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Abandonment

ARIADNE, daughter of Minos, was abandoned on the island of Naxos by Theseus during their voyage to Athens after Theseus had, with her assistance, overcome the Minotaur in Crete.

Robert E. Bell Dictionary of Classical Mythology

I. A FOR ABANDONMENT

I finger the shell. It's like an ear the snake visits with prophesies, only revered in retrospect. I finger it again, calling it ammonite, recoiling into being. Am Ariadne beached in the sway between am/am not. In the breach between Pasiphae and Phaedra? The ammonite lisps to me to attend to the wake of the tidal pulse. What poise I have on this lip of history. My endless migrations have brought me here at the antipodes of Naxos, when they would have me fixed in a star. What a career. You see me rocking slightly but this is my poise. This is my particular emergence. I still drip from the grottos, from the tunnelling caverns. I have travelled too far, too slowly, in the wings of their theatre, listening for a break, queuing with the other understudies. The plays have been mainly about bankers, soldiers, explorers and sexual athletes. The only entries I've made so far have been into their dictionaries. I found one under A for Abandonment. Some entry into being. Before I am named, the waves suck at my toes. My itch enjoys the grit of shells.

Theseus? I gave him a break all right, supplied him with his birthstring. He can visit Minos now he plays judge down there in Hades. Theseus does without the psychopomp, he has this diplomatic immunity. Well, with a little help from Heracles, he gets away with it. Charon-ferried, he clenches his bankcard between his teeth. As usual, he has the passport, garlanded with visa stamps, the torch, pencil slim, in his pocket. The unseen they call obscene, everything off-stage, he says he's mapped it all. He demonstrates it clearly: the torch, its everready batteries pole-to-pole, peeling back the dark. Still in dreams I feel the tiny disc
of light inspect my flesh. See, it’s okay, there’s nothing there, nothing at all, he says. And the monster, what of it? A minor tor in the hopscotch he played on the threshold of manhood, never letting the cracks get to him. That’s why they despise puns, they upset their curricula vitae.

I’m not going to be mythtaken, fixed in a constellation. Their tidying up jobs afterwards. I’ll underpun their purpose, sound the lisp as a way of saying, whisper monstrosities, but I’ll come to that later.

Minos built a great reputation for Just Lawmaking. Like Theseus his son-in-law. And what of his annual conscription of Athenian youth? It was just to school them in underground tactics. He sent them back enlightened all right, a fact that Athens didn’t always have the grace to acknowledge. Father and son-in-law are immune to my knowing lisping which would trouble their neatspeak, wobble their scales. Theseus folded his map and shouted from the deck: this is what you wanted. This is a new start I’m giving you girl. May your vision be well-compassed, he laughed. I saw his teeth blaze through the foam.

Of course he helped Minos clear his name: minus the minotaur that haunted his reputation. The one Pasiphae visited upon him, mother to energies beyond him. It’s true she could at one stage invent new contours for her sensuality. If she was a sculptor, she was an actor too, taking on the painfilled udder, the moist muzzle and the silky lashes she blinked through to him. He stared in steady horror.

I gave Theseus his birthstring so that he could shut them up about the mystery. What he found and if he slayed, he didn’t have to tell. He let the rumours elaborate his story. There was a kind of murder. What he overcame was an idea of a boy, left behind this kind of initiation. Only a boy fingering the tunnelling bas-relief he sculpted through his adolescence. A boy who heard nothing of Just Heroes, who swam in the undercurrents, his flesh water withered. On his reappearance, Theseus let the crowd applaud. He simply held up his sword, the fake blood clotting. Did they even speak? There was a terrible certainty in his eyes, as if nothing would elude his torch now. In the boat afterwards, I saw him against the black sail. I saw the sinews knotting in his neck. I watched him pull and flex his fingers systematically, joint after joint. I knew there could be no meeting for our bodies, unless like Pasiphae . . . I longed for my mother’s fingers unthreading my braids. I let the salt wind shred them instead. I cried no. I cried no to the bludgeoning of his loins that night, anchored in the cove at Naxos. That’s when he said it: I suppose it runs in the family. Well, if bullying is what you want . . . I’m not joking, he said. He wasn’t. As if giving me the yarn wasn’t a come-on. Or have you been in another story all along? It was you, you hussie who came to me and drugged the guards.

I remember a sculpture my mother did of her face. Eyeless. She was blowing the pan flute. She was blown and bulging, pucker-stitching like a pickled person. But this was then, in granite. I found the fissures with my fingers, I was sightless in reply. My fingers searched the mouth but it was fused with the music being played, the pipes grew out of it. I found the swelling in her throat. Before Minos, way before. I set this huge memory on the beach. Theseus’ boat was just a minor flaw on the horizon. I bathed in the shadow to the left of the nose. To the right, the way was parched. Then the sands rippled a confusion, violet swayed with
lemon. Music liquified the idea of stone. The head was something they never found when they ransacked her studio, after the minotaur.

II A for Ariadne

if I amaze
it's just that I drag
my retardation
my longing winding sheet
covered with the black vowel
never finding any consonant

never finding any consonant
the labyrinth echoes

inspect behind
before and under for
my face among you
my unruly hair hisses
with reminders
my stony eyes only
return your fear

I — like Pasiphae —
built a cowshape
but — that's skill for you —
I made him come as bull
and belly forth my own desire
(keep it in the dark)

Minos who saw the light
called up his captive craftsman
the rest you know
or does another knowledge sway you
I never mothered minotaur
I still am Pasiphae
eluding
Minos' law.