THROUGH THE RUINS

By

Joyce Hayden
Shadow

Is a book of cures etched in black wax, a ripple on the river’s skin. An alphabet read by Druids and teenage female saints, prophets of oak and sword. Is a centuries old cry from ash piles of the Inquisition, the dead trail of a hunched robe, privy to all the answers. It’s the surrender of the drowning to a whale’s world. The unhatched egg spilling itself on a sheet. Shadow is ten years in the land of the unborn with the mind of a dragonfly, its multiple vision. It’s the cat god forgot to give legs to, a Romanian onion crate with poems stuffed below. The door of a home we’ll never know, a corner my blue angel once lived in. The bitter celebration of new moon in winter, a wand sketching earth on the orbit of Mercury, an avalanche of dirt suffocating the heart, white as the world’s first crow.
Veiled
Ghazni, Afghanistan
1993

He let me chose the color.
He was glad for the law.
If you can’t hear me,
please step closer, the cloth
does muffle my voice.
He even makes me wear
it in the house.

My own son, three years old,
doesn’t know what I look like.
He knows me only from the light side of his curtain. Knows my fingers,
knows my kiss through cotton.

The men say it protects us.
But I feel like a leper. Too ugly even for God to look upon.
I’ve seen Western magazines,
Elle, Cosmopolitan. All that skin, women’s bodies. What struck me the most were the eyes.

Our men can say whatever they want.
But it’s not our skin or our bodies they’re afraid of. The eyes disguise nothing.
So we live like plague victims, ghosts, in full body veils. Heavy skin to separate us from the men, the world. A skin that hides our faces, a skin that never peels, but always burns.
The Well

I watched them hold you, taking turns, the few days you lived. Or you laid still in the bright incubator, light your only food. A white world broken by your pink skin.

They didn’t seem to notice what was missing. Bending low, knowing you could hear, they whispered to the soul fluttering away. Gazing into your eye each time it opened, falling into a well they’ll carry far beyond your grave.

I stood apart, hands behind my back, dark glasses on my face, a hangman’s hood over my heart. No one saw me there, long distance cousin. Not the nurse, not your parents, not your healthy twin brother.

Held in an open palm, little half man, little moon man, weightless and forever heavy, solid as frozen ground, untouchable as dust in wind. Wight of memory, length of sky.
I'm not going to write about that spring morning when four boys found two large wooden maple syrup tubs, then asked permission to play in the creek. I'm not going to speak about my grandmother who told the boys to stay out of the raisins stored in the basement. I'm not going to let you see the melting snows of Mount vision that flooded the waterways nor will I mention how angry my 7 year old brother was that he wasn't allowed to go and yelled *I hate you!* to our nine year old brother. I won't point out that only one of the boys knew how to swim. I won't tell you that our father was stringing cable wire between telephone poles three hours away in Syracuse, while his son was loosing balance on the bobbing raft. I won't remind you how that section of river grows swollen as a starved stomach in Spring or how my stomach aches as I write this. I won't imagine the heartbeats of the two boys who scrambled out of the water and found themselves alone on shore.

I won't tell you about my mother and her sisters who heard of the disappearance and convinced each other the missing boys were hiding in the woods. I won't remind you it was Good Friday. I won't ask you to wonder how warm the women's fear made the blankets they carried to wrap the hiding boys in after they found them. I won't tell you they couldn't find them. I won't tell you about the small blue sneaker the grapnel hooked onto or the wailing that shook the trees after that, how I've never been to that spot because no one will take me. Instead I will tell you that days after, my grandmother laughed to find handfuls of raisins in the dead boys' pockets.

I'll tell you that I hear children's voices floating off the surface of the brook I walk to every day. That forty years have passed and I've learned to forgive water,
bless it with sage leaves and strands of my hair. I'll let you know that I am jealous of the cows, now bones, that witnessed what I can only imagine. That water is my difficult, my patient teacher. That, for me, all water is salt water.
La Disperazione
Giotto
Padova

How beautiful Hope is, reaching
for her crown from the angel
who'll guide her to Paradise.
Was she raised by two parents?
Loved gently by one man? Did she spend
her days practicing in the musky
Balcony with the choir?

Has she heard the voices of angels
all her life? Her feet, so small, so perfect,
have they ever touched dirt? Even her hair,
spun and pulled back, seems to float behind her
like her impeccably starched wings.

Did she ever notice Despair, the grime
on his robe? Did she, did you, Giotto,
ever look behind the burned scar
around his neck? Did you ever bend
to see the sins of the father? Or ask
how two such lovely hands
learned to twist knots so well?
Damn the devil with his rusted hook
dragging Despair to the depths of a more
labored hell. If Hope is so wonderful,
why didn't she notice Despair
and offer some peace?

How lucky for you, Giotto, your life so easy.
Your virtues and vices, your black, your white.
From your perch on angels' shoulders,
eons above the throbbing abscess
of Despair's days, you did nothing but hand
the Devil his hook.

And you, Hope, how is it that you carry
no compassion, your pillar of piety,
you judge of flames? How lucky for you both
that the demons you sic on the
weak know only despair.
How To Escape

One day you will
acknowledge your
carbon monoxide life,
your combustible husband,
your smoldering tinderbox home.
You will welcome oxygen
back into your lungs
your numb throat, your hope.
You will awaken from your
zombie gaze, respond to
innate clangs and alarms.
You will remember fire drills,
the science lesson that water
and electricity are enemies,
the years of duck and cover.

When his face flushes
Autumn, when his fist
rushes, when his flames
devour your air,
you will pause and fuel
yourself with one last
glance at disaster. In the ice
pick stillness before his
backdraft you will imagine
your past cinders. You will
open the door in a gateway
blaze, singeing your hair and
your one true vision. You will
chant as you run: It will grow
back, it will grow back, it will grow back.
Joyce Hayden

On a Hillside Above a Vineyard near San Gimignano, Tuscany

Like the weight of salt blocks
from the mines of Syracuse
on the rancid waters of Onondaga Lake,
some white man’s Gitcheegoomie,
lake of sunken submarine races.
Sisyphus’ stone rolled over me
as ravens croaked, naming
the nouns of the world.
Monarch, autumn, glass.

Someone else’s dog died while mine,
foxy webbed feet, tongue
pink as cold adobe, swam laps
in Lake Sunapee, NH and I, in my red
’81 Delta 98, fled the one life given me
over dirt roads and western deserts.
A friend said Just start walking
and see what happens, happens, happens.
Moonshine, blues bar, smoke stack.

Homesick palm trees wept with me
on a sidewalk in Hollywood, sidewalk
without stars, without hand prints, just
a silver blade at my neck and years
of cracked eggshells, broken bottles,
makeup that couldn’t cover.
Dragonfly, headlights, plaster.
My octagon house in the Berkshires
sold last spring far from the orange
grove that forgot the smell of annual
black olives. Don't ever drink lemonade
from a carton, yellow box, black penguin.
You'll lose yourself in Northern lights,
in the flat white sand of Alaska,
you'll lose yourself among the thin
legged dock spiders of Ashfield Lake in
Massachusetts in the county of Coleraine,
in a winter of inertia, in a season so cold
every dead glacier will trumpet to the surface
Kayak. Constellation. Rose petals.
Agamemnon to Joyce

The hardest part of being here in Hades' far reaching shadow is not recognizing the dead. When life goes memory wanders also.

My one hope as my wife tightened the rope around my robe and Aegisthus played his knife across my neck, was to reach my first born daughter, slaughtered by Aulis. Despite my disgrace, I played to spend eternity lit by the flames of the underworld's sun, hand in hand with Iphegenia as the reckless jump into the Styx.

Once I knew I'd never find her, I turned my attention to the living, where I heard you curse me, enraged at my decision. But wouldn't you, didn't you, do the same as I? If your daughter had lived, wouldn't you have sacrificed her to the goddess of the young?

Isn't it true, woman, didn't you know it well, those years of swords and threats, that house where bruises ringed your neck, your arms? Joyce, you knew as well as I. There's no safe place you could have hid her.
To My Mother

Demeter, how did you not hear my shrieks that sent a year of crops back to seed? I heard your prayers at the far end of the yard as I watched your long thin fingers wed with dirt, your knees caked with grass stain, a wicker basket of white spring bulbs bedside your silk slippered feet. I watched you grow small as Hades stole me from our home.

Nothing went down as you said it would. You and my uncles twisted incest into legend, while I was left to die silent as any mortal because of one daffodil. Mother, you never came sarching for me. Like you, Homer lied. In fact it was you who snapped, “I saw Persephone looking at Hades as we planted seeds, all afternoon she gazed deep into the overturned earth with those eyes of hers bluer than the Aegean.”

I don't need to tell you what happened: How Hades’s cohorts covered my mouth, took turns on me, how I became the prize for the newly arrived dead. But Mother, I finally escaped, thanks to your family reunion, where Pluto and Poseidon, drunk on the usual nectar, called out my name as they fucked my cousin. That's why I snuk through the locked gates that early spring morning, clutching my pomegranate seeds with both hands, believing you would teach me to erase the spell.
I returned home to your mansion splayed across acres, shaming the sun, your golden chariot waiting out front. I had to ignore the gardens of sinister daffodils until, spilling my seeds, the truth covered me like the white clouds you immortals live in: I opened the front door remembering "Family is all," words you taught me to live by, and saw that everything you've said or made is air.