

THE LITURGY OF SOME HOURS OR CHRONO-RAMA-BOOM-BOOM

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LAUDS

The hour of Praise

There is screaming from above and below we pray with the animals. Something will have happened, another man overboard, the mast split. It is always catastrophic. The boat gallop, spin or drift, we will no longer attend to the world of sailors. They have made us cargo. We are cargo to them.

We have become used to filth. We wade in it. The stink will be in our nostrils when we are dead. It is the paste of our being, the medium of exchange. It is our filth, and the filth of the animals.

The animals cannot be secured. Once they were tied, in their separate quarter, and we to ours, free. But the animals, even if they no longer give us their milk, are our survival. They are the thing that means future. And when the waves tossed us, their chained legs would crack and they would die in agony. So we released them. Now, when the storm rises, we are thrown together. Sometimes, one of us is crushed beneath the weight of a beast, but we have agreed: the agony of a human is more bearable than the agony of an animal.

Once, the sailors were our brothers, our husbands, our sons. They said to us, *come! We will be saved.* Some of us came willingly, and the others came anyway. Such distinctions do not matter. They are above, and we are below. Our kinship is with the animals.

Above they put their faith in ropes and in sails, in the wooden tricks they built with their own hands, and no feast of wind and fury will correct them. They keep their watch, their chain of command. *We will do it, they told us, we will steer you through the storm and into the sunlight again.*

We listen only to the animals. If we are saved, it will be one of them, a white bird with the sun set in its feathers, and nothing of our deserving.

SEXT

The hour of Cruci-fiction

My mother has joined the congregation of the sleepless. She kept it from me at first, her lights off at night as if she were in bed. I noticed only a whitening or a lightening, a certain feathery quality entering her voice. Perhaps, though, already, she was taking more elaborate measures. Perhaps she had already begun to join in the rituals. Like all of you, I am a busy man. I keep track of the charts, rise and fall. I understand what the numbers mean. The signs from my mother were breath and color, were not my area of expertise.

When I go to the area to see her, she still rises from her stone bench, still comes to greet me, fingertips to fingertips, a slight tremor of the lips. If she speaks, I never have the answer. *Preoccupation is the opposite of love*. I tell her, I say, I left a meeting. But she'll be drifting backward, reabsorbed into one of the sleepless pastimes. On the chessboard, all of the pieces are white pawns. The man and the woman take their time before making moves, as if contemplating strategy. My mother sometimes flips a smooth silver disk, clapping the object onto her forearm, pausing, and then lifting her hand as if in surprise. A friend of hers, if they have friends in here, has a blackened die, which he blows on before he releases onto the table.

They keep awake the way an anorexic learns to eat, everything deliberate, everything about the effect. There's nothing jittery about them, just a wispieness. They are leaving, but slowly. They are like the starved.

Even this little, what I have of her, will vanish. I have seen other grown sons at the fence, the wives and sometimes the children, shrieking the names of their sleepless one, while the man or the woman balances pins or sorts grains of sand in the wind.

NONE

The hour of His Death

As I wake in the bird light of the afternoon, I think: I must begin again. Each thing is achingly hard. I must locate my pelvis among the discarded clothes on the floor. My toes are always scattered, the pinkie one in another room entirely. But today, who needs ten? I will be the person with the lopsided shuffle, and go from there.

I decide to have a mother whom I adore and in no way resemble. I decide I am in love with several people at once, and untroubled by this. Whatever there is to eat, I develop into a system of nutrition. Ketchup for the circulation! Crisped rice will make my hips ample and shimmery!

If I need to buy something, I use unguents or create some other facsimiles of money, and am delighted with my purchases. I develop ambitions like: the sum of the parts equals the hole; literature is the thing we slept on; the dead remain dead.

The weather grows lazy. I parade my gorgeous limp down the avenue, trampling half the blossoms and grazing the rest like a saint of the beautiful. I call the trees mustard and read the pattern in the pulpy muck of the gutter. I give my open mouth to each passerby, and we become lovers.

All of this requires attention. There are things I must see in a particular way, and things I must refuse to see. My children, for example, are everywhere, and the world is trying to whisper, *you have no children. You will never have children. You have abandoned your children.* I have a song for this, but my throat is disappearing.

Some offer sweets. *Give us your teeth, and there will be quiet and rest and only the smallest bitterness after.* I can run, but I am not fast, and they will catch me. I will have forgotten about tomorrow. The enemies will crowd in and collect my parts for trophies. When the bells chime, when I am nothing but my intestines, they will offer me a choice. *Nothing is in writing! Join us, and we will exalt your membranes! Love is fun! Let us squish you among us!* I will accept their offer.

COMPLINE

Invariable over the whole year, so that it can be prayed in the dark

After talking was disallowed, it became trickier for us to establish new games. Darkness had been made a rule sometime earlier, so now when, for example, Elbow-Stab gained currency, we had trouble regulating tone. Some players pursued others athletically, full body weight behind each jab, joint aimed at the vulnerable collection of organs between the rib and hip bone. Meanwhile, other participants approached the endeavor the spirit of gesticulation — a friend punctuating an amusing point to an intimate. Violence broke out between disputants. Rather than enforcing consistency, however, the kicking and biting only confused matters. Certain teammates took the novel attacks as new rules, some of us getting sidetracked as far as Blood-Draw, or elsewhere cowering in Cuddle Neck. For an interval, the inconsistency was such that it appeared we were not playing games at all. Then, the first eruptions of “*unh-unh*” (non-linguistic vocalization being still permitted) rose above the field. The calls were answered. Pitch and volume produced variations in meaning. The game was called Wrinkle, and everyone enjoyed it. Meanwhile, players were establishing a preliminary system of grips, pinches, and caresses, which conveyed censure and approbation with a fair degree of transparency. The grunting fell off naturally and then silence became a rule. Knee-Melt and Muscle-Fright had already become popular among some subgroups, and early iterations of Simple Gullet had broken out in patches along the edge. For a time, play was easy among us, then touch was forbidden, and we were left sniffing one another, tasting the air between bodies.