

The Line of the Lash

At one age
This might grant you passage by rite
 into a sisterhood which ought to have been yours by right.

 She is nine
And yearns for the place age alone cannot earn.
Already, she knows there is proving to do.
Here nature, not regarding culture, has scarcely helped
Not in this climate.
The short-stemmed and strong-limbed do not flourish here.
Eager fingers lift the pen
And, where form has failed her
Let then these hands be nimble
Let this oblation be accepted,
Pure and sacred.

We cannot say the effort wasted
In teaching her;
She knows the strokes by heart
Her catechism perfect part by part:
Thumb and forefinger deft to draw
Deep and dark,
The line of the lash.

 At nineteen
She will spurn this art, carelessly impervious.
From her do twenty-nine and thirty-nine inspire only pity
If not scorn:
Do they not know, these desperate obsequious,
That in this dominion, the true rulers have no taste for artifice?
No, *they* like best a canvas too lovely to ornament!
Having that, she discards the gossamer burka
Tosses casings so lightly away
Self-conscious self-elevation!
Liberation!
Emancipation!
 He smiles, he approves. Let the aged fools of fashion shake their heads--

They have lost, those crones of culture
She is Diana, Aphrodite, her marble undefiled
She slants a knowing eye at the other she,
 The she whose flesh brightly bears the mark
 And laughs!
 --ah, the oppression of spirit, the worship of false goddesses.

Twenty-nine, and she
Eyes the temple-doors with unease
And darts within
She is subtle, her sacrifice made quick with practice
Only a little incense cake,
This tiny mound of fairy-dust smudged light upon her face
Carries no scent but that of un-sunlit caverns far away
And can scarce be detected
Any more than her ritual
Perhaps the old women knew something she did not.
There were, after all, ancient stigmas which her brazen magics
Have proved too paltry to unmake.
Now, she wears the line of the lash.
It stings so little. It has no weight.
(There is only the issue of this watering--never wipe away tears! Better, do not weep.)
Now, she is aware that the sisterhood bears a priestly function

But there are no goddesses, only gods.

Thirty-nine,
And the resistance commands her not to bow
The revolutionaries shout of the injustice
She hears them now.
Thou shalt not cower
They fling counter-images in her face
 herself, bowed before that beautiful, ghastly alter
 craven, abject,
 broken on jagged steps
 bright marks emblazoned on her skin
 gripping fistful offerings purchased with her indentured
 soul.

She sees the portrait. Hears them rage.
Goes bareface a while.
She ponders.

She dances with shame, with consciousness, with logic and regret..

She remembers the years in the temple as a child
She remembers the lessons
Scriptures clearer now than at nine,
Words of carmine wax painted on white marble walls
Vivid
Youthful
Obscene

She weeps, and blue as blood the tears flow down
Smear, and streak, and blur
Softening, dissolving,
Melting and making the bright unlovely, beautiful-strange.

She wears the temple symbols now
Like a heretic.
Like a whore.
Like a pagan, she makes use of sacred paints
To worship at a different shrine

Where no gods may ever come.

The citizens think she still follows the gods.
The rulers wink because they think it is for them
(always, because they think they *are* the gods--not lesser imitations.)
She does not care.

Mere fools, they are misled
She misleads them
But not herself.

This painting is exaggerate
This sainting is mockery ornate
This dye is armor,

This is war-paint.

More ancient than the temple-gate
the rites were for the Goddess before she bowed her neck to fate

She lifts the pens and laughs
She takes her holy ash
And marks herself black and blue
With the line
 of the lash.