

DANIEL TOBIN

Downstream

*Twelve voice retableos after twelve paintings
by Eleanor Spiess-Ferris*

1. Listening

How long have I been sleeping here
Naked upon this louche divan, fluid
In my sloping dream, the dream I dream
Of you in the terracotta shadows
Listening? I might be an odalisque,
Though this is no one's chamber but my own.
And yours—it is the chamber of the dream
In which I speak to you, the faintest breath
Out of Brahma's mouth, say, the fragrance
Of lotus drifting across the waters,
Or the scent of a word that comes to know
Its meaning by moving dream to dream.

2. River

When I rose from the river I was still
The river, and in my red hair flamed
The encircling wheels, wheels within wheels,
By which the very air around me moved.
It was then I felt my body blossom,
Orchid and trumpet flower, lily and lace,
A necklace of birds spread hand to hand
As my fingers poised to key them into song:
To be the stream and what allays the stream—
Fountain splash, dolphin leap, supernova sky.
And the nipple-hard blue mantle of my breast
Like a cold eye staring into nothing.

3. Tears

Salt-heaves out of the inner ocean flow
From the threshold eye: self's backwaters
Laboriously fermenting, while the legs
Of the ballerina twist around themselves
Like snakes around a tree. O snifter, flask,
My little drip-bag of tears, the extract,
The elixir, the equinoctial champagne
That keeps me primed and wired for the jump!
I balance on my head a punchbowl of heads—
My many faces, the brave losses bobbing,
And these bottomless flutes like waterspouts.
Lift a glass. *Cin-cin*. Watch the boats go sailing.

4. Ark

Sea worm, sea slug, this moiling sea of skulls,
The crocodile's puppet mouth gapes wide
At starboard. On the ark of infidels
The clown is captain, his zombie face
Gazing out from under a pinhead cap.
Professor Wolfsnout, aft, has found his likeness
In the bridge-less waters. He ponders it,
Raw *imago*, like someone reading Braille.
Portside, the hound master gives the horns
To ward off the sky's bloodshot *malocchio*.
The muffle-eared, the apple-crowned, the dead
Rowers—only the foc'sle birds aren't me.

5. Passing Through

To be without oars in this great dismal swamp,
Mire bayou, slough of despond, toxic boat way,
Naked, puffed, choked, following the current,
Or is that my navigator, leech-ridden,
The steam-engine swan hauling me through?
This roiling swill fumes with my childhood,
Bed-buggers and boogie men, a brackish troop.
Or shall I call them my colleagues, sump-mouths
Wading beside me in their element
Under the impossibly blown, blasted trees?
Far off, the acetylene sky breathes and burns.
Even here, who can believe, a drift of jasmine.

6. Islands

Now I see even the islands are moving,
Carried away on the ocean's current,
Stream of many streams that runs downstream.
Now I see that my eyes are their eyes,
The islands' eyes, the many searching eyes
Who look castaways from a sunken wreck—
Bird-hatted, flower-collared—that one
Whose every thought is a lily plume,
That other whose fear burns above her like gas.
If I could but be the one looking up,
The heaven-starred, of Easter Island calm,
That one island, I-land, landless: Is.

7. Shoreline

What do the birds whisper from their crown,
The crown they have made around my head
Each in its own tuned, rueful lingo—
Chirps and chatterings, chuffs and chants,
Each wound in its own restless fluttering?
On the shoreline the dun reeds also whisper.
It is the wan voice of the undelivered.
Nothing of that sentence translates in the dusk.
Am I not a warrior left behind, the war
Over, still at war, an assassin wreathed
In camouflage, my body draped in flow?
Time to kill the king on his empty throne.

8. Flood

*Downstream the head floats: the head of No one.
Along the floodplain and out to sea: No One.
No one sings now to the gone sky, No One.
Into the dead eyes and behind them: No One.
Each one, one thing and all things: No One.
Lullay, sing lullay, lullay sing to No One.
Echoes along the surface, into depths: No One.
Tiger blooms rise. The torn body: No One.
Orpheus dis-limbed to the bright gates: No One.
Birdsong's adornment: this nest for No One.
Intervals of silence lift high now for No one.
No one from No one, No one into No one.*

9. Ophelia's Garden

After the turtle shook the world from its shell,
It homed through all the waters without bounds,
Through quale and quanta, ever ascending
Until it broke the surface on the single pool
Where the dead girl floated who dove in there
And swallowed her fill until she was the pool
She willed herself in her swelled grief to be,
And so began the change, her skin turning scales,
Her breasts lifting lilies, the fronds surrounding
Inclining like mourners, while the turtle
Paddled, swimming to her palm, dandled, open,
Flowering there in the sky blue of Krishna.

10. Floater

Goldfinch, grosbeak, cardinal, meadowlark
Frame me counter-clockwise in my slow repose—
Eleven o'clock, eight o'clock, six o'clock, one,
Such as they've arranged themselves around
The jade leaves with their black, revolving blooms.
I would compass them to the four directions.
I heard each itinerant call in my sleep,
Listened until I rose awake, feeling
The strange ferment of my eyes, their wakefulness,
And then, out of the searing, blinding coal
Of my own death flagrant on my tongue—
This violet and golden bud emerged in bloom.

11. Fecundity

And all shall be well, and all manner of thing
Shall grow through and out of me like a body
Made of light, my feet rooted in the planet's
Lucent pool, its waters reflecting sky
Out of which flower fields unfold their flesh,
Such benignly eloquent wordless bouquets,
Everything efflorescence, sexy material ghost
Of me, immaculately maculate quickening
Life, bone-house birdhouse (the human hidden
In the heart's whorled foliage) and the blue
Haloes upholding twin swans curving whitely—
In me you will find no sunset, only sunrise.

12. Fledgling

Out of the sea's cracked membrane of stone
Struck as by Moses's staff, this island of islands,
Emergent, the tree burgeoning from deep below—
An improvised mast, an ascendant cross
Lifting its one fruit through the blue reaches,
The heavenly zones at the mind's final end:
A child's face, *imago*, heron-crowned, rising
Out of the sleeper's dream, out of the river,
Rising as anywhere forever out of blight,
Out of the boundless, out of nothing, molecule
By molecule with the perilous spin of stars—
It has been waking for a long long time.