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Self-Portrait with an Ice Pick

Imagine the impact—wrecking ball, welcome injury or collision, like some secret screamed in a late night taxi. And while it was happening, bile rising and the blind urge of its happening—the ice pick striking the white wall of the freezer, the neon sign glowing through the window like a red undertow, a sliver of the street corner where Essex looked like Sex Street and a low winter sun vignetted the room, the wedding band left on the nightstand because betrayal was a tender industry then; \textit{siempre} its one urgent slogan.

There was the mind’s syncopation—fractured, freezer-burnt, mesmerized by the shards of ice that ricocheted across the floor; cuts covering the knuckles and a hole finally carved out, big enough for the bottle of vodka where Van Gogh’s wheat fields trembled. What the body wanted was its penance; scar, reminder that I could love anyone, gnash my teeth on their shoulder, then forget them in the subway car, the stale air and grime of it, metal bar still warm from a stranger’s hand and the shock, almost erotic, of being jostled by so many limbs.

Follow it back to that bar where the drinks...
had lovely Storyville names—Chloe, Justine, Simone; names like a girl on a swing with her hair blown back; espresso, nutmeg, chambord, grenadine; flower petals ground down to powder; names I stumbled through that year when my one job in the world was to smile in a way that meant, *Say something interesting and I might stay for five minutes.* I remember Alex, the Bellini-eyed waiter lighting a match, flicking his wrist like a gambler drawing fate closer. I remember walking home past empty fruit crates and the truncated frames of bikes still locked to street signs. Helicopters circling the East River, like a repeated phrase. There was no aubade, just sunlight breaking the bones behind my eyes. What the body wanted was a blank room; its own pain, untranslated, self-contained. If I can see myself there, it’s my eye in the windowpane, hazel speck reflected back against a daze of sirens.
La Bufera  |  *Our Last Trip to Sicily*

*I have seen, in the stained-glass windows*
*through the flowers of the mullioned panes,*
a country of skeletons
filter in—and a lip
of blood grow mutter, speechless.

MONTALE

Surely, no one could fall out of love here,
where the *dhoni* drop off from the pier like drowsy relay runners
and the air is smeared with orange blossoms,
their strong, nuptial smell, instinctive
as a first language. And though I tried that night
that we sat at the wobbly table in the restaurant where old
arguments began to interest us again,
I could not pronounce the word for napkin:
tovagliolo. And though the waitress smiled with her
mouth, I could tell she was annoyed by the treason of my name,
*Candito*, which means *sweet candy shell*
and is, like so many things, an accident
of translation—my grandfather trading *Candido,*
*pure white light,* for a child’s Easter treat, the pastel shell that shrouds
an almond. My grandfather, who often said,
*Pisciaci supra i ruini prima ca diventinu muschei;*
*Piss on the ruins before they build another temple,*
would have laughed even when waves pelted the olive grove that night
and the lights quivered as if an uncertain
country of skeletons were slipping in—
the marzipan birds like empty hands, the spongy
skin of the priests in the square. He would have laughed when we
returned to the baglio, emboldened and drunk,
to fuck on the ancient floor and pass out
with spumante fizzing over the sides of our glasses
and the windows flung open without wondering how bright, how
final the Strait of Messina must have looked
that morning in 1938 when he left for good.

... In the morning, I woke mouthing the syllables,
to-vag-li . . . trying to make them work, when I heard you from
the other end of a tunnel: *Take a hot shower.*
*You’ll feel better.* Then, falling through
the shower door with nothing to break the fall
but my skull and a soaked towel. You said it felt like film noir,
finding me naked on my side with one eye
clenched as if in vigorous prayer
and the other, wilder eye fluttering, the lashes beating
around the still center of the dilated world. *What a loud noise,* I thought,
collapsing into that damp, black sphere
in my brain, like the well in Orvieto,
the one you wouldn’t follow me into, collapsing into
that dream I keep having—*a man standing on a chair, a noose, a loose
locket hanging from his neck. He wants me to kick
the chair out from under his feet. At first I refuse,
but he’s grabbing my arm. I kick hard. I want to make him sorry.*
One of those moments that caves in under examination—your
careful, clinical hands prodding my ribs
for injuries. Bruises welling up, like the flush
of sex, or the sudden flare of what goes unsaid.
I know my mouth was filled with blood and that when I tried
to speak you moaned as if you could feel it too,
the tooth pierced through my bottom lip.
And pain became the vantage point, the spot where I
still stand watching the morning grow wilder, already half in love
with the ruined picture and the body’s offer
to pay for everything—a mute, bloody
mouth, a snapped neck, as if damage were its own
currency, as if regret were ever the right reason to return.