

From "III. The Helen Mysteries"

1. *A Woman's Beauty*

But desire, after all,
is a familiar thing,
already old in the world

3,000 years ago—
its enchantment
that it always seems new.

Thus when Helen of Sparta
came of age, the Greek suitors
arrived from every petty kingdom

for beauty none had before seen,
like Venus on the horizon
dominates all other constellations.

For a woman's beauty,
they forgot the firmament,
their groves & glittering bays.

For beauty they strove
against each other, to possess
it against all others.

& true, her beauty seemed
designed of heavenly sphere,
a face itself a spell,

a causeway, a casement,
the providential gate cast open
where any man might enter....

True, also, that swan's blood
pulsed her veins, as she glided
elegantly through the grip of their vision.

What they saw they thought immortal,
though it might last 20 or 30
earthly years,

& they bound themselves
by oath to defend whoever
gained her for his bed,

because, though eclipsed
by her splendor—the grace
she bestowed with a gesture,

glance, or her gait—they knew still
she could be stolen, as all things
eventually are.

4. *Feverish Battles*

But thus she was blamed
for bodies stacking up
around the walls of Troy,

(a cipher, a hieroglyph;
all hated her; all

desired her)

un-beloved of the Trojans
for bringing war with her,
& condemned by the Greeks

as war wore away at them
& they paid the price of their oaths
in slaughter & obdurate, meaningless years

far from home. Fighting for
beauty? For the property
of their liege? Was the wrong

they were righting equal
to the venomous wrong of war?
Once embarked, they entered

a labyrinth of piled limbs
& blazing pyres, & scrounged there
for ten years, as much a siege

of themselves as of a foreign prize.
Let Achilles pout; let Odysseus scheme.
Once *in*, the dark produces Minotaurs

& other monsters, in feverish battles
of soldier's sleep, no different than
monstrosities faced in waking.