

POEM SEQUENCE



Edward Hirsch

THE DESIRE MANUSCRIPTS

1 *The Craving* (*The Odyssey*, Book Twelve)

I needed a warning from the goddess
and a group of men to lash me to the mast
hand and foot, so that I could listen
to swelling, sun-scorched, fatal voices
of two Sirens weaving a haunted sound
over the boiling surf, calling me downward
while I twisted with desire in the ropes
and pleaded to be untied, unbound, unleashed.
How willingly I would have given myself up
to that ardor, that drowning blue charm,
while hopeless clouds scudded overhead
and the deaf oarsmen rowed ruthlessly home.
I was saved. I know, but even now, years later,
I crave those voices dreaming in my sleep.

2 *The Ravishment* (*The Odyssey*, Book Twelve)

I listened so the goddess could charm my mind
against the ravishing sunlight, the lord of noon,
and I could stroll through country unharmed
toward the prowling straits of Scylla and Charybdis,

but I was unprepared for the Siren lolling
on a bed in a dirty room above a tavern
where workers guzzled sour red wine
and played their cards late into the night.

It takes only a moment to cruise eternity
who dressed quickly and left, after 20 minutes,
taking my money. I went back to the ship
and the ordinary men pressing for home,

but, love, some part of me has never left
that dark green shore sweetened with clover.

3 *What the Goddess Can Do*
(*The Odyssey*, Book Ten)

Maybe it was the way she held her head,
or her voice, which was too high, or her braids,
which reminded me of a girl I used to know,

but I sat on a tall char like a god
drinking a bowl of honey mulled with wine
and getting drowsy, counting my good fortune,

so that she could transform me into a pig
squealing for acorns, grunting and bristling
in a sty, snouting the ground with other swine.

Later, our leader convinced her to reverse
the spell, setting our animal bodies free...

I have been many things in this life—
a husband, a warrior, a seer—but I cannot forget
what the goddess can do to me, if she desires.

4 *The Sentence*
(*The Inferno*, Canto Five)

When you read Canto Five aloud last night
in your naked, sing-song, fractured Italian,
my sweet compulsion, my carnal appetite,

I suspected we shall never be forgiven
for devouring each other body and soul,
and someday Minos, a connoisseur of sin,

will snarl himself twice around his tail
to sentence us to life in perpetual motion,
funneling us downward to the second circle

where we will never sleep or rest again
in turbulent air, like other ill-begotten
lovers who embraced passion beyond reason,

and yet I cannot turn from you, my wanton;
our heaven will always be our hell, a swoon.

5 *In the Mourning Fields*
(*The Aeneid*, Book Six)

The world below is starless, stark and deep,
and while you lay beside me, my golden bough,
plunged into the shadowy marsh of sleep,

I read about the infernal realm, and how
a soldier walked forth in the House of Dis
while still alive, breaking an eternal law

by braving death's kingdom a vast abyss,
the ground sunken in fog—eerie, treacherous—
guarded by a mad beast, three-throated Cerberus.

Tonight I read about us—foundering, hopeless—
in the Mourning Fields and the myrtle grove,
wandering on separate paths, lost in darkness.

It is written that we were consumed by love
here on earth, a pitiless world above.

6 *After All the Orphic Enchantments*
(*The Metamorphoses*, Books Ten and Eleven)

After all the Orphic enchantments, after all
was said and done, after a second death stunned
and claimed his wife for the fluttering clouds
and phantom forms, the misting lower depths,

after he pleaded with Charon for a second chance
but was dismissed and chased above ground
where he shunned women for a good three years
and notched a life for himself with young men,

a vegetarian priest who recited the passions
of lovers who paid for their transgressions—
the Cerastes, the Propoetides, Pygmalion,
Myrrha and Cinyras, Venus and Adonis—

after everything was closed, completed,
and the costs were tallied, after he sang
for the hyacinths and virgin laurels
and charmed the drooling souls of beasts,

after he enraged the Thracian women who
circled like birds of prey and ripped him
into pieces, as the gods had prophesied,
after his body watered the ground with blood

and currents carried his severed head chanting
downstream with such, a spellbinding grief
that trees shed leafy crowns and stones leapt
up and swollen rivers wept in their beds,

I wonder if Orpheus ever decided it was
worth it after all, relinquishing his body
so he could return to the nether world
which he knew by heart and where, I hope,

he moves with Eurydice on the other side,
a shade still singing amid the other shades,
walking behind her, sometimes ahead,
and swiveling round to gaze at her forever.

7 *The Regret*
(The Lost Orphics)

If we had never married, if you had never strolled
barefoot through high grass with a poisonous snake
that sent you weeping alone into the underworld

to join the other shades, the fresh new recruits
arriving at all hours at the waystation of eternity,
Persephone's insubstantial realm, the House of Death,

and if I, who could entrance the Stygian fog
and convince the gods of our ravishing need for
each other, here and now, in the world above,

had never turned back for my limping wife
on a shadowy path out of utter silence,
the void of Avernus, the margins of earth,

then I, might not be floating here alone
on a mournful hillside, devoid of shade,
praising young boys beloved by the fates

to the approaching trees, the bright lotus,
lover of pools, and the bittersweet hazel,
the river-haunted willow and the mountain ash,

awaiting my own death, the crazed Furies
who will send my head and my lyre downstream
still singing about us, what might have been.