

Unwritten Law

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## The New Life

I slept the sleep of the just,  
later the sleep of the unborn  
who come into the world  
guilty of many crimes.  
And what these crimes are  
nobody knows at the beginning.  
Only after many years does one know.  
Only after long life is one prepared  
to read the equation.

I begin now to perceive  
the nature of my soul, the soul  
I inhabit as punishment.  
Inflexible, even in hunger.

I have been in my other lives  
too hasty, too eager,  
my haste a source of pain in the world.  
Swaggering as a tyrant swaggers;  
for all my amorousness,  
cold at heart, in the manner of the superficial.

I slept the sleep of the just;  
I lived the life of a criminal  
slowly repaying an impossible debt.  
And I died having answered for  
one species of ruthlessness.

## Unwritten Law

Interesting how we fall in love:  
in my case, absolutely. Absolutely, and, alas, often—  
so it was in my youth.  
And always with rather boyish men—  
unformed, sullen, or shyly kicking the dead leaves:  
in the manner of Balanchine.  
Nor did I see them as versions of the same thing.  
I, with my inflexible Platonism,  
my fierce seeing of only one thing at a time:  
I ruled against the indefinite article.  
And yet, the mistakes of my youth  
made me hopeless, because they repeated themselves,  
as is commonly true.  
But in you I felt something beyond the archetype—  
a true expansiveness, a buoyance and love of the earth  
utterly alien to my nature. To my credit,  
I blessed my good fortune in you.  
Blessed it absolutely, in the manner of those years.  
And you in your wisdom and cruelty  
gradually taught me the meaninglessness of that term.

## Roman Study

He felt at first  
he should have been born  
to Aphrodite, not Venus,  
that too little was left to do,  
to accomplish, after the Greeks.

And he resented light,  
to which Greece has  
the greatest claim.

He cursed his mother  
(privately, discreetly),  
she who could have arranged all of this.

And then it occurred to him  
to examine these responses  
in which, finally, he recognized  
a new species of thought entirely,  
more worldly, more ambitious  
and politic, in what we now call  
human terms.

And the longer he thought,  
the more he experienced  
faint contempt for the Greeks,  
for their austerity, the eerie  
balance of even the great tragedies—  
thrilling at first, then  
faintly predictable, routine.

And the longer he thought  
the more plain to him how much  
still remained to be experienced,  
and written down, a material world heretofore  
hardly dignified.

And he recognized in exactly this reasoning  
the scope and trajectory of his own  
watchful nature.

## Condo

I lived in a tree. The dream specified  
pine, as though it thought I needed  
prompting to keep mourning. I hate  
when your own dreams treat you as stupid.

Inside, it was  
my apartment in Plainfield, twenty years ago,  
except I'd added a commercial stove.  
Deep-rooted

passion for the second floor! Just because  
the past is longer than the future  
doesn't mean there is no future.

The dream confused them, mistaking  
one for the other: repeated

scenes of the gutted house—Vera was there,  
talking about the light.  
And certainly there was a lot of light, since  
there were no walls.

I thought: this is where the bed would be,  
where it was in Plainfield.  
And deep serenity flooded through me,  
such as you feel when the world can't touch you.  
Beyond the invisible bed, light  
of late summer in the little street,  
between flickering ash trees.