

Jean Dibasson

Following the witch: another hymn to Aphrodite

Once upon a Time in Italy
near the comune of Nemi
while walking at a crossroads
amidst mystery and melancholy of the street
I heard a talking tree
and wandered through its holy woods.
Carefully stepping through grasses
and over mossy stones
I came upon a deer path.
A trail I tread until dusk
when it led to a lake.

The water's surface shimmered
illuminated by the night sky.
A cosmic mirror speckled with stars.
Overcast on sunken warships of the Emperor
sleeping on the lake's bed.
Dreaming of a drowned cat
sacrificed in the sea to summon storms.
So I made my way along its shore
ruminating on the reflection
and arrived at ancient ruins.

The buildings had crumbled
walls overgrowing with weeping ivy
and boughs blooming with mistletoe.
A sanctuary where worshipped wilderness
reclaimed broken bricks as its own.
And solus amidst this Dianic scene
was a woman whose white skin
glowed under the full moon
reminiscent of marble memorials
or a statuesque sculpture of Venus.



Untitled by Uruchi-mai. "Yumenikki picture after Giorgio de Chirico." <https://www.deviantart.com/uruchi-mai/art/Untitled-406322584>

She had a red mark on her right eye
 revealed by lunar light like a hand-mirror.
 And seeing me stare spoke of slipping
 in the mysterious baths.
 We talked until sunrise
 about plants and gardening
 the family farm and her children.
 Soon Dawn appeared and touched the sky with roses
 and taking hold of my hand
 she said without speaking
 to follow her on foot
 blind like Oedipus.

Amongst sights we passed like seasons
 was a field filled with strawberries
 around a volcano's fiery tiara.
 Its produce plump stuff with hay;
 a queer qualia.
 And I imitated her example
 never picking these strange fruits.
 Instead snacking on seaweed and dried fish flakes
 from the Tauric beach.

From whence we wandered for years
 before arriving at the Alps.
 As mountain peaks soared above.
 Their beaks jagged cliffs;
 the domain of Arnheim.
 As rows of pines sank below.
 Acting to conceal the uncanny.
 A furtive forest.
 A fog-drinking forest.
 At whose precipice she gave me a pomegranate.
 And then disappeared.

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While she left becoming unseen
whiteness crossing the continent
formed a seeping poison fog
bleaching creatures colourless.
Tolerating no
shadow.
So I descended to depths
below all light.
Murmuring
to bless darkness.
Stepping downwards up the Alpine slope
as the smell of soil surrounded me.
Coming across ants in trouble in a puddle
who I ignored.
Their ruse read like a book
of fairy tales.
And ever after I arrived at a river.

Her cursive current of calm water
flowing under the new moon's phase
for building houses or making marriages.
When young salmon swim downstream
and the old upriver to breed and die
singing the same song from the Paleolithic past.
Verses carved in the Vézère Valley.
And the river held the salmon as softly
as the body holds the soul.
In the present tense, in the present tense.

And I continued across the stream
while not leaving the life water.
Migrating alongside horned gods of old.
Black stags of Lascaux
whose hooves painted a forest path
like cave walls
whose art I read until I found
the spot on the map
over the border by Briançon
in France.

The base of Bacchanalia.
 With black and white banners blazing
 marking the Mont Genève pass peak;
 the site of the sabbat.
 Carnival of twelve camps
 creating crescents around a bright bonfire
 where estries and elves danced counter-clockwise
 turning their backs to each other
 and birds jumped over the flames unburned.
 The fanatics.
 While just outside this ring's reach
 a jester jiggled dressed as Koko the Clown
 coloured in blue, red, green and yellow.
 A diabolical festival
 at which Demodocus sang
 serenading attendees with tinnitus.

All presided over by the Lady of the Game
 who pointed to the pyre and promised
 hell's nine circles would similarly not sear.
 Counterposing priestly punishment;
 paradise as a balcony
 from which to watch damned souls being cooked.
 If there is a Tertullian heaven,
 it must be men watching their enemies burn.

I stood to the side and the Lady espied me;
 she screamed as if answering a sphinx
 a man!
 Such a shocking shriek my sight became black—
 and I awoke afterwards amidst barrels
 on the checker-tiled floor of a wine-cellar
 in Bordeaux.
 Under the gaze of a bartender
 in a butler's tuxedo attire.
 Getting up and regaining balance
 being transported and parched,
 I reached for a glass goblet
 when the barkeep said beware;
 the tap water is unsafe to drink.
 Awash in urine and female hormones
 from anguane up river.
 Suggesting instead a sugar-free sports drink.

So I took a sip and sought a seat
bumbling along the basement's brick wall
but stopping to admire adorning art.
A particular portrait painted
by Artemisia Gentileschi.
Judith Slaying Holofernes
hanged in a baroque frame.
Soon after seeing three sisters gossiping,
where the woman from Nemi was
one of the three.
Who even now in the dimly lit room
seemed to me like Aphrodite;
mother of Time and daughter of Destruction
drawing sunrises and sunsets on the sky.
Eternal, infinitely repeatable presence.
She held salt in her hand
and apologized for bringing it
to cure a cavity
caused by a tampering tooth faery.

Everyone knows it's bad manners
to bring salt to a sabbat.