

Laksmi PAMUNTJAK
Poetry, essays

Ellipsis

Has nothing changed?
Oil lamps and torch lights catching
ellipsis in mid-flight,
preventing it from reaching the

moon: singed, already, by birds on heat.

Baked now, in the sun.
Flayed to pith
but hiding nothing.
Certainty makes fools of us.

She doesn't know her crime,
only that she enjoys the increments
of the four seasons,
and the folds of unswept beaches -
No one telling you whether to sink

or swim.

And now the first waves of shadow
roll across the square. The fire-folks are gone
and the moon is chalk-white.
In the morning there will be a sentence;
a full sentence at last -

as if things were any different spelt out
from what is more or less known.

2005

from Ellipsis

The Embrace*on the pain of Egon Schiele*

They are not unhappy, really,
his mouth curled into a poised arc
that defines here from everything
else, even if his body is fettered by
something inside, a lament, a vigil,
that refuses to go. She lies hot-pressed
against the curve of his chin, her hair
quite a different matter, its redness licks
like fire. Palm stone hard on his pulse.
The cream crests beneath them are the
parched soil of their love, pleated now
where it once fluttered in the heat of
passion. No, it is not that love dies,
nor is it expelled the way of language
in a city of sorrows. Nor is it frail,
the moon that outwits the sun, the
wordless serene. This is only about
knowing how to clench our thirst.
They would sleep, side by side, ingesting
the odor of each other's fallow. They would
smile at each other, pointing at each other's
chipped nails. They would lovingly embrace
their names. But they are the stuff of soil.
Even the crows cannot tear him from her
grip, that which cups the dry pan of his neck.
Crinkling inwards, like the tightened pelvic of
a woman on top. She is Eden, blood for
blood. His body, a drooling phallus,
turning back into an image of the earth.

2005

from The Diary of R.S.: Musings on Art

Silent Prayer for My Daughter on Her 9th Birthday

How is it again, does one begin? The notion
itself long fallen into disuse, every beginning
a repetition. But it will come, my tiny love,
that feeling when something is about to be
born, like the dawn of joy, unknown to joy,
as when you first catch the glints of a golden city,
blue on the blade of a sun-kissed knife;
or when you taste your first mature apple,
blushing clumsily on its crimson pedicels;
or when someone enters you for
the first time, moving inside you in a way
you think is for keeps, all your windows flying
open – take me, I am your gift – giddy, glowing,
red-hot.

And you will not understand why it feels
the same raw, hard way each time, or whether things
end in order to begin again, whether there is no
such thing as an end,
 why you are always left alone for a while,
in a dark and damp place, sealed from every other feeling
but loss, though your body, take it from me,
 is always made for a new sun.

2005

from Ellipsis

After Bisma Defeated Salwa

In the forest where Salwa stooped the night before, the trees loosen their limbs. The grass makes flush. The starlings look around for something to ingest, a bad odor maybe, an omen. Here there are no paddocks, no land left fallow. Each day people rise to light as splendid as moonbeams, rays of jewel filling in where eloquence defies.

Blink and you'll miss that split second where the sun lights up a sad, claret stream. For it is morning's duty to be on all fours, telling dawn to clear skulls and bones and a husband lost. During that vinous hour even the most noble of kings knows where honor ends and posterity begins.

In an instant of light passing through window, she looks up and sees his eyes mirror the brew of air. Clear broth, that is, like purity stirred out of true. Neither is his face the seraphic of legend – just the pleasing asymmetry of any man. Aquiline nose, hard mouth, a one-eyed gray, hiding man and woman. Peeling now, a sort of icing made by cold too long lived in.

The ivory columns and their pearl inlays are stirring.

In the trail left by Salwa's westbound chariot, scarabs roll horse manure into balls to provision their larvae.

Further upriver, a hermit tries to say a prayer to the rainbow but knows not the god on duty. The plaque is too small or else the clouds need trimming.

And in a chamber in a foreign palace a princess fights to lower her gaze: "My sisters – don't you desire them?" *Don't you desire me?*

What tells you what things are? Figures gliding out of carvings on the wall: Wisnu? Siwa? Krisna? Which is the source which is the avatar? What is this bird flapping about in the stomach? this crimson spot on the sheets? Doubt like illness leaks from the pores, and for a moment the noon is distended. Bisma cannot explain duty to Amba any more than she can explain to him what it means to be faithful. How can they when he has just stolen her life and she has made him want?

2005

from Ellipsis

We Have Come Here to Get Married

*Mid-December in
Chiesa di San Francisco, Trevi*

*"...and the soul is a bride
in a still place..." - Sylvia Plath*

Christ who stares at us pendent
is now the color of rust.
Sadder still, three months on,
in the afternoon silver light.

The organ is a mill of miscarriages.
Hoar frost where color used
to flood with music: red,
orange, purple, pearl.

All night we have bashed each other
with guilt and admonishments.
This is December. An end-of-year
evaluation of good and bad, and

you and I clawing to the edge
of the bed, knotting and
unbraiding, rushing the death-blow
of poppies glimpsed in summer.

In the morning we talked about the
gray-swept graveyards of Gubbio,
chilled to solid but decanted in
half-light, the lips of jugs.

But in this church of honed edges
today has melted its images out.
Noiseless, we walk towards the altar
along the tear marks snaking down

the wall. And in the quiet,
the sheeted mirrors
strain to hear an answer
known only to the bride.

La Guardia One Blue Saturday Afternoon

Is there such a thing as a day made for blue,
or is it an aberration, that which is not -
a runt, a bad egg, a chip
from some anonymous block,
whispered only in low, hushed tones,
because it is the only thing to do. Consider
though, today: a winged, jumbo-sized bird on a
tarmac, all metal under the white sun. Holds off
a carapace of chrome insects with their feelers
pointing at heaven: a blue-collar confessional.
Topaz blue, cornflower blue, the slate blue of
de Chirico on a faraway winter night. Blue and
white, blue and red, blue and white and red,
but mostly blue and steel. Waits.
Bears some 4,500 kilograms of its own weight
excluding everybody else's. Cheered by the loud
busy slapping of royal blue ink both sides and
way out front, sending you away like a first time bride.
But you know the city is not the marrying type. And
so you will be back (now it's only March.)

Two minutes into lift-off and the blue follows you:
wicked volutes, coral polyps, scallops in their
half-shells. Clusters, enamel
wet. Striations, embedded,
never a blank field.

Meanwhile the city lies tall, inches thicker than most
and stitched together – spirit, matter, song - like a
celestial choral, a magic cathedral; all, seemingly,
within the span of a human hand.
Never a spouse, but the eternal lover,
the only kingdom fit for the sky.

New York, 2005

from Ellipsis

Two Poets in Bed

1.

Sunday 8 am, and I put to you
the question of trees:

will you keep climbing or
will you rest your heels?

by the latter i mean
will you nip the filter off
where the sun falls in
patterns of stars
that are older than humans,
wiser than birds,
though too pallid, still,
for the stories of rivers,
and ice, and perhaps even
light, or what they hide
from the sun
on the appointed day?

or in other words,
will this be then
what we accept of
planting, the melding
of love and limb into a greenness
profligate, until infirmity
drains the soil porous
and the trunks hide their
shame in pewter?

2.

Sunday 9 pm, and you say
yes, my love, they may be deep,
those layers of mould, but
ingraining goes no further than
an introduction. what follows
no one ever knows. indents are
as impermanent as skin.
starved for touch yet asleep
to sensation.

so reach me your coral then,

pin them to me like a heart, like
honey blossom the shape of dewdrop
blood. impale me if you must
with your needle, thread me thus
into your necklace. but do not
ask of me repentance.

for we all extort what we can from
the fleshy earth, suck them dry
and move on. all the while
time sheaths the divine
in the riddle of seventy thousand veils.
light and dark, vast as friends.

2005

Lives

1.

She was the woman no one paid attention to. But she was there, as much as everybody else, cowering and the only one in black, where the half-light of courtrooms shattered not so much body as soul. That cloudy day in February she looked frumpy and defeated, dark lace deepening the gaudy charcoal of her eyes. Everything about her was a wee to sharp, a wee to dark. But in a different light she would turn heads: her eyes were golden brown, at once playful and erotic. On a good day, in the warmth of a considerate lover's bed, she might even be called beautiful.

Right then, however, she felt nothing, could not see what they could. The familiar wobbly feeling in her womb, one that lingered months past childbirth, was gone; so were the cries that later used to fill her with praise for God. No one looked at her, accorded her some part in this new season of lives. To create is to stain and white is a color so easily soiled. Creation is nothingness' wound, a scandal - she was sure - to these business types for whom everything must have a point.

That night, she dreamed of meeting a woman in a foreign country, who told her stories of her daughter. She was ten, this girl, with brown eyes shaped like almonds. An ace at school, among family and friends, she talked back to adults, was funny and fearless. How she was loved, the woman told her, the minute they brought her home and called her their own.

After a downpour the city is always moist in the night, its edges thick, like paper cutout. So pronounced are things during such time that they say you can see the comings and goings of all

nocturnal creatures, marking out the incubus from the succubus, tipping the proper balance thus.

When she managed to fall asleep again, she saw the little girl a woman - a woman so grown up as to be outside anyone's purview - but in the parched yellowness of death, that ultimate Other. People streaming in with the harsh sunlight, people who had bored her to tears, people she had avoided, people who had so asserted her difference, the same people who came to her wedding, all 1,400 of them. Their bodies bent low at the door, all the way to the shroud, faces twisted out of true.

She remembered thinking that if the soul is the 'form' of the body, where is she now, where has she gone? That familiar wobbly feeling in the womb. Fighting so in adulthood to be that much more alive yet that much different from everybody else. Was this final act a message addressed to someone or something, or many people and many things, or a violent thing in itself, where there is no difference between subject and object, her and everything else - like a bone in the throat finally dislodged?

On the third day, the sun found its way into her room. It had strained the shutters after stealthily creeping through the window all morning only to find her still pasted to her bed. The melancholy of her jaundice, something she had recognized in that dream, had given way to a more generic pallor, the pallor of deflation, expiry, demise, a life choked out of oxygen, a mind shut down, a heart run aground. Not whittled, as in whittling away into a blissful sleep, just stopped. Halted. Dead. As befits anyone who cannot remove the frame because she is herself the frame.

2.

In his last picture he was the one upstaged by the chair. It was large and curly, jutting behind everybody's crown like a giant cauliflower: a massive jello head on vestigial torsos. It almost claimed him and his family. Not that his family seemed to mind: it was as if they had concurred on the details, in half-whispers, when he was looking the other way. Blowing a cloud of smoke into the dank February air, with his back towards them.

Yet all along he was thinking, okay, there comes a time when a weighty, shapeless grievance comes even to the most well planned family but what difference does it make now. He has taught them how to breathe, how to think, how to chop garlic and flick its parched skin into a plastic bag held aloft on one side by the cutlery drawer - the classic makeshift bin. He has taught them how to avoid trouble and clean up good. They cannot go far without him. They never have.

He is after all, pushing seventy, and when you grow old, you are no longer in control of your sea. Friends perish in the storm, wife takes over the ship, children rise like ghosts of dead pirates, suddenly assuming voices and forms. Even the domestic help seem to be real, actual people, and for the first time, you call them by their names.

But he will play his part for all is not lost. You might even say that the portrait is the perfect anti-mask, and whose reasons are well earned. At fifty-five his wife is goddess-glorious and at last her own person. Of course everybody knows that deep down she is a dull person, merely padded and adaptable, biding always for the pose that would unleash her into the world. As for the rest of them, well, it's time to assume other children, take up new families. Children he does not have to sire, protect and mold into adults. Ready made families: lithe, benevolent, anything but demanding.

But oh how foolish, to think that he has no wiles. For he is still the master of the false dusk, isn't he: stubble on taut ape flesh, tired eyes hiding a dilated mania he can trigger on a whim, a certain patrician witheredness photographs of his youth do not impart. And over such craft are shirts crisp and well pressed, the mark of an assiduous household; and at five paces you can smell him, an elegant, subtle musk. They always fall for his sort, a man well cared for, because at his age it is a good system that does it, not the loving care of an individual. Even children the most tender of age know that.

3.

Even as a child she was fascinated with everything, with its form as well as its possibilities. She did not only stare things out but also saw them, saw them until they became something else: the tremors of paper, the fish-scales of someone's eyes, lack of love in tongue ulcers. She would zero in on something, an aftertaste, the particular slant of an eye, the exact interval between the smell of bile in someone's breath and the time it carried nothing – a surreal emptying out, like a sudden odorless air after hours of hard rain. She poked into things for the red-rimmed, the glassy, the soft and the blind; she pondered wrinkles, brown spots, what the flare of nostrils might actually mean shaped this way instead of that. Told of the death of a relative, she wondered which came first: the maggots or the vultures. She saw the thing not as the thing itself, instead she saw the eddying, the scurrying, the vanishing act, crowds thinning into tiny rivulets, night's ingress, glib but full of doubt, veiled by buildings, lamps, tears.

People remember her as the one who, at such an early age, discovered not just entire worlds, but also words and meanings: the glance between the prince and his princess is “hauntingly ethereal,” the manner of the man who swindles money from the unsuspecting traveler is “braggadocio,” wafting from the kitchen is the “seraphic” smell of fried cassava; the little cat curls up on her master's bed in “divine complacency.”

In high school, she thought Hamlet meant that words were just that: words, words, words, but it did not take her long to realize that it was all meant in irony. No, as Gass the Wise Man says, there is no difference between news and idle chat, poetry and autobiography, history and psychiatry, pimp and virtue. She can no more look at a snowman and pretend that the carrot and the two black cherries, so intimate as nose and eyes, are nothing but a carrot and two black cherries otherwise, than to stand in awe of its transformative power.

And now she dreams that one day the work she was born to produce would not be written, spoken or recited, but *talked*, yarned as the tale of everywoman testifying to a million little things known as “life,” letters strung into words into truths into myths, so world-wise so familiar so universal no woman should ever have to feel alone.

No wonder she had broken down to the point of disrepair when the award for best young writer of the year went to someone else, whose first and only line suggested that all of us, following our Sage, might just be nothing but waves of icy air, having no blood no lymph no flesh, flowing only along this canal towards that final pallor.

4.

She is the one you find for the last thirty years bent over the same desk in the corner of the salon. No fear, she does own the place, including its paint jobs (eleven times in all), its present mustiness and the memories coagulated in the white curds of its wall: of hide and seek, of great scholastic hopes, of the closet political. And of Gia, best dog there ever was, maybe the only real forever. What feelings does she wake up to, rising every morning to the same universe, greeting the same people, their lives taking a blessed pause in the folds of her hands – only to depart again without her? She is grayer, slower, but not a day older in her hopes. Some people still remember a time of aberrant bravura when she had suddenly flowered, like a magnified signet typeface, into a magazine size working mum celebrity. For a while, she took her pleasures at a tilt, letting her peremptoriness go for the frills of slo-moing herself through the minor excesses of fame: the occasional paraphraxis, the fluty, distracted greetings and the same oversalted dishes three days in a row. It is plain she had been beautiful, but it was those very diamond-like eyes, well-accustomed as they were to the swift disjunctions of life, that plunged her back to the normalcy that was her lot to bear. And so the world comes and goes, all shadows of what once was, and she feels for them all, absorbing without growing, taking their sorrows away without a gesture of thanks, not even for always being there at everybody else’s time. She sees them all, the best and the worst of them, the flaws they’re trying to hide from the world. Yet nothing, nothing about her seems released or altered while the child, the child who at six thought she knew everything, has become the age she was when she decided to sew her life shut in order to open hers.

5.

She is the one who crunches numbers and traces the arc of company progress till her eyes give way at midnight and there is nothing in the fridge. She is unabashed about being a right-winger, about her two-minute attention span, about her preference for airport bestsellers. She is skittish, demanding, terrifies both men and women, but what earns her our respect is that she is not scared of being hated.

This is because in a lot of ways we want to be her. Hers has been the sort of post-college release into the world most people dream of - an effortless unspooling, as it were, into the best in the best of possible worlds: a seven digit salary, upward mobility, and a doting but relaxed

family. OK, so that was the 90s, when the word “manager” was one’s ticket to anything from hotel discounts and round trips around the world to house mortgages and marriage proposals, but we’re always around twenty years behind anyway.

The thing is: most people are also so wrong about her. The only thing that she has going for her really is the dotting but relaxed family bit. The rest is not so much all the best in the best of possible worlds as a simple, alienating, dogged single-mindedness. In that she is like Singapore, that peculiar island state whose trees, so methodical, so in place, are almost put-on, whose sky is so formal that its structures of light and dark might well have been concocted indoor: the loneliest set-up on the planet. And now we’re five years into the millennium and people are cheating the system right left and centre, collecting a paycheck while staying at home, the true rent of life being the one that lies between job and children. Yet she has chosen her mold and keeps at farthest bay any illusion that the fire will not burn her. Having your cake and eating it too may be the currency of the day, but not hers.

Like yesterday: it was only four days into the New Year, and while all of us were sipping G and Ts in some island resort, she was talking about having five episodes in the can, shouting down all four corners to winnow down the long list of topics. ““Stay on message!” I told them,” so she told us, failing as usual to see the irony. But it’s all there: television, PR, marketing, all those 90s buzzwords. She talks in terms of what is appropriate and what is not while batting nary an eyelash at spending nine million rupiahs on a Manolo. And the tube is not even her field – it’s just a *spinoff* of the *core business*.

But sometime just around midnight the voice that called out from the other end of the line was stricken. She told me, as anyone who appreciates fruit knows when handed a mango by the moon, she has always known what to expect. The age difference. What people think. But it’s not as if she’s known how to keep them as most women who have been kept seem to be adept at – demanding as she pleases both their erections and their nurturing warmth. She has no cunning to keep them in sweet suspense, or to rout other female, no children to sell off as she was once sold. She has nothing else to call green, not pea, not olive, not viridian.

The next morning when I called her, though, she was at the gym. “All they want, these boys, is your body.” she said with no trace of last night’s vulnerability. “Like black soldier flies, you know. In Week 28, after they have had enough of you, they leave their pupa casings and disappear. So I have 19 weeks left in which to recuperate my losses which is really not so bad – three weeks to whip myself to shape, give and take a week for the imponderables, and another sixteen to even out the balance sheet.”

6.

They call him The Cicada.

In fact, since he left the prison camp, it has become his only name.

With the exception of the termite queen, the cicada is the longest-living insect. Having spent 17 years dormant underground, the cicada dryad emerges and sheds its skin. As adults they flit

around in the sun for five weeks before they die. A swift death row, in human measurement: living only to hunt death down and hold it to its words.

Nobody quite knows how he came to be this way, but once, there was a life he knew of, something that had to do with a piece of land, a slanting slice of green just off the main road where there were children and bees flitting around a movement of water. Traces, everywhere, of something about to happen; a river too briny despite its autonomy.

And then nothing but the dense mass of his prison, this twisting and turning virgin foliage with nary a footpath to use as a guide. 17 years of knowing only one sure thing: that the river is the center of everything, so central it projects its fears and prejudices like the brashest of propaganda. But how he had pinned all his hope on it: washing away to a new beginning like Karna, leaving hardly a trace, only later prompting questions for all time. Watching, from a ruddy patch on the embankment, heaven opening like the ticket counter at a train station: one way or return? Goat-class or rooster-class? Smoking or non-smoking?

Some say he used to be a painter and that he painted a great deal on this hell on earth: involutes of clenched forms that may be knots of gully or tree or flower imposed upon a wombed setting that may or may not be a belly a casket a Pandora's Box. Others recall pictures of him as a nine year old, standing beside his parents and elder sister. The posy in his sister's grasp seems to have flown out of her mother's russet kebaya, and this russet is to be found in his skies, in his garrets, in his intestines - the duty of his memory. But one day it all stopped, just stopped.

Now, whatever is left of life he sees through her eyes. She certainly remembers how she has lain beside him at least twice a week for ten years watching his face settle to sleep, the peaks and the hollows, the dots and creases. She would trace the rims of his eyes, his nose, his lips of shale, and rest her forefinger on the black flecks crowding his cheeks as if to heal him from the wear of memory. She would whisper to the walls and to the silence shrouding them to please love and preserve this face, for it has seen everything and all.

Did I ever tell you, he told her once, of the time this man from Unit 4 – Landung I think his name was – ventured so far to Wanayasa one day and ended up floating in the very same river, his head almost sliced off his torso. They say he'd been executed by the villagers for debauching one of their women. There was to be a similar incident in the same area years later even if we were forbidden to go to that part of the jungle ever since, for fear of stoking the fires. Some say it's for honor, others say it's because the likes of Landung simply failed to give the owners of such women the proper recompense. But you can hardly blame the poor guy even if he tried. Or the water for allowing all this to take place with hardly a fight.

She remembers how warped and wilted and weary he could look in the deepest hollows of such sharing, his features undistinguishable from his hair of uncertain color. But how he too could hold captive a room full of strangers as if trailed by Providence's light, a giant among men.

But all men go back to the same spots, inevitably, as everybody has to have a story. The faces accompanying them do not have to be the same ones, indeed they cannot be the same – either they're the same ones but older, with eyes that have seen different scenes and different realities, or mildly similar ones, with hopes more intense because they are at the tail end of a

long chain of precedents. Trees too do not always stay faithful; kids chasing butterflies have long since snapped twigs on which certain hopes were carved. Even if he is no more a vagabond, stealing the future from the children, the trees, and all the fish at sea, he doesn't know how else to feel.

Many years later she was to admit that yes, it certainly seemed that he was in fact courting nature for a while, wanting it for himself the way the old suddenly want what is never meant for them, but only to have words fall flat in his brushstrokes like an impossible union.

He stopped painting until he died one day, alone and as surely not in her arms. The morning before she was to leave him for the last time the sun was sluggish. He had kissed her between her brows in a way she knew it was the last time and whispered, "I am too much of a real lifer to allow canvas to intercede itself between history and its victims."

At last she felt herself redeemed even if his death rattle shook her to the core with its silence.

2005

2005


Mary Magdalen with Head of Flowers

A Meditation on a Painting by Salvador Dali



Salvador Dali, *Untitled (Female Figure with Head of Flowers)*. 1937. Oil on canvas. Private collection. © Salvador Dali. Foundation Gala-Salvador Dali, VEGAP 2006.

Mary Magdalen with Head of Flowers

A large, stylized, brown letter 'A' with a decorative, slightly irregular shape, serving as a drop cap for the first paragraph.

trail of bare feet, some bones and the eggshell white of a girl's dress tell us that a woman has sailed across an impossible desert, leaving a skeleton of a man in her wake. No one saw her set off in the anonymous night, no one saw her sink into the glistening spread of salt she mistook for

water, no one saw what she wrote with her feet at every sacred milepost, though in a few days everybody would learn that her home had been a kingdom on earth, where they had a name for everything even if the thing named had to be made to care for its name, because otherwise it would be oblivious of the derangement that went on in its name.

A little later, when her feet finally rested on something surer than sand, everybody would learn of the way she had, in a bout of desperation, fucked a thug with a harelip who had offered a vent for her own bestiality, how she had traversed weeks of arid land with an oryx, a hawk and a lizard, and how for weeks following the savage but necessary butchery of the lizard she had holed herself up in the cool underground burrows of an uphill monastery consuming nothing but fruit and water.

It was here that she worked herself into believing her constitution as similar to that of the oryx's, capable of storing heat by day and releasing it only at night. This distinction is important because people often got it the wrong way around.

It was also here that she often heard, through the strange calm that often washed across the plain, a cry as deep as midnight, as if a crack at an answer to a question long resigned. It bore the odour of dry rot and mahogany, of vines stiffer than ash: meeting the mucus green of rotting liver and failed words on an even keel.

Once in a while she even settled to imagining her home nestled in the vale beyond the mountains, a place which only a devoted heart could reach. A place where once a lake was embowered in woods, and scores were settled on lonely hills. Indeed, the thought of it, and how others like her conjectured among themselves about what wondrous things could happen in that kingdom, filled her with something akin to pleasure. However, at the first peek of dawn, she still could not stop hiding.

And she did not wish to return.

Like many people, he first met her in a work of art. This continued long after the first encounter.

As a child, he was entranced by the thin, mousey-haired girl who sat at the edge of her bed, with hands crossed around her thighs. The great black swell next to her was both a wing and a curse, like a cloak she could not escape. Another time, he saw her again, gaunt and petered out, and now the cloak had a face, and a name. But that was before he understood that all little girls

had to grow up faster than the rest of us. That was the moment he became the champion of little girls everywhere.

Whether she appeared as the little match girl, the lonely activist or the quiet mistress, he always recognised her. Hide as she might beneath unruly hair, layers of twisted veils or a head dipped low, she could be wretched, naked or subdued, but there was no mistaking the desolation behind her eyes, like the soul of a cat worn in its toes.

He told us once, “Sometimes she plays tricks with you as others do.”

We have seen her too: she could be, like any woman, a Madonna in tempera; an Odalisque robed in stately brocade or a Venus of the swan’s egg whiteness rising from the foam, wearing nothing but her blonde hair.

But then, like no other woman, she is also the one who thrust her wet face against Christ’s dead cheek, cradling his head in her veil as if to conjoin it with her own. Her hair, long enough to wipe Christ’s feet, was her “third sin”, so the saints preached, a practice not unlike what we go to the beach for these days when hairdressing salons seem too much of an expensive joke: to beach, to bleach, to blonde oneself. There is also the jar, the chalice, the source of life—but also the source of evil for men.

Pandora, Psyche: always a frail Eve and her sister, the modest Venus.

Of course, on the issue of Christ, there was some confusion as to whether she had anointed him in life, wiping his feet afterwards with her hair, or whether she had only tried to do so after his death, or whether there were two of her, or whether she was all of one person doing both things, and more.

Added to that, he remembered that between the tears, the hair and the ointment, all of which were active and fluent, somebody fingered her as a sinner and so the Son of God had found it necessary to forgive her.

That was how he came to tell her to draw near, so that he might hold her close to his spirit, male and pure. She had touched the apple and from then on mankind would be bound to sin and sex, but he would cure her so that while she could not help being endlessly seductive so would she also be endlessly remorseful. It was around this time that he started to see her, alternately, as a youthful enchantress on someone’s canvas, in an ecstasy of golden tresses around her naked breasts; and on another’s, in the debris of long suffering, dressed only in an animal skin, an old woman.

And so he gave her his kingdom on earth, with all its bounteous riches, but with one caveat: that she could only be his in the blackness between nightfall and daybreak. The rest of the time it would do her well, it was suggested, to withdraw to an abandoned cave and live in total contemplative seclusion. She felt there must be another way but after so many months, she took to wearing no clothing but her own hair that grew ever thicker so as to compensate for her loss of flesh. It was said when bits of her bones were discovered on a journeyman’s path some centuries later that her bones had hardened so that she could withstand any pain. It

followed that only total nakedness became her. It was the dress of innocence, of the sort that could only be salvaged through repentance. The birthday suit.

Of course, from time to time a painter of dreams and memories might find her there and see a flash of pearl, a glimpse of dew. He might have been the artist who kept drawing her in his mind for the rest of his life. The same one who shrivelled, faded and buckled down to become only a figment of his own imagination, and missed her flight as a woman unto her own, a veritable spring blossom.

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