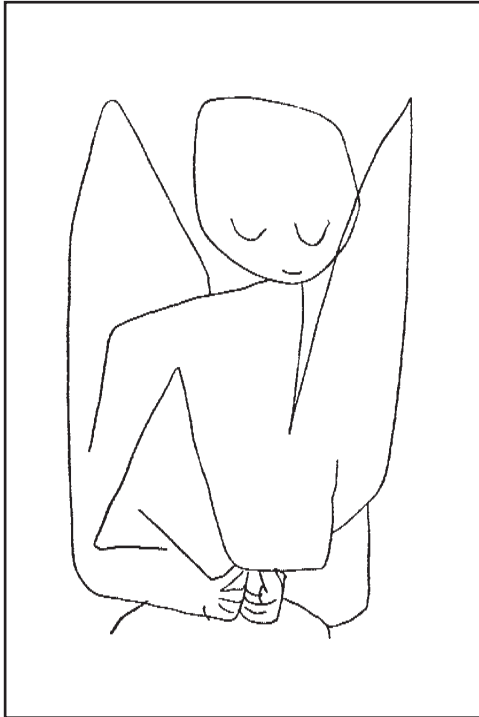


A Small Book on Black



Scars
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B L A C K

Scars

This hollow of dead skin
the size of a coin
centered on my left shin
was a gift from the ocean—
the sharp blade of a shell
tore my leg open
to show the bone that carries me.
This ragged scar on my arm
I earned being introspective
walking in woods—
rusted barbed wire
ripped through my shirt to awaken me.
And the small white arc?
this tiny moon over my left eye?
—appeared from nowhere one day in the mirror.

My body reveals its history.
I would show you
invisible tokens
of sorrow and joy—
grief-scars and love-scars.
I remember crying all day
when my mother was
dying. I remember
Aunt Ruby, who took me in,
lifted me,
and covered my face with kisses.
I ran to the bathroom
and saw in the mirror
the bee-stings of her lipstick.

When I was a boy
I dreamed I could fly.
It was wonderful to soar
over my mother's house

with its locked doors
and shuttered windows!
Dreaming taught me
the body is nothing,
less than nothing,
less than a dream.

This morning I ate the fish
I caught last night.
I laid the fish on the kitchen counter—
an old, scarred, grandfather fish,
rainbow of flesh pale with age,
scales torn and dangling.
With a knife I cut off the head,
slit open the belly.
With my fingers I removed
brown and green entrails,
the tiny heart. From the sink,
the fish's ancient eye watched
as I ran the knife over the body,
the silver scales leaping in air.
I cooked the fish
in my grandfather's iron skillet,
battered and scratched from the years.
The hot oil smoked; the fish sizzled in the pan.
I love my body in the morning,
hunger raging inside me.
The body's hunger is beautiful.
I fill it with the wisdom of fish.
If I could fly, I'd visit my mother
in heaven. I'd hold her angel-hands
in my scarred mortal hands,
and thank her
for giving me the world

The Spoon

Some days I think I need nothing
more in life than a spoon.
With a spoon I can eat oatmeal,
or take the medicine doctors prescribe.
I can swat a fly sleeping on the sill
or pound the table to get attention.
I can point accusingly at God
or stab the empty air repeatedly.
Looking into the spoon's mirror,
I can study my small face in its shiny bowl,
or cover one eye to make half the world
disappear. With a spoon
I can dig a tunnel to freedom,
spoonful by spoonful of dirt,
or waste life catching moonlight
and flinging it into the blackest night.

Shadowboxing

You are the shadow, the shadow is you,
William says as we walk home from the pool
in wet bathing suits, shadowboxing.
It's the sort of thing he says now and then,
a koan, the Zen wisdom of his six-year-old mind.
And of course what he has observed, or rather,
the enlightened perspective he is wont to teach
his increasingly absentminded, unseeing father,
is both true and useful, and I am suddenly ashamed
of the little regard I've had for my own shadow,
constant companion that stretches arms wide across
late afternoon lawns, looms at night on alley walls,
or melts into nothing to hide from the noonday sun.
I would ask him to teach me more, but when we
stop on the corner, waiting to cross with the light,
I look down at the child's shadow beside the man's:
William's small arms hooking and jabbing, two fists
knocking some sense into the darkness of his father's head.

Pirandello's Shirt

In spite of the black mask
and thin black mustache
painted on with magic marker,
I recognized Pirandello
when he climbed through my window,
meowing and curling up at my feet to nap.
Just one or two hunks of cheese,
a slice or two of prosciutto,
and he follows me everywhere
like a starving dog, racing past me
every night on the stairs
like an alley cat
anxious to watch the moon rise.
On the roof I dip some bread in wine—
I'm willing to share—
but his hunger is terrifying,
especially considering the fact
he's been dead fifty years.
We strike a bargain,
nothing to do with charity,
nothing to do with gifts:
I keep my bed,
he sleeps perched like an owl on the garden wall.
On Sunday mornings, he leads me
to the edge of the cliff.
We wait for the lone truck to roar
from the village down to the sea,
where the fishmonger opens his door
and throws dozens of fish back into the water.
Some are frozen in solid blocks
and sink to the bottom
like stones from a temple,
a carved frieze of fish.
Others break free and float on the surface,
glinting like knives.

I tell Pirandello I've never read his plays,
I want to know what he wants,
why he's come back.
If he had some message,
I demand to hear.
I threaten him, make a fist,
grab his shabby suit and shake him
until there's only a black shirt in my hand,
which I put on to fight the chill,
a shirt the color of night,
the shirt that will make me invisible
as I sit here for a thousand years
watching the rituals of hunger,
rituals of life and death,
birds flying, their savage symphony,
the dead caught in their beaks,
the dead hanging from their talons.

The Seal

I keep my vow
not to break
the plastic seal
around the book
I bought in Rome
in the gift shop
of the Villa Borghese,
a study of Bernini's
marble sculptures
of mortals
grappling with gods,
an elegant volume
I carried for months
through Europe,
unopened
in my backpack,
the only thing
I brought home
from my journey,
something beautiful
I believed
could save me,
a book to open
like a locked door
inside my head.
Older now, I know
the absurdity
of my thinking:
a plastic seal
between life and death.
It's foolish,
but for safety
I keep the book—
seal unbroken—
on the nightstand,
always close at hand,
buried for years
under stacks of books
I've opened and know by heart.