

Sonnet Scroll

Even Here: A Sequence from *Orpheus Looks Back*

By David J. Rothman

1. Congenital Melanocytic Nevus*

“Grab my ass hard,” she’d say when passion struck,
That gorgeous dancer’s ass I loved and she
Detested for its birthmark, mere bad luck
She saw as fate, judgment, and destiny.
It never meant a thing to me. I’d kiss it.
She’d say, “This thing is going to kill me, Dave.”
I’d say, “The hell it will.” I’d say, “I’d miss it
If you didn’t have it,” as she shaved.
“I look like a gorilla!” she once yelled and wept,
Her rage so fierce it made my weak words melt.
That night, her hot tears drying as she slept,
At last I understood the way she felt.
Congenital melanocytic nevus.
I never thought it meant that she would leave us.

* Giant congenital melanocytic nevus is a skin condition characterized by an abnormally dark, noncancerous skin patch...composed of pigment-producing cells called melanocytes...Affected individuals may feel anxiety or emotional stress due to the impact the nevus may have on their appearance and their health...When melanoma occurs in people with giant congenital melanocytic nevus, the survival rate is low.
—*Medline Plus*

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2. I Do

At least no one can say our lives were small.
We climbed big mountains and we loved like hawks,
Then fought like wildcats. We did it all.
Just try to fit that in this witness box.
We spent most of our honeymoon out hiking
The Kalalau trail to the end, where sand
And waves and folding cliffs were to our liking.
We read and walked and ate and loved unplanned
And naked in the sun. We showered under
Waterfalls and kissed beneath the stars.
We wandered where the blue waves broke like thunder,
Then slept and dreamed with Venus and with Mars.
And that was just one week. So now, read out the charge...
Put all that here? Impossible. We lived too large.

3. How Odd

When my wife got sick again, an odd
Thing happened. What had been a glimmering
Began to shine. What had seemed a fraud,
That I might say blessings, even sing
My thankfulness in pain? It began
To be not a denial or a need,
No contradiction or insurance plan,
Not the fearful outcome of a creed,
But both a choice and proof that gratitude
Is more than all of that. And so I gave,
Of all things, thanks, for life has amplitude,
The maximum displacement of a wave:
Thanks not only for, but to. And this is odd—
At last I know exactly where it goes.

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4. A Tree

The therapist asked each of us to say,
As best we could, what each of us most wanted
In the marriage, what would make us stay,
Would make it work, as we each felt so daunted.
I went first and tried to be restrained.
“I hope,” I said, “one day we can achieve
Erotic intimacy so fine-grained
It charges every hour time can conceive.”
“I see,” he said, then “Emily?” She waited,
Then spoke the way one does if something hurts
So obviously one shouldn’t need to state it:
“I just wish he’d fold his fucking shirts.”
“But I do!” I said, “I do.” She glared at me.
The therapist looked out the window at a tree.

5. Her Turns

She learned to make a really good ski turn.
All those years of modern and ballet
Paid off. She’d trained her body how to learn
Almost anything that came her way,
So when, a few months pregnant, she first tried
To telemark, it was a revelation.
When young and forced to ski she’d often cried,
But this, this, this was a ski transformation.
The turn came to her quickly, sweetly, like
The cascades flowing from the peaks in spring.
Her grace and balance made her look like Nike
Floating the Headwall on an open wing.
Our victories in this life don’t last long.
Her turns echo in the mountains like a song.

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6. Not Good Enough

“This fabric, meh, I don’t know,” says the tailor,
Rubbing it between thumb and forefinger,
“And this design? The pattern is a failure.
Is this really the best that you can bring her?”
And he sighs, looks up at me, annoyed.
“I know you want to make her something great,
A dress so beautiful folks can’t avoid
Stopping and staring, struck dumb in the street.
But this ain’t it.” I know the old guy’s right.
These rags can’t clothe a precious human spirit,
What she showed and what she hid from sight.
I weep. “I’ve failed,” I say. “I’m nowhere near it.”
“Big deal,” he says, “Return to where the shadows lurk.
I am your God. This is your job. Get back to work.”

7. Even Here

How did it all come to such an impasse?
Why has so much seemed to turn so sour?
Now the answers that we thought we knew are
Dry, like an exhausted well, as we are.
When did we become the people who we
Said we wouldn’t, and now, if deep outrage
Then contempt is all that we can muster,
Led by passion, who will stand for kindness?
Yet remember: hatred cannot drive out
Hatred. Never could and never will.
Let the fear be only fear and let the
Sacred touch of listening persist.
Dark the night and dark the day, let time
Mark these words still: love can grow even here.