

EXCERPT FROM *EMERE'S TOBACCONIST* (FROM *DIATOMHERO: RELIGIOUS POEMS*)

Nothing is to be preferred before justice.

-Socrates

There are roach motels

Set out around almost every portal to heaven.

Watch for them, but do not beware, my love

For when the sweet die

The adhesive turns to honey on their feet.

I

There was one point

When I had rolled over slightly to the left

When I thought I felt a slight peace.

I just seemed to bleed out faster that way .

Once someone bent down and lapped a stream from my ear-

A childhood friend of mine

Twenty years ago in rural Ohio,

Long since spread out into middle age,

Across a landscape fate would sow for her.

I wanted to reassure her, Rachel, you'll live.

I was already halfway in paradise,

Waiting out my death.

The destruction to my body was like a pedicure.

As I flipped through magazines,

Mercy sat down and spoke to me.

“When you died you were beautiful,” she said.

“May I show you around?”

But then Justice came in, in her big white robes

And let her hair fall over me, and lifted my shirt,

And gently put her mouth to my nipple

And let my story fall open.

At one point, it seemed,

While my assailant

had stopped momentarily,

and gone to piss behind a tree

(An inane act of discretion)

Somebody had come along,

Taken my destiny from me

Placed it in a basket,

And sent it down the river,

A baby Moses

For someone to find, among the reeds

As others were finding my body with the bright recognition

of finding an Easter egg

And the spreading numbness of coming up upon a snake

Coiled at their feet in the brush,

A snake curled ‘round an egg.

My white-blond hair was due to deepen to gold at sixteen.

But the hairdresser in my DNA

Simply sat there, in a darkening studio.

My menstrual cycle was due to start when I was thirteen.

But it stopped, like a jammed washing machine.

The movers arrived a few hours later. My teenage and adult years were packed up and put into freight.

Then they came and boarded up my memories of my last moments on earth.

“Don’t go near yourself,” I was warned.

We set off through the woods

Passing those sent to find me,

And I caught my foot on a snarl of hair

And a snare of rotted clothing.

“Don’t worry...that’s Snow White,” somebody reassured me.

“She accidentally fell out of her glass coffin,

And no one bothered to put her back in.”

I didn’t understand my death any more

Than a two year old understands the language

Of a room of adults talking around her.

I kept fidgeting under the table as they were discussing

how I had been killed,

Playfully biting them, like the kitten I had had when I was five,

Pulling at the hems of their gowns.

Justice took me on a tour of the facility.

“The roach motels you see set out at every entrance,” she said,

“Are not our only way of keeping evil out.

Recycling here is a lot like recycling on earth:

Not everything that comes to us can be put back into the cosmos.

The bins you see at the gates are only for redemption-based products.

Some think they’re getting away because they’ve existed

Inside the camera of the body for so long,”

She explained,

“But when they get up here we simply pull the film out...

And expose it to the Light of the World.”

Other children were brought up on the escalator.

They had no adolescence and no adulthood,

And had to wear hand me downs.

Some of the lives were too big for them.

“I can barely fit into your teens,”

One complained. And:

“My, your old age is vast! Look how it hangs off me!”

In the baths one day

I met Heide Goebbels.

“Misch, Misch, du bist ein fisch,”

I called playfully, on the stairs,”

She said,

“Not realizing my next incarnation

was already plunging down the Elbe towards me

On a fishing line that could still be cut.

Rapunzel bent over the drain we circled

So we might climb back out of death on her hair;

As we eddied down,

sending the maiden back into her myth with bald spots.

There was a blockage in the pipes

As if our guardian spirits

Knowing we were only children

Had sent any premonitions to us

Watered down, like a toddler’s apple juice;

Gauging, as responsible adults will,

The impact of traumatic imagery on the very young.
So we didn't know
That our lives had quietly begun hemorrhaging
Til they woke us in a bed wetting.
As soon as we realized what was happening
My sisters and I
Seized as many memories as we could as we
Tangled into the drain
Hoping the Lord wouldn't notice
As we climbed into a wayward dinghy
Taking no oars, being absolutely silent.
There was a benefit to dying in numbers
In a mass pandemonium
Where the stars, already overcrowding paradise
Were temporarily indistinguishable
from the numbers coming to heaven.
For a long time we drifted;
Occasionally legends passed:
Peg Powler, pulling Ophelia in her teeth;
The head of Orpheus
Singing sleep, little ones, sleep
To Willa Harper's children, in their skiff.
There were other children on the banks, at night
Dressed in hospital gowns,
Who had not died, but were hovering on the edge of it,
Who stared at us,
Eyes thick with morphine,

Half looking forward, dreamily
To going to heaven
Bundled into their illnesses like storks;
Others in the dense riverbed foliage
Who'd crept by night into Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*
Thinking they were going into *A Child's Garden of Verses*.
By the time they saw the
Asses,
Upturned, in the greenery
Spurting chlorophyll,
Pain was spurting dark green
The cool foliage of the garden where they crawled to die
And woke up, ten seconds later
Pulsing like pod people
In the dawn flower beds
Of Eden.
After we had gotten X amount of centuries out to sea
We could look back in time and see the sepia clouds of World War II behind us
As others would look back en route to Catalina later
And see smog hanging over Long Beach.
Days past the point
where billboards along the shore appeared
Advertising classes
For atheists, coming into paradise
With no language skills
Like immigrants off the boat,
We washed up,

Flickering like flashlights whose batteries were about to go dead.
We had carried mystery in us as long as we could
Knowing that it must die
So that we could live.
When the last Titanic victim died, at 97
And entered the heat of the Light of the World
She melted out of that berg
Like an Arctic mummy
And stood before herself in 1912 again: a soggy little girl.
Her first night there, when she woke in the dark and asked for some water,
They brought her a glass of the sea she'd died in.
This is frugality,
The transmigration of elements.”
But there were dangers:
Once, when they went to hose down the screens
They'd put down to stop the damned from rising
They were appalled to find
Millions upon millions of ascending prayers
That would have been answered, decades or centuries ago,
Had they not been intercepted
A plea to survive the Spanish American War,
Desiccated in the screen & drifting down in an exoskeletal snow
With a plea for a Tonka truck at Christmas 1978.
Once I lifted a waffle iron
On a soul that was still forming
And the batter clotted,
And the spirit was ruined.

I crept out guiltily,
As Cook raised her fist at me darkly .
There were many being reborn.
But often, they were difficult babies.
I saw one who had been a horse
Trying to come out as a human
Which rendered him a centaur.
“You should have seen one of our reincarnates last week,”
One physician told me, rolling his eyes.
“In her last life she had been an idea. Can you imagine the
difficulty that kind of transition presents...delivering
something intangible
Into a human form?”
The kennels of reincarnation were also in a constant state of disarray.
There were many species
Becoming confused by the mating odors of other species...
Wolves lurching toward humans, and such.
Eventually
I decided to be born again
My memory of the afterlife, they said
Would last only through my early childhood,
After which the skullplates of forgetfulness would grow over it
As forgetfulness scabs over the incoming dead,
To present the Lord with a perfectly smooth knee.
I was taken
To the border of Samsara
To be seen off.

I saw my former lives jumping, like dolphins, in the west

And my future lives jumping

Out in the east.

How beautifully they both played, in light and air!

For a time, I just drifted through variations of the afterlife,

Picking up jobs here and there;

For a while as a migrant worker

In the Elysian Fields

Until I thought I should be reborn somewhere.

I wandered upstream in the snow.

Rabbit was being born by Old Man Bickle's farm.

For three years, I was a rabbit.

Then got word downwind

As I was an old hare,

Close to dying

That a family one county over was going to have a baby.

I lived to be 85 that time

And dropped off the radar for a bit.

Last word anyone had I was a hunting dog

Drowsing at my master's feet

By a hearth in Lake Tahoe.