



Threads

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The Chase

Creeping,
I move up slowly to that place, my
paradise
I alone know;
this pursuit
is my own.

Across barren plains
I seek fertile land
for the living,
the breathing,
a singular and total
warmth.

Budding trees whisper welcomes
to a hidden glade.
Every time is as the first;
the sensation puts hairs on end.
Each return is a secret
odyssey.

Painted on the wolf's eyes
is the image of the doe,
its transfixed gaze
a still life of
fear—
anticipation?

I make my home,
visceral yet unseen,
in the space between breaths.
There is my shrine
for my religion of the flesh,
for my ritual of devouring.

Here I am, always returning
for what sustains me,
like a waterfall, rushing.
I revel in it,
unaware of anything
beyond this bliss.

Silence
begs an answer

as I savour the end
of the chase.
This moment
is a little eternity.

Two bodies meet
and each becomes the other.
Life's water runs,
mingles.
The death is small,
and never sweeter.

One Night in Livorno

It starts with children stealing in the Jewish quarter. It always does, I realise, but it's a part of stories often skimmed over or omitted entirely. These are the sons of bankers and lawyers, you know. These kids are just looking for the broad avenue of purpose before an ever-accelerating train brings them to the narrow alleys of maturity, and they are narrow, sorrowful alleys indeed, let me say.

A lot of thieves steal for the sheer thrill of it, not out of any kind of need. Need is a gauge to be filled; desire is this fountain of unbounded freedom and fulfilment, and the young drink from its cascading nectar-sweet waters until it wearies or, more likely, kills them. Depending on where you come from, that's what's called fate, or perhaps the balance of nature.

So little Agostino asks a jeweller for scrap, which sends the wrinkled man to the back of the shop. Twenty seconds is more than the boy needs to deftly swipe the two gold rings, the jade pendant and the fine silver crucifix. Maurizio, the wider of the two, waits outside on the scooter, kickstand up, engine still on. Agostino is too light

and skinny to keep the vehicle upright when it isn't moving.

The pair race off as the jeweller turns his head to the vacant counter. The kids make a dozen turns, winding up and around slender cobbled roads until they reach the nook of a backstreet. There they meet up with the other boys already comparing their illicit harvests, chattering like the magpies they are before curfew, before mothers hang out of windows and bellow their children's names, threatening to deny them supper.

It has become too much, though. The bakers have had enough and the pawnbrokers have had enough and the jewellers—well, the jewellers have most certainly had enough. Maybe it was the time and place, no more, or perhaps it was something greater, something deeper. That would be for the intellectuals to decide, for Agostino and Maurizio's little heist on an ubiquitously pleasant Mediterranean evening shatters, or at the very least greatly confuses, the city of Livorno.

The jeweller takes to the town square yelling curses. The fathers and the elders and the rabbi with his walking stick come to the streets. The jeweller demands to know why these sons of theirs would disrespect their

families, would cause so much trouble. The husbands look at their wives in the windows and the wives look at the grandmothers in the other windows, each and every one of them clueless. A great argument ensues. They neglect to wear their yarmulkes! They do not learn their prayers!

The Italians revolt—chaos. They believe the revolution has begun, although its purpose is yet to be decided. As with all their endeavours, it is impassioned; you might mistake the fervour for a night of fierce lovemaking. The men dress themselves all in white, ostensibly the colour of purity—purification, some might say. They rush to and fro with wide belts of ammunition slung over their shoulders, ammunition for machine guns. Why do they need machine guns? Rather: where did all the machine guns come from?

There is a view among some that the Italians are somewhat lazy. In truth, they sleep as often as they do in order to sustain their frequent and lyrical outbursts. There is also a view among perhaps more that the Jews are a greedy people, although those who think so have clearly never met a goy.

Cars stop suddenly, are abandoned, looted, trashed, set afire. One van has crashed on its way to the

dockside warehouse for the shipments going out at dawn. Its back doors are wide open, and two identical Marilyn Monroe impersonators perch on the cardboard boxes within. They've opened one and now delicately finger the cigarettes they've relieved from a carton in the box. They ask me for a light with a blasé look, eerie and simultaneous. I don't even have matches on me, so apologise quietly and move on.

The sound of distant gunfire rattles over the city and out to sea. They'll likely blame the Jews for the time being, but a tourist can't get in the way of an insurrection, let alone an Italian one. *Giustizia!*, they cry, and I will hear it intermingled with errant *rat-tat-tats* echoing down the streets until the sun rises over strange Livorno. I can't tell at this point if the uprising will be over by breakfast, if I will have bread with olive oil and wine with the overnight revolutionaries on the *terrazza*. I can't say what became of little Agostino and Maurizio. I only know that I came here to holiday, for my work in Boston was exhausting, and my doctor told me I was suffering from stress. I was to at most practise poetry and go for strolls up into the wonderful hills. It would pain me greatly to know that I, in visiting Livorno, caused this awful mess to happen.

Of course, I don't like to mislead. I can't say that the 1953 Italian Revolution began here or even happened at all, and I haven't actually been any farther south than Milan.

Devourer of Worlds

In this tomb
I dream of endless hunger,
the unsated gluttony
that bound me here,
here in this tomb I built for myself
as a sanctuary.

My universe
clings to fragile arms,
silent elders
clawing at the sky, unreachable.
Fragile as these walls are,
all beyond them is so distant.

I ate the earth.
Emerging, I came upon
a rich world, lush and unspoilt.
I devoured it
and would devour it for eternity
if not for this fleeting life.

My enemies I hid from;
to all others I was foul.
None was of any consequence
on my glorious path.
I feared only the unseen terror,
sweeping pinion, whispering death.

If my alien visage
could widen to a smile, it would;
like my ancestors I know that
my eager spawn
shall spread out as I did
to consume all.

The wait aches my hideous form
in a cruel contemplation.
I will make myself anew.
I will birth myself
from my own corpse.
I will reach for the sun.

Autumn Is a Girl on the Train

You sit opposite me on the other side of the aisle. I'd been gazing emptily out my window at the vaguely pleasant landscape when the ticket inspector walked back down the train and distracted me.

A shard of sunshine falls on you, illuminating your thick red hair. It reminds me of autumn, and like autumn it makes me slow down and think. You catch my glance and I smile reflexively, awkwardly, as do you.

You're reading House of Leaves. I remember what it is to feel despair and quickly return my focus to examine the commercial estate passing by outside.

No, wait—

You wear a beige jumper. In the sun your body looks so warm, your round face so soft. I imagine what it would be like to have se—

You're reading House of Leaves. I ask if you're lost in it yet. You don't get it and shift somewhat uneasily. I give up sooner rather than later.

No, wait—

I ask if you're lost in it yet. You let out a sound, almost a giggle. I smile again. I say I hope you enjoy the rest of it. You

get off two stops later. The exchange is of the sort that brightens the day a little.

No, wait—

I ask if we can meet again. We do, and then again, and again. We laugh and love—well, for a time. It reminds me of autumn, because like autumn it was meant to decay and fall into coldness. It wouldn't have worked anyway, since you never could accept that Camus just didn't do it for me.

No, no, wait—

Actually, never mind. Your hair looks brown after all.

The Waiting Room

My hands are still
as humanity slips,
falling away
out of reach.

The water forks as
silhouetted hills
rise all around, and I know
a river does not undo its course.

Transmissions once clear
are now hollow, decayed
into a static I will miss
when silence comes.

The last song begins
as my heart, knowing,
pounds a drumbeat
that fills my ears.

They take me to where
they watch, faceless,
the loss of what remained.

Dark space, bright light—
white burns, return to black.
There is only me here now,
but I am not.
I am not.

Plunged
into a waterless ice bath,
I feel the sharp edge of reality
and a dawn that shouldn't be.
Questions
find no ears. Sometimes
truth does not belong
to those it concerns.

Once I laughed
at the idea, even hoped for it, but
now the image in my mind
terrifies me like a child
facing the wide world, the cold world.
Keep me from the sleepers
in their silent steel tombs. Please
keep me away.

It is birth without womb, lifeless
and mothered by apathy. Nothing
has changed except me, but still

I am not.

I grabbed the threshold,
the brink of the nothing I sought but
never reached, and so
I am left in the waiting room.

Accidental Prophets

The man attended a weekly gathering of poets and writers. The group would share their works in progress and discuss art in varying terms. Among them were the amateurs seeking publication, the little-known local authors, the casually underground and the obligatory dilettante or two.

The man, who could not easily be described as any of these, was polite enough, unassuming and outwardly unremarkable. His work did, however, capture the attention of the rest of the group, which found his pieces strangely mundane yet fulfilling in a way that was hard to describe. His delivery was perfunctory, quietly confident, and somehow so honest and grounded that he seemed to bridge the gap between art and life, a gap that some would argue does not exist.

The man, naturally one of habit, suddenly stopped turning up to the gatherings after some seven months. This was cause for concern enough for one of the group that he looked up the man's address. On no less than three occasions he went there to check on the man, and on no less than three occasions no one answered the door. When he then called the police to explain the story,

two officers went there the next day, eventually forcing open the door.

The man was slumped over his desk, pale and dead-eyed under a lamp that was still on. The subsequent autopsy quickly concluded that a brain aneurysm was the cause of death. Finding no next of kin, the police allowed the insistent member of the group who had called them to claim the mass of loose papers, dog-eared notepads and a number of Moleskines the man had left behind.

The man had been working on a new poem before collapsing on it. When it reached the group, the news was in equal parts upsetting and inspiring. To them he had died trying furiously to express something, but it was indecipherable, almost ineffable in the disarrayed words left to their interpretation, scribbled compulsively and pencilled over and struck out and written out again. The group, now changed, stopped meeting.

The man, as we have called him, became more than just that.

A strange sort of legend was born as copies of the man's work were circulated like religious tracts. In particular he wrote almost ecstatically about the written word. He described metal meeting ink and kissing the leaf.

Information was free now, he celebrated, while lamenting that every word and symbol ran through channels of light as cold binary. Publishers would print less and less until they stopped altogether and made the smell of the fresh page a memory, the bookshop a museum. Then something would happen: people would begin to print words themselves, reviving an art and falling into obsession. The book would once again be created, passed around, fingertips admiring new pages, eyes drinking up their letters. It was to be the culture of the illuminated manuscript in the digital age.

The death was not tragic irony so much as a part of a piece. To a few, everything that the man had done was to be seen as part of a greater whole. He had made his own life, his entire self, an artwork—but whether as a Sisyphean tale of futility, a sweeping exercise in absurdity or another thing entirely, they could not agree on. Sceptics scoffed. Essays were written. People asked simply what the point of it all was. Nothing, others responded, or rather nothing that could or was ever meant to be known. The man, like poetry, was not something that required explanation. He was the answer to a question no one had asked.

A Turkish Poem

Urp gwop, gokok gwuwu,
bawuw gobloblobl,
ubalabl bwupup ku
mrup plupluplupl.

Hurk drwrwop.
Hurk guk bwa tuk,
mwhr gikopkop
brip guk guk guk.

Thinking of Zebras

My girlfriend is anxious.

'I just... What now? What are we going to do now?'

We're climbing a hill and have been for a while now. I'm a bit worn out, partly by the hill, partly by her. I'm not as concerned about it all as she is, and I'll be in trouble for that soon enough.

'It doesn't just involve us, and that bothers me too,' she continues. 'I feel responsible. I know it's silly of me but I do. You know that happens.'

My girlfriend is often anxious. I'm not really one to talk. I'm not thirty yet but the frown lines creasing my forehead would tell you otherwise.

We reach the mostly flat saddle of the hill. The peak is straight ahead, not far at all. There are a few groups of others around.

'And for it to just happen li—'

'Look,' I say, holding her arm and turning her with me to look back down the hill and out over the fields.

Spread out in front of us are the zebras. There are thousands of them, all galloping as if away from something, kicking up dust in their wake.

'You know that saying, "When you hear hoofbeats, think of horses, not zebras"?'

'Yeah...' she says.

'It's been a strange day.'

The wave comes from off to the right. Even from up here the impossible wall of water is huge, rushing over the land below.

It reaches the hill, lapping up against the grass and rock below as it begins to settle. It was never supposed to come this high. The horizon is no longer a green expanse, but a grey line that blurs into the deceptively clear sky. We don't talk about the zebras after that.

I'm not altogether surprised to find that a number of politicians have survived, but I wonder why they chose this hill. There's a fair selection on display—the nationalists, liberal democrats and conservatives are all represented—but it's the independents that really surprise me. They already have a booth set up, banner, flyers, smug expression and all. The fall of civilisation won't halt the elections, irony be damned. I'm not sure if it's any better than feudal lords and roving barbarians, but no doubt that's a question that's been asked of politics before.

I turn to the other politicians.

'Shame on you,' I tell them. 'I know it's the bloody apocalypse, but no one gets beaten to the punch by the independence party.'

Of course, the flood is just the beginning. It's still too soon for anyone to have to think about what happens next, although my girlfriend knows it means having children. Soon I'll see the glint in her eye telling me she knows I know. All it took was for the world to end.

Six Routes

I.

The 11:52 Edinburgh to Glasgow has been delayed. Please await further information.

II.

The train is not running.

/ðə 'treɪn ɪz nɒt ˌrʌn.ɪŋ/

trainRunning = false;

The train isnae runnin'.

Th'train ain't runnin'.

Train's no rannin'.

Bloody train's late.

An unexpected event has resulted in the locomotive transport typically servicing this point of access to be unavailable.

The train isn't running, but things without legs rarely do.

III.

I sit motionlessly in the depot as dawn begins to break, a heavy blue over the grey outline of brick and tree beyond the chain-link fence along the rail yard. The cold in my steel is all the more noticeable when the harsh orange halide lights above come on, flickering stubbornly. Then, the engines, the rush that builds slowly, a low vibration moving among all the trains. We hum in unison a hymn of power and industry.

IV.

Sally.

I tried I hope you know I did

Sorry.

V.

The scene is a crowded train station outside a small town. Rain buckets down; the shelter by the tracks is packed. A man stands outside it. Heavy raindrops roll off its arched roof and onto his wind-beaten umbrella, which is close to collapsing.

There is a bell and the loudspeaker makes an automated announcement: 'The 11:52 Edinburgh to Glasgow has been delayed. Please await further information.' A woman, the man's girlfriend, goes out to talk to him.

WOMAN Hey. That sounds like it might be a while.
I think we should just take the bus from town. I dunno. There's no sense waiting an hour out here.

MAN Let's just wait on another announcement.
The delays are never that long.

Some time passes. No one has moved.

WOMAN It's been, what, fifteen minutes? Twenty?

It must be serious... *(she squeezes on his arm with both hands)* Come on. Let's just go.

The man looks at her, smiles weakly, blinking as a drop of water runs down into his eye.

MAN You know, I dunno how, but your freckles become more obvious when your face is all wet like that. Usually you can hardly see them.

The woman shyly draws a forefinger down the man's large red nose.

MAN *(sniffing)* It's just your sister... it can wait. She'd understand if the weather got this bad. We don't even like her all—

A rail worker in a reflective jacket and red hard hat treads through puddles as he descends from the crossover bridge and towards the shelter. At first his shouts are inaudible in the rain pelting the tarmac and gravel. An old lady cocks her head out of the shelter, one hand securing her hat.

OLD LADY Did he say something? Is he talking to us?

WOMAN I, eh—

WORKER The train's not running.

OLD LADY Did he say the train isn't running?

WORKER *(catching his breath)* Hi. The train isn't
running.

MAN *(sighing)* We know.

WOMAN Why isn't it?

WORKER There was a man on the tracks.

OLD LADY A man on the tracks?

MAN Someone jumped in front of the train?

WORKER Yeah, right in front of it.

WOMAN Oh God...

The old lady tuts sadly. No one speaks afterwards.

The loudspeaker comes on again after a bell.

'The 11:52 Edinburgh to Glasgow will resume service at: 12:17.'

VI.

At rain-slick station,
group of strangers wait for the
train that will not come.

Rock

I don't know when it came about, but it's been here a long time. I don't know *how* it came about. It's like a rock. It's just there, real and solid, and so, so heavy.

Everyone worries.

They live. They smile. They have a problem, and even if it's the kind that doesn't go away, they cope.

You're not the only one.

I know. I wonder if it's something we're given, like getting dealt a bad hand, or if we do something to earn it. Maybe it's both.

You hold on to it sometimes almost as if it's important to you.

Maybe it's a part of me. None of it makes sense. People find comfort in familiarity even in the wrong places.

You cast shadows with your mind. You created a reality.

'It's all in your head.' I didn't create it, but I guess I keep it alive.

It's just a feeling. It's inspired by reality, not based on it.

Fear is real.

Is what you're afraid of real?

I can't tell. Thinking about what's real or not feels risky. Thinking at all is risky. Life is a dice constantly rolling, right?

It's your mind expecting a wild tiger around every corner. There never is one, but you're stuck on high alert as if there is.

Better a tiger than this.

Believe something long enough and it becomes true.

Pretend it's not there until you find it never was.

It is there. I can feel it right now.

So accept it and let go.

Right, decide that it can exist but doesn't have to control me. It can be there without weighing me down.

You make it a decision—not the feeling, but what you do about it.

It's like waking up without having been asleep. My hand's still locked around it like a claw, but I look down and it's not there anymore. The air left in its place is so clear I can feel it. I'm unafraid.

Remember how you got there.

It only lasts a moment. I move and the weight of it comes right back and it's like pulling a muscle deep inside me,

then I'm right back to where I was, like it was an illusion.

It'll take time. It'll take a long time.

Maybe one day.

One day.

They Called Me Laika

It's cold here in the new cage, but a different kind of cold from the city. It's like a dry winter all the time. There are no bars in here to see out through, only a dark little window. I can hear noises that must be coming from outside—what are they? It's like the humming and rattling along the roads, but it never stops here. The air tastes strange too. There aren't people around anymore, or dogs. There is only me.

The last home I had was big, with bright lights. It was very different from the city, which more and more now I can't remember. The food was soft and strange, but it was better than hunger. The people behaved differently. They looked all the same and seemed scared, and although I never knew why, I got scared too.

There were two other dogs, but I didn't get to know them because of all the work, the exercises with straps on us, the things they did to us I couldn't understand. I did it for Vladimir. He was the only one friendly to me. Once he took me to his other home, with smiling children and warm smells. It felt like something I had known before, long ago.

They called me Laika. I had a different name before, but I don't know what it was anymore, and Laika is fine. It's who I am.

That was before. I'm in this new cage now. The humming is louder and everything is shaking fiercely. My belly feels bad, and it's too warm, but I can't move to get to a cooler place. I can't scratch either. There's no room in here.

Why is it so hot? The noises hurt now, so I fold my ears back. There's so much shaking that it's hard to see, and the straps are sore against me. I just close my eyes. I wish for a blanket to lie on, somewhere away from here. Why is it so hot? I pant, but my mouth is so dry it hurts. Something isn't right. Where is Vladimir? Where is Oleg?

Why is it so hot?

Awash

I know without looking
that the tide
is going out,
has gone out;
as much as I know that
it must in turn
come back in,
the wait is
long.

The pale sea is borderless,
pink sky timeless,
dawn asking
for day,
a question
never answered.

The shore is
without land, simply
without,
alone.

I walk with the moon
as it emerges unchanged,
its familiar face
a blank stare watching
for a time before hiding again,
falling away before
that shroud,
cold blanket
enveloping.

I lay down
by the water
reaching out
between my driftwood fingers.

I dream hollow dreams
of the high tide
that carries away—and
the deluge
that consumes.