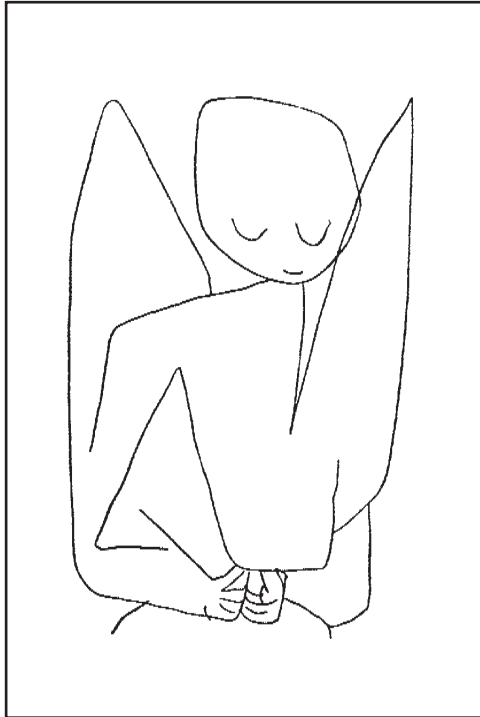


A Small Book on Purple



The Revelation
Roman Ruin
The Letter A
The Key
The Diner

PURPLE

The Revelation

For weeks my labyrinthine walks
took me nowhere— —
Every day,
I crossed countless small bridges.
Every day,
I disappeared down narrow passageways.

I had done nothing
to deserve it,
and yet it came to me nonetheless
in Venice,
of all places,
one night as I lay awake
by a threadlike canal
in the tiny Hotel Albergo.

It was like being born,
or being born again,
or dying into life.
I have no words for it.
Call it what you will.

I left the room
before dawn.
The wide lagoon—
in morning shadow—
lay empty and still.
Tied to mooring posts,
empty gondolas
black as coffins
waited in silken water
to convey the living
under the Bridge of Sighs.

When the day's first vaporetto came,

I paid and I did not look back.
I did not muse on the story of Venice,
nor imagine the story that might come next.

I knew only the sun
rising over a city of islands
cast diamonds on the water,
and the windows of the palazzos were shining.
And I knew those golden windows
truly were windows and could see
because each one held me
and knew my heart.

Roman Ruin

To repair the fallen empire of the mind,
I'd like to spend a few days
at the Raphael

in the little Roman hotel's
quiet library,
reading book after book

devoted to the city
of eternal beauty,
its ruins and catacombs,

the history of Caesars
and lives of saints.
With my finger tracing words

I'd revel in Trastevere
or lie in the Protestant Cemetery
among graves of poets.

I'd lose myself in paintings
as I toured the Vatican's
endless hallways page by page,

or lingered over renderings
of the last judgment
on the Sistine Chapel's vaulted ceiling.

Chapter by chapter,
I'd note the pleasures of dining
on the Via Veneto,

the serenity of
the Tiber, the view from
the Palatine....

In the Hotel Raphael,
left alone
undisturbed in the library

and surrounded by books,
I'd read everything
that's been written about Rome,

and content
in my disrepair,
I'd never need to travel

beyond the lobby's fresh flowers
and open doors
to see a ruin for myself.

The Letter A

*achluophobia, acrophobia, autophobia,
anthrophobia, apeirophobia, atephobia,
aulophobia, astraphobia....*

As a child I suffered
from fear of the dark,
but not from the fear of heights—

I loved climbing ladders
to sit on a rooftop,
leaping from high cliffs
into pools of still water,
or swinging from a vine
from one tree to the next.

Nor did I fear being alone;
like Wordsworth, I
welcomed the solitude
of a tiny room
or wild summer woods;
and looking back, I'm grateful
my soul had ample seedtime.

I had no fear of flowers;
as a child I imagined
nothing more wonderful
than contemplating infinity,
enthralled,
sitting on a hillside in bloom.
Had I feared the infinite,
could I have become a poet?

And because I did not fear
a building's collapse
or sweet music filling the air,
I loved ruins and flutes.

It's true:
fear of the dark
scarred me forever,
but that was a great blessing.
The compassion that fills my heart
for anyone crippled
by thunder and lightning
is unbounded—
unbounded as night
sundered by great rolling peals of thunder
and night
hewn by lightning.

The Key

This is my key to happiness,
the key to my room
in the *Hotel du Paradis*.
The tireless Algerian
keeps the key behind the bar all day
to return to me at midnight
when I climb the narrow, winding stairs
with my pounding heart and loneliness.
The Algerian calls out *bonne nuit*;
I struggle with the broken lock.
A flimsy door, I could kick it down,
but when I am patient,
when, in my quietest voice,
I say *please*
it opens
and lets me in.
I turn on the light
and there is the cell of my dreary room—
the unmade bed, the open suitcase,
pitcher of stale water on the table.
I unlatch the window
and lean into the night
above torches of countless street lamps
and wild cars carving the boulevards
with blades of rushing lights.
I pray to the moon
rising above dark steeples,
ask the moon to translate for stars
listening unseen
beyond the city's dazzling lights.
Night after night,
sitting in my window, hungry and tired,
or pacing back and forth before my desk,
I have come to love
the one dim bulb

dangling from the ceiling on a thin black cord.
I have come to trust
the smallest illumination,
the tiniest omen,
wallpaper peeling away
to reveal origins and mysteries,
the hotel's ten thousand ghosts
and the sickly-sweet perfume of their bodies.
I've learned to write or read
to the music of motorcycles
roaring down tangled streets
or to fall asleep
long after midnight
to singing on sidewalks below.
Locking my door,
I turn out the light
to the distant wailing of sirens,
sit on my bed and consider my key,
a silver key with a worn yellow tag
the yellow of a dying daffodil,
room number 8 in red,
symbol of infinity
and my lucky number.
I've begun to believe
in the numerology of my birth—
August 8, '53—
three 8's in a row,
three affirmations
I will live forever.
I put the key under my pillow,
lie down,
cross my arms on my chest
and feel my beating heart
promising everything
if only I can wait until morning
when I wake
to the wild music

of all the city's church bells,
when I open my door
and lock it behind me,
when I bound down the winding stairs
that rush to the street,
to flower shops and cafes,
to the parks and river
and every stranger waiting
to ask my name
and greet me with a kiss—
all this,
my heart promises,
tomorrow,
after I've turned out the light
and slept on the narrow bed,
after I've awakened
and returned the key
to the smiling Algerian,
who waits behind the bar each morning
with my hunk of bread and my coffee,
my sugar and my cream.

The Diner

The short-order cook and the dishwasher
argue the relative merits
of Rilke's *Elegies*
against *Eliot's Four Quartets*,
but the delivery man who brings eggs
suggests they have forgotten *Les fleurs
du mal* and Baudelaire. The waitress
carrying three plates and a coffee pot
can't decide whom she loves more—
Rimbaud or Verlaine,
William Blake or William Wordsworth.
She refills the rabbi's cup
(he's reading Rumi),
asks what he thinks of Arthur Whaley.
In the booth behind them, a fat woman
feeds a small white poodle in her lap,
with whom she shares her spoon.
"It's Rexroth's translations of the Japanese,"
she says, "that one can't live without:
*May those who are born after me
Never travel such roads of love.*"
The revolving door proffers
a stranger in a long black coat,
lost in the madhouse poems of John Clare.
As he waits to be seated,
the woman who owns the place
hands him a menu
in which he finds several handwritten poems
By Hafiz, Gibran, and Rabindranath Tagore.
The lunch hour's crowded—
the owner wonders
if the stranger might share
my table. As he sits,
I put a finger to my lips,
and with my eyes ask him

to listen with me
to the young boy and the young girl
two tables away
taking turns reading aloud
the love poems of Pablo Neruda.