

DREAMING OF ZEUS

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The image on page 47 is a reproduction of Figure 1
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and to Chris Cleary, John Gribble, David Schloss,
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CONTENTS

I

| | |
|------------|----|
| Erik Satie | 11 |
| John Cage | 13 |

II

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| Ohio Pastorale | 17 |
| The Leaves | 19 |
| Kiyohime | 20 |
| Memo | 21 |
| The Persephone Experience | 23 |
| Dreams of Miss P | 25 |
| Saving the World | 26 |
| Charm | 28 |
| Dreams of Zeus | 30 |

III

| | |
|--|----|
| Persephone | 35 |
| Hephaestus: The Bronze Aphrodite | 37 |
| Hera | 39 |
| Artemis | 41 |
| Persephone: Picking Flowers in a Field | 45 |

IV

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Lullian Circle | 50 |
| The Moor | 56 |

ERIK SATIE

for Karin Wolff

His pencil flows against the beat of the clock,
and the afternoon's shadows looming over his café table.
He looks up: carriages and passersby in hats and topcoats
stream past the window, and in the café, the cleared tables,
the waiter in his black apron, standing watch.

A brown leaf descends, slowly.
He tells himself:
Despair is a pompous personage
who rushes about in a stiff gray suit,
goatee bristling with outrage at the chirps of sparrows,
a monocled eye snapping about the street
for scraps of cheer to thrash with his umbrella.

He, himself, the Velvet Gentleman,
has no more need of despair.
No, he delights in the homely virtues, the simple joys.
Productivity is enough, thank you,
a few coins for playing his songs on the piano,
and Suzanne's portrait and his on the wall
side by side above the bed they shared
until she went off with her boy and her wagon.

The specter of their union, that orphaned child,
still pads into his orbit now and then.
That night, during his set,
it appears among the noisy tables
and gusts of cigar smoke, stares at him at the piano
as though he were a building with the wrong address,
and then it fades away.

The mirror behind the bar shows a shadow of
the black-gray ether lingering about him these days.
Fog smothering a sunburst –
a permanent state, he supposes, but no hindrance
to the music engine humming inside him.

‘Nuance!’ or some other improving directive
he would shout through the fog to his acolytes, if he had any,
assume a foreign accent, perhaps, urge them
to put aside their scores and pencils, unfurrow their brows,
and imagine themselves dogs in a moonlit vineyard,
yapping, kicking up dirt,
at play among the grapes and leaves.

He makes it home on foot
in the small hours. A beggar
totters from an empty doorway,
hands open, as if holding
the answer to a prayer.

CHARM

When a friend advised using charm to help me deal with a difficult bureaucrat, I thought, in a mental voice that could have been my father's: charm is a risky gambit for a Calvinist from the American mid-west.

And so is music. Not perhaps to the real Calvin,
who permitted the Psalms – but only the Psalms – to be sung,
but to the spiritual children of that other Calvin,
that black-robed cleric snarling in the popular imagination,
vivid as Lucifer, whose pulpit excoriations
stormed through the cosmos, and by their force
jangled the stars and caused the spinning spheres to tremble.

My father wore a black suit
to perform his earthly callings of musician and teacher.
His clarinet stood next to his chair at home,
and he often took it up and silently worked out fingerings.

Childhood polio made him walk with a limp,
but not when he strode onto the stage:
his shadow swept the curtain
like the wings of an enraged celestial prosecutor,
and he was a stranger, a priest
sparked with power to draw down music
and deliver it into the auditorium's darkness
through his clarinet.

His children were sometimes sent to Sunday School,
taught by women in bright dresses. At home
he admired our crayon drawings, listened to our songs,
and made no mention of hellfire or the elect.

Calvin, the real one, lost his voice at the end
yet faithfully hobbled in to the pews. My father
lost control of a finger in his forties.
Nerve damage. His clarinet disappeared.
He took up cooking, put away the black
and started wearing colors, like the rest of us.

A few years after he died I dreamed about us
in the living room of the final family home.
A gray prehistoric animal the length of a tennis racket
ran wildly about, then clamped its snout on my foot.
My father looked up from his reading.
'Well, Les, it looks like you've got
a prehistoric animal stuck on your foot.'

Well, yes, there is always a catch if you're Presbyterian.
But at least I did get to see him again,
in his black suit and blue chair with his clarinet,
and his stack of books in the circle of lamplight,
and a representative of a defunct, perhaps mythological species
did spring to life in our living room
and later ushered me to the next dream,
into an upstairs room, an amalgam of bedrooms from childhood,
a Hollywood-style night-fall glimmering outside the window
while I swung in circles
on a star-lit rope let down from above.

DREAMS OF ZEUS

You lounged in the shade, in a white linen suit,
holding an armful of flowers
with drops of water sparkling on their petals,
while I clicked by in the sun's glare with briefcase and files.

In another dream, behind a door
cracked open to a room lit by the evening sky,
you were an old man in black.
Your voice came to me from the shadows.
Your eyelids were lowered in deference
not to me, but to the sheen that drenches
a young woman's limbs and hair like moonlight,
returning to me as I stepped into that room.

From time to time you materialize in the waking world.
Flashing cufflinks and dental work,
swatting aside maxims from the self-help canon,
trailing cigarette ash and the fumes of cognac and cologne
through modest, abstemious rooms,
you conquer and then depart,
leaving the mortals to clear the wreckage.

Each time, awakened by you,
I went forth in your service, and each time fell,
cut down by my own assassins –
the drab-tongued functionary at her desk,
or the aging naïf choked on small-town earnestness,
or some other dreary persona circulating in my repertoire.
Each time brought back to my earthly proportions, tangled
in them like a parachutist in her ropes,
I got up and went about my business,

but still watched and listened
for signs of you – and sometimes
felt a shiver at the back of my neck.

In the last dream
I watched you float by on a barge of clouds.
Your gaze passed over mine,
and then the sky took you away.

That leaves me
in this small high-rise apartment,
the street below filling with taxis and office workers,
daylight moving off the buildings and fading through the trees
as I linger, with a few plants I tend, on my balcony,
where I might watch the lights tonight,
and the stars if there are any,
and in the morning choose a sprig for the vase.

HERA

About the worst that can happen these days
is poor service at the tea salon. But that is unlikely,
for the distinction of the customer is signaled
by the black car she emerges from at the door,
the tailored dinner suit, the jeweled watch catching the light
when she lifts her cup.

Even so, she is still susceptible to her memories,
now stirred by the window view from her banquette –
a young woman scrambling past with packages and a stroller,
another putting away her phone with an expression of defeat,
another shining on the arm of a silver-haired man –
and she scans back over the years of strife:
babies pushed through her womb
(allies, enemies, defectives, always a gamble),
battles to defend her home against the treachery of women,
doomed campaigns for her place
in her husband's esteem and in his bed.

Those years stripped the softness from her,
fashioned her voice into a harsh instrument,
scraped everything out of her but fear and rage.
They cast her into the barren grove and anointed her with failure.
And then they made her effective.

Wild-eyed shrieking in the street,
fingernails clawing for blood, snake venom in fruit –
all such vain tactics were exiled
as though they were misshapen children.
Her arena shifted, to quiet rooms of power.

Enemies were dis-armed, alliances forged.
She gave and raised money, spoke in cultured tones
in defense of family and home.
The whispers that she was nothing
without her husband's power faded away.
Treasure piled in the vaults.
The people bowed down to her
as though she were an effigy paraded on a litter.

Young men in dinner jackets march past the banquette
and try to catch her eye. Some women
would choose one or another, put him in some decent cufflinks
and a better apartment. But why bother?

Family will survive, as hers did, stagger forward
like a team of oxen in plowing season.
Home, battered, yet triumphant, will fulfill its mission.
That is enough. She will glide along the streets in her black car
and lean back on her cushions, behind the smoked glass.