Scholarship

POEMS BY JOE SAFDIE

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by Joe Safdie

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BlazeVOX [books]
131 Euclid Ave
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Editor@blazevox.org

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The *Story* of O

To the Memory of Edward Dorn

Then can you sing
a song of a woman
accompanied by that
your lute which this
company took to be a guitar
in their inattention.
Yes I can, but
an *Absolute* I have
here in my hand.
Ah yes, the Gunslinger exhaled
It's been a long time.

---Gunslinger, Book I

The Story of O

> Thus he would possess her as a god possesses his creatures, whom he lays hold of in the guise of a monster or a bird, of an invisible spirit or a state of ecstasy. He did not wish to leave her. The more he surrendered her, the more he would hold her dear.
>
> —*The Story of O*, Pauline Réage

Prepositions

The story of Orpheus
is a story of prepositions

in for with through

then

after above behind before

from induction to deduction
from drawing a line

to drawing conclusions

*when here is also nowhere**

---

*Blanchot: "the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse, which does not demand Eurydice in her diurnal truth and her everyday charm, but in her nocturnal darkness" (*cf* Cocteau)

* * *

Three Figures (An Old Relief)

Hermes on the left, wearing
his invisible hat (which clearly
isn't working) looks somber,
cooling his wingéd heels,
laying down some law to Eurydice,
who can't believe her ears:
she has to stay in this pit forever
just because Orpheus looked back?
The lug (she's touching his shoulder
now) isn't *quick,* by any means
(wandering forlorn at her mere
disappearance into another world,
what used to be known as women's
prerogative), but he is solid, even
diverting in a way, the music . . .
"So what's in it for *me*, Herm?"
her large eyes flash con-
spiratorily, but He's the God
of messages, lady, the highest
possibility of same, and He's saying
"No way, sister, there's Other Forces
at work here" (already more
than most messages convey).
"Sex, death and art" says the
latest Rilke bio, i.e., there are
alternate readings, but none
that make Orpheus look *smart* –
of course he turns around,
his impatience pushing her
back into virginity,
a little too much in love
with his own music . . .

sorry, singer, but you got
the wrong message: it wasn't your song
that made the furies stop raging,
Sisyphus lie back on his stone.
Even in hell's ghostly shades
they remembered how it felt:
the last faint touch a lover leaves
before leaving us behind . . .

* * *

"a little too much in love
with his own music"

he'd gotten used
to the eyes closing,
bodies swaying in trance,

thought no one could resist
those melodies, sweeping
through the bloodstream,

swifter than any drug . . .
so challenged the death gods,
offered himself as well, and

the bloodless ghosts, too,
were in tears. * Triumphant,
he started back up,

but couldn't stop thinking about
the audience he'd just left,
command performance,

and looked back to see if there were
any more hangers-on . . .
someone should have told him:

you can't see the dead
by looking for them.
Soon the critics got restless,

dissing him like a pop star
whose second album sells
less than the first. They wondered

if he'd lost it, that unique sound,
that voice . . . he took to the hills,
becoming *the first of Thrace*

*to prefer young boys** . . . they
never looked back . . .

_____

*Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* 10.55, 119-121

* * *

From Induction to Deduction

deduction – a cheap substitute
when you've lost the trail
and have to imagine where
it's leading, as opposed to

induction, inducement,
he prevailed upon me
(the petition before Hades)
he made me see it his way . . .

deduction – "to trace
the course of," to *deduce*
one's descent (Plutarch said
he only went halfway down,

then came back up
and wrote a song about it)

* * *

Or, the oar of discovery,
we were the first that ever
burst into that silent sea

Eurydice, how she falls,
silently, unredeemed, you're
rid of me now at last

Fee, the price he paid
for all of us (Ficino said
he *was* Jesus) or "fey"

archaic, Scottish,
fated to die, having the air
of one under a doom or spell

Ear, how we heard the word,
by ear he said, or sense merely
*the obedient daughter of music**

Red, ease, the blood spurting
from the Maenads' rocks
ewe rid a see

oar fee us
ear red ease
or fey

---

*Zukofsky, *Non Ti Fidor*

* * *

the *look* back (as opposed
to just hearing, or sensing)
was too aggressive – an invasion –
Hades always represented

with his face turned away* –
the disruptions
the Underworld makes
are *lacunae* –

stumbles across the cracks
of language – the dead
whisper – you can't see them –
they're not *there*

---

*Kerenyi: "Sacrifice to the deities of the dead was made with averted face; no looking, only the voice was allowed in the realm of the departed."

* * *

Orpheus sings: *I got rhythm*
Who could ask for anything more?

dueling banjos with the Sirens
    on the Argonauts' boat
but also a spur

        to keep the oarsmen
in rhythm   *martial* rhythms
(the fleece hung on a shrine

dedicated to Ares)
    subdued by softer strains
Piper, pipe that song again

strum   strum
Orpheus consistently sang:
there is no suggestion

that he ever really spoke –
but if he did,
        *it was surely poetry.**

_____
*Joan Erickson (Eric's wife)

* * *

Orpheus Speaks

I don't trust these animals,
yellow eyes gleaming in the dark.
They'd just as soon rip me apart.

I don't know why I turned around --
I couldn't even see her face
in the dark. The villagers say

it was love, but Aphrodite
is not my god. She knows
I serve a different master:

order, harmony. What would happen
if I stopped playing this tune?
In the dark they'd rip me apart.

The drunken sailors on the ship --
all they remembered were the birds.
Did they ever find that fleece?

I was watching the birds. Order,
harmony. The dead liked it too,
their shadows were dancing.

Drunken sailors. Animals.
Aphrodite is not my god.
I didn't even see her face.

* * *

music, there's always
I don't want you to lose
this music everywhere,
yourself, listen for
a man can't hear himself think
what's not sounding
drums pounding, bodies swaying
beneath your mind, the
music's what drove her away
river, flowing, quiet
drumbeats, pounding,
the musicians of death
sirens, the scream
make the coolest sound

* * *