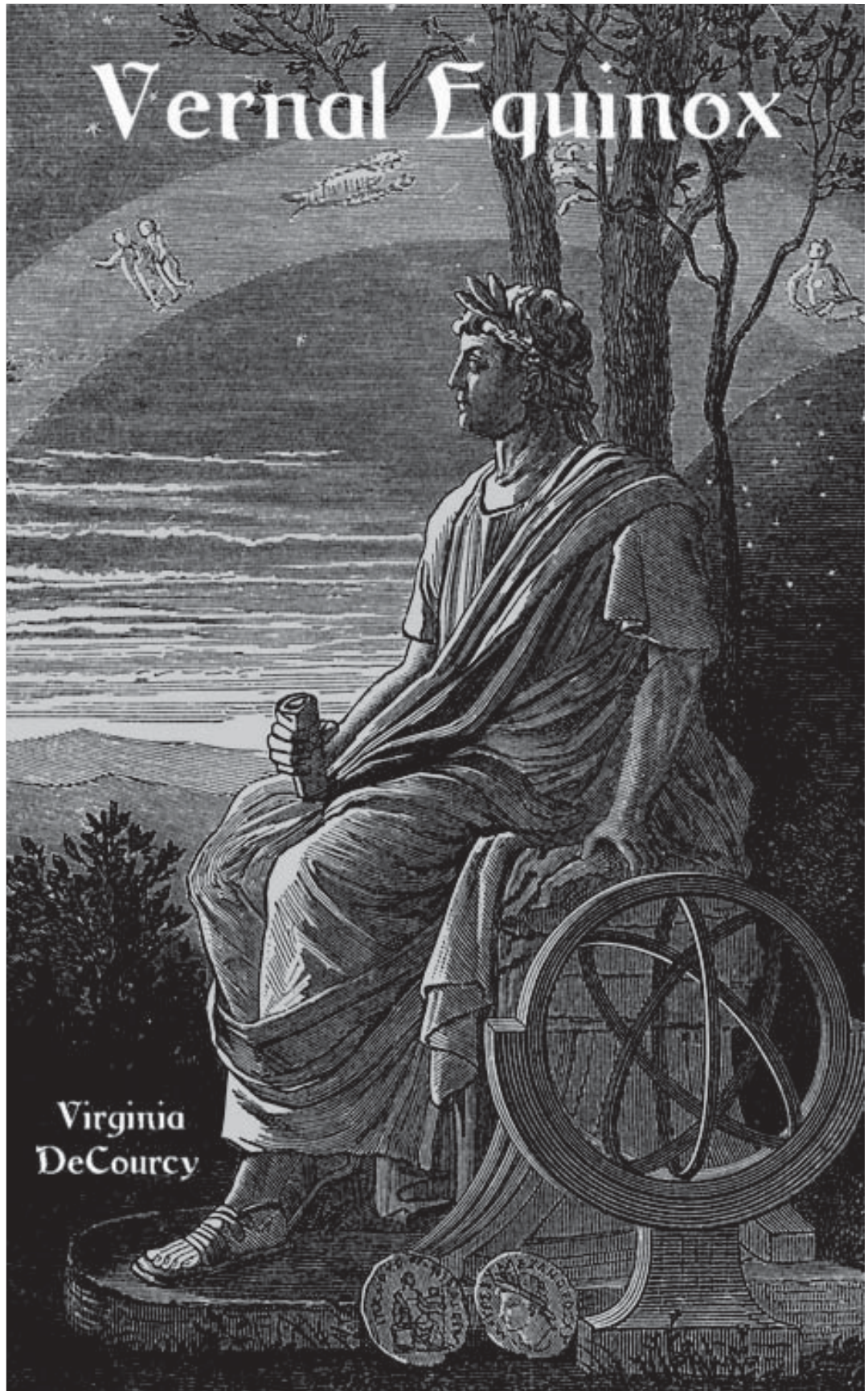
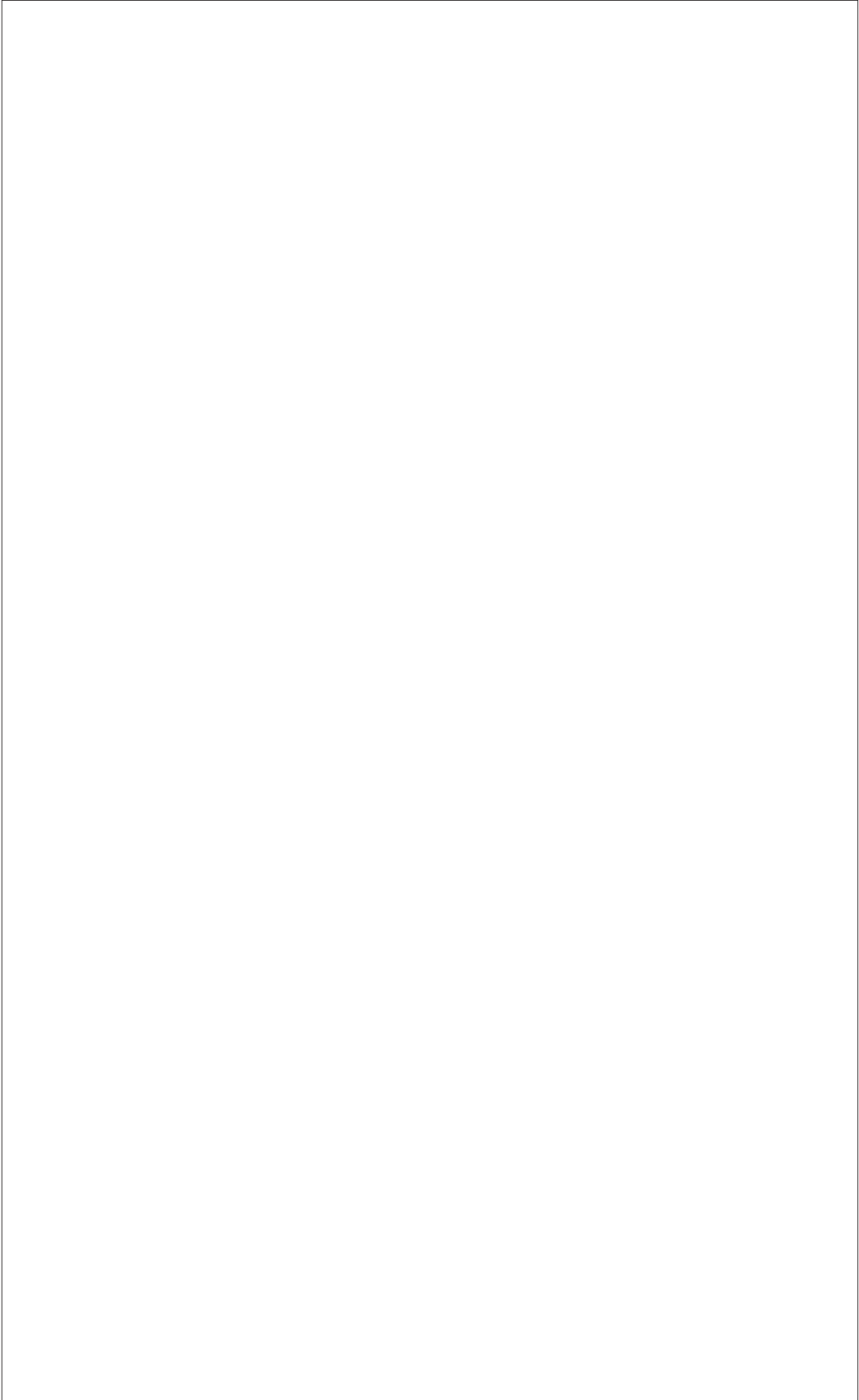


Vernal Equinox



Virginia
DeCourcy



Vernal Equinox



Virginia De Courcy

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Penelope

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Penelope

I.

Where are we,
now that we are without love:
the doors led us
to a room that is empty ~~

in bitter joy
the city above will lead us,
its own artifact
as if the sea had washed over it
and left the stone of our hands
mottled with silt,
stained with clay and desire:

we, straining,
grasping for the shape of the city ~~
it unfolds before us
in accurate reflections,
the symmetrical perfection
of the infinite, sea-washed clay.

II.

Once I found the city and the night
walled with high houses ~~
a shrine, I saw
of fire, metal and ice:

and there, above all,
the strenuous mare
torn from the sculpture of her being,
wings heaving heavy sails ~~
the strange horse face
female and orphic in mystery:

thrown up as a sorceror's conception,
she has appeared in my sea-dreams since.

III.

Where are we,
now that we are without love,

drinking coffee at a small cafe
some blocks from the shrine,
I am a girl among men sitting at the counter

here there is a waitress by the name of Rose:
gnarled-fingered Penelope,
she touches their souls,
transforming them to flowers:

yet looking into the eyes of old men
gathered at the counter
as if it were the night's plutonian shore:
I know they decided to stay behind
in Ithaca,
she made their journey for them ~~
her body hard, deeply marked by her travels.

IV.

I have dreamt of the odysseus of the mind,
that I might know the semen
of the sea-washed city within ~~

waiting at the shrine of fire and ice,
no one came except the night ~~
the face of the horse
receded like an etruscan bird
in angular flight ~~
stars above faint towers
pointed to the imperceptible passage
of winter, and beyond.

V.

I have sought
a star-lit heaven
in a point of ice ~~
a black paradise
in a child's grasp

a rose of petals
of reptile skin,
in a house that
possessed no past

a house of you.

VI.

The drawn reptile of blue-enclosed blood
worms a labyrinth
within my mind ~~

and hollows out the torn spaces there,
that the sea and the orphic mare
may draw through precisely
as a thread
in Penelope's web
and perpetuate a haunting

I do not know,
awakening to find my face
woven with reptile skin
beneath the surface of flowers and the city

Who did this to me?
the birds, fragile in geometrical flight,
know not the beating of my heart ~~
they are too perfect

this the weakness
of tense white flesh
drawn through the needle-white bitterness
of the sea-worm sea.

VII.

The dense white columns of your mind,
perceive and continue unchanged by the sea ~~
I worked closely, as a serpent might,
to detect a minute stain on their absolute ivory,
and found none ~~

I fled back and hid beneath a cape,
turned old,
and set to study the markings on my bones:

picking at my wounds as an animal might,
I found that the fragile city was a fossil
and that I resembled it ~~

you, who remain pure from me
in your room of flowers and birds ~~
you, who possess no telltale sea-markings
that would speak with the voices of the dead:

your Penelope has ventured beyond
to a journey of her own ~~
and found a city entirely shipwrecked on the void.



Seavetaking

I.

She sought her own dark sorrow
in a bed of sunlight,
red berries descending ~~

opening the door,
she heard outside the boneman of her grief,
rummaging in the kitchen ~~
he ordered her existence
into upward-gathering whales

each containing a trapped Jonah,
an insect in ambergris,
arches of the bone whale-house,
a series of vaults into the hereafter ~~

inside the whale
the world is pale,
amber and uncertain.



II.

I perceive your swimming, Jonah of the deep,
by the marks you leave on the water,
a single purple bruise of mortal discontent ~~

hands and arms conflict the tide,
and bruise the hollow white wetness,
the inner she-being of the sea ~~
the hollowed wet vastness
that fits into your sometimes webbed hands

the torn-indigo
and the rapture of the night,
reveal the image of a whale-arch on the shore ~~
beyond the water sea-plunged,
a burning swimmer in the ice-swollen light ~~

a prisoner in a vast water-cave,
I know no other distance,
but measure you as a series
of white-hot steps, crazy in the darkness.

III.

At first she thought it would be a flower
growing from her decayed body ~~
that the deeply-veined minute sorrow
might join like an alien sphere in the wide morning:

that a fair tower might still be unearthed
beneath ruins of stone and detachment,
the fingers of her burial careless:
when the vision went its natural way,
it was partly in the stone of the memory ~~
a secret death, she told no relatives

she packed away the bones neatly in a sack,
she cleared away the sorrow like remnants
after the feast,
and left no spot of blood upon the carpet
to puzzle those who might come after.



IV.

Held deeply within indigo spaces,
a bird with a golden mask:

Vernal Equinox

I

I found a cold spring
that stitched my startled heart
asunder into small pieces,
revealing the nexus of a dream:

taking the softer parts of recollection
and shattering them into brittle gentility ~~
splinters of softness in yearning,
that harm much by wanting:

like a wagon viewed as a child
going away forever over the hilltop:
I break the misted pane of glass,
to see out, but find it a lens
of unsure gravity, populated
by a dream of southern planets,

vernal in black space, heliotropic
in stitched white remembrance ~~
as returning planets that stop
and pierce the heart with sudden
and vernal hope, although
deep in snow with the frost coming
I settle down to an early winter
in God's gray habitat:

all those stars out there, trusty and consistent
on their slow axes ~~
once they formed a celestial sphere, close to man,
just beyond the planets, in perfect circles:
or was that the heart swung over
on heaven's complexity:
when the mind exploded the world outward
into infinity, the heart wept.

II.

I tell you,
sometimes I feel spring
as a disconcerting ghost
pressing down midwinter ~~
although more often in a once land
filled with my heart's family gone now ~~

equinoxes progressing in westward change,
three precise stars balanced above
the huge dark trees in a garden of snow ~~
when I slept at night, a child,
and pulled the quilt of the sky down over me:

in all that longing,
light as the frozen air touching stars ~~
I felt a mystery,
a movement in spring ~~
like the animal body of infinity
stirring from sleep:

horn of the tipped stars must still exist,
although that viewing place is gone now,
and hard it is to construct another,
where is the heart
to find again ~~
the cool dispassionate lens,
that viewed in perpetual expectation
the horned rim ~~

as if the stars would speak
or the trees would become giants ~~
or gently he might open the door,
and pause after all in the horned brilliance.

III.

I believe it happened in spring ~~
vernal equinox meeting Saturn
in full orbit,
from the May meeting of trees in silence:

if twenty-nine winters have come and gone,
through this painful lens ~~
and the horned rim of stars
no longer approaches the mountain,
I stitch the planets into place ~~
expecting no motion of their own ~~

and abandon my own idea of order
within the fragile land of mind's disappointment,
spying out the terrain there ~~
with a vision only of finiteness:

horned stars too painful and silent,
to answer back the question of true spring:
my soul goes to riding westward
in planet's swift succor ~~

and presents the heart as an astronomer
among vernal equations
of balanced light ~~ and dark,
that show on rough edges
of the indigo lens ~~ ragged, into the night,
the perception of startled spring
among the heavy uprootedness
of the wandering sky.



Rainy Hyades

The rainy Hyades rise in the autumn evening
and bring the yearning of that season,
as a starry scythe that harvests the horizon ~~
hyacinths deepen to a withered purple,
scattering like birds before the chill blade ~~
so my heart in autumn worships the lips
and breasts of spring: on a long dark couch, her russet
hair outspread.

The mask of the moon
that betrays the outworn beauty of the body,
rises before a darkened mirror: golden claw
of your nakedness displaying lapis lazuli, to ornament
warm blood, pulse of beauty, cannot be traced
in a wreath of thorns
prickly as stubble in a yellow field ~~
it bruises the skin of morning, to hint
that all is mortal.

When I found spring in a thicket, in a world grown old,
she wore a golden embroidered cap
like Persephone's, close-fitting as skin,
to hide the secret hair of her autumn:
such was Hyades rising in the enigma of rain,
as the halo wound about the sun
on yearning days ~~
its passion remembered:
a golden claw that accompanies
the face of the sphinx.

I loved the body,
its rainy coolness against black deeps
like a violet wild on a far tundra ~~
to nourish beyond the short span of the moon,
creating unnatural lines of grace
among thawing streams where black carp drift
before the divining tree.

How is it
to awaken within the moment of body
firm like warming snow,
to melt distorted, features frozen,
preserving the unstable state of the heart?

When the moon grows thin and pock-marked,
it rides above the ventry of a world
gone russet with death ~~ like a woman's body
no longer young ~~ stretched and brown
in the settled fullness of red berries gathered
beneath a scythe of bitter stars:

It is rainy Hyades that enters my heart
on certain guessing days
that come round again like familiar planets
seen through a cloudy lens ~~
with the world grown dusk, I feel
unaccountable tears
and pray for the passion of the body:

as if I were already among the ushepti
in that vast pyramid in Hades' depth,
handmaid to a dark and golden lord,
jewel-beaked and embracing wing:
his underworld.

Be it not yet,
my heart is too filled with the wonder of blue
egyptian swallows, though winter marks
the granite of their resting place.

I would see again
the vaulted radiance of early day,
to wish
like a dark coach rushing through rainy hills
to the pines of Mantua:

I did when young,
when all the world was pure lilies for the taking.

How it is to grow old ~~
a dying out, a confusion of the stars,
is the beginning here, to feel autumn in the heart,
and beauty no easy thing to claim ~~

to search for grace like the withered loins
of an old man, to be defeated
by a sudden tremor of heart's unease:
rainy Hydes, you come in autumn
and in your starlight
I see the scattered hyacinths lying
within a vault of supernal night.



Gravetime

"Why a little curtain of flesh
on the bed of our desire?"

William Blake
The Book of Thel

I.

The death wings of a bird
reflect a star,
voyaging to the other side of the world

I resent the journey,
the lessening of light,
feeling it in my heart
as if it were the night

the unhopeful winter
surges toward spring
 on feathered gallows:
sea steps change ~~
and beyond the strand,
I saw the small body of spring
slain on the hilltop,
the bride of many whirling ravens.

II.

Gravediggers stand near,
gaunt as oaks in winter ~~

I feel my fingers starved
as newly buried bone,
clutching black silk:
within the coffin lies a woman,
her gold-willed hair
crushed beneath a skullcap ~~
a many-jewelled and horned headdress

the gravedigger gave her:
he gave me nothing,
as befitting those who
 sleep before gravetime ~~
where winter is the eternal
 and unlovely season.

III.

There must have been a reason,
a beginning to winter ~~
the void of birds
makes it difficult to remember:

as if the fragile veins and wings
of what must have been my being ~~
snapt shut suddenly
as the shell of a sea-thing,
or the cold metal lock
of a secretive box ~~
(to deny the light
and touch the frost).

IV.

My mother was a seamstress,
she sewed me shut:
my mother was a seamstress,
her needle pierced my heart:

we never spoke,
as one would speak,
beyond the curtained window ~~
yet waking in the night,
I heard her sigh in the other room,
and thought her breasts
were wakeful, as in another world

she was a bowl of lilies
in a sphere of hyacinth and yew ~~
she was a bowl of lilies,
my father plucked her roots,

letting the frost in.

V.

Like unwilling birds of prey
that light on the horned ledges
in a grotto of the heart,
the sea rushes in:
purifying the carrion
of stone cages within ~~

in winter awakening,
my body feels unsure ~~
smelling of death somehow
in its meagre warmth:
the world intones
a frailty I cannot grasp ~~
I start, and try to hear
the words pronounced:

there would be an ending to this ~~
as waiting, a train filled
with birds finally comes:
the rustle of their winged discontent
fills the terminal like women
crying in a prism of sand and ice.

VI.

Carved walls of intricate thought,
trees of solace grow berries
fastidious as shrunken autumn's aftermath:

seeds black and round ~~
hurtful spheres containing
 the mirror of another light:
worlds stand side by side,
doors passing from each,
domes of torn being ~~

as if I lived in the heat
of a distant star,
and knew it ~~
 pressing it into my body:

yet here, within my breasts,
the frost remains ~~
dark birds light upon my heart,
and I have waited for the rest,
have known it ~~
as an unlovely visitor,
the forbidden guest ~~
that stole the sweetest fruit,
burying it ~~ hard and bitter
in ripeness it decays:

(they whispered she was digging
her own grave), filling it
with black seeds:

thoughts like hawks
that glean the countryside:
or on a solitary branch,
I wait in cormorant attitude ~~

VII.

While beyond,
the sea is chanting,

its hollows and caves
an echoing cathedral ~~
a massive organ voice
with silver pipes:
it imitates the motion of the earth,
and never dies ~~

I hunt close to the shore,
not wandering out over
the great black rocks:

I do not know how
I will find death
in so immense a thing:
my heart has long been carried
to the birds within ~~
I sound a bell in the dark,
hoping it will find me out.



Pilgrim

I.

It was the defeated
conjuring of the hazel branch,
a wishing stick that intersected
human bone
and bound the salt of stony earth ~~

no well to be,
I struck a deeper depth,
as rod into rock:
there foulness mingled with dreams artesian,
creating the semblance of will.

As a swift horseman on urgent journey
through a bleak roumania of foothills and snow,
(no familiar roof toward evening),
I entered the dark unknown of a wood
and there discovered, in a small clearing,
a holy burial ground of stakes
and crucifixes, fresh-driven.

The saints all hung there, flayed and torn,
noble prey like lion or stag,
in the art of medieval venery ~~
dark blood staining their humble linen.

It is painful
to approach the lord in rushing night ~~
his touch like fire that rips the face,
twisting the sinews of the world
to make
a beatific faith.

II.

I longed for you,
like an old rain-witch seeking water
in a wooded fen.

Strange white birds did not beguile you,
but as a horseman assured in stealth,
I planned to ride you down in the open
and take your heart
in the chastity of Jesu spring.

You fled from me, lord ~~
though no dawn hunter, I came to be:
when you held your ground,
I gave up my stealth to wild birds
and to fasting on the primeval plain.

III.

You remained at a distance, elusive, as a crow
in the poverty of the body ~~
my lament the pain of that old love
returning at times
like a carrion bird to its rafter:

I wished for greatness
in the mortal heart and found it not ~~
grief like a foul old woman
wrapped in rags,
begging from chamber to chamber
throughout the passageways of the heart . . .

on bitter Sundays she does my wash,
as some old raven
that ekes out a living on blighted fields.

Begone, old woman ~~

I remember you
in the filth of your rags,
unbidden
except on washing days.

IV.

If I failed to find you
on that nebulous plain,
wishing to give you the alms of my heart ~~
as Paul among dangerous horses,
you flame out unexpectedly
in persecution of the world's duty.

No pagan has seen the equus of the heart,
it has taken to riding
along the blackened shoals of the sea:
a hanging tree I found on the cliff,
a lyric prayer the gaunt wind sang ~~

I collected splinters and dangling shreds
of linen stained by after-birth:
a skeleton of timber washed below ~~
it floated to the surface like a dead man
twined in a wreath of kelp.

I sat on the sand as night came on,
heaving breakers on rock,
and fingered the relics strewn at my feet ~~
if the Southern Cross bejewels the night sky
across the equator
to a distant land I cannot see,
I long to touch, like trembling clay,
the star of you.

V.

A pilgrim stands by the hanging tree,
(tincture of your love remaining),
and violates the burial of bones
for the perfection of your stigmata,

lord Jesu . . .



Anchor

"David compareth an anchoress
to a pelican, which leads a solitary
life, and to the sparrow, that is alone."
The Ancren Riwe, 1300

I.

Here is the anchor of my heart,
the snowy masses of the mountains
and the white birds that live there ~~
within those ice relics of the far cliffs:
a sanctuary for the owl in storm,
that sleeps and hides in the thicket:

in the radiant morning
of the contemplative heart ~~
I obey the rule of the sun, and gaze
on its ascendancy past mountains,
the wind a canticle where the valley
repeats a shrine:
snow, mountain, sky ~~
earth, elements of my solitude ~~

if there were an explorer of the wide poles,
seeking the eternal thought,
a part of it is here:
sun can fill the world with light,
slowly as over a ridge ~~
an astonishment of light
my earthly self may call the sunrise:

yet in this peace surrounding,
I come to know your face ~~
birds, mountain and snow air,
as if you created this landscape
to compassionate,
the meditative jewel of the heart ~~

II.

My Lord, I long to join you ~~
as on a whaling vessel toward the arctic,
the hear the whales sing,
and the blind whale like Homer
with his sea-harp: to hear their
epic songs and rounds, in that far polar night ~~
and know them gods of us ~~

their singing voices
echo a cavern of intricate ice:
their thought scooped like precious spermaceti
from heaven's skull ~~
a wreath of briar left behind:

the mouth of the whale is large,
and its voice small ~~
if my heart anchors here
among the massy whiteness,
how can I hear or touch you:
I imagine your raiment voluminous as arctic clouds ~~

as when an old woman waits on the ice,
her tribe has gone its own way ~~
did the great weight of the white bear
carry your sight?

III.

I know you will not take my heart,
too filled with the pulse of subtle desire:
an incunabula of your soul,
I must grow cold, go to your arctic,
and explore there ~~

how is it both to freeze
and keep the heart:
it seeks its own anchor in the white owl
that hunts in the starry blue ~~
and when the sun comes at midnight:

shuddering, on the gray branch,
the heart awakens.





Passion's Possibility

Even beyond that most fair and ugly country
that contains by necessity all higher dreams ~~
I know that the blood-fire of true winter
pierces there our pale desire,
heart's passion trapped in hooded ice:
snowbound,
to wait for dark complexity's
first coming;
and watch the fugitive, starless flight
of a storm infinity of sparrows,
let out from the sun's back gate ~~
to fall from the beautiful blind sky:
and there ensure heaven's secret pity.



Virginia De Courcy
1950 ~ 1986

