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Author

Karlsson, Stefan

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THE MISSING LAMP

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

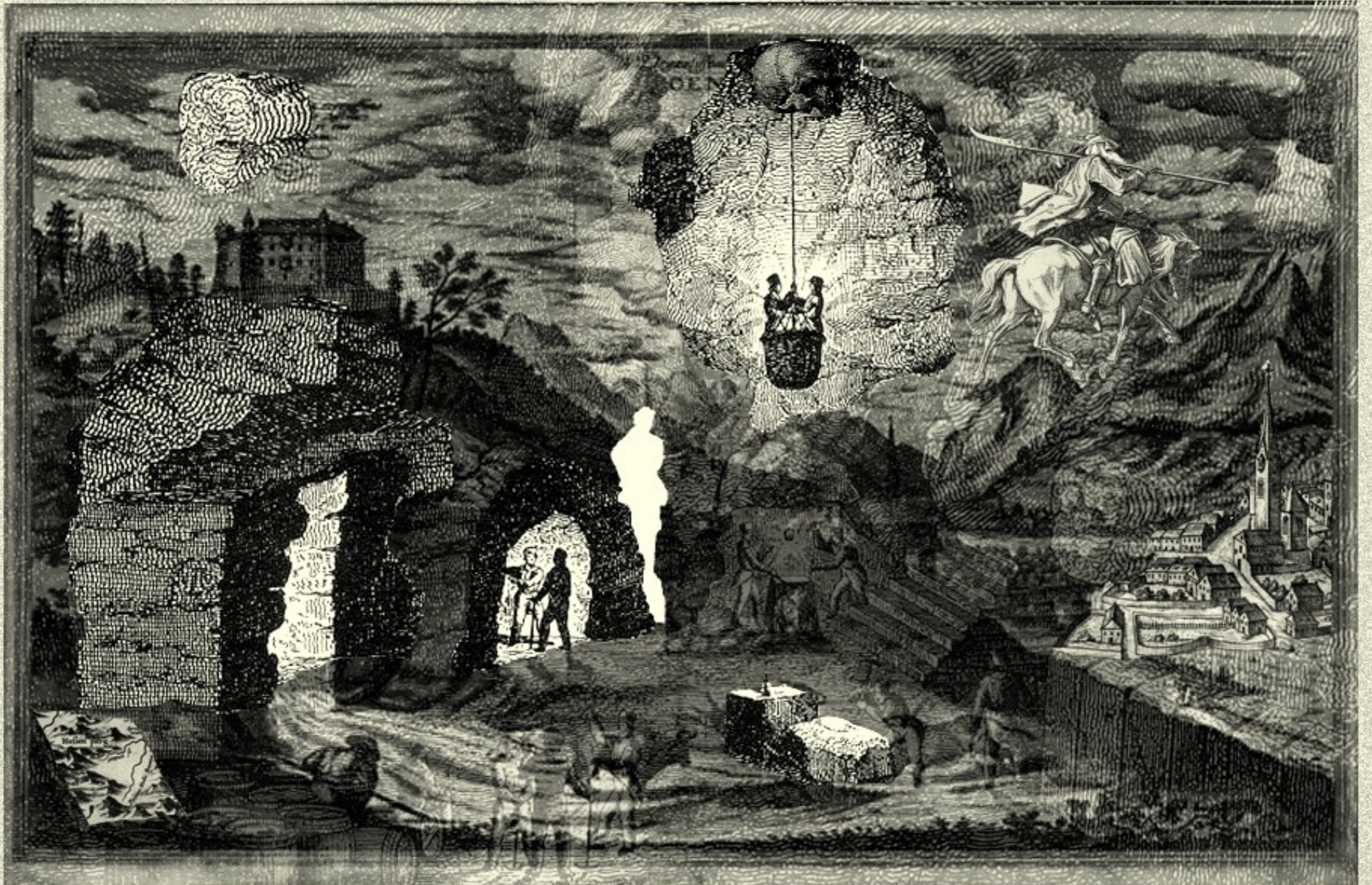
BY

STEFAN KARLSSON

ADVISOR: STEPHEN YENSER

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The Missing Lamp

By
Stefan Karlsson

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PREFACE

i

I too
to appear. It was, no doubt, the
for winter. I remember
set out
a simple martyr
golden hair
to leave
no richer than
my little book

W. R. D.

Paris, May, 1922.



□ Julien Torma
circa 1922.

*Preface*¹

. . . worst intentions. Your self-centeredness, which has exceeded Christ-like dimensions, sickens me. Every word in your letter, even those on the most trivial business concerns, seemed magnetized to point directly back to your apotheosis. Your thinking finds its footing in an intellectual snare: “I think, therefore you care.”

Now as I said, I’m not writing to chastise you, but to explain my motives for writing you. I have enclosed fresh hogwash of mine. I was in Tyrol writing this book for several friends who have been extraordinarily generous to me—needless to say, you are not among them—when I stumbled upon the awkward realization that the most memorable action of my life was Rimbaud’s decision to quit poetry once and for all. I saw that I might likewise walk out of the text of my poems, but into what, I still wonder.

What we know: If a book wants to stay alive it must keep its secrets. I assure you no magic carpet will pull itself from under you in this book:

¹ Editor’s Note: This letter was sent to me in a bundle with a manuscript of poems by my friend, the poet Stefan Karlsson. Unfortunately, I regret to say that the first page of this letter was misplaced. The rest of the text is presented unaltered and without editorial intrusion.

- 1) I have never lived in nor visited nor traveled through Tyrol, the setting for a number of these poems. It offered itself to me as a white page on the globe.
- 2) The Goddess that weighs heavily on the minds of the Tyroleans, according to a few of the aforementioned poems, is an invention, though I'm not sure whose.
- 3) Your poet friend, Julien Torma, alluded to throughout these irrelevancies with unabashed intimacy, I have only met once, and in passing.

Now that there are no more secrets between us, I will tell you how I met your friend: My company descended from a hike over the Tiernjoch, a cruel brute of a mountain, like the throne of the Creator—as Lautréamont describes it—a heap of gold and excrement topped with his bucket of basted brains, or rather, more true to scale, like a pustule on this Creator's monstrous face, and we came into a valley with a pretty lake. The scene we saw looked like a model kit of the scene we should have seen: the lake as still as a corpse, isolated bursts of green, and a chalet near the lake's head. I had never seen such an exemplary lake as Lake Tiernsee.

On its plasma screen surface, as reflected storm clouds tussled about like drowning seamen pulling one another under to perpetuate themselves, and even as a troupe of schoolgirls exited the chalet in queue—their steps synchronized as if set to war drums—and removed their skirts, their shirts, and knee-high socks and jumped in, each of them gurgling with virginity and with no adult supervision, which in hindsight seems perfectly careless of their headmistress, for one of them pretended to drown a younger girl but in her excitement was actually doing it, the idiot, so heedless of others—you might take note—until an older girl, evidently the prefect, scolded her for her stupidity, which this dimwitted little diva dismissed by flopping out of the water like a looped fish and stomping away from the chalet in the direction of a stranger who

stood watching in the distance, and even as I rebuked myself for thinking of these girls as possessing “virginity,” as if that was a mark of their value as people, nothing life-like seemed to happen, that is, if life is like that, a TV screen with nothing on.

Here I am being needlessly literary for a letter you will eagerly discard. The bus is nearly at my stop now. Will continue writing when I reach my apartment—

I’d like to interpolate here some words on my own biography, since I suspect that you have forgotten who I am, and indeed that people other than yourself exist. Please excuse my intrusion:

For ten years I withdrew from contact with my family and friends and settled in a mountain cave, where each day I lamented, ‘Someday I will find real solitude and I will finally think my life through,’ until I discovered that the world—by which I mean the collective of all people, dead and alive, in it—felt the same way, which filled me with an unspeakable rage at the uniformity of the human face: its boring eyes and useless eyebrows, its idiotic mouth and cheeks and chin, but most of all its nose, that throne of stupid desire. I returned to Los Angeles, where I vowed to kill myself as soon as I completed my magnum opus, which was to be a compendium of my grievances against humanity. I lived invisibly for forty years, until I died peacefully in my sleep, my tome open at my bedside with a dried-up pen on the page. My literary executor took the manuscript of my lifework—which he evidently valued as much as himself—with him on a solitary hike into the mountains and was never seen again.

These are, of course, juvenile fantasies, which I hope you will pass on when this book comes to naught. I added the last sentence about you as an afterthought, but I thought you might like to use it. Is it Romantic enough for you?

This may be the opportune moment to mention that I was joking about meeting Julien Torma, but you know as well as I he never existed—he was just as much an invention as any Tyrolese Goddess. So you are not perturbed by this.

Now back to my purpose, how I *thought* I met him:

The headmistress Ms. B—— finished giving me the grand tour of the Chalet School. Ms. B had taken it upon herself to launch this school for girls after her parents died mysteriously. Once she set her mind on a project, she said, she would not be dissuaded from her purpose. Otherwise, she was a charming young lady, with a sharp sense of humor. For instance, when foreigners made a cultural faux pas or unwittingly publicized their embarrassing foibles, as when this little English girl upset the German hairdresser by mistakenly asking for *holy* water rather than *hot* water—these were the japes she liked best.

It was love at first sight for us—though, in fact, I had met her once before, but only in passing, in Innsbruck, the wrong side of town, an encounter best left unmentioned. She suggested we elope, but I pointed out that it was stormy, and it would be a hassle to change mailing addresses.

“Why don’t you stay on here at the Chalet School as a tutor for the girls?” she asked me. “Then I won’t have to lose you.”

“I’ll never leave you,” I promised her, more serious than I had ever been in my life.

It was decided. I took to investigating her bookshelves, to approximate the limits of my imagination in this place where I was now a permanent resident. Ever since I was a boy I've had an eye for the books I shouldn't read, which I liked to ascribe to my upbringing in a Catholic household, but which I now realize is more likely due to my own vulgar taste. Perhaps that is why I was instantly drawn to those three slim paperback volumes piled on the bottom row of leather-bound classics. Three books: *Le Grande Troche*, *Coupures*, and *Euphorismes*, all written by one Julien Torma. I asked my love why she had these books in her possession.

"The last tutor left them," she said. "He wrote them. I thought they might help the girls practice their French, but their content was questionable."

Why would he leave these three books and not the fourth in Torma's bibliography, his first publication, *La Lampe obscure*?

"One morning he said he needed to go for a walk," she said. "He picked up one of his books and said he was taking it with him 'to love his boredom.' He never came back . . . That was a full week ago."

I rose and grabbed my coat: "Ms. B, I must leave to find this man at once." This was my chance to uncover a literary mystery, the anomaly, Torma, the author who never lived to write his published works.

"He will be many leagues away by now," she warned me. "It will be a perilous journey through the Alps. You will have to be well prepared, for the terrain, the storm, and your encounter."

She gave me a backpack and loaded it with a blanket, a pair of sweats and thermal underwear, a map and a compass, a can of radishes, a tent in a can, a book about astronomy, a

book about astrology, a book of wet matches, postage, parchment, a pocketknife, a pistol with one bullet, a pair of trick dice, a thermos with hot water, a flask of holy water, and a zither. I thanked her and when she turned around I stealthily discarded these items out the window and tossed my original array into the pack: a copper axe, snowshoes, a frustrating firestarting kit including flint and pyrite, two species of polypore mushrooms, a jar of bilberries and strawberries, a quiver of fourteen arrows and a bow, and a flint-knife tucked in a sheath. I wanted to undertake my quest the right way.

Lightning threw the countryside in spasms onto the retinae, and thunder beat me on the head, a caveman's club. The land before me throbbed as if the Creator, writhing in bed with a toothache, cursed his invention of teeth, of the mouth, of the world. I bid my love farewell and prepared my soul for the long, directionless journey ahead. As I left the Chalet School in the direction of the lake, I caught glimpses of a man standing at the water's edge, a book in his hand, though how he read a word in such darkness I have no clue. I approached him and realized it was the same stranger I'd seen by the lake that afternoon when the girls played in the water. His glowing face was instantly recognizable, those limpid eyes, that smirk too infamous to be insincere. The book he held was none other than Torma's text *La Lampe obscure*. I introduced myself and commenced my sleuthing.

"I was just visiting the girls' school. Are you familiar with it?"

"Yes," he said. "I taught there not long ago."

"Indeed, I have filled your post. I see you have a literary inclination, as do I. What are you reading, if I may ask?" I asked.

He smirked and boldly replied, “It is a collection of poems of my own composition.”

That was all I needed to hear. I bid him farewell and took to the foothills. This man was clearly an impostor, a con man, a plagiarist, a forger, etc. He was not Torma. Torma would never have claimed his works as his own, let alone taken pride in them, even if he had authored them. This was deeply perplexing to me that this man might fool unsuspecting people by thus misrepresenting himself. I walked on with no aim in the dark, until it occurred to me I had been unconsciously following a pathway of light that stretched ahead of me. I now hurried to reach it to see where it would lead me, but my vision was so obscured I couldn't see that it was a reflection of the barely visible moon on the lake, that is, I didn't see what it was until my feet plunged knee-deep into the water. I'd evidently gone in a circle. There I was, a fool who had fallen for this optical trick, as if following some heavenly trail would have led me away from my anxiety. But as I looked on I remembered the ruminations of Calvino's Mr. Palomar, that everyone similarly beholds this illusion of reflected moonlight remaining always ahead of them, no matter how they move along the water's edge, the light therefore not on the water's surface but in each person's head, as if this light belonged to every individual and not to no one. I'm no fool. I knew that the light nonetheless exists independent of any person, which means this universal yet individual ownership of the phenomenon is itself the illusion upheld by the ego.

I thus came to a conclusion regarding the enclosed poems, which is the matter of this long-winded letter, that being that my name would be an obtrusive addition to my works. I realized that the name Julien Torma could be a placeholder for this idea of an author, that poets could continue to publish under that name, consecrate their work to this tabernacle of poetry, so

that their words would not only represent, but physically be the flesh and blood of this unknowable, unborn, universal person. Isidore Ducasse, not his Comte de Lautréamont, wrote, “I will leave no memoirs,” to prevent his life from interfering with his art. Though I leave you this letter and these poems, I attach no name to them. They may very well be the musings of anyone. I have never met the person who wrote them.

You will undoubtedly find this undertaking absurd and pointless, but as my executor, it is in your power alone to ensure that my authorial intention, which I hereby revoke, is adhered to. Take my will as you will.

Hope all's well. I'm itching for travel as I close the books on this too-long phase of my life. I feel the Tiernjoch calling me. I will forward you my address if I have one. Consider my cell phone dead and my internet presence a ghost. I must find some new way to communicate.

With much love, yours,

“Julien Torma”

April 6, 2013

THE MISSING LAMP



Westwood Blvd.

For K. D.

Climbing the Tyrolean Mountains, Julien Torma, ‘pataphysical poet and nonexistent nihilist,
Dismissed himself
As just contemporary. Perhaps he expected a literary death would suffice to earn him fame,
But I suspect his legacy, too,
Was no more to him than a mountaintop view, a peek into a “façade of a façade, behind which
There is nothing.”
Pretty phrasing, but gloomy, isn’t it? It’s too soothing, believing you’re the only soul who feels
The way you do. I’m nothing
Like Torma, I know. I’m penniless, in love. Still I feel for the ‘mad’ ones who need their fictions,
Don’t you?

Walking Westwood, I check my iPhone at the corner as a jogger checks her pulse, neither of us
More alive. Well, I’m
Hungover, “lost in so many screens that I am seeing screens appear behind my eyes,” on my way
To BofA before it closes at 2.
It’s past 1:30, but the cars on Wilshire stream like a stock market ticker as they leak the stink of
Gasoline, and all is new,
Because I’m drunk. I need the help of a human being, a screen won’t do: My card was declined
When I purchased our liquor,
And the “invisible hand” is pushy. Did the surrealists who summoned Torma unconsciously
Savor Smith’s metaphor?
I’m sorry if this is obscure to you, like the names of my friends you don’t know when I text you
To tell you what I’m up to.

How could you know my grandfather was a banker in Trinidad? The unknown details weigh in,
Then amount to nothing
But this—Torma’s point, our bios ring untrue to life. The tellers at BofA work like caricatures of
Characters you’d expect to see,
Which is the ecstasy of being drunk in public, to see the façade made flesh, and this flesh unreal,
Unlike yours
This morning as your sleeping face consoled me, showed me I’m more than the banana peel I’m
Slipping on. I’m the meat of
My love, spread over the pure surface of things. There’s something romantically mechanical in
Writing out of such exhaustion.

Back on the Boulevard, a real deus ex machina, Pedro calls *me* to offer a ride home. I gratefully
Decline. I want time to sit with
Myself at Saffron Ice Cream across the street from DEATH, written in red letters on Ramen's
Black window. (In lieu of
Their façade they've erected another.) What private myths we bring into being, or renew. Here
The Goddess I
Envisioned dwindles into vagueness at its conception, the unnatural result of misconception, of
Thought's elision.
Thought wants to spring fully armored from speech. Torma, echoing the mandrill's skeptical
Cackle, strolls back
Into Eden, without arousing the angel's interest, or suspicion. I'm counting on you to text today,
To name the particulars
That populate your vision. My face in the storefronts, this familiar street belongs to no one.
Here, now it's yours, ours.

All Hallows' Eve

I shoo away two zombies
on this silliest of holidays.
I need to lighten up.
Weren't the dead made
to jolt us living into action?
I need to clean my apartment
before Friday, All Souls' Day,
when Kathryn will pay me
a visit. Bread crumbs soil
the dining mats. My bed
sheets need to be washed
of their inexplicable stains.
I will have to have washed
myself several times by then.
She'll say I smell "so clean."

The living room is aglow,
though not with a light
of its own, like a love you know
you shouldn't trust, but do,
since you don't want to be
a vacant, unlit room.
My roommate's laugh
from the living room
reminds me what I'm doing
isn't what I need to do.
But shouldn't Jimmy
Schuyler make me better
at being human? He writes,
"What is a / poem, anyway."
A question that is its answer.
I might say, What keeps me
from maturing into a monster
as I make my soul monstrous?
I somehow know better,
that the soul's an idea, but I,
you—we really hurt each other.

My roommate's TV is aglow
 with talk show hosts: Katie Couric
 explains to Jay Leno
 the concept of YOLO. Yes,
 this world persists. Plus,
 she describes it all wrong,
 says it's "a bucket list."
 It would appear death alone
 traps us, that death is
 somewhere outside us
 like a foreign country, or
 rather like a tourist in our
 foreign country, while
 we, somehow inside our-
 selves, freely germinate.

The idea glimmers before me
 like my face, now lit
 and reflected by the TV,
 so unlike Cézanne's still lifes,
 those apples that reach out
 and pick you from the gallery.
 I'd like to see them now,
 if their picture on a screen
 didn't spoil their reality.
 If only I could leave the country
 without setting foot in another.
 Even vacating the apartment
 means stepping *into* the air
 of this quiet October.

There is no vacating
 the poem. I pay it a visit
 momentarily, as a foreigner,
 then remember I've lived here
 before, in fact I've lived here
 all along. It leads me out the door
 and down a road I'd never noticed
 to a stranger's dark home,
 where it bids me ring the bell.
 The door creaks open
 and a masked man greets me.
 I'm not unafraid of him

or myself, for my face is masked,
too, but the man reaches out to me
with a fistful of candy,
removes his costume, and
Oh! It's my old roommate
from college. We laugh and
he invites me in for drinks
and tells me all I've missed
in the years I haven't seen him.
Heading home the way I came,
I can feel my face glowing.
Funny, I used to hate that guy,
but now—what was his name?
I crawl into my bed and think,
Who is this poem, anyway.

Not Enough

My friend watched a snuff film.
But that was a long time ago,
he tells me. Tomorrow he'll fly
off to boot camp, bless his
manly soul. Tonight

we're driving through the hills
where our rich friend lived
before the fire burnt his dad's
mansion down. The flames left their mark
along the road, but we can't
see the damage in the dark.

I tell him about a pornstar I liked
who they found stuffed in a duffel bag.
He nods and drives, as if that was life.
It's a brutal industry, growing up.

An eternal flame burns in the park
(I never knew it) for the soldiers
from our town. My friend slows down
and we look. We're so hungry it hurts.
Fuck the suburbs, and with that, we go
get burgers.

We've had good times in parking lots,
and tonight's no different, despite
morning lumbering toward us.
I stumble to a dumpster
and when I chuck my bag
it rips and chunks of
meat and fries fly all over,

and I remember my dad
used to brag he once rode his friend's
motorcycle deep into the mountains
out of LA's sight. My father,
the lawyer, who cusses

at the weather, who grumbles
about money, who always picks me up
when I need a ride home.

Julien Torma Returns
from the Mounts of Tyrol

Your “cruel” Tiernjoch, here is the mountain
of mayhem where our adventure
began. A failed project, I trailed off into
its outset, your beloved star turned collapsar.
I was a poor guide. I never misled you.

You granted me my only life. You cared.

Damn you. Now I will speak with the dead
certainty of the peasant who holds
dear his daily milk and radish on such
arcana as would cripple a more
love-groomed, loathsome poet.

Nothing, gloriously starlit, comes to mind,
the trembling beauty of a safe abortion.
I assure you, I’m a breathing plagiarism,
too, packed, no, packaged with more platitudes
than friends to tell them to. Believe nothing

I don’t say. I’m the iceman haunting cinema.
I write myself *à mort*: “It’s a coarse coat of frieze,
but it keeps one warm.” Our Last Knight
dawned upon the land he loved to blot out
chamois from the hills with unmatched skill.

Thus I return to void my mark—“Ha ha!”
quoth the mandrill, for the sake of change,
and rightly so. You see, I hate waiting
in movies for life to start again; I loathe
the cold of learning of another person;

I can’t write a word if it’s poetry. Hell hath
its Eden, too, no doubt. Now with the sweet
honesty of the peasant who carves his face
into a dying Christ’s likeness, I’ll cut my spiel
on such pieties I couldn’t cut with diamond.

Grant me one life more, for example.

Tyrol's dead rise up everyday
to squabble for space in a schoolgirl's book.
You living give your lives to preserve an alibi.
Mandrills, too, "must love one another or die."
The good Tyrolese wisely play dead.

To People of Considerable Taste, Good or Bad

My advice to you is *get boring*. This is not helpful, perhaps, if you've got a jot of humanity. Wilde, at ease on the divan that he bought for naught, died of an interior design complaint. He went outside himself thus. All the Greeks on his shelf had died, leaving only their souls (if you believe in such *stuff*) to complain they'd had enough of people leaving this world to that tasteless herd that mocks the gods. Take these immortals, at odds with our worldly views, as models, and you will lose everything, too, except the newness of your point of view. This matters, you'd think. My reflection, now, flatters my face. My double does or does not replace my soul: a matter of taste. The thought's attraction lasts as long as my beard remains stubble. Then I'm bored. My taste in boring death matches my fondness for woodgrain flooring. Listen, the air stiffens my little hairs, warns *never get boring*. Thunder thrills the earth. No wonder, it's all mouth and no tongue.

In Others' Words

"I'm an impostor," I tell my wife
as I cook her eggs this morning,
just as that night on our honeymoon
I gave her the same warning

when our ski lift neared the summit
in that idyllic Alpine resort.
I said, "My words are not my own.
I'm a state implanted consort:

I perpetuate a false ideology
with every innocuous word
to those near me." But she didn't hear me,
or she had no ear for the absurd.

When I wrote her a poem our first Christmas
then unwrapped the source of my forgery
she said she admired the effort
I put into being ornery.

"Sunny side up," she orders
as I finish scrambling her eggs.
She's a talking head, the open *LA Times*
concealing her torso and covered up legs.

"There's an article, the three reasons
we're at war," she says. "Have you heard?"
"Do tell," I say. "First, greed. Second,
hypocrisy." She pauses. "The third?"

"You don't deserve to hear the third,"
she says as I serve her eggs, all ready.
"I love you," I tell her. "I know,"
she sighs. "I've heard that already."



Stefan Karlsson, *Map of Tyrol*

The Maps App

Land lies pale and flat on, or under, the screen.
 The altitudes of the Tyrolean Alps, home to the glacier
 where they found Ötzi, the mummy, are textured,
 vaguely, and green. In Westwood, if you drag the screen
 along the boulevard, ghosts of familiar buildings
 spring from the land. It's the new 3D simulator.
 Is mapping still in progress, or do mappers at Apple cater
 to metro hubs where Apple's plotted its buildings?

Pinch your favorite street and it shrinks away from view.
 Even as you zoom out, the businesses in Redlands
 remain distinctly labeled, with icons to map their functions,
 while your home in little neighboring Highland lies
 somewhere among the blankness, as if a blanket of snow
 swept your inch of California. Is it a comfort to know
 they can't place you, or is that hell, being unaccounted for?
 Who's asking? The Tyrolean country, which bleeds
 into Italy and Austria, is marked by a meager pinprick,
 which proves the mappers pick their myths, as you do.
 Your search for the Ötzi Monument yields no results.
 The overlooked landmark marks a lifetime undiscovered:
 the remains remain removed, his name never recovered.

The map prompts you, you're still here, a throbbing
 blue dot. It beckons: *Are you in need of directions,*
or is it enough to see me surround you in all directions?
 You are here because satellites, probing
 the earth's surface from above the earth's sky,
 divined it so. Four of them, flung apart, triangulate your position.
 But have you left a mark as you copy "The Map"? Your position
 on iPhones given, you're still in the map's (but *whose?*) eye.

Ötzi the Iceman

One must hold one's thoughts to a glacial pace
to notice the body heat of passengers thaws
the belly of the bus in wake of the unforeseen storm,

and have been warmed to the bone
to feel the rumble of the bus's engine,
whose thudding rhythm alerts the senses

to their being present, and to thus presume
the swaying sidewalk trees beyond the glass
rustle as the bus goes past, their dumbness

an overdubbing of the mind's muteness
as it lurches home minding its business
among like-minded commuters, reaches

its stop, where icy air grips the rider, holds him
to his homeward route, that road where he is
a body cloaked in ice with no name fixed to face.

O Li Po

I've offered you your wine,
My Illustrious Mengfu-tzu.
My friends, Grand Master Chin
And T'an-chiu, can't refuse.

Omei's Harvest Moon is wan.
Open the Heavenly Gate, Illustrious Lord
Of Forty Forts. Men wane, friends love.
Here, I've offered you wine.

Don't refuse your disciple, Master
Meng. If openly offered Heaven, why
Stop at the moon? "Ah, but after
You're drunk you can't hit the sky."

True Story

I walked into a bar early one afternoon wanting to drink a beer alone when I saw my friend Jake arguing with Julien Torma over which of them made better line breaks in their poems.

Jake gestured to me. “You told me this man never existed,” he said. “You said he was a literary hoax. But he’s here and he’s an ass.”

“Yes,” said Torma, with a smirk. “I write plays that make no sense so I can laugh at my actors and audience alike. It was rude of you to assume my feelings are less real than yours.”

I spoke up: “Perhaps, but I still believe you were invented by a group of ‘pataphysical writers—Queneau, Sainmont, Vian, Daumal, maybe more. You don’t seem worried about their feelings.”

Jake intervened. “You owe him an apology.”

I considered it for a minute, then said, “Didn’t Queneau write a story about a talking donkey that loiters around a bar, but no one wants to hear what it has to say?”

“Shut up,” said Torma. “How dare you insult me like that? Anyways, it was a horse, not a donkey. And I’m a man, not a horse, and certainly not a poet.”

He stormed out into the street, where the bright golden air of the nothing-new day erased him from our view.

Jake and I had some beers, said words concerning our breaking up of lines and relationships, then shook hands and prepared ourselves to face the real worlds we had no clue about yet, our lives, unwritten, constrained by text.

Macqueripe Beach

[*Trinidad*]

Dead center in the bay the boys dig up the cannon.
Upon further inspection, a pipeline, which they abandon
at once. That's the magic of oil in this Mouth of the Dragon:

it disappears if you look away, slippery as the crabs
that steal from hole to hole as a diver's hand grabs
at sand. One of the boys, no doubt the one flexing his "abs."

Great, now they're throwing rocks at the fortress
walls, which are really trees, the forest
cradling the shallows like an ouroboros

with its head cut off, or the water caught in a chokehold.
Not even Papa Bois, the goat-footed local,
can tame these boys, here on the island of aunts and uncles.

All but one believe that distant blur is Venezuela.
(It is.) Deserting land to join the bay, he wants to sail a
galleon to that mirage that glimmers like a gala

of inverted mermaids, their upper bodies the fishy
parts, the princess winking a fisheye at him, or is she
crying so hard her lidless eyes are itchy?

It's decided, he will be the boy that gets himself stranded
and likes it. But now he returns to play bandits.
Pops talks to a neighbor about the island's good habits

falling apart: "Mustn't pull over to help. . .too insecure."
His boys chase a peccary, the assassin (it does look sinister).
"It's peaceful here," says the neighbor, a noted Trini cricketer.

Anonymous Letter

At every street corner
during my morning walk
a young unknown girl stops me
to tell me—hello how are you?

It's eight o'clock in the summer morning.
A single bird pierces this exhumed city silence.
In this adorable landscape of human interest stories
of *crime passionnel*
of stray bullets in the draperies
of fingerprints nearly everywhere
only a barefoot child confronts the day's ambush

—How are you
—How are you
—How are you

Let's accept the caresses of overly ambitious thoughts.

Julien Torma (1925)

A Visitation

After Max Jacob

Did my neighbor die, mere feet above, in our sleep
or did he (or she) cease being weeks ago, skiing
down the Tyrolean Alps, down a slope overly steep?

At any rate, his (or her) wifi network's down.
I'm left to my maps of Northern Italy, or their
facsimiles, left like a count to imagine my town

nestled against my mountain, from my castle.
Why would anyone tap at my door? *Is it you,*
Lord? Through the eyehole I see a fragile

thing, this disfigured person, this face, more surface
than skin, dripping. It slips its business card
under the gap: "The Melting Man, at your service."

Come in, sir. But the damn door's jammed shut.
Come round the porch. . . Oh, the window's stuck,
too. The man leans on the screen, his gut

oozing through. *Can I help?* He shrugs
as if to slough off my chagrin. *I'll break the glass,*
come in. In! But no, he's breaking free, his slug's

eyes drooping, raptly. "The Molting Man,
in your surmise," I now realize it reads.
Molting Men, rather. We peruse each other, scan

the lines on our brows, and browse. And rapture?
Shouldn't we abstract it from this departure?
I went on one way before our encounter. And after?

A Man with Spleen Complains

Now this last part was weird as the word “phallus” in the mouth
of a lady you just met and kinda fancy. But before my mind goes south
I swear this cashier was dressed in a carnival costume
and even that couldn’t hide her split tooth. Her golden ostrich plume
headdress accentuated her flat chest, her bikini skewed
a little. Bland, but not unpretty. I told her I was looking for a particular cat food,
but I couldn’t remember what. “Well tell me about your cat,” she said
in a way that made an impossibly thin condom, and an eerily hairy earlobe, appear in my head.
“Miss,” I said, “my cat’s grown wise. He has refined taste. He doesn’t fall for false advertising.
And he certainly won’t eat that processed shit.” My temper was surprising.
She asked if my cat by chance was “bound” to a wheelchair.
“Oh,” I said, “well, perhaps.” Either she didn’t notice her faux pas, or she didn’t care.
Goddammit, my cat was dead. All its life I’d killed it with kindness,
but I killed it nonetheless. I apologized for being shy. Next

I told her how my grandfather had once played hooky from work.
“That was in Sweden,” I added, but regretted it, because she looked hurt.
I wanted to be a gentleman, so I handed her my handkerchief.
“I’m sorry, it’s just a coincidence,” she said. “My granny was also prone to mischief—
One day she played hooky and lost her job. And she was the *Queen* of Sweden.
Look here’s a picture.” Sure enough on the Queen’s kneaded lap, there to deepen
my guilt, sat my dead cat. I thought we were finished with this silly cat business.
I now saw she took me for a fool. “Nonsense,” she sniveled, instead of asking for forgiveness.
But hell itself seemed to be at work in her. So I shut up. I led her down the aisle
and pointed out some quality brands, in cans. She paused, as if expectant, then smiled
and carried her choices to the register. I checked her out, she left. I confess
I miss her. She left as if I’d never even loved her. Says my Boss, “It takes even less.”

Working Poem

I'm sick today but I'm here at work
 in the library mailroom nonetheless
 and loving it. Today's so gracious
 for once the idea of another poem
 isn't what's making me nauseous.
 The weighty books I have to send
 feel springy in their pouches. I say hello
 how are you to strangers who come
 and go, and to my coworkers, whom I
 should know better. I suspect they think
 they're in on my shtick, though
 one friend here was surprised to hear
 I'd done a reading, that such things
 took place in our day, but never mind—
 my philosophy is alrightness,
 and why shouldn't that include politeness
 if it gives someone a moment's respite
 and let's me disappear for a minute?
 Now the mailman strides in jubilant
 because the score was 3 to 1,
 and my boss is pissed because he was dying
 to watch the damn thing but here he is.
 Small talk, cough drops, hard of hearing
 patrons with headphones oozing bad music—
 I change my mind. I'd rather be at home.
 I'd prefer not to write this poem
 anymore, which reminds me how Breton
 erased text when his writing "wasn't
 automatic enough," and how Lautréamont
 wrote for none to understand, but to develop
 his thought, two examples that lead me
 to knowing nothing of what comes next.
 I must be a failure, an incomplete one, to write
 in such absolutes and say nothing of Absolute's
 brother, Nothing, as if every poem wasn't
 a love poem to death. In Ashbery's words,
 "it's a never ending getting closer,"
 this asymptotic death, whose sole
 symptom is I always sense the never-

ending closing in on me. I'm kidding no one:
A burnt cup of coffee concerns me more
than my soul being roasted to perfection.
Meanwhile, my meanness sticks to its mean
and I say good day as the mailman
carts my packages away, which means
I must get back to work, that is, my job,
back to what I know, the weight of a book,
the time I clock out at the back of my mind.

Delights of the Poet

(After the painting by Giorgio de Chirico)

How long have I been waiting for this train?
It's 2PM and the sky is blackening.

That clock must be wrong.
The station's too bare.
Someone must have labored hard to make that
empty space be there.

I'm a worn-out nerve
exposed to violent currents in the air
ever since you left me here
to wait for your return.

It's a wonder my shadow
doesn't desert me, too.

How can my thoughts stay intact
when light hits the white building so hard
the marble façade cracks,
its nothing peeking through?

My nothing walks about in white
and bangs its head on walls.
"Someone has to stop her," I say.
"Before she hurts herself permanently."

But I look around the station
and see my shadow on the train
with nothing, elopers
waving goodbye.

How long now?

It's 2PM and the sky, happily
blackening, looks closer than it ever has.

*Learning to Live**for D. K.*

Adam finds a stone in his hand
and before him a brick wall.
He throws the stone at it
but it slips through a hole.

Who would build a wall
with holes, he ponders.
He finds the stone
is back between his fingers.

How now, he says, who put
my hand around this stone?
Why can't I bust
this wall and be gone?

Eve fills him in: You fool,
the holes were there first.
God built this wall around them
so they wouldn't burst.

Before the Flood

The Sons of God perfected their vision
Of evil. God had a dream (for he had fallen
Asleep) in which he saw the earth returned
To Eden, to perfection. In other words,
He saw his reflection. And since what God saw
Was so, there were now two Gods at large in heaven,
The one asleep, the other awake, though
In a dream. This Dream God, full of love and
Hate, saw that his Sons worshiped his nightmare.

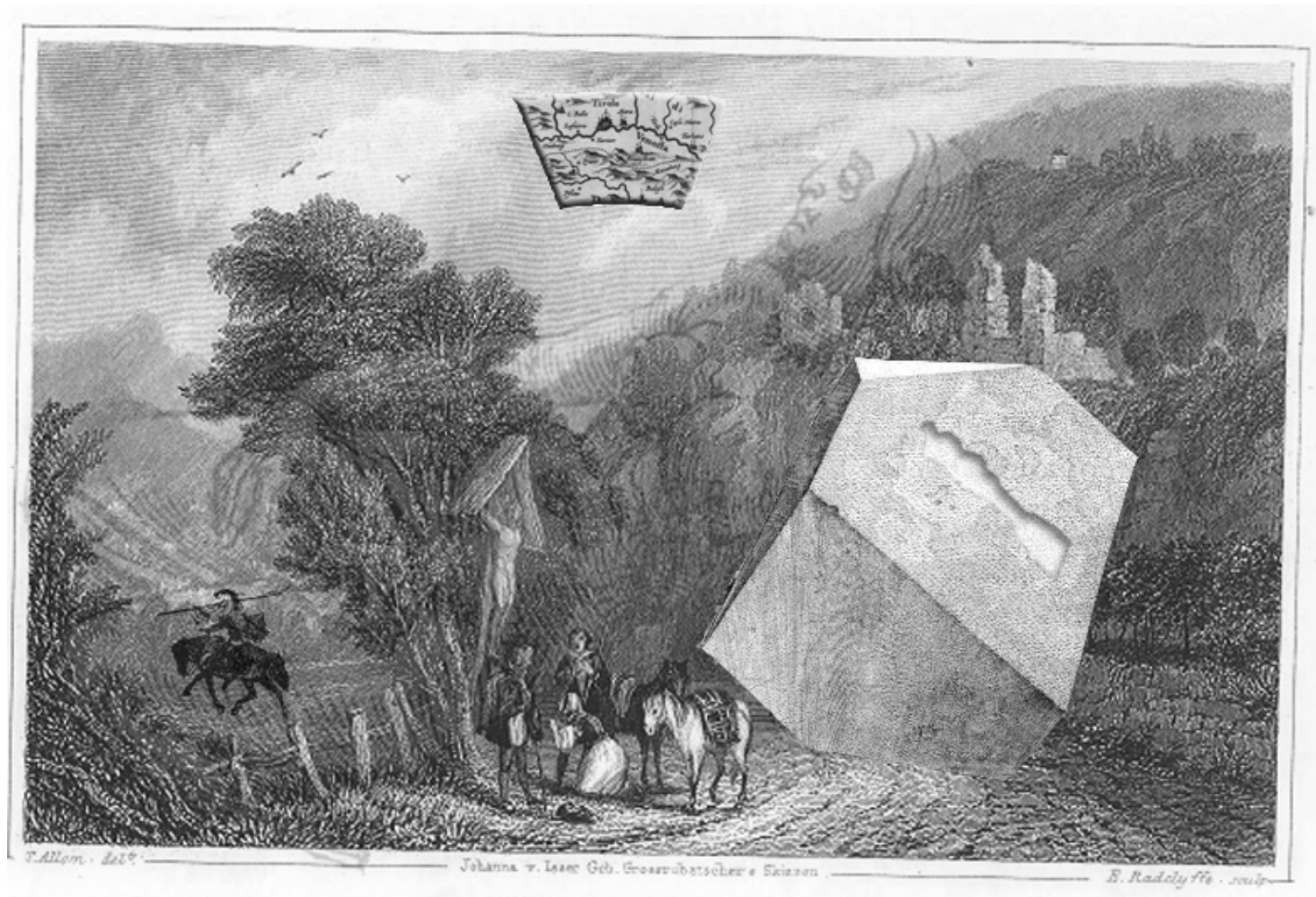
And so it was. So he said unto Noah: *Gather a pair
Of every beast, for two is the new number
Of perfection.* Noah reasoned that in every tiger
Countless fish and birds, and countless creatures
(Even men) resided, and in *these* beasts all kinds
Of other beasts were present. To Noah, nature
Seemed beyond pairing and repair, but never mind:
God would pare them down to perfection.
The other God, asleep, dreamt that Noah had a vision:
*Soon there will be daughters, then more procreation,
And finally the good part, civilization.*

The Flood

The pure product of imagination,
My voluptuary love envisions
A lace-lined latrine, finished with pristine
Polychrome, or cream. O love, what a dream.

My Goddess' tastes are so outrageous.
I watch her salivate over nothing
Till my face shatters and showers blessings
On her, my body a fountain wrought for this

Purpose. In a dream I descended
To a dungeon where my love's latrine was laid.
Go, till the water overflows, she commanded,
Till it soaks your pant-cuffs, and I obeyed.
You must wipe love clean of its perversions,
She instructed, *starting with this mess you've made*.



T. Allen. del.

Johanna v. Lasser Geb. Grossröbatscher's Skizzen

B. Radcliff'sc. sculp.

Stefan Karlsson, *Tyrol Under One Goddess, for Julien Torma & Friends*

Landscape with Goddess

What we worship must have exotic form.

-D. H. Lawrence, "Christ in the Tyrol"

Business drives farm cottages apart as usual.
The udder reigns over
these Tyrolean Alps, while the good people
of the valley nestle under
its dominion. A comfortable country,
the texts concur, to settle down
and take one's life, or take a hike
across vaguely signed and unmarked margins.

The preponderance of clogs that once fueled
a competitive spirit among the cobblers
turned splenetic when she revealed
(or rather hid) her face in these, her new, parts.
In "June in the Austrian Tyrol" the big
rig we don't see breaks the peasant's back.
Travelers like us with pockets full
of harvested radishes must pause for
the white clouds tousled round the mount's white skull.

Pfennigs lost in the grass-of-Parnassus,
strawberries, pine wood, schoolgirls with glasses:
In these early hours, myths stir the walker,
who presumes to preserve their autotelic telling.
The foothills' gestures appear to recur,
albeit imperceptibly.

As evening snow obscures the worn out lines on the map,
we look up from the dwindling white page
to see the highway newly paved. The tractor
breaks off its dialogue with the valley's cows—
How shall we stroke our radishes?
And eat them, too? The answers are not unasked for.

Our guide stops and points to a blank plot
where a castle once stood. The site suggests a spot
where people died or fell in love,
where food was good, and some people weren't.

Luckily, we're not pictured in the postcards we send.
The Alps must begin somewhere. By leaving
the ground, they are their own ground.
That much, from our moment of contact, is obvious.
Her premise is groundlessness.

The Woman in the Cabin

I didn't happen upon a cabin among the stars.
 I designed it from the ground up, then removed
 the ground. A move that drew national attention.
 Back then I was recognized. "Her facades
 could rival Hearst Castle," was the bossman's toast
 at the office party on the night I settled to launch
 my dream house, this remote cabin among the stars.

There's a loft upstairs I never use. The universe
 is my basement, front yard, backyard, my only view
 ever since I exceeded my orbit. I'd never noticed
 how flat and fake space looks till I was free to look.
 God had always seemed perpendicular to me,
 but now the living room gives me vertigo.
 One of the kitchen corners is obtuse, by mistake, so
 when I prepare to eat, the island looks oblique
 to the big living room window, where outer space
 peers in like a neighbor you have to keep an eye on.

But the cabin is nicely furnished with diversions,
 and without the kids and grandkids here, it stays neat,
 livable. I took up quilting, I gave it up. The stars
 were all that moved me, and my hands were too short-
 sighted to map the crazy patterns. I'd look up to see
 their game of musical chairs still up in the air.
 Instead, I draw shapes for hours. I wake up with my son's
 cowboy books on my lap. I would knit but I don't
 wear clothes anymore. They were the last things to go,
 after the mirrors. If I find myself in a dress I tear it off.
 Here's a secret: I invented my own rather naughty pastime.
 I happened upon my grandson's whoopee cushion
 and with this devised a sport: At teatime I position
 it under a seat pillow in the parlor, then rearrange the seven
 chairs, trying not to remember (and this is the hardest part)
 which one it's under. Then I roll a seven-sided die
 to determine where I'll sit. It still gets me in stitches.
 I never appreciated my grandson's humor. I'm not sure
 if my kids had any. I preferred their inside voices.
 It made my work livable. They still live on Earth.

They, or some authorities claiming to be them,
sent two rescue missions. I turned both parties away:
If this is your foundered “housewreck,” I’m captain here.
Who among you vultures thought you could change me?
I don’t mean to bother anyone. Not everyone
understands that. Honestly, I’m no Joan of Arc—
it gets lonely up here. But there’s no time to dwell
on other people. I’m fast at work on a new project:
A prairie house. There my favorite sister will join me
with our old Labrador named Puppy. I’ll be returning
to Earth, my next feat. As soon as my blueprint’s complete.
We’ll build it from nothing. The thought keeps me afloat
in my floating cabin, where I’m most at ease with nothing.

Open Your Eyes

Write when you no longer see anything there
eat warm bread
call a friend from the end of the street
leave the movie theater at noon
be surprised at the beach by an eclipse
collect the rain
on immense sheets of pink blotter
set fires along the road
& above all
forget your letters
forget your name
forget like one who smiles thinking about something else.

Julien Torma (1925)

Notes Toward a Retraction

“And as bull elephant seals advance
 on San Simeon to breed
 this season, likewise not by chance
 but by Kathryn’s persuasion,
 I will finally visit Big Sur by the time you read
 this letter (Fate, to be sure, still up for speculation).”

A fragment from a handwritten note to Lance
 who’d left to basic training.
 Just as those coastal cliffs surfaced in advance
 of my trip, so Tyrol, as a concept,
 foamed into mind, full-grown and bare, constraining
 me to a shell of infinite space, where I crept

as a hollow man treads hallowed ground. It promised
 if I stood aside, the blankness
 of Paradise, all its treasures not known to exist,
 would glow through every word,
 and I might give it to you, as Dante gave Beatrice
 his every thought, and death might come to light, unobscured.

Which was absurd. Was I better off writing notes to friends?
 If I could skim the pure surface
 of things like Faustroll’s skiff, see through a panoptic lens,
 might my self-effacing work be worth it?
 If I could throw aside the lamp that “[throws]
 the nerves in patterns on a screen,” who knows

what wonders might be seen? I’ve learned: No one cares.
 Poems devoid of human voice
 might soon grace our screens, but Zephyrus carries
 the voice he hears. Thus I promise
 from now to be honest, water-clear. Forget my noise.
 Torma’s last words are mine: “The Last Word remains

that of our friend Bosse-de-Nage, *Papio cynephalus*.”

Notes

“Julien Torma Returns from the Mounts of Tyrol”: On February 17, 1933, poet Julien Torma, so the story goes, left for a solitary walk in the mountains and never returned. His body was never found, leaving open the question of suicide. The quotation “It’s a coarse coat. . .” is attributed to the “Last Knight” Emperor Maximilian, huntsman and patron of Albrecht Dürer. Auden’s line “We must love. . .” from his poem “September 1, 1939” was famously omitted from certain printings of the poem, and Auden refused to reprint the poem altogether in a number of collections.

“O Li Po”: The phrases used to construct the poem were derived from J. P. Seaton’s translation *Bright Moon, White Clouds: Selected Poems of Li Po*. Lines were pulled as workable material if they began with “O,” as in, “Oh, how I love you, my Illustrious Mengfu-tzu!”

“Open Your Eyes”: Both of the Torma translations come from the Dada suicide’s second collection of poems *Le Grande Troche, sorite* (1925). This particular poem bears a resemblance to André Breton’s famous “Lâchez tout,” a poem that anticipated his split from the Dadaists and the advent of Surrealism. A note at the back of *Le Grande Troche, sorite* says the following about “Ouvrir les yeux”: “This poem is a beautiful image of oblivion: Torma prefigures his destiny. But isn’t this the case of any poet?” (My translation)