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THE SPHERE OF BIRDS



Gallery Books

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Blindness

Whether arrived at in the womb or through old age,
or because hatred in a hoop skirt and whalebone corset
has been welcomed as honoured guest into your home,

the result, it seemed, was much the same: a darkness
emphatic as when the clock's short arm breaks back
an hour to let the shadows loose over the lawn, to make

welcome the fall's first frost. In double science after lunch,
one boy argued it would happen if you touched yourself
too much or spent too long before the goggle box —

revenge of the body on itself by way of an unravelling
within the tissues, humours, rods and cones, so that
the soul's supposed door could no longer open to usher

in the objects of desire, to carry word and image upside
down into the flesh. Those fledgling years the sightless
were a nation unto themselves, their flag crow-black,

their head of state the shopkeeper whose eyes were like
two hardboiled eggs without the shells stirring below
the jars of clove rock and jawbreakers arranged in rows

across the shelves, whose identical twin was taciturn,
pure strange, forever, it appeared, *staring* into space.
They knew far more, I guessed, than we could know

about the grave, about the afterlife, and how the world
could be so cruel, why in the third act, the seventh scene,
of the play we were reading that year in school,

the king's daughter must conspire with her husband the duke
who will use just his fingernails to gouge out the earl's eyes,
leaving behind these two bloody sockets a loyal servant

will dress, as best he can, with 'flax and whites of eggs'.
Our teacher, whose vision was perfect, swore the walk
to Dover's chalk cliffs, its 'crows and choughs', was metaphor

for something or other of how the future would describe
its arc, whispering softly into our ears, then leading us away.
Later he told us of the cloistered monk who kept a poker

in the fire until it glowed a bright orange and he applied it
gently to both eyes, so that the dark he craved would be
seamless, so that he could not lose his way to what he saw.

The Hive

Put your ears against the warped slats of the hive
and the walls hum, just as they did that night
I woke up to find the house alive with moans,
my two roommates having come home with men

and, through the walls, now wrestling love from them,
something bright and beautiful in their drunken abandon,
in what was forgotten as they tangled, limb
and limb, all queen and drone until first light arrived

and the milkman carried three bottles up the steps.
In Virgil's world there was nothing like this:
'they neither delight in bodily union, nor melt
away in the languor of love,' he wrote of his swarm,

his bees born of a bullock's blood after the sacrifice
and, later, picked from leaves, gathered whole
into their parents' mouths and carried home,
or so the poet claimed, mistaking need for such

small miracles, the apiary a world without desire —
something to want and fear, to want and fear,
like the butterfly tattoo on the back of the first girl
I ever saw completely nude apart from glossy photographs,

brief snippets of film. I know now it was a swallowtail
she'd had etched over the notches of her spine
as though it were rising clean out of her backside,
suggesting we carry something colourful and winged

in the folds of our intestines, and not our own
version of soil, harbinger of the earth we'll lie under.
All that summer of her I hunkered in the dirt
and bent towards clumps of squat, green plants,

lifting their leaves to see if any fruit lurked underneath,
ripened and red, ready to be plucked, the sun above
Sussex tearing the skin from my back, layer
after layer, as I made my way from runner to runner.

It was my first time alone in a country I'd been
warned was very different from my own.
At night I got drunk on cheap vodka and puked up
strawberries. I was learning about freedom and restraint.

'Tear off the wings of the kings: while they linger
not one creature will dare set out on its airy way,'
Virgil reveals later, confusing his genders,
yet describing perfectly his golden mean for bees

as he watches a battalion of workers glide
from cassia to lime blossom, or whatever
the gods have set in bloom. I think the heart must
be like this, a sort of hive sending its workers out

from flower to flower, leading the drones into the snow
every winter, always doing a dance to please someone.
It has its swarm, its sting, and, if you rub a finger gently
round its rim, it starts to hum, as though flexing its wings.

Moving and Storage

Heft of a vanity, a chest of drawers, box springs
and mattresses, clocks and mirrors padded with blankets,
sofas and love seats, each standing lamp, and, once,

the Steinway Baby Grand Jed and I lowered
from a fourth floor balcony in the Castro, our sneaker soles
squeaking off smooth cement as we tried to split

the weight into fair shares. This was my punishment
for leaving home so finally at the third try. I'd put
a distance of ten thousand miles between myself

and that damp island only to turn up broke at Harrington's
to ask an ex-cop and ex-serviceman from Kinvara
if he would take me on, though I could do little more

than spit and smoke. The rope burned through
my newly hardened palms as I gripped and loosed
on Jed's command, letting the piano jerk down

towards our boss, who stood in a blue blazer,
both hands raised, opening, closing, like a small bird's wings
while he screamed 'lower the fucker, take the strain'.

Later, in Blondie's Bar in the Mission, he would
crack himself up again telling the waitress we were two
of his illegitimate sons or, broody with whiskey,

would cock his thumb and barrel his forefinger,
pressing the nail into the smooth nape of Jed's neck
to illustrate how the Nazis had disposed

of those his battalion unearthed outside Dachau.
Solemn, he would describe the almost grassless centre
of a field, clank of his shovel's lip against a stone,

a soldier next to him stooped to retrieve a pair
of smashed glasses while another came on the first scrap
of cloth, the stench of rotting flesh growing

stronger, blood in the soil, then all that remained
of an entire village, limp bodies piled up
like sacks of grain. 'I came here with nothing,'

he would say, 'just two worn pairs of pants and an address,'
as he nodded once to order the next round
or fumbled with the keys to the Deluxe Cadillac

he'd drive half-scattered back to Half Moon Bay
where his wife was dying in their summer home
as a tumour the size of a tangerine ripened in the left lobe

of her brain. 'Lower the fucker, take the strain,'
he barked, as our heads bulged with blood and our backs
stretched, arms still raised as, weeks later,

in his store of scuffed armoires and stained lounge chairs,
he'd raise them once more to play conductor
to the quiet Polish boy with the glass eye

who could not afford to buy 'at any price', but
came in anyway sometimes to pry Rachmaninov and Liszt
from the hollow of that string and bone machine

which should have dragged us cleanly from the roof
and crushed the man standing helpless beneath
its mass of tautened wood and wire, and battered ivory.