

Among the Dead:

Ah!
and Afterward
Yes!

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FOREWORD

BY SARAH SHUN-LIEN BYNUM

Becca Jensen describes this book as taking place inside a family of five: Mrs. G, Mr. G, the daughter, the Collector, and the Chorus. The word “family” is a wonderful way to suggest the relationship among the multiple entities that we encounter within: family as both structure and story. In one of the book’s first pieces, “How To Persuade an Abstraction,” the Chorus instructs us to take abstraction by the throat, to take hold of “tales and other ends” as it slithers past us. For it is through story that we wrestle best with abstraction, and the powerful family narrative that Jensen builds here is her means of considering loneliness and lack, the impossible search for beginnings, exile and foreignness, and the ecstatic apprehension of a world in which everything (as the Collector paraphrases Proust) “seems to be folded into everything.”

This narrative is built, with the assiduous help of the Collector, out of fragments and allusions drawn largely from the Western canon: the Bible, the *Odyssey*, Spenser and Shakespeare and Milton, the English Romantic poets, Melville, the Modernists. The literary fragment is itself a sort of exile, existing as it does outside of its original source, denatured by quotation marks, or made noticeable by a difference in rhythm and syntax, or foreign-seeming simply by virtue of its familiarity: the reader’s vague but strong sense of *don’t I know you from someplace else?*

The Collector heightens this sense of the familiar (and the familial) through his unusual method for cataloging the source materials. Though he is careful in documenting the origins of each fragment, his catalogs do not directly or obviously correspond to the order in which the fragments appear throughout the book; often we are introduced to the source long before we come across the fragment, or else we are surprised to learn that an image we liked twenty-five pages earlier in fact hails from Milton’s *Lycidas*. The Collector offers us not an index of allusions but rather an atmosphere. We are immersed in it, surrounded by it; the Collector’s lists flow in and out of the narrative, both beginning and ending the book, enveloping it. This atmosphere of allusion produces the feeling of reading great books: of being inside an enormous bell, a bell cast from the world’s wide store of epics and elegies and tales and novels, unable to tell where one’s own voice ends and the reverberations begin.

The fragment is an exile but it is also a consolation. It reminds us of the family that, through the act of reading, we come home to. Yes, this book is haunted by loss, by orphans and shipwrecks and drowning, yet when one’s “mother is a fisherman” and one’s “father is the sea,” drowning can be a kind of homecoming.

THE COLLECTOR: WHEREFROM

“after three hours she curtsied profoundly and left.” Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

“ah! and afterward yes!": “The gentleman put up his eye-glasses to look at me, and said, ‘Come here, my dear!’ He shook hands with me, and asked me to take off my bonnet—looking at me all the while. When I had complied, he said, ‘Ah!’ and afterwards ‘Yes!’” from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*

Ahab, captain of *The Pequod* in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. Ahab, along with his crew, drowns when *The Pequod* sinks from damages incurred from the leviathan Moby Dick. Only Ishmael, the main character and semi-narrator of *Moby Dick*, survives. The last word of Melville’s novel: orphan

all of Odysseus’ men: after sacrificing six men to the six-headed monster, Scylla, Odysseus and his crew arrive on the island Thrinakia, where the god Helios (a.k.a Hyperion) keeps his sacred cattle. Though he warns them not to, Odysseus’ men eat the cattle. Back at sea, Zeus punishes the offenders by sinking the ship and drowning all the men but Odysseus. Odysseus’ narration of his past exploits ends with this story; the rest of *The Odyssey* pertains to Odysseus’ present course of action in Ithaca

“all the rest is commentary” is from Hillel, a Jewish religious teacher of the 1st century B.C.E. When asked to summarize the Torah, Hillel replies: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary”

“among the Dead” comes from T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” from *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920): “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead”

“and in my breast / Spring...” is from No. 115 of *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, Tennyson. The line ends with the word “rest”

“angel of its face” refers to Isaiah 63:9, also commonly translated as “the angel of his presence”

THE CHORUS: HOW TO PERSUADE AN ABSTRACTION

“You take it by the throat,” says I! “The throat
by which it lies.” You find that slithering moon, find that tearing
sky and “gosh, gosh, gosh, gosh—”

“Hold it,” I say, still! “Tight by the belly” until it opens
like the sky. Then dear expedience curl it “past yourself, past”
your resting roundness, and let it come, roundly roundly:

But remember peace good gosh, peace
good you. For in the slithering sky does lie that “easy, open
moon,” just waiting to be missed

“So says I, says still:” take hold
of tales and other ends; for that, dear princess—is the world gone round, “round
like the moon when it tears” itself out of the sky

MRS. G AS YOUNG GLYNIS YOUNG

I. Fragments

Once, and but once
upon a time, a heart upon,
upon a head. Came hand
in truth,
amen.

“How like a shepherd am I,” claims Glynis Young, “how
innocent I bend. Look!
how I allow nature to outdo herself.”

the high lawns, the early
cherry, and then the later plum,
but always still and always always
and amen

the hills rolling into parcels
of pure sky

James places the last purple shadow on the violet's outer wing. He has spent some time thinking about the round corners of its soft shell, the forest floor held in a pool of its waxy leaves where later he would go and search for mushrooms, feeling the damp earth, the hint of sunlight, moving like desire around his kneecaps or what Hegel calls the twofold significance of the distinct. How

1. we remain ourselves only in contrast

-thereby-

2. becoming contrast ourselves.

James watches what he is not move beneath the violet's tender neck, radiant between the landscapes of the park and the outer mountains. It constitutes itself as an interior, which is the rotting wood of the

picnic bench, the sky among its blue globules. Meanwhile:

some wind throws a juniper into itself.

Meanwhile the violet dries into the thin white bone of the teacup, its rim looking like a shaved tooth. Nearby, a few seabirds push their dense feathers between the pillow of James' skin

- a. like long and gray
- b. among the sun
- c. feeding in flight.

Pale clouds churn through the wandering air and there is a feeling with James that is like the difference between emptiness and space or what one looks like with the other inside it— "Hello," he says to the crowd through which the familiar beckons: the dulled afternoon light falling from his face.

JAMES' FACE

abcdefghijklmnopqrstu

vwxzyzvwvutsrqpo

nmlkjihgfedcba*****

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