

Ode to Edvard Munch

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I find her, always, sitting on the same park bench. She's there, no matter whether I'm coming through the park late on a Thursday evening or early on a Monday evening or in the first grey moments of a Friday morning. I play piano in a Martini bar at Columbus and 89th, or I play *at* the piano, mostly for tips or free drinks. And when I feel like the long walk or can't bear the thought of the subway or can't afford cab fare, whenever I should happen to pass that way alone in the darkness and the interruptions in the darkness made by the lamp posts, she's there. Always on the same bench, not far from the Ramble and the Bow Bridge, just across the lake. They call that part of the park Cherry hill. The truth is that I haven't lived in Manhattan long enough to know these things and, anyway, I'm not the sort of man who memorizes the geography of Central Park, but she *told* me it's called Cherry Hill, because of all the cherry trees growing there. And when I looked at a map in a guide book, it said the same thing. You might mistake her for a runaway, 16 or maybe 17; she dresses all in rags, or clothes so threadbare and dirty that they may as well be rags, and I've never seen her wearing shoes, no matter the season or the weather. I've seen her barefoot in snow. I asked her about that once, if she would wear shoes if I bought her a pair, and she said no, thank you, but no, because shoes make her claustrophobic. I find her sitting there alone on the park bench near the old fountain, and I always ask before I sit down next to her. And always she smiles and says of course, of course you can sit with me. You always sit with me. Her shoulder-length hair has been died the colour of pomegranates and her skin is dark. I never asked, but I think she may be Indian. India Indian, I mean. Not Native American. I once waited tables with a girl from Calcutta and her skin was the same colour, and she had the same dusky brown-black eyes. But if she is Indian, the girl on Cherry Hill, she has no trace of an accent when she talks to me about the fountain in her favourite paintings in the Met

or the exhibits she likes best at the Museum of Natural History. The first time she smiles . . .

“You’re a vampire?” I asked, as though it was the sort of thing you might ask any girl sitting on a park bench in the middle of the night.

“That’s an ugly word,” she said and scowled at me. “That’s a silly, ugly word.”

And then she was silent for a long moment, and I tried to think of anything except those long incisors, like the teeth of a rat filed down to points. It was a freezing night near the end of January, but I was sweating, nonetheless. And I had an erection. And I realized, then, that her breath didn’t fog in the cold air.

“I’m a daughter of Lilith,” she said

Which is as close as she’s ever come to telling me her name, or where she’s from, or anything else of the sort. *I’m a daughter of Lilith*, and the way she said it, with not even a trace of affection or humour or deceit, I knew that it was true. Even if I had no idea what she meant, I knew that she was telling me the truth. That was also the first night that I let her kiss me. I sat with her on the bench, and she licked eagerly at the back of my neck. Her tongue was rough, like a cat’s tongue. She smelled of fallen leaves, that dry and oddly spicy odour that I have always associated with late October and jack-o’-lanterns. Yes, she smelled of fallen leaves, and her own sweat and, more faintly, something that I took to be wood smoke. Her breath was like frost against my skin, colder even than the long winter night. She licked at the nape of my neck until it was raw and bleeding, and she whispered soothing words in a language I could neither understand nor recognise.

“It was designed in 1860,” she said, some other night, meaning the fountain with its bluestone basin and eight frosted globes. “They built this place as a turnaround for the carriages. It was originally meant to be a

drinking fountain for the horses. A place for thirsty things.”

“Like an oasis,” I suggested, and she smiled and nodded her head and wiped my blood from her lips and chin.

“Sometimes it seems all the wide world is a desert,” she said. “There are too few places left where one may freely drink. Even the horses are no longer allowed to drink here, even though it was built for them.”

“Times change,” I told her and gently touched the abraded place on my neck, trying not to wince, not wanting to show any sign of pain in her presence. “Horses and carriages don’t much matter any more.”

“But horses still get thirsty. They still need a place to drink.”

“Do you like horses?” I asked and she blinked back at me and didn’t answer my question. It reminds me of an owl, sometimes, that slow, considering way she blinks her eyes.

“It will feel better in the morning,” she said and pointed at my throat. “Wash it when you get home.”

And then I sat with her a while longer, but neither of us said any more.

She takes my blood, but never more than a mouthful at a time, and she’s left me these strange dreams in return. I have begun to think of them as a sort of gift, though I know that others might think them more a curse.

Because they are not entirely pleasant dreams. Some people would even call them nightmares, but things never seem so cut and dried to me. Yes, there is terror and horror in them, but there is beauty and wonder, too, in equal measure – a perfect balance that seems never to tip one way or the other. I believe the dreams have flowed into me on her rough cat's tongue, that they've infected my blood and my mind like a bacillus carried on her saliva. I don't know if the gift was intentional, and I admit that I'm afraid to ask. I'm too afraid that I might pass through the park late on night or early on morning and she wouldn't be waiting for me there on her bench on Cherry Hill, that asking would break the brittle spell that I can only just begin to comprehend. She has made me superstitious and given to what psychiatrists call "magical thinking", misapprehending cause and effect, when I was never that way before we met.

I play piano in a Martini bar, and until now, there's never been anything in my life that I might mistake for magic. But there are many things in her wide burnt sienna eyes that I might mistake for many *other* things, and now that uncertainty seems to cloud my every waking thought. Yet, I believe that it's a small price to pay for her company, smaller even than the blood she takes. I thought that I should write down one of the dreams, that I should try to make mere words of it. From the window beside my bed, I can see Roosevelt Island beyond the rooftops, and the East River and Brooklyn and the hazy blue-white sky that can mean either summer or winter in this city. It makes me think of her, that sky, though I'm at a loss to explain why. At first, I thought that I would write it down and then read it to her the next time I saw her. But then I started to worry that she might not take it the way I'd intended, simply as reciprocation, my gift to repay hers. She might be offended, instead, and I don't think I could bear the world without her. Not after all these nights and mornings and all these dreams. I'm stalling. Yes, I am.

There's the silhouette of a city, far off, past the sand and smoke that seem to stretch away in all directions except that one which would lead to the city. I know I'll never go that far, that going as far as that, I'd never again

find my way home. The city is for other beings. I know that she's seen the city, that she's walked in streets and spoken all its dialects and visited its brothels and opium dens. She knows the stink of its sewers and the delicious aromas of its markets. She knows all the high places and all the low places. And I follow her across the sand, up one dune and down another, these great waves of wind-sculpted sand that tower over me, which I climb and then descend. In this place, the jackals and the vultures and the spiny black scorpions are her court, and there is no place here for thirsty horses. Sometimes I can see her, through stinging veils of sand. And other times it seems I am entirely alone with the wailing sirocco gale, and the voice of that wind is 1,000 women crying for their men cut down on some Arabian battlefield 1,000 years before my birth. And it is also the slow creep of the dunes across the face of the wasteland, and it is my heart pounding loudly in my ears, I'm lost in the wild, and I think I'll never see her again, but then I catch a glimpse of her through the storm, crouched in the lee of ruins etched and defaced by countless millennia of sand and wind and time. She might almost be any animal, anything out looking for its supper or some way to quench its thirst. She waits there for me in the entrance to that crumbling temple, and I can smell her impatience, like dashes of turmeric. I can smell her thirst and her appetite, and the wind drives me forwards. She leads me down into the earth, her lips pressed to my ear, whispering so I can hear her over the storm. She tells me the name of the architect who built the fountain on Cherry Hill, that his name was Jacob Wrey Mould, and he came to New York in 1853 or 1854 or 1855 to design and build All Soul's Church. He was a pious man, she tells me, and he illustrated Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" and *The book of Common Prayer*. She says he died in 1886, and that he too was in love with a daughter of Lilith, that he died with no other thought but her. I want to ask where she learned all these things, if, perhaps, she spends her days in libraries, and I also want to ask if she means that she believes that I'm in love with her. But then the narrow corridor we've been following turns left and opens abruptly on a vast torch-lit chamber.

"Listen," she whispers. "This is one of my secrets. I've guarded this place for all my life."

The walls are built from great blocks of reddish limestone carved and set firmly in place without the aid of mortar, locking somehow perfectly together by a forgotten Masonic art. The air reeks of frankincense, and there

is thick cinnamon-coloured dust covering everything; I follow her down a short flight of steps to the floor. It occurs to me that we've gone so deep underground that the roar of the wind should not still be so loud, but it is, and I wonder if maybe the wind has found its way *inside* me, if it's entered through one of the wounds she leaves on my throat.

"This was the hall of my mother," she says. And now I see the corpses, heaped high between the smoky braziers. They are nude, or they are half-dressed, or they've been torn apart so completely or are now so badly decomposed that it is difficult to tell whether they're clothed or not. Some are men and others are women and not a few children. I can smell them even through the incense, and I might cover my nose and mouth. I might begin to gag. I might take a step back towards the stairs leading up to the long corridor and the bloodless desert night beyond. And she blinks at me like a hungry, watchful owl.

"I cannot expect you to understand," she says.

And there are other rooms, other chambers, endless atrocities that I can now only half recall. There are other secrets that she keeps for her mother in the deep places beneath shifting sands. There are the ghosts of innumerable butcheries. There are demons held in prisons of crystal and iron, chained until some eventual apocalypse; their voices are almost indistinguishable from the voice of the wind. And then we have descended into some still greater abyss, a cavern of sparkling stalactite and stalagmite formations, travertine and calcite glinting in the soft glow of phosphorescent vegetation that has never seen and will never have need of sunlight. We're standing together at the muddy edge of a subterranean pool, water so still and perfectly smooth, an ebony mirror, and she's already undressed and is waiting impatiently for me to do the same.

"I can't swim," I tell her and earn another owl blink.

If I *could* swim, I cannot imagine setting foot in that water, that lake at the bottom of the world.

“No one has asked you to swim,” she replies and smiles, showing me those long incisors. “At this well men only have to drown. You can do that well enough I suspect.”

And then I’m falling, as the depths of that terrible lake rise up around me like the hood of some black desert cobra and rush over me, bearing me down and down and down into the chasm, driving the air from my lungs. Stones placed one by one upon my chest until my lungs collapse, constricting coils drawing tighter and tighter about me, and I try to scream. I open my mouth, and her sandpaper tongue slips past my lips and teeth. She tastes of silt and dying and loss. She tastes of cherry blossoms and summer nights in Central Park. She wraps herself about me, and the grey-white wings sprouting from her shoulders open wider than the wings of an earthly bird. Those wings have become the sky, and her feathers brush aside the fire of a hundred trillion stars. Her teeth tear at my lower lip, and I taste my own blood. The wind howling in my ears is the serpent flood risen from out of that black pool, and is also icy solar winds, and the futile cries of bottled demons.

“Don’t be afraid,” she whispers in my ear, and her hand closes around my penis. “One must only take very small drinks. One must not be greedy in these dry times.”

I gasp and open my eyes, unable to remember having shut them, and now we’re lying together on the floor of the abattoir at the end of the long corridor below the temple ruins. This is the only one of her secrets she’s shown me, and anything else must have been my imagination, my shock at the sight of so much death. There is rain, rain as red and sticky as blood, but still something to cool my fever, and I wrap my legs around her brown thighs and slide inside her. She’s not made like other women, my raggedy girl from Cherry Hill, and she begins to devour me so slowly that I will still be dying in 1,000 years.

She tells me she loves me.

There are no revelations here. My eyes look for the night sky somewhere beyond the gore and limestone and sand, but there are only her wings, like heaven and hell and whatever might lie in between, and I listen to the raw and bitter laughter of the wind . . .

Some nights, I tell myself that I will walk around the park and never mind the distance and inconvenience. Some nights, I pretend I hope she *won't* be there, waiting by the fountain. But I'm not even as good a liar as I am a pianist, and it hardly matters, because she's always there. Last night, for instance.

I brought her an old sweater I never wear, a birthday present from an ex-girlfriend, and she thanked me for it. I told her that I can bring her other things, whatever she might need, that she only has to ask, and she smiled and told me I'm very kind. My needs are few, she said and pulled the old sweater on over whatever tatters she was already wearing.

"I worry about you," I said. "I worry about you all the time these days."

"That's sweet of you," she replied. "But I'm strong, stronger than I might seem."

And I wonder if she knows about my dreams, and if our conversation were merely a private joke. I wonder if she only accepted the sweater because she feels sorry for me,

We talked, and she told me a very funny story about her first night in the park, almost a decade before I was born. And then, when there were no more words, when there was no longer the *need* for words. I leaned forwards and offered her my throat. Thank you, she said, and I shut my eyes and waited for the scratch of her tongue against my skin, for the prick of those sharp teeth. She was gentle, because she is always gentle, lapping at the hole she's made

and pausing from time to time to murmur reassurances I can understand without grasping the coarser, literal meaning of what she's said. I get the gist of it and I know that's all that matters. When she was done, when she'd wiped her mouth clean and thanked me again for the sweater, when we'd said our usual goodbyes for the evening, I sat alone on the bench and watched as she slipped away into the maze of cherry trees and azaleas and forsythia bushes.

I don't know what will become of these pages. I may never print them. Or I may print them out and hide them from myself. I could slip them between the pages of a book in the stacks at NYU and leave them there for anyone to find. I could do that. I could place them in an empty wine bottle and drop them from the Queensboro Bridge so that the river would carry them down to the sea. The sea must be filled with bottles . . .