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Ode to the Oud

Gourd-shaped muse swollen
with wind in the mulberry,
tell me everything you're made of,
little desert boat of Ra.
Oblong box of Bedouin doves
pecking pomegranate seeds out of the air,
you're the poet's persona, his double
in the high priest's third chamber,
each string a litany of stars over the Sahara.
Pear-shaped traveler, strong but so light,
is there a wishbone holding you together?
I wish I knew how to open you up
with an eagle's feather or a pick
whittled from buffalo horn,
singing alive the dust of Nubia.
Rosewood seasoned long ago,
I wish I could close your twelve mouths
with kisses. Tongues strung in a row,
I wish I could open every sound in you.
I envy one blessed to master himself
by rocking you in his lonely arms.
Little ship of sorrow, bend your voice
till the names of heroes & courtesans,
birds & animals, prayers & love songs,
swarm from your belly.

Ode to the Maggot

Brother of the blowfly
& godhead, you work magic
Over battlefields,
In slabs of bad pork

& flophouses. Yes, you
Go to the root of all things.

You are sound & mathematical.
Jesus Christ, you're merciless

With the truth. Ontological & lustrous,
You cast spells on beggars & kings
Behind the stone door of Caesar's tomb
Or split trench in a field of ragweed.

No decree or creed can outlaw you
As you take every living thing apart. Little
Master of earth, no one gets to heaven
Without going through you first.

Cape Coast Castle

I made love to you, & it loomed there.
We sat on the small veranda of the cottage,
& listened hours to the sea talk.
I didn't have to look up to see if it was still there.
For days, it followed us along polluted beaches
where the boys herded cows
& the girls danced for the boys,
to the money changer,
& then to the marketplace.
It went away when the ghost of my mother
found me sitting beneath a palm,
but was in the van with us on a road trip to the country
as we zoomed past thatch houses.
It was definitely there when a few dollars
exchanged hands & we were hurried
through customs, past the guards.
I was standing in the airport in Amsterdam,
sipping a glass of red wine, half lost in Van Gogh's
swarm of colors, & it was there, brooding in a corner.
I walked into the public toilet, thinking of W.E.B.
buried in a mausoleum, & all his books & papers
going to dust, & there it was, in that private moment,
the same image: obscene because it was built
to endure time, stronger than their houses & altars.
The seeds of melon. The seeds of gumbo in trade winds
headed to a new world. I walked back into the throng
of strangers, but it followed me. I could see the path

slaves traveled, & I knew when they first saw it
all their high gods knelt on the ground.
Why did I taste salt water in my mouth?
We stood in line for another plane,
& when the plane rose over the city
I knew it was there, crossing the Atlantic.
Not a feeling, but a longing. I was in Accra
again, gazing up at the vaulted cathedral ceiling
of the compound. I could see the ships at dusk
rising out of the lull of "Amazing Grace," cresting
the waves. The governor stood on his balcony,
holding a sword, pointing to a woman
in the courtyard, saying, That one.
Bring me that tall, ample wench.
Enslaved hands dragged her to the center,
then they threw buckets of water on her,
but she tried to fight. They pinned her to the ground.
She was crying. They prodded her up the stairs. One step,
& then another. Oh, yeah, she still had some fight in her,
but the governor's power was absolute. He said,
There's a tyranny of language in my fluted bones.
There's poetry on every page of the good book.
There's God's work to be done in a forsaken land.
There's a whole tribe in this one, but I'll break them
before they're in the womb, before they're conceived,
before they're even thought of. Come, up here,
don't be afraid, up here to the governor's quarters,
up here where laws are made. I haven't delivered
the head of Pompey or John the Baptist
on a big silver tray, but I own your past,
present, & future. You're special.
You're not like the others. Yes,
I'll break you with fists & cat-o-nine.
I'll thoroughly break you, head to feet,
but sister I'll break you most dearly
with sweet words.

English

When I was a boy, he says, the sky began burning,
& someone ran knocking on our door

one night. The house became birds
in the eaves too low for a boy's ears.

I heard a girl talking, but they weren't words.
I knew one good thing: a girl
was somewhere in our house
speaking slow as a sailor's parrot.

I glimpsed Alice in Wonderland.
Her voice smelled like an orange,
though I'd never peeled an orange.
I knocked on the walls, in a circle.

The voice was almost America.
My ears plucked a word out of the air.
She said, Friend. I eased open the door
hidden behind overcoats in a closet.

The young woman was smiling at me.
She was teaching herself a language
to take her far, far away,
& she taught me a word each day to keep a secret.

But one night I woke to other voices in the house.
A commotion downstairs & a pleading.
There are promises made at night
that turn into stones at daybreak.

From my window, I saw the stars
burning in the river brighter than a big
celebration. I waited for her return,
with my hands over my mouth.

I can't say her name, because it was
dangerous in our house so close to the water.
Was she a boy's make-believe friend
or a beehive breathing inside the walls?

Years later, my aunts said two German soldiers
shot the girl one night beside the Vistula.
This is how I learned your language.
It was long ago. It was springtime.

The Blue Hour

A procession begins in the blue-
black gratitude between worlds,
& The Rebirth Jazz Band
marches out of what little light
is left among the magnolia blooms.
Step here, & one steps off
the edge of the world. Step there,
& one enters the unholy hour
where one face bleeds into another
as a horse-drawn buggy
rolls out of the last century,
& the red-eyed seventeen-year locust
grows deeper into the old hushed soil.
Lean this way, a blue insinuation
takes over the body. Step here,
& one's shadow stops digging its grave
to gaze up at the evening star. Or,
at this moment, less than a half step
between day & night, birdhouses
stand like totems against the sky.

A flicker of wings & eyes,
mockingbirds arrive with stolen songs
& cries, their unspeakable lies & omens
as if they are some minor god's
only true instrument & broken way
on stage in the indigo air.

They come with *uh huh* & *yeah*,
a few human words, to white boxes
on twelve-foot poles,
to where each round door-hole
is a way in
& a way out of oblivion.

