

The Art of Life: A Poetry Anthology

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Gatsby Reborn

A meditation on The Great Gatsby by F.Scott Fitzgerald and The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov. The ultra capitalist and ultra communist societies represented in the two respective novels are really two sides of the same coin.

The people sit like toy soldiers overdressed,
Peacock regalia, in the finest Long Island silk.
Above humming energy from the megaphone,
Above careless mouths, floats an invisible master.
'Hear ye, Hear ye!' - he booms:
'With Bacchus on my right-hand shoulder,
And Midas on my left,
The Sun King and his *sang réal*
Are behind me and in front.
Blue rivers and blood are under your shoes,
Be careful not to slip;
And remember to always
Keep your eyes wide shut.'

Mr Gatsby stands alone over the pool
While the soldiers play,
Hands reaching out, eyes peering through the fog,
Realising that Anushka has already spilled the oil;
But Margarita is flying around him
On her broomstick
Like a pale flag of liberty, ad astra!
'Come join me, brother!' - she shouts below,
And up, up, up they go...
Free at last...

Leelou Lapteva, BA Literae Humnaiores

Paint (Making Art)

My friend Daisy is a fellow painter,
In your face she hopes to see the smudges of his.
Reality is boring, everyone knows that.
Daisy prays to see him again, watching the
Reflections and echoes trailing the walls,
(The sun hurts the eyes).

Impatience is the greatest vice,
Time, the oldest enemy of all.
Every pigment we rub between our fingers
Is just an imitation of our one true home.

And she can sketch you too, don't you know.
You seem to have the same shy
eyes and shape of the head as he.
As she sleeps, she'll sew a thread of stardust which
Knots your third eyes together.

You can be her fiction, her Narcissus in the water
And she, your Botticelli's Venus.
When the paint dries,
She'll start her next attempt at Summer,
You'll find your new *Primavera*.

For now, you two entangle in one thousand and
One nights of multi-colour.
Eating lotus petals, crushing their honey
Under your tongues,
Licking each other's ecstasy and...

At midnight she forgets her desire to paint
Summer in his truest likeness,
Curving herself deep into you,
Her blue hidden under your crimson and blush,
Making art.

Epilogue:

It's morning, the dove-tiled houses are now glowing a soft yellow,
The cotton sheet - a cold canvas of your shape.
In her mind you've become a Monet:
Gold and blue tones dissolving into
Another fantasy.

By evening, she's lying in another bed,
Creating your likeness,
Thinking of him,
Making art.

Daisy's Self-Portrait

She's come back from white-dressed Puglia,
After chasing Summer around Europe.
Heatstroke is her favourite disease,
Languishing - her guilty pleasure.
Teal porcelain teacup, espresso dregs,
Cold granite, ink-stained fingers and a frown.
Daisy, why do you look so blue?

She tells me: "I thought I was going to create my masterpiece,
It was nearly within my grasp, until Summer
Left me on a burnt terracotta porch, and I've been trying
To flee the autumn chill ever since.

I've given parts of myself to Picasso, to Botticelli and Dali.
We were painting together.
Each time I thought I was perfecting my master craft,
Getting closer to capturing Summer's likeness...
I've sunbathed in apricots,
I've swum in magnolias and peonies,
My skin has breathed in fuchsia and exhaled sweet dusk
And yet my palette is desolate,
My paint brush, forever dry."

But Daisy, your own self-portrait remains
A blank canvas, untouched,
Tubes of paint hollow,
Bled dry for other chalked-up palettes.

She shakes her head.
"I've never been good at self-portraits.
I get frustrated, I'm never happy with how I turn out.
And Gauguin can't help me, nor Goya nor Van Gogh.
I'll stick to the arts I know, and eventually,
I'll find a new Summer."

She's booked her voyage to Australia.
Then when the rain begins to fall,
On she'll go to Morocco, then Malta.
She wants to paint its saffrons and maroons.
In Malta she sees a summer so breathtaking,
Her heart swells with a love she thinks she hasn't felt in years.
She reaches for her paint brush, her palette,
Determine to not let this one slip away.

Her brush strokes are deft,
Her use of light and shadow – exemplar.
She catches summer at its climax,
And falls into a peaceful slumber...
In her dreams she sees
Dido on the shore, faithless,
Still waiting for Summer that would not return.
It's time to paint her self-portrait:
The palette's no longer quite empty,
- Except for the colour blue.

Empathy, Love & Cigarettes

Lost in the music, painting some wax work,
Searching for my shadow self, despite her elusiveness.
Blues in my mouth, red on my fingers,
I want to tear out my heart and let it dry up on God's porch,
Shriveled and pink.
I'll eat it up after, looking for my eternal youth.

Blowing on dandelions, plucking bone-coloured petals
I enjoy the tobacco; I nibble on the nicotine.
You know I still search for you in every person that I meet.
And melancholia rolls up to choke the English Channel,
Hot needles prick behind the eyes,
Feeling half but attacking the marble not as a
La Pieta, but as a strong *David*,
Beautiful and admired as such by the rest of the world.
Magnificent all on my own.

But if they looked closely, they might be able to see the Tommaso,
Young Cavalieri, staring back in all my works,
Everything I've ever written since I was a child.
It happens unconsciously, the way I perceive the world will
Forever be in the kaleidoscope of your eyes.
My eternal muse as real as the air beside me,
Living here in loving memory.

Judas and Brutus

Judas ate supper with me again and again,
With bread broken and wine drunk.
One day I awoke to find myself being hammered
To a cross at his hands. I cry out in pain.
“’Tis but a scratch!” He berates, “It isn’t personal!”
Meanwhile irreversible nails are buried in flesh and bone,
And my blood pours out for all to see.

Brutus watched everything unfold,
He’d been whispering in Judas’ ear all week.
No longer happy with our triumph
He saw me as Caesar and wished he could lead.
Though I’d already offered him the spot
Next to me in the chariot, it would require more toil,
And a brief moment in the shade was too much to bear,
He had to be up at the front or not at all there.

So when the knife fell,
He couldn’t look me in the eye,
Unlike Judas, he could admit to himself
Exactly what was happening,
And what he was choosing to do.

That’s the trouble with Brutus,
He thinks wrong is right and right is wrong.
He’s addicted to playing other people,
So he doesn’t have to be
Alone with himself for too long.
That would be his version of Hell, would it not?

And when I think about that, I feel sorry for him...
I’d rather not be, than be so utterly lost,
Hating me as intensely as himself,
He begins to realise I’m not the only
Heart he double-crossed.

Patriotic front crumbles at the weight of conscience,
A slave now to the toll of fortune.
I feel your shame from miles away,
Begging my ghost relief from self-inflicted pain.
“Caesar be still, I killed not thee with half so good a will”.
Speak those words instead at the grave you fill.

Your epitaph reads:
‘Here lies Brutus, Caesar’s murderer and friend
Lost for all time, lost till the end.’

Leelou Lapteva, BA Literae Humnaiores

The Bird

Like something from a dream,
Hard to catch, hard to feel,
Hard to forget, slipping through my fingers
Soft as sand.
You are a common, pleasurable noise -
Hard to remember but once heard familiar
As a mother's voice.
What do I make of your song?
To me you are a gateway to happy memories, an age bygone.
Why can't I find you? Why can't I touch you?
Strange bird with your swift feet and beloved swooping
I see you graceful, golden, leaping
Between rocks like it is a dance only your feet can know.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw you skipping on the sea
Knowing that I would capture this moment in my mind
Like it was a mirror to Elysium.

Kintsugi

Raised with mirror cracked,
We have a bowl patched up with golden ink,
Like kintsugi of the prettiest ceramic blue,
Placed on our mantelpiece.

We don't talk about what's inside it,
Mother Nature says I couldn't have grown up without
The full china set, when pieces had already
Eroded, defeated by Father Time.

Our blue bowl sits there
On the mantelpiece still now.
It doesn't do anything else but
Mother thinks just the sight of it will make me happy.

She doesn't remember I watched it smash over
And over again until I learned to expect nothing else.
It's there because of me and to it
I am always compared.

It used to hold Mother Nature's pearls when it was younger,
When a lot would, but not many could.
Mother Nature feels eternally grateful,
Bound by a loyalty forged before
The earth drew its first breath, it does not matter that those
Pearls melted long ago in the saltwater of her tears,
Her love is unconditional.

The bowl was there once upon a time
To catch her tears
And transform them into steam -
An evil alchemy - addictive to the already unhealthy,
And who else would tend to it so lovingly?

The Forgotten Girl

No one remembers my name,
It faded from the lips of men a hundred years ago,
Into the soft syllables of the wind.
The same wind that blows through the leaves
Of the chestnut tree –
The sigh of Death above my grave.

No one remembers my name,
I lie guarded by a gravestone smaller than the others,
Engraved with the figure of an angel,
Watching over me with tender, waiting eyes
As I clutch my heart, feeling mortal life escape:
Through my lungs, my fingertips, my bones, my matter.

No one remembers my name,
But they see an angel when they look at my gravestone,
A guardian angel who lifted me into his arms,
And took me as his own.
So if my name no longer exists in mortal memory,
Let them see the angel who guided me into the arms,
Of one who remembers all.

Vinegar Chips

Mum and dad carried us on their backs to a safe haven,
A realm of chalky cliffs and violently grey skies,
Vinegar chips and funny bow ties.
Some of the pigeons turn away
When they hear a squawk too low or too curled:
Where are you from? Where are you from? Where are you from?
It's a reminder they aren't welcome to be birds of a feather,
Despite the fact we all grew up here together.
The next time a pigeon remarks I speak with just a pretty voice as them,
And then asks why I was never taught my native tongue,
Laughing at such a silly idea! Know that it's so pigeons like you,
Who love to sing whichever tune is in fashion
But always stick to their own flock,
Could see me as no different, a start to compassion,
My parents never got.

Look at yourself before you judge another,
Forgetting a past life when you were a foreign brother.

Leelou Lapteva, BA Literae Humnaiores

Spirit's Soliloquy:

Now thou hast learnt of the isle of my brethren,
The spirits and faeries, servants to the wilder
Forces of nature.

We are part of the honey-combed fabric
Of matter and elements,
That make up our whimsical world,

And like silky, golden honey,
We have trickled into the hearts of men,
Sweetening and intoxicating on the order of another...

Prospero, Prospero, the magic wielder,
Our master, our enemy, our friend,
He who commanded the gentle, lapping waves,
Into inky, monstrous beasts,

The soulful wind,
Into a chorus of cacophony,
The blue, cloudless sky,
Grey with storm clouds.

And he transformed it all back again:
The pale sunlight upon the hot, white sand,
The rustle of nymphs among the lofty treetops,
The blooming flowers which beam with longevity,

The abundance of succulent fruit
Plucked from Eden's Garden,
The mournful ballad of the wind
Sung by the slaves of Aeolus:

Of distant lands separated by the endless sea,
Of ships, long gone to Davy Jones' locker,
To rot at the bottom of the ocean...

Our home – a dream, a wonder, a miracle of nature,
Lonely now without the entertainment of men.
Of their sins, and their virtues,

Of their brashness and bravery.
The isle of magic will miss its victims and heroes,
Its friends and foes.

It will miss Prospero,
But nothing can last forever.
It is time for men to depart,
Forgetting our so potent art.

The stars shall shine bright,
As the day turns to night,
And the isle of magic,
Fades from thy sight.

Nostos

We're self-exiled from opposing tribes
Drenching their feet in the muddy earth,
Shared language buried in the
Bones of our wolf-skinned grandfather,
Who loved our land more than it loved us.
Such realisation instigated a crossing
Of borders otherwise hidden in
The mundane spillage of beer
Or a tender piglet spit roasted.
Understanding *nostos* meant something else entirely,
Our ship - our freedom,
Our love - a compass pointing soul-home...

Moonlight refractures in a thousand
Shards upon the wine-dark sea
Mosaic of Poseidon, carpet of Selene,
Ebb and flow for me!
With wax-filled ears and a dwindling crew,
Persistence is key to maintaining the ship,
Sirens sway hidden in the breeze,
Ready to fester in every bruise and blow,
Like torches they arise from ink-black
Dusk to feed on wisps, willow-bendy,
Arching their backs at the gusto of Aeolus' wind.
Fear snatches me like the jolt of a boat
Teetering towards the abyss,
I hold onto our wheel, a tarot card of completion,
Taunting of the ever-change, eyes momentarily
Closed to the Fibonacci spiral of wheel-spokes in front
And whirlpool below, throat choked with sprays of sea water,
Feet slipping at every lurch and throw.
Athena asks why I've forgotten how I built this ship
– Every plank of the stern, rudder, deck and mast,
Suffused with childhood symmetry, faerie-like felicity.

I think of birthing a crew to help me
Steer the boat on its right course.
The shared joy of hoisting our colours high,
Of building sandcastles on Aruban shores,
Jumping over waves in glee, and,
When they get older drinking rum by the fire,
Will be enough, I can make them happy enough,
That they will think it was worth it to
Join me. In every hug we shall find
A calm sea of infinity.

Leelou Lapteva, BA Literae Humnaiores

White Dewdrops Through the Snow

The motherland has been left behind,
It's too painful to return
When the last thing I remember seeing there
Was your smile blooming like white dewdrops through the snow.

The motherland has been left behind,
Our name is the only living thing,
A red thread of fate, which ties me
To the soil enshrining your bones.

The motherland has been left behind,
I imagine you telling mother at seventeen
Not to worry, no matter how far we go,
In our hearts we carry every loved one we know.

Artisan

Let's paint our next canvas together
And fill it with so many
Happy hours it feels like
Floating in the universe's ocean,

Eyes looking at the clouds crafted by hand,
Simply existing as we truly are.
We don't need anything to feel happy because
We know that it never left us,

That returning to calm, choosing joy,
Which becomes more and more of a
Choice to make the older we get,
Is simply remembering our birthright:

To create, to thrive, to never die, and
To live, to live, to live.