspiece, the red screech of brain; northwest lies the right hand which writes the left hand knows not, amphibious inscription on the bones of a *homo erectus* with arms full of flint, still etching the cave Wall overandoverandover—

(—*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.*)

with a fatal buffalo, dressed in his finest brown and white)

I know this, I see it, the body becomes the lodestone and I, oh, I, have become the Stone itself, turning in a grinding orbit around a flaming sun which is also myself, dying my skin with the blood of that beforetime hunting party, glutted out onto the slick glacier, around and around, faster and faster and something is breaking in me faster than it is being built, something is splintering, offbreaking, the vivisection of confession before their ravening altars, evisceration in the rays of that whistling sun, and, oh, the sky is opening and I am dying because it is growing so within, roots bursting out of my mouth, the thick rootandbranch of the Stone roars out in a beam of white, and I am breaking, breaking, breaking

(—*The clouds methought would open and show riches*)

Oh, what do you see in the sky, high up high where I cannot go, trapped am I here among the turn styles and empty way stations? Rice-fields planted by centaurs speaking all those scriptures I have heard as the caravan embraced the mountain? Are they there where you can touch their watery crop? The jasmine-blossom of the moon, fat and morose above me, eating

the stars like escargot, popping each spinning pearl-shell into her milky mouth? What do you see that I cannot, I Possessed and ground under by those old smoking wheels within wheels bearing in their spear-spokes

*(—which Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount
Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I,
all wound with adders who with cloven tongues do hiss me
into)*

madness.

Oh, I and all under the gallery of twisting night, what is becoming me? I see your outline, the macaque-shape sliver of gold against the grey-lit Road, and you cannot help me, cannot give me the redemption of nothingness, the benediction of emptiness. You suffer near me, I suffer inside this woman-skin, the shade of fire-salamanders, and both of us dread the night when I am not precisely what I am. But here in the dark that brings delirium, I am open and beating, my whole body become seven-chambered heart, aorta like a rope of rubies, like a red, red Road. I can feel him coming, the Monstrum, hinge by jamb. And in terror I approach the Beauty that dances the steps of annihilation, the Maenad-self with the blood of cats dripping off her Rosicrucian lips so that—

*(—when I waked,
I cried to dream again.)*

18. "Oh, Darlingred, what do you see when you are lost?"

Out of my skull I blearily watch the world detached and departed. I drink from a fountain with a Minotaur pouring water from a maiden's beheaded corpse, as though the Labyrinth were creating itself to taunt me. No comet-track of the frog-kicks of voices whispering from before, no sprinting ideation, no speck of camel-hair remains. We are moving, expecting to make time against the morphing Path, expecting impossible things and racing against the night which will bring only progress towards mania and fire-vertigo. I brush a long sheaf of burgundy hair from my face, and stare at the Road, in this region fashioned of polished cedar.

"I see wheels in the sky and my own body cracking like a tree's trunk. And strange whisperings tunnel through me like earthworms."

The Monkey scrambled up onto my shoulder and stroked my cheek with great concern.

"I am so sorry, beautiful, pitiful girlcreature," his voice was warm and kind. "It is so hard for you." Garnet tears sprung to my Grecian eyes, spilling like paint.

"I am afraid that I am not myself any longer. Even in the day I stare out of my body, I do not inhabit it. And I can hear the Door following us, shuffling and sliding."

"Yes," the Monkey sighed, "I was hoping you had not noticed. She told the truth: there is a Door, perhaps a few hours behind us. It is very stealthy and patient. But I am more clever. I snuck up on it, to see what sort it was." I waited, while he hopped from one foot to the other in agitation. "Oh, my dear, it is a great, black Door, oval and light-eating, with a bull's head knocker. It will not come before your next heartblink, but it will come." He patted my hair and fussed with his tail, softly murmuring, "We have time, little one, we have time. Hoo."

"I cannot think, Monkey. Tell me a story, or a riddle, or lecture me. But fill up my head, I am weary, I am growing old."

He paused, seeming to ponder some great puzzle. "I will tell you the storyriddle I think you need. I will tell you how I Devoured my name. Long was the time I lived young within the pretty stone arms of my Temple, and I was alone. I enjoyed alone, it enjoyed me. I swung from the thick red-berry vines, and felt their length firm and sure in my golden hands. I danced on the altar, I sang the songs of my birth-tree and my mother's strong fur in the choir, echoing all through the dome as though my brothers and sisters were all around me in the forest. Hoo! I was content. I did not think about the Center, I did not care."

"Once I was like that, too," I whispered sadly.

"We all are. And then there is a day when we are broken into, like a rich house, and rifled through. Everafter we look sidelong over alabaster shoulders and know that we will never be so pure again. Mine was a pleasant spring morning, the rain fell like a grey sweater unraveling, and I played in the yarn-drops as I was used. I was not myself then, just as you are not yourself, but empty and happy. But that day, and not another though it matters not which, a Snail crawled into my Temple to escape the wet. He was very beautiful, with a great, grey double-spiraled shell like mother-of-pearl, sparkling even in the dim stormlight.

His body was like living oil, goldensilver, rustling and slippery, large eye-stalks waving gracefully, visiondancing.

I hooded in a more or less friendly manner, but he ignored me, moving within his ponderous shell towards the thickest and most delicious of my vines, slowly breakfasting on a fat leaf. I marched up to him and rapped imperiously on that iridescent shell, whereupon his oilskin rippled slightly and eye-stalks swiveled vaguely in my direction. "Leathe me alone, thwiftfurry thing," the Snail yawned. Of course, my Darlingred, I was indignant, began to hop mightily and grow purple-faced in a most unbecoming fashion. I insisted variously that he ought to be more respectful than to gobble up my vines without a word, that he ought to vacate the premises immediately, that he ought to know he was eating in my Temple. Again, my only answer was the bored motion of glistening eye-stalks.

"Lithen, mate. I needn't take orders from thome thilly primate who hathn't got a name."

"I don't need one, you lispig mollusk. My mother knows my smell well enough, and the Labyrinth has no use for names. Hoo! Now run along."

He munched thoughtfully on one of my red fruits. "Doethn't it though? If you hathn't got a name, you aren't much of anything. Thith Temple can't be yourth, you hathn't got thome thort of *deed*, and even if you have got a document of thome fathion, to whom would it be made out? Tho the vineth are ath much mine ath yourth. Leathe me alone."

I was at a loss, and covered in snail-spit. He seemed logical enough, if one forgot where one was. My pride, which in those days was great as the vaulting Road, was wounded. I growled at him and bared my yellow teeth, but the Snail snuffled further onto the emerald vine. "And I suppose you have a name, wretched slug?"

The great Snail drew himself up to what I assumed to be his full height, his damascene flesh rippling in opaline waves. Across his broad chest a word floated uncertainly, but clear as your red limbs. It was quite sloppy, for a Snail cannot be very good at letters, but in its oozing alphabet I read distinctly: **CALIBAN**. He rustled and reduced slimily, with a triumphant little smirk. I stamped and hooted.

“Where did you find that?”

“Not that it’th any of your bithness, but I went though a green-and-clam-thell Door, downdowndown, and I found it, playing with thome ugly trout. It wanted to come to me. It’th mine. You can’t have it. Go Away.”

(Now, Darlingred, you must understand that Snails know very little about anything, and are quite slow and rather silly. I think now that he must have stolen it. He was too fat and lazy to Wrestle such a fine name. They are officious and greedy, and they walk the Labyrinth believing themselves its masters. Snails are tiresome creatures.)“But why do you *need* a name, Snail?”

“It maketh one Important, it makes one a Creature of Influenth. It denoteth Worth and Thubthtanth, pinpointeth one’s Plathe in the World. The value of name cannot be overethimated. It is one’th invitation to the banquet. My banquet today ith your vineth, becauthe I have a name and you do not.” He crawled even further onto the vine, which of course caused him to lose balance and tumble to the stone floor. He was not harmed, really, but scolded me anyhow. “Hateful little monkey! Your wretched vine tripped me! No wonder you are thuch a no-account, foul-thmelling thcoundrel! I thall never come back, never! Beast! Ruffian! Rathcal!” This train of Snail-speech followed the opalescent moon of his shell past the threshold and onto the Road.

It mattered little, for by then I was not listening. I was fired like a field of dry wheat with the idea of a name, the desire for it.

I cared nothing for being Important in the wobbling eye of a Snail, or my Place in the World, nevertheless, the need filled me like rising bread, a growing hole in my chest.

But I could not leave my Temple, the Labyrinth would swallow it whole behind me and I would never see its warm Walls and cozy altar stone. Already I had left my birth-tree and lost it, along with the bristled, hot smell of my mother's russet fur. So I laid a trap. Each day I left the Temple, just a bit, trailing a length of spider's thread, sparkling like a strand of a star's mane in the mild sunlight, to find my way home. I let the Doors catch my scent, let them pick up my trail in the blackberry brambles, leaving a bit of fur in the thorns. They would sniff around the Temple at night, creeping like mangy coyotes up to the vaulted entrance. But they are creatures of *outwith*, of the dark wild air and the external void, they would not come in, for the nature of a Door is a conduit, and they were lost like a wolf in a snare in the paradox of a Door entering through a Door, DoorswithinDoorswithinDoors. And I waited, watching them like a besieging army, fanned out like playing cards. I waited for the Door which would lead to my name. I was certain I would know it.

And I did. A very fine old wrought-iron gate, designs of baobab trees, banana leaves, and lush hibiscus, a heavy steel knob in the shape of a panther's head, complete with real fangs, stolen away, the milk teeth of some savage kitten. With a joyful snarl I leapt at it, trailing a length of strong vine behind me. Did the Door but no swifter than I, I looped the end of my emerald lasso around the massive knob, swinging wildly wide, entering the snapping Door. I shrieked and groped blindly, reaching out for the name, calling it, beckoning with my paws. I snagged something on my fingers on the backswing, slipping out of the Door's grasp, nearly losing my tail as it clanged angrily shut. I fled back into the Temple, clutching my prize, accosted by the

cacophony of thousands of Doors slamming in fury and gnashing their hinges. Hoo!

What I held against my heaving chest was a gigantic sturgeon, swollen with silver scales and squirming in my grip. Her mouth gaped helplessly and its pupilless (so like yours, my own!) eyes blinked their transparent lids in fear. I did not lose a moment, but slit her Gautama-belly with my teeth and plunged my paws into the writhing black mass of salted caviar, searching, searching, searching.

With the last gulping heave of the great Fish's gills, I seized and pulled from her corpse the body of my name, all entangled with translucent entrails and strips of silver skin, scarlet and flowing moonstone, clinging to the shredded womb of dark eggs and golden flesh. It was furious, and began to bite at me with the sharp branches of letters. I knew I had little time and gripped the vicious thing in both paws, shoving it down my triumphant throat, the sweet tang of starfruit and water-moccasins. Hoo! It was mine, I held it within me.

After this, I began to understand things, as the Snail could not, since I alone ate with intent. I was wholly Other. I had Devoured a Center and it arranged my organs into ascension, made clear the Paths of the Labyrinth, and I ceased to fear it. I ceased to be myself, and yet I was myself, whole, and no other."

At this the Monkey began a slow grin that split his face, terrible and feline, punctuated by his long yellow teeth. He reached into his belly, pulling aside the golden fur like theater curtains, the skin and muscle Wall parting like an ocean, and behind it the dark and secret moon-shape of the Stone. He held open his body so that I could see, pushing against the oily flesh of his stomach like some misshapen fetus, the outline of his name in a savage jungle-calligraphy, still trying to escape the calm pool of his gastric perambulation.

EZEKIEL.

19. "I could never do that, Ezekiel," I murmured as he closed the sheath of his skin.

"I know," he said, closing himself as though buttoning a suit. "You are not strong enough. There are ways within ways. You follow the way of the mad. It is different." He shook his head at me. "But I am here, *hereandnow*, I will not leave you." The Road had slushed almost entirely to deep, rich black mud, and we were slogging through it one sucking footprint at a time. The Monkey's fur was streaked in dirt like war paint, my arms like ruby stalactites circled in bracelets of earth.

"Why are we walking? The Labyrinth will change around us, the Door will swallow us. Why do we not trust in it? I want to lay down, I want to Stop. It will carry us to her, or it will not. I don't care."

"We must keep up appearances, Darlingred. We cannot stop. Forward motion, endless if, but still we must."

"I don't care." I stared ahead, unblinking, scarlet eyes drinking in the wide marshes and waving reeds. "Once I was the Marsh King's daughter, and my wings were brown. I sipped at tadpoles with a delicate beak, scimitar-curved, and when I took tea with my father, I crooked my little finger like a scythe. I was a blade of flesh and nail, I was murky and obscene as the delta water." Dew formed in blood-droplets on my eyelashes.

"You are slipping away from me," he warned in a whisper.

"No, I know it did not happen that way. But was there a

timebefore, Ezekiel? Was there? Was I a child once, did I make mud-pies and leap two-footed into inkwells? Was there a yellow-clouded summer once when I skinned my knee, and felt the prickle of a father's beard on my cheek as he dried my tears? Did I love a boy once, with hazel eyes and hair like wheat in the sun? Was I a woman once and not this? Did these breasts like swollen apples ever feed a daughter or a son? I could not say, I could not say, there has never been anything but this, but oh, Ezekiel, what if it has not been *foralways*?"

I was crying, long, stringy hot wax-tears, coloring my face like a Christmas candle. Through the red blur, I could see the landscape changing, the mud drying into desert-cracks, gold streaked with spider-legs, expanding into the horizon, sparse Walls become cacti—filled up with their thick tequila-water, oozing from green shell like mucus. The Road nearly disappeared into the thirsty land, its track crossing back over itself over and over, fashioning from dust and sand a checkered pattern we strode, a weeping candle and a gilded djinn.

A terrible thumping sound came ripping across the land, searing and boiling the air, the sound of a Door opening and slamming shut hungrily.

Thumphthumphthump.

It was the whole sky, eating all other sound. I clasped my hands over my ears, screaming to drown it out.

"We must move quickly, Darling. This place smells of tar and spoiled vines. He is coming! Hoo!"

"I am Sister to Rigor Mortis," I shrieked as though it were a mantra, a spell to ward off the Door. "I am the Wife of the Crucible. I am still, the desert moves." I felt a calm pool of darkwater within me, growing, a lake which had never known the rumor of waves. My fear was stopped up like a bottle of wine and speed flowed into my limbs.

"Quickly, Darlingred, quickly!"

We began to run over the flat land, the binary earth, feet trailing bronze clouds like wings. It truly felt as though I stood motionless, and the Labyrinth swing wide and long around me, a farmer's scythe whipping through grain. Blue and gold, sky and sand. And then nothing.

We halted like a sentence fragment, cut off mid-syllable. Silence reigned and the horrible clamor was gone.

The Road was garrisoned, bordered on all sides, attended like a bride. All around us stood limbs of glass, dismembered legs, arms, heads, blown glass like crystal, like sculpted water. They stood in formation, that old familiar (though how familiar to me who has known no othertime?) phalanx of the chessboard. On each side they stood, silent, transcendent, prisms through which the radiance of the sun-that-is-a- star flew like a wind. Facing Queens of women's torsos, full regal breasts and prince-bearing, horse-riding hips, Kings with muscles like breastplates, broad, bow-drawing shoulders. The Knights were shapely legs meant to grip the flanks of a war-stallion, cut off at the crown of thigh and the ankle, the slice smooth and perfect, revealing faint rings like great trees. Bishops stood as straight, powerful arms, perched lightly on fingers like insects. Rooks molded into feet, toes like transparent pearls curling into the desert Board. And the Pawns, severed heads all in a row like marigolds in the window. Each of them were beautiful, craggy faces of crusaders and classic profiles of a dozen Helens—

(—I will be Paris, for love of thee—)

I pushed the voice aside like a heap of armor. Their pouting lips full and slightly open, hair falling in glassine waves around slender necks, couching the crystal faces in a sea of refracted light. We gaped, I am certain I no more than the Monkey with all of his smirking knowledge, with all of his high-sounding name. The suddenly equatorial sun streamed through them in broad

sword-strokes. I could feel his paw sweating in my hand, and when he spoke his voice was low and growling.

"I think we ought to be very quiet, and go around them. Follow, follow me." He began to creep along the perimeter of the glass figures, but even as he passed the line of pawns rippling voices pricked the air. A fractured unison, each delicate soprano tone following on the previous note.

"Stop. We know. We see. You are the Magus."

I froze before the mirrored unblinking eyes and tall limbs. "But I am not."

"Not you, womanchild. Him," they sang. I turned towards the bronzed figure of Ezekiel, who stood with bared teeth.

"We should go now. Hoo! I beg you, they will spoil everything!"

The response of the crystalline limbs flew outwards like a sonic boom disrupting a choir of castrati. "No, No, you cannot! We know, we know who you are, we can see the flesh beneath your oystershells, we see your Path blazing ahead of you. You have returned! We knew you would, we did not lose faith. You must hear us!"

I began to tremble, as though the precise tonality of their voices had achieved a terrible resonance in my bones, and I was shaking into rubble. There was no change in the figures, the Queens' breasts still proudly rode the air, the Pawns' hair did not rustle by strand or lock. They stared at each other, the opposing armies, ever at the instant before battle, before the Knight slides on his severed ankle to his appointed square, never truly fighting, shattering, slivering, poised forever on the *edgemoment*, the *timebefore*. The weight of their anticipation creased the wind. Ezekiel snarled and spat, noises bubbling up from his throat as from an ancient cauldron, rimmed in leather and studded with iron slugs. He growled under that stream of sound, "Now, now, now, now. We must go. They will take you

away from me." I knelt and held him, as he had held me, stroked his coarse yellow fur into silk, whispered and pressed my waxwet cheek to his shoulder.

"No, I will stay, I will hear. I have to. I stayed for you, Ezekiel, I stayed to hear you. Perhaps everything ought to be spoiled."

He seemed to calm, the smooth of rippling muscles under alarmed skin, ruffle of bird's wing ligaments and joints like mouths. He touched my face with something like tenderness, resigned and hopeless. But his flesh only leapt and hardened again when they spoke, fluttering in the wake of that sapphire music, thirty-two voices striking like a dulcimer hammer.

"This is our mind: the quill-hand is the noble, the tooth-hand indolent. The left foot knows the blistered sky, the right foot treads the leavened Road. This is what we see when we look through the glass-that-is-you. Separation and shattering lie like lovers below your fifth vertebrae. The right hand and the left hand fly apart."

The Monkey's shrill vibratory words cut through theirs. "You see? They know nothing, they are lunatics. You can learn nothing from headless pieces who can never Play." He spat like a woman's curse.

"Oh, my Ezekiel, but I am a lunatic, too." My face was an ocean, flowing in its own tidal reds, the effusion of tears eroding the shoals of my cheekbones. My mouth hung open, collecting the leaden drops, lips full and loose, gleaming with salt.

"Magus," came the glissando of the chessboard, "why do you hate us? We do not harm. We do not lie. We could never harm her, of course not, no, never, never." It was as though the pieces asked and answered themselves, though they spoke in that same fractured unison.

"That name is not mine. It is a lie." The Monkey smelted his words like a twisted blade.

"It is, it is!" They sang gladly, "The falcon told us, with his leather hood, and the desert mice! You are the Magus, with hands like stars, who walks the sacred marshes with crane-feet, who ate his name. He who made us and has come again."

If they could have danced, they would have made their chessboard into a ballroom. Their glass flesh glistened and flowed over invisible bones like the currents of a hundred rivers. The long calves of the Knights wanted desperately to tremble, the fingers of the Bishops, arched like flying buttresses, lusted for movement.

"What else could it mean, that you bring her with you, excreting Want like sweat, she who will kiss the belly of our Queen, the Seeker-After, the Player?"

"No one brought me. I came on my own feet," I protested.

"All that matters, humankind, is that you came. You came and you will make us whole, you will mend what he built, give with both hands what he held back from us. He knows you will, he knows. That's why he snarls at us, who never hurt him."

I looked helplessly at the inscrutable Monkey, his eyes like rosary beads, glinting dangerously between the shield-lines of crystal figures, his little copper body like a smoking hookah. I fell between their words, clinging to cliff-phrases, slipping on the algae of predicate nominative, tearing my fingernails to the quick. I could not understand. "Ignore them, continue on. We must stay on the Path. Forward motion, endless if, but still we must. You know the Door lies behind us. They are foolish." He was already walking away, leaving me, expecting me to follow—how soon had he come to believe me a loyal child, an acolyte, a modest student with the moon-scalp between her braids illuminating humility! I straightened my scarlet spine and called out to his back,

"Are you what they say? Did you make them? Who are you?"

I whispered the last. His warm, autumn shoulders slumped, and he spoke to the wind, without turning towards me.

“I am myself and no other. But in the beginning, before the Walls and the Road, beyond the beforetime, before and after the name traveled through me, I was also myself. Do not interfere with them. They are, that is enough. Let it be.”

I waited for a friendly *hoo*, but it did not come. In the press of the desert I was cold. I turned back up to the watery shapes.

“The tooth-hand is indolent. It does not speak. He carries the Stone, but it slithers in your veins like a sidewinder. As long as he walks beside you, you are not free. He keeps you mad for purposes none can divine. The right and the left. He conceals like a Door. He left us like this, and will leave you. But you can help us, you can, you can. With your red mouth you can show us the Way.” They seemed to beg, to implore.

The Monkey had given up and leaned against a large adobe Wall some space away, chewing on a cactus-thorn lazily. His glance spoke of resentment, do-what-thou-wilt, bemused sorrow.

I closed my eyes, swam in the fresco of light on my inner lids. “How? I cannot help anyone. All I can hold in my hands is Death, red and bright.”

“No, no, humanchild,” the chrysalis-voice of the pieces whispered, faint with anticipation, “You can give us the great silver chariot, the reins and the moon-bellied mares. You can move us, you can Play.”

Stutteringly, I began to see. “You cannot move yourselves?”

“We are the Game,” came the bell-like answer. “We stand forever at the beginning-place, where he put us, stiller than rain, and we cannot move the smallest iris. We are forever tilted towards action, never within it, never thrilling to Purpose. We were made, we cannot be. We do not know what Game we are, we do not know our name. We do not know Rules or Stratagems. We see into the hallways of your bones, but we cannot see a Path

across the Board. No one can be both the Player and the Game, no one can hold both ends of the sword in his hand and yet part the flesh of his enemy. No one can be both the Man and the Bar."

"You want me to teach you to play chess?" A silken rustle, smelling of mint and new basil on a grandmother's windowsill passed through them, sibilant and sighing.

"*Chesssss . . .* is that what we are? Are we *Chess*? Tell us what *Chess* is, child, tell us how it tastes. Tell us, tell us, and we will give you a thing you desire." My heart began to flutter like a sparrow within. "We will give you a Vision, a Vision of the *beforetime*. You may look into the glass belly of our Queen and see a landscape of *notnow*. We are poor oracles, our eyes cast not forward but backwards and within. But we can show you this small thing. Trade us for it, beautiful, blessed redwoman."

"There was no beforetime. I have always been here."

"And yet in the oracle's eye you extend both forward and back. Perhaps you are right. We have been known to lie. It does not really matter, of course. Your want speaks loudly and in perfect verse."

The Monkey was frowning now, but he was a gold blur in the darkness of my tears. I held on so frailly to the Road and the now, I feared to look even an inch beyond it. One madness had become comfortable—could I bear another? The serrated edge of unlearning my own singularity? But my Will had long ago become flotsam, curiosity a plank which had forgotten the shape of its galleon. If a thing was offered, I could not refuse. It was not the Way.

I sighed, drying my tears on my wrists, walking onto the Board, listening to the dull pad of my bare feet on the squares. The pieces seemed to lean in like glass towers, listening with their crystal veins. (But how do I know these Rules, how can I know them, who never learned them?)

"The King," I began, sniffing, "can move one square in any direction. But the Queen can sail the Board like a dreadnaught, can move anywhere she wants . . ."

20. The Board thrummed with its new word: *Checkmate*.

They were ready to move, leaning into the sun like wind sprinters, finding the shape of strategy in their glassy bodies. But they were honest pieces after all, and would keep their bargain. A high, clear voice like an amethyst trumpet trilled down the battle-lines, and this time it was the great Queen's alone, her powerful shoulders squared and assured now of her position, hips flared provocatively, thighs in a feline crouch. "Come, humanchild, come here." Her tone had grown leaves of command and the language had lost its surreality—she knew now she was royalty. I walked through the forest of erect glass, mirrored in the limbs, a bleed of woman through perfected flesh. They towered, crackling with silence.

I knelt before her, because that is what one does in the presence of Queens. Headless her beauty seemed more annihilating and lightning-edged, full now of new power and surety, knowledge that she was the key piece in the precious Game. Though she had no hands to stroke my face, her voice nevertheless caressed me like a favorite daughter, smoothing my hair and drying my face of tears like blood.

"Darling, it is not so dreadful as that. Oh, my dear, my dear one," she crooned, as though rocking a sweet-faced princess to sleep after a nightmare. "Look into me, now, into the canvas of

my belly, see what you have purchased, yourself and no other. Look deep, *downdowndown*. It is yours, our sight is yours. Don't cry, don't cry, my precious girl."

I placed my hands on the vase-curved of her waist and stared into the curved mirror of her stomach, the crystal womb within, and a strange fog was there, forming into a scene, projected against her uterine Wall like an amorphous child, slowly sprouting fingers and organs like a night-lily. This is what I saw in the Queen's womb, with the anointment of oracular sight on my brow as I pressed against the coolness of her skin:

A girl and a boy, sitting lazily cross-legged under a pale green willow, picking at the grass. She is lying with her head in his lap, long red hair fanned against his knee. Her skin is not my unnatural red but like honeyed cream. She grins up at him, his eyes the color of an evergreen forest, of dragonfly wings, his corn-gold, too-long hair falling over his forehead. And she laughs. When she does her back, her throat arches slightly, and he blushes. He smells of wheat fields and fallen autumn apples soft against the earth, and it is a smell she knows like her own. Under the filmy reed-curtain of the old willow tree, they hold hands and talk quietly, shoes discarded like peach pits. The sun is low in the sky, warm and orange-gold on their young faces, their strong white smiles and freshly washed hair. The light spills onto their shoulders like water from a well. There are sharp-smelling rosemary branches braided into her hair, with their little blue blossoms, and the oil is on their brown fingers. The boy whispers something in the girl's ear, and she closes her eyes, lashes smoking cheekbones like bundles of sage.

They rise from the thick grass. They lean, arm in arm against the tree, that melting sun illuminating their youthful forms, her smallish hips, his long legs all rimmed in summerlight. Just before the image fades into the looking-glass womb again, I can see him tenderly brush a strand of hair from her face, full of uncertain care.

And then they are gone. They know nothing of any aftertime, any night in the long line of nights ahead, and they are beautiful, simply. I cry after them, hands and face flush against the crystal-ball belly of the Queen. I choked and sobbed, clawing after the vanished watercolor, trying to hold it to me like a doll.

"There, there," the Queen murmured. "It is what you came for, after all. To know that you are more than you were. Poor thing. But you must go now, for we are ready to Play at last, and we are terribly excited." Indeed, she seemed to wriggle in her space.

Stumbling across the Board I blindly sought the edge, and as I passed the last Pawn with his flowing hair, I heard him whisper sorrowfully, "I think you were very beautiful when you were young—"

And then they were lost in a rush of light as a Knight leapt over the row of Pawns and the Game commenced, so swift and violent that a sharp-paged wind was thrown up by the whirring movement of the pieces. I could not even see them, only their phosphor-trails, streaming glasslight behind them as they looped threads of infinite patterns over the Board. Knight to take Bishop, Pawn to become Queen, Rook streaming across his straight highways.

"Well, now you've done it," came the reedy voice of the Monkey I had nearly forgotten, hairy arms crossed over his chest.

"Do you think you've fixed anything?" I sighed heavily. "I did what they wanted."

"Of course." He walked over to the edge of the Board, profile whipped by the Game-movement as by a speeding train. "Do you see what is happening, what you have done? They are Playing their Game, and they will Play as long as they can, every possible Game combination, every conceivable attack and defense. And when they have traced the leaf-Path of every Game that could ever be imagined, it will be over, and they will

die. They will Shatter and Splinter and there will be nothing left but a mountain of broken glass. You were right, you carry only Death in your hands, and it is Death you have given them, its tiny seed wrapped in your crimson smile."

I wanted to feel pain, but there was nothing. They had asked, begged, even traded. If they died it was their fault. I could not pity them, it was not in me, if it had ever been. We all find our Way here, or we do not. It was not my fault.

"Surely there are many combinations," I said.

"Yes, more than you can hold in your painted head. But it is a finite number, and when they reach it they will die. As they were, they were immortal. They were missing a thing, and you have not given it to them. They can no more Stop now than they could Begin. You put them in motion, and now the motion eats them whole. But they are no more than they were, it is only that they have traded for a different stagnant swamp. The wretches would not be satisfied. Come, Darlingred, this is a graveyard now, with glass headstones, we should not stay to witness. I do not blame you. It hardly matters whether one thing in the whole lives or dies. But I warned you."

"What did I see?"

"An image, nothing more. Let it be. Oracles show, they do not interpret. If you let it grow in you, it will consume the delicate madness we have woven to lead us to the Angel, and all will be lost. I warned you. Forget the children and the tree, forget it all. There is no possible retrieval of even a single strand of his hair."

We walked out across the empty desert, with its ghost of Road, and I stared ahead unmoving, falling though I was standing, yielding not to the radiating image of the Queen's womb, but in the possession, entirely now, of the Stone within his belly, its promise of seizure and deliverance, and the moon like an epitaph in the black sky. I did not see in that half-light that my body had blushed to a deep, rolling green. I did not see

the flush of fecundity, the sheen of willow-leaves covering the surface of me like a mosaic.

I walked like a jade statue, over the dunes and Away.

CANTO THE THIRD

21. My fingers curved like ram's horns, beryl-green and hard.

Osprey-claws, and how the green, green willow branches of my arms do look black in the sallow moon! How sequence like a tumor pure and white multiplies in my throat. How I must swallow it, the thick mushroom flesh, swallow it all. *Downdowndown*. How that sensual slither of *must* snake-coils over my larynx, squeezing—how it all goes and I with it, no more than a wicker raft seeping water like cyanide.

I am Death, oh yes, with my pretty green eyes. I can smell it, oozing from my emerald pores, stink of blood and spent semen, mustard-gas and alleys thick with crooked, greasy pink lipstick, the musky scent of headstones slowly sinking into mud, fingernails disintegrating, bile rising in a thousand throats, sparrows with necks broken like slender arrows, rot of trees, rot of splayed limb, rot of stale whiskey in a rusted flask, worms suckling at breasts blooming like corpse-daffodils, the sickly trail of black milk trickling from a molded nipple. What you smell coming from you when you are Death, when you are dying, when you are exiting your own flesh, stage left, stage right, exeunt, exeunt. The left hand and the right fly apart.

The body becomes all things, the stage and the player and the entrance, the foil tipped in poison and the exit pursued by a bear, the return carrying a severed head, my own pretty severed head

trailing cobra-hair and blood of jade, never to be monarch again, Medusa in repose at last. It is the mistaken identity and the lovers united, it is the climax repeated until it is the denouement, the soliloquy of folded hands and pointed toes, act twelve borne on the silver tray of a flat belly. When you are leaving it, how beautiful the platforms and stairs of the body seem, the trick Doors and velvet curtains, the skein painted pastoral and scaffolding of bones, musty costumes hung in the closet on ribcage-rungs, the proscenium arch seems to vault upwards to the damned, the orchestra pit down to the divine. It is all so graceful and well-conceived a creature, so realized a character, fleshed out in all its roles from ingénue to crone, so comfortable a body, so desired, when it is flying away from you like a migratory bird. It is everything, yet I cannot connect to it, I seem to move my legs and hands from a long distance. My sight, unblinking and yawned, remains, the beam of stage-light from blank eyes like grass on a grave.

I want to lean against a tree (a willow, bright and pale, and a boy with the sun in his hair?) and wait for madness and death, pretty sleek hounds worrying my meaty bones between them, gnawing the marrow and howling at the tree-roots. I care for Nothing. Indeed I tend it like a favored rose, nuzzled and cupped a motherly hand around its dark petals, breathed the sharp incense of its exhalations and coaxed them skyward with the ministrations of a patient monk, gardening into eternity with a luminous rake. I pulled out the green shoots of Purpose and Center, held off the marauding winds and ate their fruits, juice dripping from my chin. And now I have lost my charming grail, the woolen Nothingness that warmed me so well.

Am I green now, malachite and woven leaves over rounded shoulders and unpierced heels because of life or death? Because tendrils of red-fruit vines loved my skin, because the wide, furry leaves of violets and spears of rosemary are infatuated with my hair and my knee-caps? Or because mold and decay have

dressed me in their ball gown with its plunging neckline, clad my feet in algae-slippers and circled my neck in grave-grass like a string of pearls? I could not say, I could not say. I am so tired, I do not care. And he cannot make me, the golden Beast with stiletto eyes, this little homunculus dogging my steps, snapping at my heels, vomiting words from his long-toothed mouth, vomiting truisms and riddles like tubercular phlegm-blood. He cannot make me, he cannot make me. I am too full of the fat black-palmed baby of my Death to allow him within me, I am too near the coughing morning of its birth. Its teeth join the needles of the Compass, snagging on my womb.

I am within my verdant body as it is within the Labyrinth. We find our Way. The sylph that is "I" is vanishing slowly, a daguerreotype dissolving under a spill of phosphor, image of eyes like stone wells seeping from the page. My body will remain, and the Compass within, magnetized, aborted daughter, but I will be eaten at last by the Labyrinth in a triumphant swallow—I will be a high Wall or a fair-thighed fountain. I will be remade into the flat expanse of the Road, my pointing arm extending into geometric perfection towards the horizon.

And the golden golem Monkey will keep swinging and hooing with his iconic smile, as content to preside over my dissolution as my baptism. As long as he can anoint my colored forehead with oil and announce me to the invisible multitude, corpse or Queen, it matters not. He hates a poor, doomed toy in the desert because it showed me what he would not, because it did not incline its head humbly toward his paw. I hurl my bitterness at his chest like a pistol shot at dawn. Pace off ten steps and fire true.

Ezekiel, Ezekiel, what do you see in the sky? A burning woman, a bullet fired from the mouth of a star, streaming green fire into the sucking earth.

"Darlinggreen," came his rasping voice like a silver spade in the soil, "You don't mean that. Hoo."

22. Oh, I don't mean anything.

Whether you are here or not matters less than nothing to me. Sun-creature, I never asked you to come. You attach to my flank like a lamprey and want me to love the slow drain of my blood from the wound. Leave me to the copper bit and the foaming mouth, the pulverized teeth and the jaw of frayed wire. Leave me to drown in the rice-fields, when I have become blue again they will eat pearly slivers from the delicate dish of my mouth. Leave me to go mad alone. It is such a private thing.

"I know you are glad of me, it matters nothing what you say," The Monkey patted my bent head and I simply breathed. There was nothing else my body could manage. Under the curtain of my agate hair I could smell a strangeness growing like a bladed weed, sharp and thick, sweat and smoking bones. Ezekiel tugged on my glowing limbs.

"Visitor," he murmured.

Through strands and curls like living vines, through my heaving breaths ragged and strangled, I saw now a massive Bear, thickly-furred and broad-headed, lying on his side with a great sucking wound in his flank. He whimpered and bellowed at turns, black blood seeping onto the papery earth. The Monkey scampered up onto the mountain of his hip, examining the gash.

"It has always been like that," the Bear moaned. "It never heals. I have tried poultices of laurel and banana, honeybees' wings and birch bark, bird-marrow and Wall-dust. Nothing helps. It laughs at me, with its bloody lips. But I have come to love it, now. It is warm and bright and pretty. It never fails me. Would you like to come and touch it?"

I said nothing, moved not an inch. The Monkey looked at me expectantly.

"If I put my hands on him," I whispered, "he will only die like the rest."

"You touch me, beloved Darlinggreen, and I am not dead," Ezekiel crowed softly.

"Yes, see? Perhaps not, perhaps not, girl," the mournful Bear brightened hopefully. "Come closer. I am very beautiful reflected in your skin." His wound did reflect black and red on my thighs, pulsing like a womb, open and quivering as if to speak. He stared at himself reflected and refracted in me, preening. I did not move, frozen by a manic disgust.

"Don't be afraid. If you are very, very good, you could have a wound, too. I would even administer it myself. My teeth are the color of the stars, aesthetically perfect. Orthodontia is so *expensive*. But see the results! Wouldn't you *like* to have them in your nice green flesh? Be sweet to me and I will make you beautiful, paint your belly with blood." He struggled to rise and come near me, but I backed away as best as my weak leafbody could manage, bile rising in me like the tide. The Monkey had also clambered off, and returned to me, protective and proprietary, grimacing at the beast. It kept on its imploring way:

"Don't run away. You haven't seen the pointillist masterpieces of my intestinal tract, the glory of my bruises, the majesty of my swollen tongue! You are very ugly now, girl, with no breaks in your body. All revolting solidity. Come, come, I will make you splendid, seraphic, *gloriana* in the highest! I will

make you the Queen of Capillaries, Empress of Bones! Don't you *want* to be beautiful? I will love you forever, I will write masterpieces on your flesh!" I began to cry through my suffocation, drawing dagger-breath, loathing his nearness, the warmth of his mewling breath.

"Come closer, I cannot see myself in your mirrorbody any longer. You are too far off. I am being very generous. It is not polite to refuse."

I broke and ran, stumbling and weeping. The Monkey sprinted after me, trying to keep up.

"Come back! It is useless to run, the Door is on your heels! One way or another, you will be like me, and bleed! We will all be beautiful before dawn!" His howls echoed after us, choking my poor neck.

But he was right, I could hear it now, clanging copper pots in my skull—

(—*nam vos mutastis et illas*—)

Latinate clams clattering in the water, their vulgate symphony of clicking nails and meaningless morse code, which translated reads as a meaningless clam-tongue, pink and meaty. The Door-tongue, the Hinge-dialect.

I cannot run far enough, ever and ever.

The sea takes back its stones. My limbs crumble. There is black mud under my nails, secret and ashamed. Such a private place I inhabit, with no Rosetta Stone to help you make sense of it, of my ceilings and windows. I never asked for comprehension.

Mask yourself, Ezekiel, with that knowing look, and pretend you can read the scroll. Pretend you know what we are doing. What do you see in the sky? You cannot say because you do not see. I with my irisless eyes swallow the vaulted air under an eyelid. You see nothing. You would sell my bones for katana hilts in some furtive bazaar, my eyes for jewels in heraldic

shields, my ears for pincushions, ninepence each. you would hawk my green brocade skin for upholstery, my knees for inkwells, my hair for quills, my lips for slide rules, my breasts for goblets. Abandon me to a thousand hungry Beasts, partitioned and packaged, given away like a bride, devoured and burrowed-within, until I am no more.

(—*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora*—)

But the language of the Doors clangs in my swollen head like a busy dockside, I can feel it behind us, the black circle, divining our tracks with a velvet nose. Is it past the Board in the desert now? Has it come past the coffin-body of the Queen? Its strange trilled consonants move over me like diamondback snakes, the rhythmic phrases like the charmer's straw basket in the musky market, sidewinding somewhere in our shadow. With each pianowire strangle of sentence, a new lacerating chord is strummed in my thick-pooled brain, with each bevelled vowel, brightened under a glass cutter's knife, finds its mark and pierces me like a gold-fledged arrow, and the Door turns towards the church-bell tone of word striking flesh. In this way I can feel it drawing closer, the heat of its black body like a secret sun.

(—*torpor gravis occupat artus: mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro*—)

Oh, it bears down like a woman giving birth, the pressing, all those massive hands on me, pushing down into the swallowing earth! And among those thousandthousand hands can I not detect a bull's solid amber hooves? Can I not see ivory horns tossing above me, tips gilded with hemlock? The Minotaur at last, the *monstrum* lurking, the monster-that- is-not, hunting with powerful thighs my steps like crocus shoots in the spring, the Center of the Labyrinth that I know cannot be stealing along the Road, stalking me as though that Center were I. We circle each other, a fleshy yinyang covered in blood and dust and

sapphires crushed like blueberries, seeking each other, spiraling like sumo wrestlers, stamping our fat feet in the sacred salt. And when one of us is perished, gored through like a potter's wet vase, will not that crusted salt be found on our howling mouth?

(—*pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret*—)

Black eyed Bull behind me, lowing at the moon, fatal light flickering on his gold nose-ring, his blood shouting with the nearness of our meeting. As though that Center were I, as though I were what he sought, my presence in his belly the very completion of his bovine existence. As though it were not I that sought him, sought the terrible Center of death, as though I were not the Seeker-After, as though I were not aware of his breath smelling of sour mash and clay kilns, as though I were fleeing the inky ripple of muscle and not waiting for his milky teeth on my breast.

(—*in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescunt*—)

And still this hypnotic chanting in the confessional of my ear, the hissing syllables wreathed in smoky incense, the intimacy of his rust-red tongue lapping at my calves, a lover's searching fingers grasping for me in the dark. These savage incantations meant to bind me still as nightwater or to warn? He is so close now, the wild smell of his mouth is so near. Perhaps I will lay down on this Road, covered in soft leaves how like a bed, perhaps I will lay down and let him slam shut over me, his Bull's mouth clamp down at last on my emerald humanflesh. Perhaps I will not fight. Perhaps I would be more beautiful Devoured. Perhaps victory means collapsing in mid-stride, knowing the precise moment to give in. It is the fight which comes at the end of a Quest, is it not? Even a Quest-which-is-not. If I do not fight, there is no Quest. Perhaps then I will not. The Compass beats a steady time, a sparrow-waltz, ticking towards the north of my glacial eyes. It

wants us Devoured, within that meaty belly; Compass-child
Within me Within the Bull-Door, all of us together like a Russian
doll.

(—*ora cacumen habet; remanet nitor unus in illa*—)

Come then, poor Beast, I am not afraid. You must admit I was
a challenge; I have eluded you for such a long time. You do not
need to ensorcell me with these murmured verses, black and
red. I am still already, soft and quiet as a hedgerow in infinite
fields like skies, dotted with lambs as with stars. I will sit and
wait, draped in green, cypress-candle, palms resting on my
knees in fertile quiescence. If I am yours, you are mine,
wheelswithinwheels, and we will gobble each other up as
though we were hook-nosed witches feasting on the plump
calves of naughty children, gleefully sucking delicate bones
and our long, greasy fingers.

I collapsed and knew nothing but a long expanse of black-
ness.

23. Fat raindrops like children's hands slap my face.

I rose cork-like into watchfulness. I could hear the slip-slush-thud of his hooves, of his sliding threshold still gritty with desert sand. He is just behind us, close now, our faithful and patient hunter never daring to disappoint. The Monkey tastes the rain with a long, cicada-seeking tongue.

"It's coming. It's here. Did the Door and swifter than I. Are you wakeful? Will you keep running?"

"*He*. He is coming," I murmured, swaying slightly.

"He, then. I am sorry for what I have not told you. Hoo, Darlinggreen, I am sorry. Get up, now, my dear, there is further to go. He is coming." Ezekiel stroked my olive hand and coaxed gently.

"Sooner or later, there must be a Door, there must be a Minotaur, even if there is not. I choose this Door, and no other. So I win. I will lay down at his threshold. What is eaten also eats. If I choose him, I will never be caught. I will win the Game. It will stop."

The Monkey shook his coppery head. "I will go with you, you know. I will always go with you, at your side, my Darlinggreen. Hoo." His gaze was loving and soft and forgiving as a glove sewn of feathers.

We sat for a time, listening for his approach and combing each other, my fingers twined in his fur and his rubbing my cypress-skin like oiled cloth.

"I do not know," he admitted, "what it will lead to. This is our first capture, the gaining of a Third. It is something new, for the first time in alltime, something new. But it is also older than all. It may take us to the Angel and her white lips, but it may not."

"I know."

"I am quite sure you do not. Hoo."

Silence. The sky overhead was a profound blue, blue as once I was, the cobalt flesh of longago, perhaps not so longago, but I could not say. I was melting, and I cannot say anything. I have come to this, I accept.

And then he comes over the horizon like a black moon, simply, soundlessly, dark as a pupil, gliding gracefully towards our little tableau, knowing that he no longer needs to conceal his movements. It is an elegant entrance, without trumpets or heraldry. The silver Bull's head knocker, a tarnished and terrible sky-gray, leers, diamonds dripping like saliva from his great teeth. He is so beautiful, coming towards me, coming towards us, slightly ajar as though his mouth were open in anticipation, the eyes of the Minotaur as blank and irisless as mine. My handsome Death, gargantuan, profound, and I am proud of it. I am its green-veiled bride, reclined and waiting.

The Monkey looks at me with warm eyes, squeezing my hand. But I am not afraid. It is leaning over us now, a devouring eclipse, breathing heavily and watching to see if we will run. I laugh softly, a gluttoned and velveteen chuckle. I am stretched beneath him, body curved into a crescent moon, with the Monkey nestled in the swerve of my waist like a glinting jewel. I can feel the Minotaur's mouth on me, his muscled arms gathering me towards his inevitable throat/threshold, the beaten earth littered with bones at the Center-which-is-a-lie, the dry fires of his digestion, furnace leaping towards me, to conflagrate and Devour my limbs in a rush of fire and slamming wood. How tender Death and the Monster can be, if you do not fight. I

hold open my arms in second position, remembered from some mirrored room impossibly long ago, to take him in and tear into his flesh as he tears into mine.

As the great black Door slams shut, he breaths a sigh of relief and release, a hot rush of that fermentfire air as he rasps his words in a rush, orgasmic larynx shredded by my jade nails as we fall, downdowndowndown.

—hanc quoque Phoebus amat. Carissima! Ederis!”

24. Rain of rice-clouds as we pass through him.

The thick throat full of bats and chewed rope flies by, and it is not so much *down* as *through*. Through the twisted body of the Minotaur, skating on bulbous intestines and pancreatic oil-paints, slicing his flesh with katana-limbs as I go, Devouring what flanks and flesh-handfuls I can seize, savoring the smoky meat, full of fennel and scorched crow's wings, his black blood dripping from my willow-chin as mine did from the Angel's. I enjoy now the biting and tasting as she did, the cello-bow slide of flesh into my belly. It is Power. With each sink of my teeth into him, his teeth into me, I hear him hiss like a kettle, the low comfort-hoo of the Monkey at my side, and my own triumphant wolf-cub yelps. What a lovely little concerto we make, the three of us in the dark. But as it is begun I can see that I was mistaken.

This is not the important thing, the *passingthrough*, the Devouring. My white-armed Death is not comprised of this sooty bullbody. There are many Detours. After all, something lies ever on the far side of any Door. And I could see it as soon as
(it snapped at her, did the Door, and she fell in.
Downdowndowndown—)

we were inside, lying like a hearth and waiting. What lies inside a Door? What do you see in the sky? Only Another and

Another and Another, a Door *toleading* within the Door *fromleading*. Doorswithindoors unto the end of the world, the disappointing climax of entrance, knowing that there is always one more, always another Wall, another step, another bridge across the doom of ages.

The second Door glows red as from a forge, a dull and angry light illuminating the muscled walls like a manuscript. It beats inevitable like a deer-hide drum in the distance. *Thuhthumpthuhthump thuhthump*. We might as well be patient.

Thump.

25. Such a simple thing, opening a Door.

And stepping through, such an accustomed sequence of muscles and fingerbowl-joints; habitual, thoughtless, even. As though from a lustral basin, I sprinkle sacred drops of the Minotaur's spinal fluid on my brow as we exit his Doorbody. (Have I done this before? Am I doing it right?) Anointed one am I. Dark to light we move, from the museum-arches of black bone to a dusty cloud of subtle gold, as though the wind had swallowed the last possible ray of saffron sun from a dying sky and choked on its beams, coughing out a cigar-puff of topaz-kindling into the little room where we stood suddenly, having stepped through a dilapidated closet Door, draped in rags.

The Monkey climbed cheerfully up my treebody and perched like a parrot on my shoulder, looping the long noose of his tail around my neck, a pretty tableau of gold against green. It took some time for our eyes to adjust, like waking up, peering and hazing. If I had had pupils they would have been struggling valiantly for just the right aperture to take in the little hut where we found ourselves safe.

It was her scream that brought me into focus, instantly aware of the new Walls, knotted shelves sagging with thick-bound books, the forked red of the fire in her hearth, flames feasting on the crisp pages of still other volumes, inexplicably interdicted

and condemned to the stake. Tall, slender jars like sentinel herons, bundles of dried branches and herbs hanging like a tangle of roots from the ceiling, scenting the room with an unpleasant odor of rotted wood and rosemary. Thick brown pelts covered the floor, and in the corner nearest the fire sat a woman curled into a rough-hewn oak chair far too large for her frail frame, dwarfed by the high warped back, feeding another book to the fire. All this I took in like a breath, lined with the ragged razor of her voice screaming high, tearing, hawk-like.

The scream penetrated my body, coiling like an eel around the Compass within, spinning the needles, a twisting ribbon of tongue roiling through my ravaged flesh. Her so-human voice scored me like a whip, this realwoman, the first I had seen, without wings, without glass skin, just an old woman crumpled into her last chair, wrinkled and dog-eared, her house full of strange beasts.

Of course, it was not the same for her. I was not human any longer, my lithe serpentbody green as grave-grass, long arms like birch saplings, lips like anemones. And my terrible eyes, almond-shaped emptiness, plain green stones set in my chameleon-face. How awful I must have seemed to her, how grotesque, with my smooth-furred macaque brushing his tail over my collarbone. I emerge Monstrous from the Monster, my skin the dragon-flesh of nightmares.

And so she screamed. "Stay Away, Away! Don't touch me!" She fox-howled and spat, shaking as though possessed. Her long white hair trembled like an avalanche, black eyes deep as river-rocks. I reached out a hand to calm her, and she scrambled backwards in her huge chair, screeching louder than before.

"No! Don't come near me, you can't!"

I recoiled from her, and whispered when I spoke. "I won't hurt you, I promise. I'm not anything bad."

"No, no, girl, I am," she hissed like the pop of a black book-spine on the fire. "Very bad, indeed. I'm sick, infected. If

you touch me, you'll be sick, too, and then what will you do, hmm? Don't breathe near me, don't touch anything, just leave before you swallow my infection like a frosted cake. This is a plague house. Didn't you see the black curtains, the sign on the Door? Please go." She seemed to shrink into her chair, nearly weeping. I was stunned, transfixed by her hate and fear like sour black bread crumbling on my tongue. The Monkey picked at a knot in his fur.

"You're fine. I would smell it if you were really ill. Hoo. Sick smells *awful*," he said matter-of-factly.

"No, no, I am Deathly Ill, I am Afflicted, I know it," she cried quickly, her piccolo voice. The wretched woman was shaking as though her bones were rattlesnakes' tails. Her breath came in great, tattered rasps, thin chest heaving. I walked across the small room and knelt beside the poor crone, leaning my emerald head on her knee, gazing up at her weathered face.

"Please don't," she whimpered, "you'll die, I swear."

"It's alright, grandmother, it's alright. I'm sick, too. Mad and Dying." She flinched at the contact of my cheek and her bony knee.

"Is that why you're green?" The woman seemed interested by the possibility of a new disease.

"I think so." I answered softly. The fire crackled behind us as she considered us.

"Well, if you're dying anyway, I suppose it doesn't matter," she brightened, "But keep your pretty pet away, he'll catch it for sure." The Monkey hopped gracefully up onto the lid of one of the oblong jars and proceeded to groom himself contentedly.

"I shall keep my distance if you like. But you're not sick at all." He paused in mid-comb. "Darlinggreen, she isn't, I'm sure. But I can smell something else here, like mint in a rose garden—" He trailed off cryptically, smirking as he returned to his glossy pelt.

The crone chose another fat book off her shelves and began to rip the pages into long strips, stuffing them into her mouth until her eyes watered and her cheeks bulged. Painfully, methodically, she chewed and chewed, until she could swallow the pulpy mass of parchment. Black ink stained her lips and fingers. When she had eaten all she could, she threw the book-carcass onto the fire and reached up to seize another.

"What are you doing?" My serpentmouth hung open in confusion.

"I'm dying. Why should they live? I'm hungry. Why should they be full? Now they are inside me, and I can store up words like a camel stores water. I shall never run out." She patted her stomach, which was indeed swollen to motherly proportions. "Whereas you, my green-skinned dear, I think will be entirely spent before the end. Dry as a sand-beetle." She chortled throatily and returned to her books.

"Why do you think you are dying? You have lived a long time," I asked sleepily, warmed by the fire.

"I do not think, child. I know." She ignored Ezekiel's loud, derisive *hoo* and continued. "I have already killed a boy, already infected him and he is dead, moldering in the ground."

With this, the old woman began her story, told in a familiar sing-song rhythm, for she had told this tale to herself a thousand times before in her small dark hours, like a rosary. I reclined against her, my back to the rosy heat, listening to the vibrations of her reedy voice through the skin of her leg.

26. “I came of age during the plague years.

Every night I would stand in front of my great carved mirror and raise my arm over my head, grip my shoulder lightly. I pressed oystershell fingernails into my skin, feeling for the embryonic lumps, the soon-to-be purple buboes I was certain were seething just beneath the vanilla smoothness, a smoothness waiting to play me false and erupt. I turned my head, feeling the night wind on my neck, blowing in through the frosted window. In those days the night sky seemed to me to be the great raised arm of some dark woman, her armpit and the first curve of her black breast, and the stars glowered, punctured lesions of plague ruining her perfect flesh, the great red autumn moon a blood-filled contusion.

I used to sit on the fountain-rim with a young boy in the Square, under the pale-cheeked fountain-statue of a beautiful selkie-woman with water flowing over her classical face, half born from her shimmering seal skin, her long hair like the very kelp-braided sea, her hands peeling the length of grey sheathing from her marble thighs. Her eyes stared blank and unblinking, (just like yours, my girl,) perfect eyebrows carved delicately. I sat on the rim of her fountain with a boy with orange-blossom eyes, a willowy creature without a name, and his skin smelled like a wheatfield strewn with the sweetness of

fallen apples. He was blonde like the silken wheat and blonde like the yellow apples and blonde like the ocean sand. The boy had slender legs and a fine, aquiline nose, and all in all recalled a deer paused below a cypress tree, tensed in the moment just before bounding away.

When no one was looking I would lift my thin blouse, exposing in a blush-inducing flash the light brown of my girlish nipple, and ask him with a quavering voice whether he saw anything. His dark eyes flickered over me, appraising. Sometimes he pushed his fingers into my flesh painfully, sometimes he would just glance and assure me I was not sick. But every time he would smile and softly say, just as your pet says:

“You are fine. You will live forever.”

I used to run away to a wide field full of long grass and dense hedgerows. Around my pale toes the soil was black and wet, sodden with March rain, rich and velvety, oozing under my heels, swelling beneath my arches. I was transported by the chocolate soil, its sinuous sheen. Crocuses pointed upwards all around like candles with young green leaves, unopened purples and whites. I would run far from the willow-framed square and its sorrowing fountain, far from myself, and pause there in the mud and silver-green grasses like Eve below the Tree.

I ran to expel the scream that roiled and churned inside me, the cry that threatened to rip out of my larynx and tear my bones. In those days I was a scream embodied, saliva and tears pouring from my shaking mouth into the earth. I did not yet know the color of apples or Indian serpents, only the tightness of quavering pink lungs, uninfected lungs, plump and blushing organs clear of any blemish in their polished interior.

Against a great gnarled oak tree, feeling the texture of its trunk like a second spine, I sat cross-legged in the late afternoons, roots extending down into rain-soaked deepnesses. Into

the sky-mosaics of pearl and dove and dusky ash and cream-tipped waves of pussy willow softness I stared, tremulous with the fear that the color would never change, never shift or contort, searching for the black line of a bird to break the endless expanse, as though the breath of my soul depended on the shattering of the sky. I waited in my own incubatory warmth no less than the crocuses and dormant tulips, thick with the desire for change, restless beneath the unvaried veil of cloud, trying to move the long strands of cirrus-mist with the sheer kinetic force of my need.

The boy sat beside me, clasping my small hand in his small hand. His face was half-lit by the clouds, gentleness of elephant skin light playing on his cheekbones, so high and noble, the arches of medieval buttresses. I remember him always in profile, a dark-browed angel, the glint of quartz deposits in his marble skin, gazing steadily at the horizon as though the line of his olive-eyed gaze could penetrate the secrets that lay along the linear flow of sky.

I suppose I loved him, though he never asked me to search his body for lesions. I cannot even recall how many days we spent under the water-shadows of the fountain, in the grass-pillows of the field, though they seemed then and still seem innumerable. The coughing and retching of the world dissolved into the wind. But the examinations of flesh and sinew continued separate from the taut-skinned drums of pounding plague.

The fear of a flat-palmed hand sounding a low note across my throat flowed on faithfully. It became a game, even after the hottest forked flames of sickness had blown over and what remained was merely the mass graves, the pits with long, mushroom-colored limbs stacked within like the rotting bricks of a misshapen pyramid, the tangled once-gold hair of women like handmaids meant to accompany some monstrous pharaoh

into the silver sky and the storm. Hollowed cheeks like jackals echoed loudly in those ashen faces, covered in squares of bravely bright green grass.

Later, when I learned geometry, every angle I measured with my clean plastic protractor seemed to be that of a bruised and broken elbow, the acute angles of riddled bones to haunt all the calculations I ever made.

It was only a game, for him to probe my neck and my arms with tremulous seriousness, as though some latent epidemic lay under my skin, straining to burst the confines of my body. His eyes trickled over me with such earnestness, such tenderness, as though my wretched skin might break. In the rainy sickle-bladed stalks of grass we laughed as softly as the susurring leaves, wrapped ourselves in woolen lengths of silence, watched whisperingly the sky and the trees.

We were young by the sea. The salt and kelp towers, foaming terraces, portcullis of coral and brine. Below the flowered balconies pounded the ineffable blue of the ocean, petals like rose-stained feathers drifting down onto its mirrored surface. The sea bore away the wind of the plague, carried it off into the soft cloud-drifts. The sea scoured us clean, made our skin perfect again. The stairs like a shower of peachstones down to the surf became polished and merry again, bright as brass banisters. The universe of our twinship, our two-ness, the low-population cosmos of our lives seemed slide back into the familiar leather gloves of health and flushed cheeks, of hair streaming in the flapping breeze and laughter like the songs of white pelicans.

Of course I never caught the plague. If I had, perhaps the boy would have stayed with me, feeling that I needed his clinical expertise, his gentle fingers, his eyes boring holes into my uninfected skin. If I had begun to perish beautifully, with a trickle of sparkling ruby blood at the corner of my beestung child's lips,

perhaps he would have waited for me, knowing how I needed his clean fingernails and quiet voice, he would have stayed because he would have known how I loved him. He would have stayed and told me I would live forever even as the blood vessels burst in my rose-leaf eyes.

When he died I tried not to think of his body being the color of mushrooms. I know, know now forever that I passed the terrible knives of plague into him, that every time he touched me he took the disease out of me and into himself, purifying me every time his fingers pushed into my muscles and bones, making me smooth and white and clean, taking all the purpled darkneses that never rose up like tiny volcanoes into his fawn-limbed body, dying of the sickness I never contracted.

But I knew, secretly, that I was a carrier, and bore like infants the black strains of death within me, the only children I would ever have. That I would live forever by virtue of the demons I harbored, and bring affliction like a silent choking seafog to every boy that ever lived. Every boy I loved would cough up a glut of blood onto my white dress and apologize weakly before he collapsed into an ecstatic seizure of death. I knew always that I had killed him, killed him, killed him. I knew. I know."

27. The woman's face had become a jagged mountain.

Salted tears coursed from every crack and niche, the secret erosion of her once-beauty and her bitter core.

"I know what I am," she wept, "myself and no other, tumors blooming in every pore." I cannot imagine we were a comfort, my blank stare and the Monkey's accusing indifference. Her tragedy had burrowed into her, and the crone before us was little more than a maze of empty worm-tunneling. I pitied her so, even through my own ant-farm form.

"Still, you are healthy, old woman," the Monkey mused calmly. "I can smell the warmth of baking apples in your skin. Why do you not simply give her what she wants so that we may leave you to rot in peace? I can smell it here. She will hunt it out. Hoo. Your story is your own. We cannot take it from you and we do not want it on our backs." I looked up from her warm knee with a start, at the visage of yet another riddle from the mouth of a primate, another thing I could not understand.

"What do you mean? What is it? What do I want?" He ignored me and the crone chewed long book-strips, avoiding my eyes. He slipped from the jar and trotted over to me, fur rippling in the firelight.

"Darlinggreen, I know you are angry with me because of the chess pieces, and because I am such a sealed box where you

believe treasures and secrets are hidden away. But do not think that just because there is a friendly fire and a ceiling, because there are books here that we are not still within the Labyrinth. That a house is an escape.”

At this, the woman cleared her moldering throat unfolded her limbs like creaky shutters and rose from her chair.

“Would you like some tea, girl? I have some nice willowbark tea somewhere . . .” She rummaged in her jars, profile caught by the palest of slanting lights entering a round window near the birchwood rafters with their garrison of black-beaked crows. She put the kettle on for tea in the half light of a hut filled suddenly with long shadows of the hearth and of dawn, filling the little tin vessel.

I watched her drawing water, most domestic and ancient of tasks. Draw water from the well, and the moon from the sky. Corn from the earth and a child from the womb. (Wise woman, wise woman, do these things with your strong brown hands.) The hut-which-is-the-world is washed in blue kitchenlight, in the small, smaller, smallest morning. There are no possible others, just us beneath the kettle-steam spiraling towards the ceiling like the trajectory of a strangely-fledged arrow shot above the burnished pot, a little copper sun growing red on the stove. And the tea-leaves where she will divine the only face of her beloved endlessly repeated in the blue, blue light.

As the water bubbled and she made tinkling domestic noises with mugs, I heard her mumbling like an incantation: “This is my house. This is my bed. That is my wine-glass which does not drain, that is my fruit-bowl. I have put those violet flowers in their vase, I have set the saki-cups and the tea-cups and the flour-cups on the table, I have cleaned the mirrors. I have swept the threshold and the closet-floor. I have tended the Library. This is my house, where I have cleared a space for my sickness to curl up like a cat. I am half-sick of shadows—I won’t give it to her, I won’t.”

This last was underscored by the dreaming trickle of brew into a goblet, and her shuffling bare feet moving back to the fire. She sets one clay cup before me, shooting a gruff look at the Monkey, and kept the other for herself, collapsing back into her enormous chair/throne with relief.

"You get none," she clucked, "because you are a nasty little Beast who talks when he shouldn't."

I drank, and it was bitter. Piquant leaves and rainy soil, the tang of acorn mash and copper filings.

With his large eyes like equatorial bats, the Monkey looked up into mine. "Look at these Walls, look at the Path from kitchen to fire, look around at the Doors and the Creature in her chair. Hoo, darling, it is the Maze writ small, yet and still holding you within. This is not your home, you cannot stay."

"But I am so tired, I want to sleep, I want to stay. I could get better if I slept."

The crone nodded over her pulpy supper. "Let the girl stay if she wants to, I have plenty of room. But it will not help you to sleep. I have slept and slept, until I could not dream, but it is no balm, it does not heal. You came here because you are sick and this is a plague house, where lepers like us must eventually find our Way. This is where you belong."

"I am too weak, grandmother, too weak. You are right, I am Sickness, I am Death. I ought to go no further. I deserve to be buried in your book-shreds and disappear."

The Monkey stamped his foot. "Hoo! Stop this! You are the color of my birth-tree, it cannot be long now. Come out again into the moon. You will heal, and she loves the smell of her own rot. How many times must I pull you along like a mule? You would not listen before, and you killed all those beautiful Queens and Rooks and Knights. Listen now, the Road is calling like a mating swan." He stopped, breathing heavily. "Please, do not leave me," he murmured, as though he did not want to be heard.

I pretended I had not. "Yes, I killed them," I wept with heaving breasts, "they were kind to me and I killed them."

"Hoo! They were not kind! They could have killed you with that terrible vision, they could have stolen you away! You barely escaped with your lunacy intact! You are separating faster because of them, your seams popping like an old mattress. And now you cannot even move your treebody from a filthy hut."

"I killed them . . ." I slipped into my accustomed, guilty sea, gentle and welcoming, flagellating my back with pilgrim's whips. The crone's eyes glittered blackly, her teeth flashing in the fire light and the growing morning.

"Stay, girl, with your body full of green lesions. There is nothing for you but your disease. It will be a good friend, it will be a faithful hound, it will love you and stroke your hands at night. Remember the Bear, and how his wound was a comfort, how it made him beautiful. It *is* beautiful to Stop and Rest, to recline and drink one's tea. I will be your mother and tend to your ravaged body as if it were my own. I will mop your brow when you fever, and wrap you in furs when you are chilled. I will lance your boils and clean the blood from your lips. I will rub your feet with oil and make you brews to calm your stomach. I will clean your vomit from the floor and cradle your head in my lap, I will tell you stories and kiss you goodnight. I will love you and check your soft skin for buboes, I will press my fingers into your flesh with tenderness. Stay and be warmed here. We are alike—we carry Death like a swaddled child, with her black eyes. We owe a penance. This is where you belong, here with me."

With her great gnarled hands like walnut branches she pulled a heavy volume from the shelf, bound in leather like silk, dust like gold plate over its cover. Embossed in silver on its surface was a great glimmering hammer, heavy and deadly as

though it might truly crack open my skull like a chest of coins. She opened it and ripped a long piece of parchment, stuffing it into her wet mouth. The old woman, face kind and pitying, held it out to me like a Eucharist, pages opened and waiting, offering its papery throat meekly. I reached out a hand to tear a morsel from the thick spine, and saw the proffered page, and the word written across it like a brand on a bull's thigh.

Kore

I drew back my moldavite fingers sharply, my mouth parting like a pond beneath a ducks feet. I gazed at the Monkey, struggling to understand why the word was spinning through me like a drill tipped in yellow naphtha. He smiled, slow and wide. "Yes, yes, Darlinggreen, you see. Because you choose a course once, because you choose one sequence out of many possible, do not think it is the only time. You must choose it again and again. Will you take this thing and dwell within forward-motion or take it and wrap yourself in woolen death until you cannot tell if you are a corpse or a woman? You will take it, but will you Stop or Go, and here is stillness, will you rescind it? Kore, Kore, you are the Maiden, the Maiden and the Monster and the Blade, the Sleeper and the Castle and the Kiss, the Apple and the Mouth, the Damsel and the Dragon, the Witch and the Spell. Wake now and take the name she hoards like a fat gem, the old lizard."

Between their gazes, one milky and rheumy as a new moon, the other black and fierce, I keeled like a ringing buoy. How long had I swum within the whale and known my Will was nothing, no meaning, capsized? It would sicken me further, I knew, to go on, to take this name, to reach out and make a gesture, drive me further from what I was when I was myself and no other. It would fly through me like a row of teeth,

madness carousing and glad, faster and faster. She wanted me to take it and throw it into the flames, lose it forever, repudiate it and kill it. But I would not, of course, of course, because that is not what a Seeker does, what a Maiden does, she ever after eats the apple and the pomegranate and impales herself on a spindle, its sparkling tip emerging from the crown of her dappled head.

And so I extended again that brocade hand and tore the name from its book, in a long rip of infant thunder. Without removing my eyes from the crone's hungry face, I folded it in two and placed it on my tongue like a sugar cube, and closed my dark mouth over its edges. It melted like chocolate, slightly chalky and full of oil, the taste of gold ink flowing down my throat, coating my organs, liquefied manuscripts with the sweat of pale-eyelashed scholars permeating, incense and myrrh like waves, smoke of burning horsemeat and overripe peaches, the name turning end over end, falling into my belly, *downdowndowndowndown*.

The Compass needles tore it into frenzied pieces, and it floated on pointed toes into my veins, inseminating my body like a blown milkweed, vanishing into each cell as simply and quietly as closing a Door. It crawled in my fingers, flushing warm in my calves, the name taking hold and sinking like a galleon into my bone-reefs.

I smiled, though behind glimmered the mad lolling of a wolf's leer, I smiled. I stood without a word and took the Monkey's paw, walking softly towards the next Door, round and rough-hewn. The crone snarled and called after me and wept all at once, her voice breaking open with sorrow like a fruit, pulling at her thin white hair, clacking her rotted teeth like guillotines. Behind us I could hear her ravenous, clawing at the books and shoving them into her. I could hear her strangling grunts as she pushed them into her throat with both hands,

choking on chapters and indices, cutting her wrists with glossaries and footnoted, poisoning herself, verse by verse.

The wooden Door opened smoothly and elegantly, sighing a little, and closed behind us with a satisfied jamb-smacking, smothering her coughing gasps. As I stepped into the sunlight, I could see my feet below me, following each other down the Road, and each toe shone pure gold in the auroral grass.

28. I knelt heavily in the little meadow.

Scalp burning, eyes crackling thorn-violet, feeling a hundred hands on me, judging the Void that is me to be common and poor. Hair hunug in a tangled saffron morass, seaweed drying on the beach, lost in gladiatorial sand, foam clinging to the curls and tendrils, smelling of salt and starfish. Walls surrounded the clipped green, covered in salmon-colored roses and lilies of the valley. The air cloyed a too-sweet perfume. The long grass-stalks full of milk lay restful and sweet, as though a woman's hand had smoothed a taffeta dress over her slender knees. The alpine virtue, the perfection and peace. (Which is illusion, it is only that it wishes itself so.)

And I was not peaceful in its center, (perhaps because I do not wish myself so. Is it wishing that makes the world, glaring and broken?) full of my own bubbling streams and thrusting trees, full of harsh-branched gorse and cattle-hides. And the Maze doesn't care, it is impassive and huge, it mocks and waits.

The Monkey's fingers twirled clockwise in my sorrowful hair, shifting from his terrible requiring self to the warm lickings of a mother lion in a flash. Curls now the same shade as his rough fur, burnished gold to my jasper waist, my warm-shaded hips. I was a womansun, high breasts with nipples like coins, mouth like a reliquary. I shone with faceted light, blinding,

pure. My skin radiated. I could have warmed a hundred ragged-eyed children, huddled together on every inch of me, trying to cover me like a subway vent. My flesh crackled, an orb of dilated copper.

But my eyes are true, still featureless and blank, plates of gold armor set in my face.

“Kore, Kore, my Darlinggold, it is not much further. I see the sun in the sky and its light.” I nodded dumbly, sleep pulling my head earthward, exhaustion creeping with her feline tail, sweat in arcane snail-tracks around my knees, my wrists.

“I am so tired, Ezekiel. You must let me sleep. She would have let me sleep. There is no ‘I’ anymore, the scarlet letter to mark my position on the Map-which-is-not, the I’s which cross within the hermetic “X”, not unlike a Compass, under which must be buried something of value; I am only pulled along like a ship on a tether, pulled into port with a shattered hull. Please, let my poor ‘I’ choose sleep without your prodding and gnashing teeth. I must, I must, I cannot . . . ”

I was nearly asleep already, and as I laid my head down on the cool grass I heard him crooning his loving “hoos” like a lullaby.

29. In the dark, the dream-self bleeds.

Dreams of the interior, standing on a rib, balanced on one foot, looking up into an esophagus-sky. Catching as it passes the brief light of a boy with hair like cut wheat—and then it is gone, and I am falling into poison sweat-lodge dreams rubbed with white sage, with buffalo blood, with rattlesnake bile.

And, oh, I am under him again, the Stone with the Inquisitor's cragandjag face, and he with the rack under me, bending (as though for a shield) my spine into a circle, diameter twice radius, π^2 , numbers marching like ants up and down my bleached bones, the queen and her thousand daughters perched upon black and white ladders and staircases that smell of opium, velvet slant of plush-lipped opiates, slant, slant, slant, slant of perpendicular bones, the geometry of bruises and burst lips. His marble mouth next to my ear, words like grave worms, like winged insects, like mocking plague rats. The Stone torments me:

Go ahead, Darlinggold, precious. Scream in the sunlight and scream in the moonlight and scream in the starlight and lakelight and cloudlight and fishlight and gooselight and rowanlight and dawn's rosy fingers, Rosicrucian dawn, Templar aurora, Maltese cross blazing across the sky like the outline of a corpse: In this sign thou shalt conquer . . . To the gold dust of the desert, to the streets of the

Maze, feel the cool stucco on your burning back, feel the lick and tickle of the flames while we burn you, burn you, burn you, witch in the Holy Land, cat-woman, you smell like the sage-garden and didn't we see you dancing naked with the devil in the orange groves last midnight Thursday? Can't deny, can't deny, but my did the oranges taste nice, my didn't their juice taste cold and sweet, my didn't he make music on that drum, didn't he make you a percussion/tympani, beat on the copper bellied skin of your back, songs to wake the stones, blow into your bones and out came symphonies?

(—They cannot finde that path, which firste was showne,
But wander too and fro in wayes unknowne—)

How can you deny your possession, your Assasination, with all those jabbering voices in your head, pretty young thing? Aren't you the devil's pan-flute, woman? Confess, confess, confess and we will merely strangle you, and the hooded executioner will hide his erection from the crowd, the excitement from seeing your lips burst open like sea anemones, eyes go wide as though in the throes of orgasm, his hands intimate on your lily throat, oh and he'll turn aside at the last minute so no one will see. Confess and be saved. Or we'll we'll hang you from the hawthorn tree, burn you at the stake like venison and eat your pretty limbs at a banquet attended by twelve Kings and no less, twelve Queens to drink your blood from teacups, for I say unto you that the body of a witch mortified and vanquished in the name of God is yea verily as sacred as the body of Christ, and it shall melt on our tongues like unto the very Communion wafer, and we shall feast upon it as on the tender breasts of doves, and suck the holy marrow from her bones. Our hounds will gnaw the severed feet and be blessed in the hunt. the children will suck your knuckles like cherry candy. A burning is always cause for celebration: the village eats for a week. Quick as a spring hare you won't escape, we know all the best hiding places.

(—Furthest from end then, when they nearest weene
That makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne—)

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Oh, ho! Indeed, you are far from salvation, from rescue and release. I am the Path that pierces you, my body gores you like a matador, and how I burn inside you as though you were a censer with all your pretty gold finish. Never think there is anything else but you and I alone in the dark.

Oh you Salome-witch, with the blood of that glass-bellied Queen on your painted fingers, dance here in the Dungeon as you danced in your heathen grove, and we will merely crush your skull with a stone. We will take a sliver of flesh from your dancing heels and plant the wisteria with them, and oh! How purple they shall grow in the spring! Walked you on the desert Road like the shadow of a hawk, but you can never, never escape it, it trails you like squid ink, trails you like a credit report, chases you like wolves after caribou, clings to you like jellyfish. We knew you when you came, we knew the moment your black foot touched Holy Ground. Perhaps we will only drown you, drowning in the Sea will salt the meat, and your lungs will fill up with scrolls before you die, the parchment will choke your cilia, papyrus in your ivory nostrils, (and tell us, tell us how nice the oranges tasted!) Aramaic letters smearing on the Walls of your esophagus; oh, how pure you'll be! HOLY, CLEAN, PURE, white the color of divinity, and you all stained RED, RED, RED, blackberry juice on pricked fingers, pricked like that famous beauty's finger, only you weren't ever a beauty, were you? Oh no, not with that dress, not with those shoes, not with that ratty hair!

Oh, you though you could charm even with that dreadful time-release skin moldering into all sorts of decayed shades, your stupid mewling mouth gibbering with black vomit on your lips, the vomit of your sickness, your unclean brain, cramped and filthy, and yes, oh, yes, precious, aren't you the Monster after all, deformed and grotesque, commedia dell arte devil with bells for horns, weak but ugly, oh isn't that you in the proverbial nutshell! Isn't that JUST PEACHY? Your little piglet haunches all scrunched up in your dank corner picking at the lice eggs of true reality and how they GROW on you like fruit!

Oh don't cry, little bird, don't cry. Aren't you a NICE GIRL after all with your lolling eyes and your mouth full of smoke and your sloppy eye-make up, aren't you really a NICE GIRL at heart, oh yes, of course, precious, we know, we know.

And we'll crust you in salt like a diamond dress, how pretty and NICE you'll be for the feast! All dressed up. With three fingers (for the Trinity, of course) we will scoop the mound of salt from your contorted mouth and remove your teeth to play dice with, and scrape it from your cheeks as though from a fat side of salmon. In the afterglow of your ascension we will dance and dance.

(—That path they take, that beaten seemed most bare—)

Oh, you foolish girl. I am beyond everything that you are. You should not have come, not have come, to the walls of the Labyrinth with its mosaics and cisterns like the vaults of heaven. So becoming with your clear eyes. Yet you could not see the Way. Come and dance for us, Jezebel-witch, Delilah-daemon, show us the calves famed in Gaul and Britannia Ultima, show us the white-armed dervish of the orange groves.

(—This is the wandering wood, this the Errours den—)

This is the end. You know nothing. Do not pretend. You are mine, my very own.

And in my dream, in my sacred madness I see his face how like a stalactite lit by the light of bat's eyes. The callow face of the Stone, cutting me like an obsidian arrowhead, surgically slicing, glutting himself on me, glowering, gloating. Now that I have chosen sleep he can have me entire.

Oh, but know that I will wake as dreamers do and you will slip back into the white pebble in a macaque-stomach, and I will lurch onwards.

Will you now?

Oh yes. I accept. Here and there, my body is all sweet flesh and curve, ready for the witch's oven, ready for the gingerbread hut, ready for the peppermint banisters and butterscotch windowpanes, the cinnamon-gummy rugs and white chocolate

stairs. Ready for the black licorice whip oven grill and cotton candy pillows, the pumpkin pie floors and caramel apple chandeliers, the lemon-ice wash basin and the cider bath water. But I'll wake. And in the end, won't I make a lovely pie, cinnamon crust with a honey glaze, twenty-four blackbirds baked inside, to lend sugar and mystique to my bones? Won't that be a dainty dish to set before the King? When I lie souffléed at his bedside and he runs his tongue over my soft grape-flavored centre? Won't I then be the best dish the witch ever served to his Majesty under a silver dome?

Oh, we are just SALIVATING, darling, positively DRIPPING.

You will see. If I accept, if I do not fight, I will prevail.

(—'Yea but,' quoth she, 'the perill of this place

I better know than you—')

30. Hoo.

I am watching you sleep, Kore, Darlinggold, watching your eyes flutter like bees' nests, watching your breath whistle through the grass like a scythe. I am watching your coppery chest riseandfallriseandfall, tidal motion of your stomach concealing and cricket-breathing. I am watching your forehead crease like an envelope, lost in dreams I do not share, but can guess.

Oh, womanchild, I have walked beside you and I have chosen to, not because you were weak and needed my padding footsteps next to yours, but because I heard your voice echoed off the faces of every Wall, and came to you drawn as a furry-feelered moth. I dragged my Temple along the Road to you as though it were a plow, as though I were a black-shouldered ox, and I let you breakfast on its fruit. I let you kill my beautiful, simple-minded chess set because even in your delirium you dazzled above all their cut crystal. I let you go mad in my arms. I have pulled you quietly and surely along the Road, to give you what you desire, because you were bright and new against the mud-brick. Just as Maidens cannot help but eat anything they are offered, Beasts cannot resist the pull of Maidens, irrefutable and fierce. We lumber towards you out of our black corners and dripping dungeons, drawn and caught, even when we know it is so. Oh, especially when we know. And I came to you, you and no other, out of the grey of the Temple.

Soon it will be over, my Kore. Soon there will be a blue Door and a Key you do not think I know you have. We have played this scene so many times. Soon there will be a shaft of light through you like a lance and we will part, because that is also the way of Beasts and Maidens. I know. I accept. I have, after all, set this sequence in motion. But as you sleep I am filled like a pitcher with sorrow, because I love you and do not wish to see the last of your many-colored shapes against the sky. But it is the course of these things, and I will follow the tale I know to be ours.

You shift in your sleep and I know it is because of the Stone, the Stone I carry inside me and thus keep close by you, so that it can do its work and change you one last time. You did not want a sequence, but I have given it to you, you were content, and I have given you pain in a silver bowl, for as I love you it is also my nature to harm you, to torture you, to push you along the Road that passes through me and present you amid fanfare with new twists and snarls, with new bottomless wells and dead ends, with Angels and Hares and Lobsters with colored shells. Without pain, there is no progress. Though you cannot see it now, though I am only the little golden Monkey who nuzzles your face, I am also the Stone and the Inquisitor, the Camels and the Carried Women, the Man and the Bar. I am the Voice that Recites verses inside you, from a place you will never remember. I am even the Road itself. I adore you and I worship the presence of you within me, yet I have borne horrors to you on my back, given them like presents. It is the Way, and I have fulfilled it.

I have brought you this far, through the acetylene torch of Walls shrieking a beckoning call, drawing the orange streaks of your soul towards it, to absorb into itself all the cardinal colors, to bring together the reds and yellows and white-heats and oranges, to conflagrate in some Compass Rose which lies at the

center of you though you cannot believe in a Center. Nothing grows in this place that cannot carry its own water, the cactus that blooms at night, the single lemon-yellow flower. And you carry seas inside you, the salt and the tide of blood and plasma.

So you walked and became purified, and ascended poles that dwindled skyward like fabled towers covered in thorns, the sky opening like a womb to enfold, envelope, encase, entwine, entreat. The burning blue furnace of heaven, where the world is battered on a white anvil, poured molten into a Labyrinth-shaped mold, spattered with red sparks that become stars and iron-oxide rich soil. You turned your salt-crusted face upwards, creased eyes and parched lips, hands blistered from making corn cakes on the searing rocks, toes calloused from walking through caves with the dark, seductive rustling of bats overhead and the maddening smell of water within, you raised your eyes to the vault of sky, and I saw you like a first revelation. You are so beautiful, Kore, Kore, my Darlinggold, painted with metallic dye, extended arms thinned to thread by hunger and ascension.

The balance of one foot on the pole, like a parchment-colored flamingo, will be as it ever is upset by your arms in second position, and you will falter as you must, feel the hot wind rush up from earth and down from heaven, and as you step off into space, into unknown and unknowable, flesh carved with hawk-claws and pictographs, shaded by the great image of the desert snake etched in sunburn on your back, and I will vanish gratefully in a puff of raven feathers. Their Plutonian violet-black will float in a sudden hush down to the red rock below, and I will leave you to do this all over again, for that is also the Way, the cry of events sounding again and again like the tide, full-throated. We have walked together before how many times and will again. So it is not really farewell, though each time my heart tells me that it is. You cannot teach the body to

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know the lay of the Maze, it will insist always on its own telling. You will not remember me in my golden fur, you never do, with your shivering eyes, and next time I will not be a Temple-Monkey. But you will be a humanchild, fevered, forever and ever, for it is your tale in which I am the villain and helpful guide and the scenery and even the shuffling prop master.

There is no end and no beginning. There is only we two, alone in the dark, for always.

31. *She wakes, with sand in her eyes, for it is the last day.*

It is a silver sun, full of diamond sunspots and a nacreous corona, beatific, filling the sky like a supernova. The Monkey, fur made into jewels by the brilliant light, makes her a last breakfast of robin's eggs and wild turnips. Terns wheel overhead, with their lonely cries, watching the gold woman and the gold animal go about their morning tasks. She washes her gleaming face in a fountain, water trickling off her features in sweet rivulets. Her blank eyes have become beautiful, have become hers, and they are polished like copper pots. She eats the steaming turnips and salty eggs slowly, not entirely knowing why she savors them so. The Monkey grooms her (savoring himself this last contact with her wild, coriander-scented mane) and she allows his touch on her bronzed hair, calmed of her night terrors by his deft fingers.

They are near a long Wall, stretching lazily beyond sight in either direction. It is made of living vines and long tendrils of ivy, tangled together like the woman's hair, over and under, over and under. Here and there a fat white blossom opens and shuts with a flutter, like a hand. It is well-kept, tended by some loyal hand. There is no stone beneath, the Wall is entirely leaf and stem, entirely alive, displaying its green like a lady her colored fan.

It is the last morning of all mornings until the next, with its cold light and misty breath, the last grooming and the last foun-

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tain-washing. Her limbs creak slightly as though she were truly made of gold, a molten statue-woman walking far from her pedestal. She is pure now, in her lionbody and named, and her flesh is liquid light where the sun strikes her, striding like a flame-deva down the Road which is sullen, ashen, carrying Direction inside her, so that she faces herself on all sides. The Monkey clammers up her smooth back and takes his place on her glittering shoulder.

Is it indulgent, perhaps, to take a moment to admire them, their pairing, their shapes against the tooth-white sky, the comfortable lie of his tail around her fleur-de-lis neck, the confident rhythm of her bare feet, the precise matching shades of her skin and his pelt? Is it a distraction to give them this last tableau, this last snapshot under a spring morning, under a willow tree with her eyes laughing?

Let it be. We must make allowances.

CANTO THE FOURTH

32. Forward.

I move forward. There is comfort in my feet, pads thick as rain-boots. I woke up, after all, with the Monkey murmuring over my head. The Wall smells of ambergris and its flowers are weighted like suicides. Hunting the old emerald self, dingy facets of a forgotten sapphire elbow or garnet knee, merrily we go along hunting the sloughed shells of me on this corpulent Road, we highwaymen looking to rob ourselves. Once perhaps I was a streak of charcoal painting the Road like a cannibal, but I could not say. My mind is a laundry line, flapping white wings as a rinsed sky, drops on a tin washboard. (But are there welts on my back, measured kisses of the rack? Oh, yes.)

Here we go round, here we go round and what do I expect from the svelte malarial dawn but another suspense of hours? There is comfort in a tail around one's neck, I suppose. I walk looking down, trying to see what the Grasshopper saw, the prim insects that once were Walls. Trying to see the next step on the Path, trying to see where in these muddy tracks the spider-leg pinpricks twist, trying to divine subsequence as though it were water. (It is as though a thing has been taken from me, now that I am named, now that I am gold. I slip, I cannot hold a thought.

But I am not concerned. The sun shines through me like a sieve, I cannot hold the ragged tuxedo tails of my dream, I slide

easily along the Path, a little chipped-paint boat. I cannot think, I can hardly feel my body, the only weight being the fat rose-green Compass resting as solidly as a breadloaf in my spacious belly. I am made of air, suddenly, constructed of my own breath. Because of a name which somehow takes as it is given? Because of a border, a limit, a Wall which walks with me, cradling close.

Call me by name and inchoate I will sidle up to your princely thigh, call me by name and be made an alms-cup, be made mendicant on my Temple steps, be beggared and crippled because I cannot be a word, only a word, a tongue-curl which is me, a flick of lip, a syllable or two, certainly not three, and is this me after all, chained to the sea floor by a creeping sound, vermin of aural combinations? It is not so pretty a madness when it is named, then it is a patient, wrapped in white and pinned to a butterfly board. Then it does not blaze or consume and I am not, I am named and still as Stone, it is not what I wanted, what I came for, no, not what the contract stated, but I will take it with grace—)

“Do you smell it?” The Monkey sniffs the air, alert and aroused, face banging into the air like a hickory switch. “I smell the chlorinated honey-grim, I smell the hominy and loam. Hoo! It is the End.”

I looked where he did, and saw nothing but the linear Wall stretching like a cat’s claw, and the tallow of the horizon.

“It is an empty day, Monkey. It is a day for walking. I do not think we will find anything. It is a day for Skimming Over, cream from milk.”

The Monkey bit his lip and ventured a resigned little chuckle.

“If you like. But I can smell sap and plum sauce. We are Nearing.”

“Oh, stop,” I sighed, “Can you not speak to me outside of your riddle-realm?”

“Should I speak of the Bear we abandoned to his beauty? Should I speak of your visions? Should I preach the Gospel of the Man and the Bar?” He paused like an insect on a leaf. “Should I speak of how I do not wish it, after all this, to be the End?”

“Do you not?” He looked earthward, blushing if a Monkey could blush.

“No. I am accustomed to you now. I should not be surprised. It is always like this, and I am always sad. Hoo. It is the smell of the sky on your shoulders that does it, that roots me to you at the last of all possible moments. Let us try to be quiet. Words spoil everything.”

And so we went, softly and methodically, Monkey dozing off on my shoulder and politely remaining smugly silent. And of course I could not see what was ahead, could not see the terminus, the road sign marking the last detour, could not see its nailed boards and blue shadow until we nearly tripped over it.

“I told you, I told you,” hooted the Monkey, clapping his little hands. “I smelled it miles ago! Humangirl, your nose is a poor servant. The End! The Uttermost End.” He danced a little, though less happily than he once did, when in the delicious throes of proving me wrong.

It was nothing more than a little Door, no higher than my wedding-band waist, arching to a delicate point at its crown, like a Bishop’s miter. Deep blue, was the Door, expanse of india ink, flowing tempura-thick over boards knotted and hewn with a dull axe. Vaporous frescoed stars floated around its rim, edges blurred and fading into the expansive blue, giving each a pale aureole, a vague corona. I felt myself falling into the color, as though it were truly a lake and if touched would ripple outwards from my finger. But there was no knob anywhere on its ornate surface, and it did not leap out or gobble us where we stood. In fact, it had not even been following us. We had stumbled on it quiescent and still, and even now it made no move to seize us.

"Why doesn't it want us, Ezekiel?" I marveled, slightly disappointed.

"Do you want it?"

"Well, no, of course not, it's dreadful . . . but . . . I cannot quite say . . . yes, I think I do. It is Not Like the Others."

"No, my Kore, my love, it is not. It is the Last Door, Your Door, and this is the last day. Not the cream but the last dregs of milk. And I must leave you to it." He smiled wanly and scratched his elbow.

"You are a slippery little thing. You come when I do not want you and go when you please. You drag me out of the crone's hut only to leave me here, when I don't even know how to open a Door I shouldn't want ajar. I am nearly dead, if my jaundiced skin didn't advertise it, and you will go and leave this bird's wing Door as my headstone."

I wept a little, but it was cursory, the shedding of such valuable tears as my own metallic drops. (Collect them and be a sultan, be a banker, be a thief of forty) I knew it all along. When long, long now before I lay beneath the radiating Angel I was alone with her, in her arms so cold they burned, and it would be so again. I am the Maiden, and when the Maiden faces the Queen it is alone, so no one will see that she thinks the monarch beautiful and worthy of love, even as she seizes what is hers from those white arms.

"Hoo! Darlinggold, if you think you have been carrying a Key all this Way for any other purpose but to open a Door, then you are a silly girl and you do not know how these stories go. It is the Uttermost End. Everything is simple from here on out." I tried to hide my surprise that he knew of the Lobster's little Key, which I still had nestled in my pack.

"As for the rest, at the end, you are always alone, it is inevitable. The Maiden goes on, the Beast stays behind and catches tears in his whiskers. But as I have tried to tell you, even this

is only an event, not a true end. It is the borderland of a sequence of events, but there is no revelation to be had. There is no conceivable end in this place, it goes onandonandon, past the last permutation of a chess game, past the last rose that ever grew. 'Last' and 'End' are meaningless here, and when you go through the Door you will find nothing more than the Road stretching on, *downdowndown*, past where you thought it must end. I have played my part for you, within you. Now it is done and I will go back to what dark corners Beasts originate from, and you to the cloistered courtyard that all Maidens find behind the last Door, even if it is not truly the last. But perhaps it is, after all," his eyes twinkled. "I have been known to lie."

"There is still so much I do not understand," I said softly. "I do not even know, truly, who you are." He threw his skinny arms around my neck and stared into my marble eyes.

"Oh, my darling, I am myself and no other, no other unto the nexus of all possible endings. Look deep enough into my eyes and you will see Roads and Walls extending infinitely, in my pupils lie every twist you have ever walked. I am secretive, I will not give you answers, but there they lie, scattered about like shrapnel."

I swallowed thickly, seeing in those black pools all the miles upon miles, the spurt of a thousandthousand fountains and the right angles of hedge Walls, and the wide Road, extending its massive Avenue like an artery into the body of the Monkey, knotting and turning and opening onto itself, another thick snake breakfasting on his tail, sautéed and served with tea.

"Good-bye, then, Beast," I whispered, awed.

"Good-bye, Kore, my Beauty, my Darlinggold."

"Oh, Ezekiel, what do you see in the sky?"

"Air. Air, all around, like wings."

He covered my face with his hand briefly, tenderly, and I could smell the wheatfields and fallen autumnal apples on his leathery skin. And then he was gone, vaulting over the Wall in an artful leap, tail disappearing over the wild green.

33. I turned, creaking like a hinge, back to the Door.

So blue, so blue, and I could hear it panting slightly under its veneer of silence, struggling to wait quietly, like a good girl, and fold her hands under her legs. And I stare, into and at, unable to move when at last it comes to it. It seems such a large step, the span between two sparkling feet.

I draw the Key out of my pack where it had lain since the millennia past when the Lobster clattered. And it too had changed, once the indigo of his baroque claw and my impressionist belly, it had shivered into gold like an autumn tree, nearly disappearing into my palm creased like a map of some lost continent. But the surface of the Door lay as smooth as a child's mouth, no Keyhole marring its oceanic sheen with black.

(—For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say—)

Keen and bright the unmarred surface, and I without a guide to point the way with a finger taking up the sky. The Door seemed to laugh, to shake soundlessly with mirth at this hapless girl thing trying to enter its starry girth. (How am I to do this alone, who avoided the Doors so well and gracefully for year upon day?) How to elude one, simple. How to penetrate a laughing fence, I could not say. I am weak and blurred, contours

entering themselves and diffusing like the perfume of the harem, My ignorance like a fat jewel, something I could grip in my hand and turn over, marveling at the workmanship. I am playing that same old four-string chord, stretching my sapling fingers to press down on a neck like I was strangling a goose.

I am old, old, now, no Maiden but that very crone with her diseased bones, her desiccation, her bleeding liver, her cataracts. Full of lack, bursting at the perforated edges with emptiness, pressing, pressing

*(—So did my soul, that still was fleeing onward,
Turn itself back to re-behold the pass—)*

pressing in like a tourniquet, and it is her blood that gushes wantonly from my body, sick and congealed. I have progressed, the effort is so tiring, so full of weights, hanging on fish hooks from my beaten breasts, pulling the flesh earthward, to entice the worms. How do I open it? Does she lie on the other side, all lithe paleness and un-mad, un-sick, un-weary? Liquid Stone, airy and full-lipped, surrounded by her throne of flapping fish? I cannot compel her, ever, so full of every Compass ever minted, and I with only my chubby-cheeked one, so pitiful in my belly, shrunk into a corner of acidic solace,

*(—And never moved she from before my face,
Nay, rather did impede so much my way—)*

all quivering magnets and wild needles cutting. I cannot excavate from her womb the fluid of a grimacing umbilicus to heal myself, I cannot put up scaffolding over her snowbody and chip her down to the size of a pill I can swallow and become. I cannot even open her docile Door, her little lapdoor, pink-tongued and eager. I cannot

*(—Thou art my master, and my author thou,
Thou art alone the one from whom I took—)*

for will I once in the cloistered cobbledstones be hers again, to write on, to be carved, to be marked by her terrible black

tongue, to be her shuddering paper? I have no long yellow teeth to show like crescents suns, how without a Monkey by to scream and gnash, will I keep her from scrawling over me againagainagain?

But the Door, (did the Door and swifter than I) the Door waiting for its answer, its correct walk-on-three-legs-in-the-evening magic words, the sibilant slip of a Key into its body.

And though its body is smooth and coherent, perfect polygon of gleam, mine is not, battered and meringued I, with pores like chasms burned there by my claws and ragged voice and I have always lain open as a book, read and skimmed and coffee-spilled, left spine akimbo. Because of the ease of sliding a Key between arm and rim, between the ulna and the radius bones, between the socket joints of my legs. Because I can be pried open like a window.

*(—Behold the beast, for which I have turned back;
Do thou protect me from her—)*

And so if the Maze has twisted in me, bone-Key hair-Key meat-key opening my chameleonbody to it and all its fingers and all its mouths and all its teeth, so may I twist in myself, (all things ending in the body) and open the Maze.

I took the Key in a shimmering hand, caught into fire by the afternoon sun, netted into a sphinx's paw by shafts of pikelight. Well wrought the delicate shell, serrated edge of claw forming the Key ridges, where it would fit and swivel. The Door seemed to hold its breath, chest swollen with amphibious lungs full up, peering to see if the correct sequence would be followed, the correct procedure observed, if custom and usualhow would dance as they were used, hand in hand.

Holding it like a blade I stood statuesque, arm outstretched like an orator to deliver scathe and curse.

(—Thee it behooves to take another Road—)

And I plunged, delved, dug, stabbed it deep into the brittle surface, oh and the severing blow of fracture and slither (*ininininin!*) into the soft place between my coin-breasts, where there is a fine down like a gasp, and oh, the grinding as it chews inward, the molten gold blood sluicing from the sucking wound which is so like a mouth, so like the opening to a jeweled womb, so like an iris. (*Ininin!*) Rushing blood warms the Keybody, it is deeper than inward and I cannot see for the pain, the pain of opening which is always present at these little penetrations—

(—*Forth issued from the sea upon the shore,
Turns to the water perilous and gazes—*)

See how soundless, accommodating, finger-crooked, the Door moves open a sliver, not enough to bite and tear, but enough for me to slip inside, like a Key. Its breath winds out like a thread soaked in gasoline, sour, tonguing the skein of air between us, searching for me, for the blood it smells. See it wait, still so patient, expecting that if I will not step I will certainly fall if I bleed just a little more. (*Ininin!*)

But, oh, oh, see that the blood is not gold any longer, any longer, and how I have side-shifted the spectrum one last (but it is never the last) time, one last chloroform masquerade, one last ball with slippers worn through, one last night on the town under all those lights! I have flashed transparent, translucent, cut glass, clear as the rivers of Babylon, and how the sun shines through me as though I were a goblet at the feast! Oh, how the clouds reflect milky in my brow, in my grecian eyes, my singing foot! Fled color and now there is only light, light, light. I am made of light, brooks and streams, hair cascading like snakes from a glass-blower's pipe, pure and clean and clear at last, but it is never last, never last. I can move in any Direction, I hold all Direction within, and oh! See now it lying prettily within, the Compass with its thorn-needles and bouncing glacial norths!

THE LABYRINTH

My little child, my little dusk-daughter so nestled in the glass belly, flushing all your greens and pinks, indignant at the disappearance of flesh. I am glad to see you, little one! Where shall we go, where shall we go? Forward is the only remaining place, I'm afraid, we must suffer to be eaten again, *ininin* and down, here we fly and fall. Into the Door at neverlast, slip of light we!

(—I cannot well repeat how there I entered—)

And I step within, hush inside, whisper through, and there is a vanishing, of a perfect crystal foot as the deep azure of the Door closes with a coquettish latch.

34. "I suppose you think you've arrived somewhere.

That you have won a thing, that you have *passed through*, achieved a fetching Grail."

Comes her voice like a grinding Stone, on her fishing-Wall as I knew she would be, covered in her opals like eggs, watersurface-shimmering, wings curving over her long back to the icy earth. The wound and the Key had together vanished from my glassy sternum. Her court of mercurial trout heaped themselves still along her white thighs as she exhaled that same noose of nettle-smoke, watching me with eyes like gutters trimmed in icicles.

"*Hic monstra, hic monstra, puella*. I suppose you think you have come all this Way and found me out, found a Lair, found a wicked, wicked Creature, a *femme fatale*, a Villain."

I sucked in my breath, blood ticking in my temples, and replied, "Angel, I have come through a Door. I suppose nothing more than that. But it did not capture me, I chose it."

"And now," she hissed, "you think I will wave my magic rod and reel, and heal you, you who disdain my frescoes and chuck my lovely navel-Stone down the gullet of a Monkey. Wretched girl, ignorant glass-piece, for your pleasure I will do nothing."

"I did not think you would. And I cannot make you do it."

I walked slowly to the foot of her alabaster Wall, through the familiar pale of her courtyard.

"I have no artifice, no companion, nothing to seek after. I am here blown clear as the southern sand, offering only myself, and you know you have been expecting me." I smiled my most charming smile.

"Why do we not at least fish together awhile, since I have come all this Way?" I held out a crystal hand to her, crossed with lines like longitude or—(*in this sign thou shalt conquer*) to be helped up onto the slippery Wall.

"You have come no distance at all, girlchild."

But she hefted me up and by her side, handing the rod to me, and smoking resentfully. "They are biting on Grasshoppers this afternoon, young and crisp," she added. The Angel puffed her pipe like a squid sluices its ink. The fishing line trailed down to the icy Road like a web, into the neatly cut circle and frothing Roadwater. I held the arch of the rod gingerly, not knowing what next to say to her who regarded me with a catlike stare.

"Ask yourself, infant, how many times we have sat thus, among all these writhing fish. Ask yourself how many times we will yet smoke together under this tumor-white sky. And still you think it is an act of moment for me to heal your pathetic little death. You always do. I tire of patching you like corduroys." She exhaled from her carved nose.

"I have sat with you but once, Angel, when you gave me this sickness like a slice of cake."

"Yes, of course, dear. I am terribly wicked. And this *petite* scene has been played only once, only once. Why, we hardly know our lines! We must practice, a thousandthousand more times, until we choke on their dust."

I fixed the rod into a crack in the Wall, ignoring the thrashing pulls at the line.

"I have gone mad for you, as you wished me, as Ezekiel said

it must be, lost in marshes and under red robes, I have lost my eyes and eaten my name and it has all been because you could not let me be, you could not let my walking lie, you wanted me and so I have become what you wanted. Why do you mock what you made?" I stared blank-eyed at the repetition of Wall-rims endless to the horizon and further on.

"It is my entertainment, to watch you flop and gasp like one of my little trout. You would not rob me of that, my *puella*, no. Do you not see what you have achieved? Completion, End. At least a facsimile of it. It is so beautiful. And your singularity is the best of all. You cast a shadow neither sunward nor back, it is only *alwaysnow*, for you. That is enviable. But you have done it without Purpose, without intent, and so it means nothing. You still and always understand nothing of what I could have given you. I would have made you a Hero, you would have been made entirely of blaze, and eaten the Labyrinth in a swallow, so great would have been your need. As it is, you have found your Way to the End, and you do not even know it, because you would not accept the Quest. The function of a Quest, my function, is merely to make the End significant—you squandered me."

"But it would have been illusion. Nothing is the reality, the absence of Center and meaning. I carried it like a shawl around my shoulders. You would have laughed as I drowned naked."

"How vivid. Cling to your little cliffs, if you must. My gifts are vast." She bent her archer's mouth around the ivory pipe. "Oh, humanchild, must we do this, must we play this game where I am a frightful Witch and you are the brave Maiden? Don't you want to play something else? I am very nice, you know. Put your mouth on my wrist, it tastes of peppermint. Wouldn't it be more fun? Why don't you be the witch this time?" She smiled for the first time, teeth like a row of soldiers, leonine and seductive. I felt my old helplessness roving.

"I am dying and you speak of games. How long do you think

I can sit at chatter before nightfall when I will be mad again? Give me what I came for." The Angel shook her sapphire head.

"Oh, all right. You are such a stubborn little caryatid. You must always have it *precise*." She cleared her throat dramatically and fluttered her razor wings wide.

"I will *not!*"

I spread my hands, hopelessly confused, lips parting in anguish, unable, at this last which is not last, to comprehend her animal mouth. She moved close, trailing her fingers from my waist to my chin, slowly, tattooing cold into my flesh, her dark eyes drawing those same snail-patterns inkless on glass skin.

"Oh, pretty little thing, we all play our parts for you. Do you like it, precious *puella*? Are we very good at what we do? Do we satisfy each and every night when that red, red curtain goes up? All of us glossy little ducks in a row? Do you love us, dearest, darling, only? Will you clap, clap, clap? Shall I bow at the end as I yield? Oh, Darlingglass, will you laugh at *all the right parts*?"

She laughed herself, deep in her throat, an intimate rumbling as she lay her silky head on my terrified chest. "It is all an act, my own, but it is all there is. All we have, you and I. The rapiers are real, the duel is true. But you never see the stage, tragsiclyph. I suppose I cannot ask for that much. I am a witch forever, and you will fear and never love me."

"Please," I whispered through loose and prised lips, "take it out of me, take it out, let me be whole."

"You are close to the skin, now, beautiful, close to the rim, dancing out beyond its edge. You could put out your smallest finger and see the pattern. But it is not, after all, the Way of things. Come, come now, you must play your part, too. Threaten me, put your hands on my throat, tell me you will surely kill me like a brave and good Maiden ought to, if I do not wipe you clean as a window."

She leaned upon me like a divan, smiling her disturbing

kittenish smile, bewildering and lithe, full of snow. I put my hand tentatively over her mouth, shrill cold screaming lip to palm with the contact, and her eyes twinkled with mirth above the flesh-hyphen.

"Just stop laughing at me and help me. Or I . . . I shall. I shall throw all your fish back into the Road and shovel in the hole. I will snap your pipe and your rod. And . . . I shall Devour you piece by piece down to your last feather. I can do it." I spoke in measured beats and though I didn't really want to harm her, I understood instinctively that it was the Way. That was clear now, clear as I was.

"Oh, *brava*, darling," she said, muffled by my hand which I removed without expression. "It is so very hard to be strong when you need something from someone."

"I want to be well. I am not your mouse to bat between paws. I want to be as I was. I shall go if you do not, and whiten to dust among the poplars and whitethorn. and then you will have no one."

The Angel's face flushed with her pearl-blue light, her corona pulsing once, twice.

"Oh, Darlingglass, don't get upset. This is all pre-determined, after all, written on the whalewalls in indelible ink, at least more indelible than mine. You cannot blame me for wanting to drag it out a bit. You are such lovely company. Kore, Kore, after all is done and done again, there is no end and no beginning, there is only we two, alone in the dark, for always."

She leaned forward in a cloud of yucca blossom tobacco and ambergris, her face filling up my vision like a moon, and touched her lips to mine. I shrank back from her glacial kiss, breathing in gulps.

"My dear, this is how it is done. The Kiss that heals the Maiden, removes the thorn from her thumb. I gave you your delirium with a Kiss, and I take it back, as you have commanded. It is the Way. You have been such a good girl all

this time, right on cue, will you allow propriety to keep your death snuggled up inside, just below your heart, safe and warm?"

She touched the skin of my sternum, where the Key had thrust, and leaned in again. This time I did not shrink, but allowed her snowdrift lips on mine, pressing like a vise, crushing the blood from my face, and the delicate bones, pushing her face downward (*downdowndown*) drawing me upward like a bucket from a well. Chewing lightly on my lower lips, still connected thus, she whispered, "At the other side of a Door lies nothing but another Door, and another, and another."

Each "another" was punctuated by the press of her diamond teeth on my mouth. "I am the Door that catches you, and you must step through me, limb by limb. Come in, come in, my Darlingglass, it is the Way. Hoo."

Her eyes were shut and in the sheen of her high cheeks I could see my reflection, irises large and green as sugar cane. I moved forward, only slightly, only slightly, an intake of breath, and I slid through the scrim of ice, I breathed through her skin, passing through her body and the wriggling trout and the ice caves like Temples, through the river-network of her veins, where fish upon scaled fish spawned towards her great silver heart, booming cavernously,

(thumpthumpthump)

and I passed the threshold of her bones, and I passed the barrier of her spine, *(ininin!)*

and I breached the Wall of her muscled back, flowing through her in one long inhale. I went through her like a pane of glass.

My last hand disappeared through her torso with an exhale of smoke, smelling slightly of apples strewn over a field of cut wheat.

35. Such a simple thing, opening a Door.

Stepping through, the familiar series of movements, the old village dance. Feeling the rush of air as it shuts behind. So simple and sweet, to be whole in the dark. I understand now. I accept. The revelation is complete only here, in the soon-gone second, with nothing but blackness all around. This has all happened before. It will happen again. I can see myself stretching forward and back like a chain of paper dolls, walking through echoes and shadows of each other, held and rocked to sleep by the Labyrinth, which is constant and adoring. I understand. For one instant, I see the pattern before it is consumed again like a burned photograph.

There is only one Man, and only one Bar, and they walk into each other, and they are the same.

And once through there is, of course, only another Door, a little flame pulsing civilly and softly. And so I fall, again and again, end over end which is not. *Downdowndown.*

CANTO THE FIFTH

36. Look closely. This is not the Way.

Up or down, I could not say, I could not say. I ate the severed halves of a Compass Rose seven-hundred-and-negative-eight miles back, covering the yellow red meat with lime skins and choking it down. Now it is Within. So I could not say northwest or south, only the veil-fire *that way* and the moon-forest *this way*, this turn or that turn, round the oleander Wall rippling underwater or over the mandrake Wall salivating on my hand as I execute a three-quarters pike half-caffeinated flip over its thick shoulders. My body is bound with guitar strings, nipples like fawn's hooves strumming E minor chords and finger-picking a Path through resonant briars, redolent of the desert bellies of blue lizards. By now my feet are worn through, holes like mouths gaping and smacking in cathedral soles, pounding, thrusting on the Path like a drum-skin stretched into incandescence, finding that old comfortable rhythm that by now I know so well, that I invented out of dust and the sweat beading prettily on my own calves.

It is all familiar now, after the passage of constellations and the ingestion of the Compass Rose, holding now that flaming cross inside me, *in this sign thou shalt conquer*, north-brow south-hips east-wrist west-thigh, in this sign thou shalt walk until the end of days, in this sign thou shalt blaze and burn, in

this sign thou shalt stride tall through this Place, this happy Garden of Lies, in this sign thou shalt eat berries and lie under the moon, and let it tan your skin silver.

I carry Direction inside me like a child, a watery infant daughter of a circuit of dawns, connected by the fibrous strength of my spinal fluid and thread sun from the enamel of my teeth. She, in all her diamond gills and sunfish fins is anchored in my rich belly, wrapping her precious little Compass-form in my umbilicus like a mummy, and so I am her sarcophagus, too. Her mother and her coffin.

And the directions never change, magnetic north is always at the crown of my mercurial head, south always at the arch of my holy foot, for I carry the Rose within, growing like a Vedic moon. O serpentine I, having a tail fat with scales linked like opaline chain mail, and thus no way to give birth to this precise little cat-child, kept inside an adamant muscle wall. It pushes against my ribcage, stretching the skin of my lifting belly. Amphibious and infertile, webbed into frozen fecundity, Great-With-Child, never Birthed, never Mother. Trapped in the swallowing, breasts heavy and pendulous with milk, unable ever to feel the tug of that small mouth against them. Ever huge with the weight of oceans, of a thousandthousand mountains, halted in freeze frame like an urn. Ambrosial blood swimming between us, the eater and the eaten and the eater again, sucking at the soil of the womb like a clear-petalled lilac. And in this habit of motion-forward, I have learned:

The Void of the Labyrinth does not exactly stretch, or exactly coil, or exactly twist. But it *snarls*. A bolt of belligerent lightning-silk angrily unraveled, corded, torn, circumnavigating itself in a rattling feint, coming apart and crushing in. And it changes, like the horned moon, cycling without pattern. Walls mutate like film noir rape scenes, tearing at pearl skirts with mud-brick fingers that leave stigmatic bruises.

Roads. Oh god, I cannot speak of it, but the Roads have filled me entirely, stuffed and crammed into every corner, oozing out of my body like icy caviar. They are my avenue-bracelets and my fat sapphire street chokers, my gold scarab short-cut armbands and my boulevard harem anklets, they are my cobblestone coin belts and my alleyway-agate earrings. Long Paths criss-cross my torso like ammunition belts, and the innumerable dead-ends pierce my breasts beautifully, hanging pendulously, swinging with laughter, slapping triumphantly against my bronzed belly.

And. There are here tremors of Doorways. They appear in the morning like dew-dampened butterflies, manic and clever. They travel in packs. At night the hinges change from right to left, or vanish completely. Some are no more than flaps of fur, iridescent in the light of the Walls, or sweeping veils of gauze and silk, long curtains like a woman's hair. Like my hair. Some are hard and ornate, carved with a fantastic code of Arabic and Greek, letters drawn in a paste of crushed diamonds and the hooves of a drowned horse, written with the elegant tip of a black cigarette holder. These have heavy knockers and bulbous knobs, brassy and baronial, in intricate shapes; I have seen a knob like a griffin's fierce mouth, open in a scream with her tongue made of rose quartz, feathers fanning out magnificently in silver on the face of the Door. And a falcon-claw knocker all of amber, the reptilian talon, the three terrible nails ending in their razor points, all wrapped about with the leather of bondage, the flying trails of a hunter's bird cascading down the polished Door, ending in a large lacquered ball with which to strike and enter.

But they are not beautiful to me, any longer. They cluster whispering and break and dance in and out of vision. And they hunt. Like sleek foxes they creep along the places where the Wall meets the Road and wait. They will glide up silently and

swallow you as you lie beneath a sighing willow, or stalk you through three dozen twists and turns of the Labyrinth, seizing you as you come upon one of the long boulevards. They are savage creatures, and hungry. On what do they open? I have learned only to avoid them, and I could not say. I did not exactly *come* here, and I will not exactly *go*. I have always been Here, I have always been about to escape. I have never been *arrived*, always *in transit*, slowly digested by the Road with Doors snapping at my heels. I will never tell the tale of:

“One day I woke up and I was here.”

But perhaps it was so, I could not say. Then equally perhaps I shall one day fall asleep and be not here. If this is true, what came before has dissolved from me, lost like milk teeth. But I think, rather, that it has always been as it is, and there was never a *beforethis* nor will be an *afternow*. I am accepting. This is not a thing to be solved, or conquered, or destroyed. It is. I am. We are. We conjugate together in darkness, plotting against each other, the Labyrinth to eat me and I to eat it, each to swallow the hard, black opium of the other. We hold orange petals beneath our tongues and seethe. It has always been so. It grinds against me and I bite into its skin.

I accept. It is not always unpleasant under this particular cubic yardage of sky. I once (will? never?) thought in miles and leagues, counting my measured footsteps with my abacus-lips. I once chanted the low, quiet black magic of numbers and distance, of meters and kilometers like coiled snakes in baskets. I wrote over my whole body with sap, calculating how many times my feet had abused the earth, how many times the stones had gnawed my toes. No more, I have forgotten numbers. I washed the sap in a marble fountain of a serpent-woman spewing clear water from her gaping mouth, that despairing cavern. And I walked on, my pack secure on squared shoulders. I accept.

THE LABYRINTH

I am not exactly alone. There are Others. Of course there are the Doors, and they are company of a brutal sort, but I glimpse now and again a flash of golden fur or tinfoil tail in a stream. And I hear rustling in the nights that is not the sibilant gliding of an impending Door. I could not say what creeps and whispers through the branches and down the threaded Road, but I hear it, and I am not afraid.

I am the Seeker-After. I am the Dragon and the Damsel, I am the Castle and the Dungeon, the Mad and the Madness. I am the Man and the Bar, I am the Sword and the Flesh. I am the Player and the Game.

I am the Walker and the Maze.

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Visit www.catherynnevalente.com for more details, news, and updates.

