

MITCHELL PARRY

Imperfect Penance



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Rest and Silence

(Innsbruck: January 1, 1913)

Sunrise, and the new year staggers down the streets, away from the city's dogs shivering in the snow. Cold light burrows into corners, peers through shutters, curls up in shadows. Slow and inevitable.

A thin stream of light filters into the room, lengthens across a threadbare carpet, the intricate and vaguely eastern pattern briefly visible before it sinks back into the dust: flourishes of leaves thrust from a central bud; pathways turn back upon themselves, loop and loop and spin into labyrinths of yellow lines and spirals, the tracks of some mysterious animal.

And still the light advances; a shaft falls across his face where he sleeps on the greasy divan. Beneath their lids, his eyes flutter against the light, muscles in his cheek twitching in sympathy. He dreams a desert, a horizon blurred by shimmering heat.

Some part of him has already begun to shrink from the light, has recognized the beginning day and is even now appalled by its inexorable progress. To wake, to wash, to eat — the necessity of struggling through the day, through the haze of veronal or chloroform, an ocean of language in which he must wade, float or drown. The lament awakens, keens softly to itself. In this desert, broken pillars, afternoon's long light, faint beat of hooves on a distant plain.

He turns his back to the light and nuzzles deep into the divan's rancid cushions.

Fully clothed and even so the chill gnaws at him and he shivers against it. In the street, a dog. The town wakes, slowly. Floorboards in the next room creak: retching and

hoarse coughing. Now the desert dissolves and he is a youth standing in the town square, a slip of paper in his left hand extended as though offered to any who would take it. *I want to be a rider, like my father before me.* There is movement around him, but he cannot understand the strange forms that bob and dip into view. Their words break like bubbles. Hours he stands — days, perhaps. Cool wind rushes through his clothing, into his poorly fitting boots. Muffled hoof beats, a crash, curses.

He jolts from sleep into a clammy anxiety. Outside his window, a man with a wine-thickened voice lashes a horse out of a snowdrift, cursing as the animal slips to its knees.

In a pocket of silence that follows, he rolls over, rubs his eyes. Yawns. His forehead swells, heavy pain. Eyes closed, he shuffles through the room to a basin of nearly frozen water. Cups his hands, submerges them until his wrists are numb, then splashes water onto his face. Gasps. Dim in the mirror above the wash basin: tight, thin eyes; wide nose. Even under his own gaze he appears suspicious.

Is it a grin or a grimace? "Happy New Year, Georg."

Er war anders als wir

In the photo you are a hunched bundle on the verge of flight or collapse. Tight collar, wool, close-cropped hair. The decorum of the age barely squeezes you behind the café's zinc-topped tables. You are tucked into drawing rooms of the elite. Who recoil from your silent explosion of hands, the endless twining of finger with finger, flashes of pale wrists. Sunlight on polished wood moves the same way — eddies of the grain pushing dark through gleaming veneer.

I know the odour from your clothes is sour and pervasive: dust, sweat, chloroform, sweat and drink rise like whorls of heat in sun, mirages in sweet wine held up to the light. Think of this as a train ride through stasis. You are not like the rest of us. Remember Verlaine, yellow-green and brainless at his table. You sit trapped here, motionless but blurred, fingers tangled like worms corded in a pail, Vienna wheeling past your eyes like all the stations of panic between here and home.

Night

Rain. Stoned and soaked to the marrow in Vienna, clothes clinging to me like a second self, intimate wet Doppeltgänger. Veronal in my blood, tongue thick, the skin of my face. Stop outside the Prater, lean on a wall: where was I going? Kokoschka, his studio. Oskar can help me. Must remember to.

That story he always tells about his childhood: falling onto the midden, decayed pig erupting into yellow pus and flies in his mouth. The fly at the root of his tongue, laying eggs. Maggots. Opening his mouth wide to show: *It cut into my parched throat like a disc of iron*. As if I needed one more image to add to horror's arsenal.

Remember to knock, like a well-bred young man. That time I walked in, Oskar and Alma tangled on the floor, Oskar not even pausing, merely grunting *Wait outside*. Later, nothing: they were composed, dressed, Alma sipping tea, Mahler's ghost hovering behind her, poking derisively at Kokoschka's paintings. Remember: she is still grieving.

He opens the door, dressed in one of those suits he had the Imperial Court tailor make for him, his shaved head a bobbing white moon in the doorway. He peers at me through the rain, squints into the darkness of this ocean, my night.

"What do you want?"

"Oskar, it's Georg." I tilt my face upwards, into the light from the open door. Oskar starts when he recognizes me.

"Trakl, dear fellow!" he says, reaching for my hand. Rain splatters thick discs of wet on the wool of his sleeve. "For God's sake, come out of the rain!" His hand on my arm as he guides me inside: cold wet pressure through my jacket. I shiver, suddenly the papery flutter of wings flap against

my cheek. I drop to my knees; a sharp insistent stone pecks at the hands over my eyes. A shriek escapes my mouth, poor little girl.

“Gelblich! Come here!”

The canary hovers before Oskar’s face. He raises his hand and she perches on his finger, gently biting his lip. Bird kisses. Kokoschka blows softly into her face. She closes her eyes, drowns in love’s windsong.

“So jealous,” Oskar coos. “At night, while I sleep, she pecks at my eyelids, to wake me up.” He lifts his hand quickly and the canary rises into the air, buzzing over to a string running the length of the room. She perches and sways on her tightrope, muted yellow against the black of the studio walls.

Kokoschka chuckles and waves to a barrel in the corner, the only seat in the room. I drop myself onto it and lean against the wall, a wave of black numbness rising from my legs to my face, lapping against my eyes. Wet wool prickles my thighs, the back of my neck. The pale dome of Oskar’s head looms in from the black centre of the room, parched lips moving dryly.

“Wine?” he asks, and presses what must be a bottle into my hand. He smiles and nods, recedes into the blackness

Gelblich peeps softly to herself, watches.

Bottle to my lips, mouth to my mouth, tang of white wine pinching the sides of my tongue, cleaving to my palate. A swallow and the veronal scum coating my mouth washes down my throat, love’s deepest kiss. Close my eyes, then, sink in it, Grete’s long fingers caressing Schmetterling from the bones of the keys, fluttering up to her throat, to the perfect geometry of her jawline. Geometry like the lines of music intersecting in her body: I was even jealous of the piano, the way it could always call her away, the way

her body rode its voice long into the night. Her dark eyes burning into me even then, she hovered on the music, no one suspecting the heat her gaze pressed on my belly.

I hide in the shadows, waiting for the rustle of Grete's skirt on the spiral staircase. A dog licking a razor, frenzied at the taste of its own blood, the grainy dark of summer evenings. A storm in the wings, windows shuddering against wind's rough touch. When she comes the air around her crackles, galvanic. The arch of her forehead, her soft eyes gleaming. Electric space between us. I lunge from the darkness, the gasp catching in her throat (as I knew it would) when I pin her arms to her sides. Mouth to her nape: "Tell me."

"Georg, let go," she hisses, struggling in my arms, the music of her body in my arms, my arms. "Let. Me. Go."

"Tell me," I whisper, heart pounding against the spools of her spine. Panting from the struggle.

"I have nothing to tell," she says, voice rising. Then sags in against me, drops back to whispers. "Georg, we cannot."

I spin her around, then, press her against the wall, show her her eyes burning in my own. "We *must!* Look at us — how this devours us! My God, all night the sound of your breathing in the next room claws at my skin." I press harder now.

Her eyes burning with a different flame then: bird eyes, black: hot, feathered eyes. "You are mistaken." But there is the wall, there is my body, there is nowhere for her to go and suddenly my mouth finds hers, my wine-sticky tongue brushing her lips, hand clutching at her dress, her breast, a swollen nipple.

The blow cracks across my cheek so hard it is the only sound in the house. She erupts into fists and venom, pounds my chest hissing *Bastard bastard bastard*. Her spit on my cheek,

tears, the down of her cheek soaked with tears. Her lips slide across my face, pour into my mouth. She pulls back with a drowning sob: "See how you have ruined us."

Later she curls against me, her rage collapsed into rounded angles of sleeping flesh. On the blackened rocks the flushed bride of the wind hurls herself toward death. The top of my head dissolves into air.

Canary chatter; the tightrope sways.

Drunk. Kokoschka stares at me strangely, looks at the painting on his easel: Alma lies in his arms, asleep, the night around them swirling in eddies of rage.

"The bride of the wind," he whispers, then smiles and nods. "My colours have not lied. Thank you, Georg. Thank you." His hand offered out as if in gratitude for these poor words of grace.