

KRISTEN CASE

Daphne

1

Translucence of backlit maple leaf, dappled radiance of half-shaded maple leaf, cool heaviness of clustered and all-shadowed maple leaf. O infinite, O alphabet of sun-in-leaves. Numberless run of the singular. Numberless run of the multiple multiplied. O flashing current all through.

Let us consider her: a girl become, by the force of her own prayer, hard and silent and arboreal.

Among other things, the Daphne/Apollo myth is an etiology: the story of how Apollo became linked to the laurel tree. In some versions, it is also the story of how Apollo became a poet: like Orpheus' song, Apollo's art is given in consolation for the loss that initiates it.

The story goes like this: a girl/woman is chased after and lost. She becomes a lost thing. The man becomes a poet. In my early readings of the various iterations of this story, I imagined myself a chaser.

2

On a morning in late May I find myself sitting in a small, six-sided room in a museum in front of a painting by Agnes Martin, thinking about the meanings of capture and escape, and whether one can capture or escape those meanings, or what beauty might be if it were not experienced inside a story of capture and escape.

A critic: It is dramatically satisfying that rape and violence should occur at the ultimate place of refuge: in the dark recesses of the woods, where the heat of the sun is excluded, in a virginal setting, in those very woods where Diana herself maintains her realm as the defender of virginity.

How may these threads be separated? The god, the girl fleeing, the prayer, the tree, the crown, the critic's dramatic satisfactions.

Her language sounds, perhaps, the way Martin's *Night Sea* would sound if a painting could sound. A small electric thing repeated, each time the same, each time minutely different, the hand becoming evident when you come close, a breathing irregularity held inside the grid of the regular, a fluttering, a pulse coming through it. When you stand close to the painting you can see how this electricity is created, is ongoingly created, by the small movements of a human hand, by overlapping and minutely different shades of blue paint, by quivering lines which are in fact tiny gaps between the blue rectangles.

When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then this grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do.

In Ovid, the lost virgin girls Daphne, Syrinx, and Arethusa mean: the space between what is wanted and what may be had.

The stories are told in different voices but contain many of the same elements: the girl is a servant to Diana, goddess of the hunt. She scorns marriage, is careless of her hair, desires to remain a virgin. Hunted by a god, she prays for deliverance. At the moment of her capture she becomes: a laurel tree, a stream, a weeping cloud, a spring.

A critic: *The end of the hunt regularly is an actual or ritual death.*

In the instant before transformation, both Daphne and Arethusa feel their pursuer's breath on their hair. This detail is picked up in Pope's version of the Syrinx story in *Windsor-Forest*.

*And now his shorter breath, with sultry air,
Pants on her neck, and fans her parting hair.*

4

In American Sign Language the sign for “applause” is shaking two hands in the air. The sign for “hearing applause,” according to the online ASL guide I consulted, is to *mimic clapping*.

Movement of little waves on the water, movement of leaves. Shudder of bright, shudder of leaf light. Weightless, without a body, it comes to you through the shifting body of leaves.

Little leaf, little light. A movement you would not call *pleasure*.

I am thinking of the difference between clapping and mimicking clapping, the space occupied by that difference.

Imagine the sudden unfolding of leaves. A living rustle of light on water.

Is Daphne a suicide? It seems a poverty to think so.

In her film *Bright Star*, Jane Campion invents for Fanny Brawne a poesy of clothes, the intricate folds of a ruffled collar flashing like leaves around her throat.

5

Two possibilities:

1. We could imagine Daphne's tree-life as a sort of freedom. For this version, the only part of the story we change is her silence. In its place: a shivering and light-saturated language, silent only to the inattentive, and a resistance so entire that it grows past what it resists and becomes something wholly beyond the grammar of capture.

Or,

2. we could imagine the scene without the hunt. What if the laurel crown were not a consolation? What if the runners ran together toward some beckoning ecstasy? What if Apollo felt not grief but joy at Daphne's strange and sudden flourishing?

The second version is harder to believe.

6

When I was [] a man twice [] known [] child. He []
[] and expertly [] []
couldn't move until [] weeping cloud. [](the
lifting? unbutton-[] I cannot [] []
[] then frozen and insens[] ongoing and []
[] movement of [] *happeningness* of []
]. I recall a *no* [] did not speak itself in the absence of any question, []
[] lifted and handled []].

But there was a question.

It was: "fast or slow?" These being the options I said, "fast."

This presence of this element of choice made this occasion into a kind of flickering short circuit at the far end of my memory: I could speak, I could not speak. Consenting subject, inert object.

I am interested in the relation between my becoming frozen and insensible and Daphne's becoming arboreal, the way both occur at the moment of being caught. The trauma literature calls this response "tonic immobility"—*an evolutionary adaptive defense to an attack by a predator when other forms of defense are not possible*. The trauma literature also says this response may exacerbate psychic harm in the aftermath of the event: feelings of shame and worthlessness, etc.

Tonic immobility is sometimes called *thanatosis* or "apparent death." Though the trauma literature suggests that this state is detrimental to assault victims, preventing them from effectively resisting, I am compelled by the implications of the word "tonic," which as an adjective can mean both restoring or preserving of health and relating to the home key in tonal music. I want to imagine that the immobilized body holds some evolutionary secret, that a body subject to tonic immobility might break or be broken into a new kind of singing.

An actual or a ritual death.

Sometimes a kind of blankness settles in and it is difficult to locate the substrate of ordinary beauty and pleasure that pull one toward, say, a better sentence. I am trying to reconceive of this blankness as a kind of quiet music. A tone. I am trying to imagine it as *tonic*.

A grid. *A drowsy numbness.*

The laurel is known for its uses in cooking (the aromatic bay leaf comes from the laurel tree) and its medicinal properties, especially its use as a *salve for open wounds*.

One of my questions is about how much we have to give up. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the poem that for me most perfectly communicates the infinite as a lived idea, Keats describes the urn as a *still unravish'd bride*. The verb *to ravish* may mean: 1. To seize and carry off, 2. To rape, 3. To fill with intense delight.

What am I to do with this language?

For a long time I have been asking, is our delight recoverable?

7

As a result of one of these stories or all of them I think often about the space between desire and love, and whether there is a space, and whether love is a laurel crown or a transformation past all capture or joy at another's strange and sudden flourishing, and whether desire is compatible with love or love's destroying machine.

I am always looking for proof that what looks like love is only the machinery of a desire which would kill its object and I am always finding it.

In the moment love is consumed by its machinery, personhood slips out and seals itself in wood.

One of my questions is about how much I have to give up.

A weeping cloud distributes itself. A weeping cloud is a disbursal of small blue currents of equal size in all directions. A weeping cloud sheds so much feeling feeling ceases to feel anything beyond the labor of release and the labor of reception. Weeping, like shaking, is the body gone into ungatherable being.

Or now the shaking of this willow in the slight and continuous breeze within what might be collected as the porousness of a shared silence, or non-silence—the wind making little waves of light and sound through the languorous branches. This cicada.

9

This morning there is rain in the trees, layers of rainsound on layers of leaf, a surround of it.

In the surround of rainsound, each nameless, shudder of wishing.

I am thinking of Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* and of the hermit thrush and of the sign for hearing applause.

What I am trying to describe is a world without any words on it.

The song of hermit thrush seems to come from many directions at once. It throws itself beyond itself.

When the singular is merged into an uncountable multitude of minute differences another kind of being is suggested. Suggests itself. I want to suggest.

A laurel tree, a spring, a weeping cloud, a stream.

What tone, what tonic, what wordless repair?

Notes:

Sections 2 and 3: Parry, Hugh. "Ovid's Metamorphoses: Violence in the Pastoral Landscape." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 95, 1964, pp. 268-282.

Section 3: Campbell, Suzan. "Interview with Agnes Martin." *Archive of American Art*, 15 May 1989, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC., pp. 10-11.

Section 6: Russo, Francine. "Sexual Assault May Trigger Involuntary Paralysis." *Scientific American*, 4 Aug. 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/sexual-assault-may-trigger-involuntary-paralysis/>.