** ***\* The Temple Singer*** \*

**I. *Curator and Priest***

Have I shown you the figurine

the temple singer?

Hold it in your hand for a moment.

Imagine the sound

of her voice,

how simple and clean…

An arrow piercing

a sheet of rain.

Water from a source

high in the cedar forests.

A fountain that surges

to the height of its yearning
and falls away.

\*

Consider this blue world
pasted on the ceiling

in lapis patches:

It is my Never-Healing Heaven,

the plaster of its wounds laid bare.

I reach out my upturned palms,

try to remember the ancient prayer.

Dry rain sifting
from a tessellate sky
dusts my hair with fine

white powder.

I have forgotten the names of my gods.

**II.*****Empty Room, Open Window***

**

This clay tablet:

I pierced it with signs

fresh as love-bites once—

shaped like your sex:

They meant You.

I rub the clay

like flint to ignite
one scintilla
of that sunburnt noon

and the desert sand relieves
and there rises once again
a city of towers and temples,

gardens and canals: the wonders

of a dream with its own blue sky…

*Oh the swelling of that day
and the minute of the hour
and the scent of roses in a bowl!*

*You naked on your bed of cedar,*

*your beauty
burning in its fire
like a sacrifice,
you, reaching out your arms to me!*

\*

Empty room.
Open window.

Nothing.

\*

And the scent of roses in a bowl.**III. *Cedar and Pine***

Here in this alcove
absence takes the shape
of tallow smoke.

One memory is another
and their sum is oblivion.

Did I once write a poem

for a temple singer?

I have known many temple singers.

*But now once again it is You*

*only You*

*walking beside me*

*******in the cool of the morning*

*in the garden by the river.*

\*

I think of the curved planks

you were admiring on the wharf that day

when you said to the shipwright:

*I have never seen wood sanded so smooth.*

You turned to me in the midday air

and whispered in my ear:

*Smell the wood, Love, and it is only you and I*

*up in the mountains, among the cedar and pine.*

And I am still perhaps a little jealous
how in full view of the appreciative youth
you ran your slender fingers
over that curvilinear, unassuming grace—
seaworthy work of his hands.

**IV. *The Splendid Arrogance of Trumpets***

**

Dawn, inching into colors.

First day of the planting season.

I wake up in your bed.

In a timid nimbus of light

I see you there beside me,

propped on one elbow, gazing

into my eyes with a tender,

slightly abstracted look,

running your fingers through my hair

lightly as birds skim water.

A blaring of brass horns
in the distance fanfares
a procession of soldiers
coming home victorious
through the lapis-covered gate.

Children dancing in the street.

The splendid arrogance of trumpets,
jingle of timbrels shaken.

Women in windows

showering roses and lilies of the valley.

And the young captain

who slew thirty men in battle

walking grim in his terror

of showing how abashed

and delighted he is.

Now you, at the window,

motioning to me: *Come and see!*

You take from your hair

a single red rose

and let it slip from your hands.

You turn with a smile,

looking just a little

beyond me.

****V. *The Swiftness of Rivers***

*Today I sing before my Lord the Moon*,

you said. *“I must purify myself*

*in the sacred waters.*

*My harp needs tuning,*

*my hair is a scandal of disarray.*

*Help me put on my necklace,*

*you gawking idler!—*

*But O my Belovèd,*

*How lovely you are in my sight!*

*How comely are your ears with precious gems,*

*your arms with bands of gold!*

*When I look into your eyes*

*I see sunlight playing*

*on the surface of the waters.*

**\***

All our days were spent among roses

and finely wrought things,

vessels of bronze and gold.

We laughed as we spoke of love and life

in a dead language.

I have forgotten

how to say the words.

But I remember the laughter.

It is its own language.

I think it is the speech of gods

and swift rivers.

**VI. *I Remember the Night, and the Moon***

******

Darkfall. What daylight had repressed

rose up as pallor, with a new answer

to the one immortal question that is night.

Insomnia’s god, your face the color of my bones:

how subtle you are, to shed a light so akin to shadow.

You would smile so faintly at the sacred game,

the Lion-Bird gnawing you away, you ripening

again, like barley in the barley’s season.

I remember now: *Moon-Bull*. My Lord Nana-Sin!

\*

Stealthily now I climb the stairs

to your palace on the temple’s top.

******There, at the window, I watch and wait.

Your distance is with me, gliding past

a reticence of copper mirrors, running pale fingers

over lamps grown cold. The city sleeps.

*Where is my Belovèd, she promised*

*she would come! Is she lying*

*with the young captain, was she lying?*

How anxious is the one who waits by the window!

In rhythm with an Age of Waiting

you inch from cloud to cloud. Your halo:

a threshing floor in the sky. Ghostly oxen

tread the circle.—Darkness will have its harvest:

The Goddess gives her husband to the Shades.

**VII. *Midday’s Roses***

******

I sometimes revert to the habit

of reading by the light

of an oil-burning lamp

with its fragile flower of flame.

In whatever room I read,

it wakens on the walls the same

fitful shadows of lovers I once knew,

so that I may never cease

to be familiar with all I have lost.

I am reading a book called

*Treasures of Darkness*.

I know the items in the illustrations:

The lyre painted gold and blue,

with the head of a bull for a prow.

The gold-leafed cosmetic box.

Headdress hung with leaves of gold.

They forgot there ever was a light of day.

They forgot they had ever been touched.

\*

*O my Belovèd, come before me*

*in a robe made of midday’s roses,*

*wearing bracelets of sunlight!*

*How fresh it still is,*

*the ancient honey*

*in my hive of dreams.*

*\**

*Stand before me just once more, Belovèd,*
*stand and be golden in the morning light*
*so that I may gaze at you and smile*

*because I am so bitterly happy.*

****VIII. *Water and Stone***

Spring rain shrinks
from the garden statuary.

The last bead drops
down and away.

The soil drinks it.
Worm wine. Root manna.

Wet stains grow vague on the balustrades.
A faint chromatic mist floats

from the roof of the portico.

The sandstone’s salmon color

will be restored.

Not yet. There is a seeping-in.

The stone drinks

and its thirst is not slaked.

A puddle steams on a marble slab,

withdraws inward from the sun,

dragging along its unwilling
surface tension.

Gone.

The stone has a jet sheen.
An idea of water subsists.

Is it still wet?

**IX. *Starlight, Morning Light***

******

At night, when the sky is clear,
I can pick you out
among the crowd of your companions,
unreachable, the Stellified:

Sealed in the ark of your distance

like a secret thing.

You who are dead here,
in my living,
live there, long after I died.

\*

Daybreak.

You are sitting by the window
combing your hair,

still dripping.

Sunlight,
its shower of arrows,
softens to a bodiless caress

passing over you.

\*

*You, Atalỳa, my Belovèd,*
*you by the window*
*there!*

**

♫