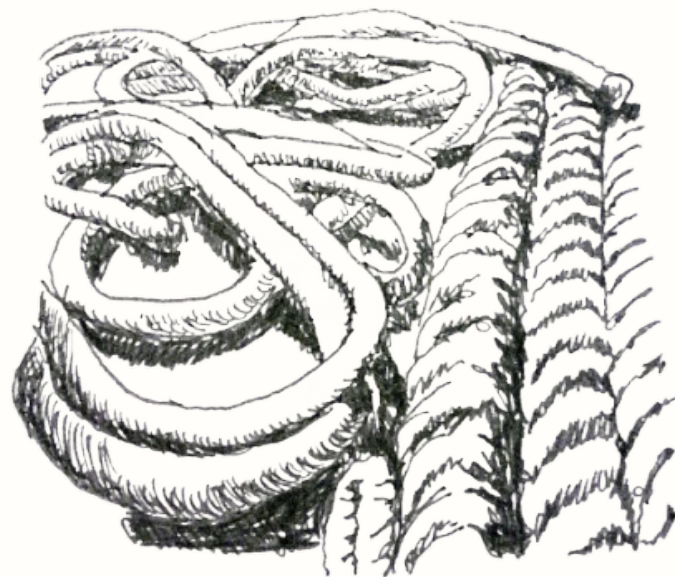




House of Atreus (crescendo.)
after Richard Strauss
Helena C. Aeberli

RUB ME OUT
David Rushmer

who to? you?/ october 4th
Lili Peg Jenkins

Prosopopoeia
Xinyuan Chen

Epithalamion
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HELENA C. AEBERLI

House of Atreus (crescendo) after Richard Strauss

She becomes out of nothing. There is only the crumple of her, in the corner, a crippled heart under grey tarps.

She is the unnerve, *unheimlich*, the dying bird at the door. There is something about her that sets teeth on edge, like nails on chalkboard. She is a charcoal smudge on the heel of a jackboot. The rag and bone man would sweep her up but she is woman. She opens the trapdoor of her mouth. In one fell swoop

I am lost in her as her soul comes into being.

—

Morning rises like smoke from a cigarette. I watch the aftermath of a Friday night in the city; upended kebab boxes smearing ketchup and brown sauce, smashed glass and beer cans folded in on themselves like dead pigeons, though the dead pigeons are tucked neatly into alleyways. Someone's cat regal in the pickings. A girl in a too-short dress and heels, her fake tan ending sharply halfway up her thighs, reaching out to pet it. Her cushioned handbag hangs from a tarnished chain like a priest's thurible.

I see last night's Elektra in the rubble of the modern world. Last night's dinner rises up to meet the back of my throat and I retch harshly into

the recycling bin lid. The cat and the girl raise their hackles to the occasion and run away.

Not long after I email my advisor and tell him I will miss my supervision. The back of my throat tastes of white wine and bile. I tell him I am sorry and the chapter is coming along well and he doesn't have to worry, which won't stop him. The bin man outside looks dissatisfied. I am not surprised. I think about telling him I am pregnant but I cannot think of how to say morning sickness in Greek and this is how my advisor likes all correspondence. Mourning sickness. I think of wailing women and weeping and gnashing of teeth. I tell him I have nausea which scarcely requires translation. *Nausia*, from *naus*, meaning ship, so seasickness. I am at sea. Troy is behind and I have yet to reach the doors of home.

Also I am not married and my advisor is a traditional man. He is a seventy-something lecturer in Greek drama at a university ten times his age so I can forgive him. His cheeks reddened when he covered an undergrad lecture on *Lysistrata* and he huffed the words, a bellowing frog. There are more women in one scene than in the serious drama of his life. But to him I am barely woman, in black cords and a sweater with my hair pulled back, so I was forgiven.

Now my body asserts itself and enslaves me to a history which is not mine.

I take up the library book, tatty at the corners, and pick at it like cold leftovers. My brain is slow today, half sicked up in the dustbins outside, half left with the gods at the opera house, craning forwards, peering down. The text is from the 1970s. It purports to be the key—to what—to everything. I wish it were true though I know it cannot be. The words congeal. Words I should know, I don't. Like: *Ataraxia*, eschatological, and transference.

I open the dictionary on my phone and type in the words. Their definitions mingle with the bile at the back of my throat as I unlearn my assumptions. You impart your own meaning onto a word, then look it up and your epistemological universe unsticks itself. The foundations crumble. This is supposed to help you but in reality it makes you feel like shit. Like therapy or spotting constellations.

Elektra, my Elektra, out in the cold, in the ruins. Every so often she shudders. There is the gold all around her but she cannot be alloyed. She is the food left solid in the vomit, asserting its abject presence. I hear her song as I try to work; it inserts itself. She is the voice in my head. I think about God, about miracles, and I think about the altar in the church of my childhood, then the kitchen table built of the same driftwood. I stop myself before I go further. I am adrift and out at sea. Nausea rises in me, the sea rises and the ship tilts. I think of Helen's long cold voyage after which she vanishes from the story. I wonder if she knows of her sister's fate. I think of her many afters, in which she is raped or stripped or hung or loved and lives in matrimonial harmony. There is an opera for her too but it is unlike the Strauss which now courses through my veins, thickens my blood. There are black clots between my legs; did Elektra bleed? What I have written—*women lacking control of their boundaries provide a particular threat to the*

social order; women who must be contained by rites of passage which themselves involve boundaries and their ceremonial crossing. Women's porosity, her physical and symbolic apertures, which make she herself a boundary to be crossed or closed off. What I have written which holds no meaning when there is song. Why could I not follow song? Why did I choose this—the written, the solitary, closed-in world?

I push away from the desk and walk to the unlit kitchen. The cracked bulb dangles. I crack an egg and shot it from the shell. This is all I can keep down.

My mother, singing in the kitchen, arm deep stirs the pot, whiteflesh reddened, half-way up her flesh. My mother, singing in the pews, lit amber by stained-glass light which drips down her throat. What she inherits: this, which is the curse of her mother, and her mother's mother. The home and the church, she flits at the boundaries, unmakes herself in edges and draws back together: a casserole, a shopping list, a song. This is all I can keep down. Her perfume and the cadence of her voice. A bat in the belfry. If I open myself up I let it all in.

This my inheritance: the incensey, chewing-gum stick of the underside of a pew, lying downside up, gazing at clenched fists and candles, at song-books whose words blur, the place I return to.

—

Like Helen, Elektra's story peters out and blurs into marriage. The edges soften. There is an extra at the corners of the scene, an interlocutor in the photographs. Who is he to take centre stage—

friend of her brother, soldier, no lover? Pylades. It is a weak name for a weak character, whose only trait is love for another, to hold out a towel for his bloodied friend. He is post-coital already. I am more angry with her. Who was she to pass on her tainted blood, so darkened with hate? Perhaps she did not choose it though every stage-play frames it so. (I think about getting up and leaving; my Elektra, contained. But to walk out at the interval is its own kind of curse).

I have read about blood as ritual, as rite, as taboo. I have read about bodies as bottles to be stoppered. I have wondered how much a daughter bleeds, how she should bleed. I have read about cannibalism and leeches. I have bled.

It is her brother who pays the price, though Elektra wields the axe too, her brother who takes the Furies as his gift. To be hounded to the edges of the earth, forever in the song. To take death and stamp your name on it. And she takes what? A gentler curse, a marriage bed. My thesis has no time for Pylades. You cannot sleep in comfort with an axe between your legs.

Orestes I think, and the name could be her hiss, or it could be *his*, the name could be football boots freezing on the doormat, could be fried eggs slid off the edge of a plate, could be smoke from a cigarette, could be an empty parking spot in a hospital lot. *Orestes*: coward, who returns only to leave. *Orestes* in the door, at the tomb, at the shore of the sea. She beside him is made shadow.

Better Strauss's ending, where she dies.

—

In Sparta they left babies on the mountaintops to die. This is one of the first facts I learnt about the classical world, aged six, from a book of myths tucked at the back of the community box at church. This was also my first experience of irony. I, who already knew obsession, became obsessed. I read everything I could, devouring. I couldn't stop. I cannot stop. Like on the news today, female infanticide statistics. Scrolling through facts which suggest corpses which themselves suggest facts. 132 villages in India where no girl has been born in three months. Exposed on the mountaintop. The Spartans exposed both. But the gods are only ever kind enough to save the boys.

In the book of myths: two golden eggs, cracking. Castor and Pollux. Helen and her sister. Their mother raped by a God in the form of a swan. Smothering. The sort of pillow you scream into. In the book of myths: touch-and-feel feathers, the word 'loved'. Another kind of curse. No wonder she married into one, the sister. Sometimes hurting feels like home.

I was six. The more I read, the more I knew, the more I wanted to know, the more I wanted to read. This is the sort of thinking that leads you to a gestating PhD and a part-formed pregnancy, to a mobile phone keyboard in ancient Greek and a thousand wax tablet curses running through your head. To fingers that hover a moment too long over *how would you describe your faith*.

Sometimes I envision a life where the book of myths was not there, where I stayed pressed against my mother's calf, arms wrapped around her, where I hid behind the pulpit. Where God stayed God and the world was writ in sentence case. Would I be who I am today? Where I am today? Sometimes the past drives us in subtle ways—the jolt of a familiar face out of place, the lightest touch on the back of the head, an

upended meal—sometimes it is obvious. I am who I am who I am. And what if I wasn't?

But fate finds you anyway, in the end.

Something inside me slithers.

I lean over and throw up on my keyboard.

—

Outside the afternoon festers. It is warmer. It is no cleaner. I have scared off the bin man. A fox has been back at the bags. Ossified dog shit. A pair of skin-coloured socks curled together like baby walruses, pinkly grubby. A dead creature, unidentified. Several rubber bands. Somewhere in the distance a bell's jingle indicates that this is still the cat's realm, ungovernable by man save by association. The black bag in my hand hangs heavy, as if preparing to be thrown overboard. I toss it into the bins and it lands softer than it should, squelching. I don't peer in. I don't want answers.

Have there not been enough ambiguous sacrifices? In Sartre's telling all gods are the gods of death. In Sartre's telling Elektra founders and fails. Sacrifice for him to what? The correct ending. There is no correct ending. You wait for the call. Who is there left to tell? I am pregnant: and who cares? All you do is propagate a curse. Another unwanted daughter.

Girl with an axe for a shadow. Playing *tag, you're it*, or *sardines* at Christmas. Under an altar of noise: amazing what children can black out whilst taking it in. This year no one has hit anyone, just yet. My

father in the bath. Hidden under the table, which shudders when they slam it. Shouting. Girl with an axe for a shadow, swinging. Black bin bag, swinging. Her, singing. A tree's shadow, like a neck, breaks in a storm. Plane trees stand sentinel along the road to her childhood home. They should be olives. But Elektra is anywhere, is everywhere. Oh bright one. What is the vision you will bring me?

My stomach churns and I don't know if it's the thing inside me or something else. It's all just things inside me. How many more thousands of words must I cough up before I feel complete? How much must I learn? And can I? Knowledge: understanding acquired by experience or study. From the Middle English not the Greek. Though go far back enough and it is all the same. My advisor says: *Gnosis*. *Knowledge*. Spiritual, intuitive, mysterious. Abstract, accumulated, absolute, epistemological, carnal, divine. God, I am in you. You live with me and through me.

You are the mystery of me: Elektra: my obsession: who kills her mother though she touches her not. What is the value of a single word? And if that word is prophecy?

—

Which one of you was your mother's primary carer?

How often did you visit your mother?

When was the last time you saw your mother?

Did your mother seem distressed last time you saw her?

Would you say your mother had a good support network in place?

Did you know your mother had stopped taking her medication?

Are you aware that most psychiatric conditions have genetic factors?

What do you know of the debate between nature and nurture?

When was the last time you exercised your free will?

Do you believe in Fate?

What is it you're running from?

What is it you're running towards?

Did you love your mother?

Did you love your mother?

Did you love your mother?

—

What is it I want to know?

Words spool out of my mouth. They drip to the page. I read them back and they knit themselves a noose around my neck. I am choking. I was not there to see her choking. I take six painkillers on an empty stomach and pretend to sleep. My hair smells of bile. It is familiar. Outside there's an ice cream van. I had forgotten it was summer. So she will be born with Spring. I am no longer pretending.

Knowledge of the gods is a dangerous thing. Zeus's Semele bursts into flame, when she looks her lover in the eyes. Knowledge of God is the ultimate good. But you cannot see the face of God and live.

At the opera someone whispers *She wasn't very likeable*

In a lecture *Women are the currency traded between men*

The Furies who are also known as *The Kindly Ones*

Who are we to carry with us the dead?

Something like egg white slips down my thigh. My scraped-back hair is lank, the colour of piss. She was peaceful on the pillow but her hair was dirty. The dirty bathwater from weeks before. She is stirring inside me.

The world is boiling over. It is hotter than it should be, for July. *Tantalus*. What is it to eat your own son? Would you not think of your descendants, your House of Atreus, those who will bear your curse?

But this is how time started, how the world came to be, when God ate his sons and his daughters, and swallowed them whole, without teeth.

Did you love your mother?

In Euripides' versions of the story it is Orestes who finds Helen. To kill her as punishment for her part in the war. Or perhaps he cannot bear to see his mother's face again.

I have forgotten the definition of my name. It means something else to me. It is in someone else's tongue.

I am tired.

What is it I want to know?

O Bright One

O Elektra

My mother at the kitchen table with her hair in rollers. My father in the bath, an audience of soapsuds. My brother's fists, his jacket pockets. The pockets under his eyes, the pills in his pockets. In hers. Me, screaming. I hate you I hate you I hate you. I am eight I am fifteen I am nineteen I am twenty six she is dead now.

Tragedy in One Act

I with the axe over my shoulder. I who drags the axe through the remnants of my mother's life.

DAVID RUSHMER

RUB ME OUT

“The absence that takes the place of breath in me begins to fall like snow on the papers again.”

-Andre du Bouchet

I

say my name

sing my wings

“the breath of a bird”

it vanished in an instant

•

what remains
at the centre
in the collapse

premonition of another world,
just beyond this edge of time

panic of light

where the
trembling

is captured.

•
your body
 is the limit
 of the sky

 a flick of blood
 of memory mattered
a music injected directly under the skin

 kissed
 in a disorder
 of images

that penetrate each other
 in another act
 of laughter
 spread wide

•

each event, a horizon,
 a dream
 I remembered

uttered
and slapped me

 hands,
 the hauntings
 of language

 fissures and oubliettes

 where
 we find ourselves, lost

II

if I could live in a fraction of time just beyond the silence
push my arms beneath the surface
feel the flow of blood here in the arteries of wind
 my eyes, sundrenched
and leave my bones as a message

breath, invisible
 as a mouth filled with snow

LILI PEG JENKINS

who to? you? / october 4th

i don't know if it's lifted or descended
this fog, this memory; which memory?
tidal anxiety with cause: you bleeding moon
no dread now, just surrender
crying at the word implies desperation buried beneath exhaustion

but so able now to see myself coming home to you
you having let yourself in and made me dinner and
started drawing the bath

smiling as you come up to meet me with a 

i feel i am holding my arms wide at the cliff edge
now
not because i am going to jump
my feet are planted in the ground
the gale—who, you?—buffeting me every which way

stomach shrunk to a nut
body trying to keep me ensnared in sleep now
it was nicer before without the wanting

but now again i want
i hold against my lips the tiny  that holds you

XINYUAN CHEN

Prosopopoeia

Proserpina, this is dedicated to you
This verse proper, I consecrate
With devotion, given; Maiden
Of light gold sheaves and shades, seals
Golden light. Words proliferate like grain.
Proffer, lyf, perforate, fer.
Proserpina, accept this song,
For I shall no more reap.
Young sun goes away, houses
Are empty. I am afraid to make a sound.
If I go through the fields I see
Rows and ears and holes.
Make prosper, Maiden,
You who are born of high gods
Ceres and Jupiter. You who weep
Shrines on the Aventine.
Daughter my daughter
Proserpina, light your torches.
Bring forth. Make a song.
Have pity. *I think of you full of tears.*

XINYUAN CHEN

Epithalamion

No regrets: it has been done. Was a long decline
After the roses: always the incomprehensible
Making a face behind the screens. When angels
Spread their dark gold wings I miss the green
Days I spent with you, where the air was green
With glimpses, where fear was not, absolute
In stillness and coolness of style. Inside
This room whose vegetative eyes I water there are
Things that pile up and cannot be sorted
Which are not what they seem to be. We had been
Alone and empty, and the corridors were full
Of the sun, dust glittering along known traces
Where logic has an end. I had come to a place
To pray for valid prayers, and the uplifted keen
Kingdom of the night folding the flaming heart
Knowing that what is done cannot be undone
Knowing that we had not chosen, had not will
To act and to sigh. A cold morning's mail
Brings to dreaming heads a stone pigeon's gait
The clashing of swords and death of a snail.
As they depart, I say to my companions, You—
We should like to have something after this life of toil.