

Excerpts from *I'LL BEGIN IN THE MIDDLE*

doves on a wire

Angelic grins
in
unlikely
places

or false faces
multiplying
seductions
tempting you
to think
your way
down
fissures
plummeting
to who knows what
or
here we go again

But
if in the throes
of finding a way forward,

to conquer (you might believe)
the white space,
make it your bitch,
bellowing yourself
into rhetoric of
ALL-VICTORIOUS HERO,
you stumble over the waste basket,
piss your pants, flop
face down
in greasy water,
WELL,
AT LEAST THERE'S
SOME KIND OF REALITY TO THAT.

The Muse awaits
on the other side;
she always knows
where to place her fingertips
on the tambura.
She finds the right ending
to the song, if
indeed,
it has an ending.

Yet
how badly do you *want*
to hear the Muse speak?

Mohammed
coming home from work
began to hear
reverberations
that shook earth & heaven,
which he could make no sense of
until
HE SAW THE FEET OF THE ANGEL GABRIEL
EMERGED BELOW CLOUD,
PLANTED ALONG THE HORIZON,
& knew that
the vibrations were the Angel speaking—
speaking to *him*,
but it was up to him to let the words come clear.
He went home,
crawled into the lap of his wife
& shivered.

But I saw you,
& let myself feel what I felt,
a reverberation came from or through
or into me
& instantly you became Muse,
& though it may matter to no one but me,
I've been writing to you ever since.

Ask Villon,
poor, incarcerated, given
to drinking hard
& chasing prostitutes.
He got in an argument
with a priest
& ended up stabbing him
in self-defense.
Priests
accurately sensed
Villon was *trouble*.
Mouthy, bitter, playful, & articulate,
he penned lines of ironic despair
in late medieval Paris,
carving a certain indelible Frenchness in the French.
A thief on death row
& disillusioned womanizer,
dead by 32,
he wrote as he lived:
recklessly.

“De Ce Je Me Puis Revenchier”:

“Anyone who’s never done any wrong
need never speak.”

Rumi,
deep in his cups,
asks,

“WHO IS IT WHO HEARS WITH MY EAR?
WHO SAYS WORDS WITH MY MOUTH?”

He might as well ask:

“WHO SITS HERE FARTING?
WHO KEEPS ORDERING THESE DRINKS?”

He’s sure it’s some other person,
someone misplaced
in this ridiculous situation
who finds himself drinking at a bar
& scribbling

& WHO & THE HELL KNOWS
HOW THE NEXT LINE WILL TURN OUT?

Definitely don’t ask *him*.
He’s got no fucking idea.
He wants to return
to some planet that makes sense,
to some cliff where the birds gather
yakking in their own language,
where he can recognize the iridescence
imbedded in his feathers,
& no one questions his motives
when he takes flight.

You can ask all you please
who feels the tip of the finger as it touches
its Beloved,
or who yearns to be out of this nowhere town
because surely there's somewhere to arrive,
& many, many people
will HAPPILY tell you who & what YOU ARE,
what's expected of *you*, & the extensive list of
regulations
you're expected to live by.

Somehow, Rumi
remains unmoved.

NOTHING ANSWERS THE QUESTION
BECAUSE IT'S THE QUESTION THAT DOES THE
LISTENING
& CARES—WE PRESUME—ABOUT THE ANSWER.

But other questions persist.

Like:

WHO OR WHAT LIVES IN THESE LINES
800 YEARS LATER?

&

WHO ACCUMULATED
THIS ENORMOUS BAR TAB?

Open the door.
Enter the room.
Enclose the darkness.
Listen until
outside
becomes inside
& inside
vanishes. Nothing
holds it up. No sink,
no swim. No yesterday,
no tomorrow to flutter
the depth. Stars light
themselves. Affirmation,
if you need it.

But were I to instruct you,
if I had the temerity,

were the blood of my race
to run in my veins
as hot as it feels—

& my race, it must be understood,
the race of poets,

stands on this ground
if it stands at all—

THAT IT MUST SPEAK
SUCH
THAT IT CAN'T TAKE IT BACK;
THAT IT SPEAKS OUT OF PASSION
& A KIND OF HELPLESSNESS,
A LUST FOR WHAT HASN'T
& MAYBE *SHOULDN'T* BE SAID,
& *YET*
ONLY SAYING IT
BRINGS A LIFE WORTH LIVING,
AN AIR WORTHY OF THE LUNGS,
A FORCE THAT BLINDS YOU AS YOU SPEAK.

*& there
now
something exists
in the air
between
you & me.*

Make of it what you will.
If it matters to you at all, as much
as it mattered to me,
it becomes what you bend
to your own aptitudes, obsessions,
cherished angels

in night sky.

If it makes you dream,
you, after all, do the dreaming.

Did I enter that?

Did I put your party dress
on grotesqueries of your grittiest fears?

Did I seduce you
into places you've never been
& never wanted to go?

Will you blindly or willfully
misuse my wording, my intent
& ride off into idiosyncratic landscapes
where barnyard owls dive deformed
playground equipment
& the moon hangs pregnant on every surface,
subverting it, mesmerizing it,
making it its own?

BUT IF YOU WANT MY ADVICE,
you won't really know where you're going
until you've arrived there.

Each word,
each step,

a kind of land mined hopscotch
(& that's if you're lucky).

Your entrails may hang from the monkey bars
awaiting a monkey troupe.

They arrive in silhouette
to poke at them,
& then start up soprano shrieks

at the moon.

You were hoping maybe
that it would work out better than that.
This wasn't why got you in this business
at all.

YOU WANTED BEAUTY.
YOU WANTED
TO STAND UPON THIS GROUND,
THIS HALLOWED GROUND OF THE POETS,

& now
you're only howling at the moon,
& is it even listening?

LOOK:
you stand here
UPON THIS GROUND THAT CAN ONLY BE SPACE:

Your craft cannot save you,
but you better have it
in some measure

to find
words
for

LIGHTNING

when it crosses your palm.

If you're a poet,
you live for it.
You don't know when
it will come again,
like monumental sex with a mercurial lover.

WHAT IS IT WHEN IT'S THERE
& WHAT WAS IT WHEN IT'S GONE?

Believe it or not,
I'm not trying to discourage you.
I only want you to open your eyes
& see that you're standing on

nothing at all.

Precisely
where all the greats & nobodies
have stood
talking to themselves,
to their page,
to their own nothingness,
a somethingness shouldered

against all the stale & thuddingly *known*.

I cannot defend you against
your own impossible position,
but I can hang here
crying like some coyote,
saying a lot of things
I don't know even know
I'm saying,
swinging in the desirous air,
where
birth & death
arrive
at
the
same
edge

.
. .
. .
. .

NOW,

GO, THOU,

& DO THE SAME.

I is another
& another & another
& many kinds of others
a crowd really
a house packed with spirits
who tread incessantly
between rooms
holding loud conversations
with themselves
in snotty voices
that vaporously disappear
when sun comes
leaping in

A lark ascends
the blue but
drops the red seed
from its beak
& a banyan
takes root
in the sky
unfurling more roots
from its limbs
until
it propagates
into a forest
where the locals

come & leave
offerings
of saffron rice & raisins
at the base
of the massive, original trunk
as monkeys swarm the branches
to mock them, moon them
& pelt them with poop
because
that's how it goes
these days
in the sky forest.

&
each
word
forms
a sky droplet
around
a nucleate
particle
—pollen
or dust,
a syllable,
a morpheme
flicker or
pulse—

to freeze,
collect,
& elaborate
into intricate
dendrites,
concretized
in upper atmosphere,
crystallizing flakes
in descent,
& lit
by street lamp
as they wander

into it

& wander out—

It's lonely like that,
what alights on your tongue,
in some saturated darkness
where the speaking
amounts to a cone
of delicate, illuminated,
quickly lost crystals,
slipping away
as soon as
they arrive,
& yet
in that sougning,
silent depth,

you live for
what you can get—

The surf pushes poet up shore,
still jabbering at ghosts,
to glance about, amazed,
at the alien & familiar
—the familiarly alien—
shoreline, a moving definition
of location, a located progress that
charges in & withdraws, eats away,
spits it back, &
how did I get here?
& is this the same or different?

YES.

MAYBE THAT'S THE POEM'S WHOLE CONUNDRUM:
YOU MUST CHOOSE SIDES WHEN THE ANSWER
DOESN'T.

& can you speak to that razor's edge?
Is your speaking a razor that cuts all edges?

The poet drags into town passed
monkey-infested alleys, a burning Toyota Camry,
WILD, CRESCENDOING, CASCADING, SHOUTING MUSIC

out a basement window, & guy at an outdoor table
in immaculate white suit
expelling white smoke from expressive nostrils—

There's some reason that guy,
enjoying his hashish,
stares with complexity at the scorpion
a few inches from the toe of his sandal
in a neighborhood of
drunken argument & inspired fucking.

YOU make sense of it.

The bard merely reports
(as the bard might like to think).
& yet, a journalist can record events
while evading making any *real* sense of them.
The poet has trouble distinguishing taking a piss in an alley
from an angel pouring goodness out of a heavenly ewer.

Is *that* a problem?

I.e., you keep ending up somewhere
you may only tenuously understand,
despite many explanatory languages
swarming together to make it known.

How much you might feel in a tiny life.

Like Tu Fu

— *empire in shreds* —

boating to a postal station
on the far edge of the known world,
uncertain if he'll ever return home
— or if *this is home now*:

*"Another night on the water—remnants of light—
& again cook-fire smoke from a thatch hut.*

*A postal station beside abiding white sand,
& beyond the lake, wildgrass, young & green.*

*Spring ch'i rises in 10,000 things,
my solitary raft the Wandering Star.*

*Moonlight rolls boundlessly on the waves
that flow lustrous into Southern Darkness."*