The Disquieting Muses

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always,
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father’s twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
“Thor¹ is angry: boom boom boom!
Thor is angry: we don't care!”
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

¹ Norse god of thunder.
Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear mother,

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep.

Words

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from the center like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

Poppies in October

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.
Nor the woman in the ambulance
Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly—

A gift, a love gift
Utterly unasked for
By a sky

Palely and flami
Igniting its carbon monoxides, by eyes
Dulled to a halt under bowlers.

O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful—
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

The Applicant

First, are you our sort of person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something’s missing? No, no? Then
How can we give you a thing?
Stop crying.
Open your hand.

Empty? Empty. Here is a hand
To fill it and willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed
To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.
We make new stock from the salt.
I notice you are stark naked.
How about this suit—

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.
Will you marry it?
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof
Against fire and bombs through roof.
Believe me, they’ll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
I have the ticket for that.
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it’s a poultice.
You have an eye, it’s an image.
My boy, it’s your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

**Fever 103**

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple
Tongues of dull, fat Cerebus\(^2\)
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean
The aguey\(^3\) tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell
Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves,\(^4\) I'm in a fright
One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,
But trundle\(^5\) round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak
Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,
Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.
Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.
Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.
Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.
I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—
My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

\(^2\) Three-headed guard-dog of the dead in the Greek underworld
\(^3\) feverish
\(^4\) Isadora Duncan, an early Twentieth-Century dancer, died when her long scarf got caught in the wheels the convertible in which she rode
\(^5\) roll
Does not my heat astound you. And my light. 
All by myself I am a huge camellia 
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush. 
I think I am going up, 
I think I may rise—
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I 
Am a pure acetylene
Virgin 
Attended by roses, 
By kisses, by cherubim, 
By whatever these pink things mean. 
Not you, nor him. 
Not him, nor him 
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)— 
To Paradise.

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6 bright, clear gas