

## THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

*summer*

I ghost-wrote search-engine optimized articles  
as a content intern at a venture-backed startup  
for their entrepreneurial and wedding verticals.

Under my chirpy alias, “Ada,” I made up  
*How I Designed My Wedding Website*  
“In 15 minutes!” And were that not enough

imagined myself so irresistible I would invite  
investment bankers and emirs, nurses and poets  
into me; as if being desired were my natural right

I buried my head in my laptop and wrote it –  
*5 Websites that Made Us Want to Hug Someone*  
for Eileen & Walter & Kate & Julia & Rohit

and afterwards, the week’s shitposting done,  
my fingers cleaved unto currency a mural  
for drowsy emporia; a ticker-tape on the run.

1.

My small bouquet with garden roses, astilbe, and tulips in gradient red fringes hangs from my hands. I am my offering: my thighs a scissored dowel, a madras shirt let loose from my fitted chinos; on top of that a thrifted Harris Tweed overcoat,

my head the tied phlox. The sisters, bridesmaids in seabream strapless gowns iMessage one another. Cast among this anonymous barrage, these cousins strut in two-piece suits, and uncles with shirts stained by vales of armpit tears - of woe?

love? exhilaration? – cry more. The reception plays “Don’t Forget to Remember Me,” a refrain three words too many. What is marriage, if not love repeating itself? Dust; wipe; buy the baking soda; poach eggs; compare insurance packages; make the bed; bathe

each other; turn the faucet off. A UNC peer-reviewed study shows that, over decades, married couples are 37% likelier to both gain weight; share gut bacterial profiles. Joy is the fattening of life. Is the optical illusion a marble vase or two symmetric faces,

noses grazing at its carinate? “Please put down your hands,” sings Nico, struck deaf in one ear, “because I see you.” Parental Wedding Photo #13: my mother’s white veil billows from her curls like smoke. Her dress disappears into the wedding cake.

With a dainty hand, and a giggle from her charred lips, she stuffs a handful of cream into his pursed mouth. This is the optative power of art. An uncle stuffs a glass of champagne in my hands: “To Will –” “To Anne –” “To drinking!” *Ka-CHK!*

The shutter collapses memory into a public event. When I was in kindergarten a girl I promised to marry at recess showed me how to make my face look skinny. Imagine, first, a lump in your throat. Now press the bolus into your pharynx

which produces a laryngeal closure that tucks the thyroid cartilage towards your epiglottis, locking up your windpipe. Touching me as she did this, her eyes choked. I cannot breathe. If attachment is the primal form of suffering, is then love

the tinny overdrive of catchy melodies; and faith in the spooky silences in between Freud’s *Auslassung*, the floating bridges we build over lakes to reach places we don’t belong to? Robert Schumann, in this trope of *après nous le deluge* –

if you ruin your life for love, perhaps your life wanted ruining – ended his career as a pianist with a hand injury then fell for Clara, daughter of his piano teacher who, furious at losing his most prodigious child to a law school dropout,

sued them both. As the legalities for them to wed dragged on for three years Clara went on concert tours to earn the family keep while bearing a son, Felix, wrote *lieder* with her husband. Bob wrote 130 of these in a year. In his Op. 42,

tr. “A Woman's Love and Life,” the song-cycle with explicit nuptial themes, the third song in particular reads as “I cannot grasp it / believe it,” where the voice swings across the titular line with dotted notes punctuated by an insistent pulse (which Clara

would have played on piano) that interrogate the soprano with an iambic meter into the minor mode. In the next line, “the dream has had me bewitched,” the piano stashes the syllable “witched” with dissonance. Human tenderness is always raw;

afraid of touch. It's not a great poem. “Schumann,” a critic writes, “a son of book-sellers, nevertheless set his superb *lieder* to mediocre, obscure poems.” Now you see that the epithalamion is a minor genre. Its pleasures are formal, not aesthetic.

Marriage is compromise, its comforts endemic to consciousness. This is why Brâncuși, composing *Leda* as a marble jut on concrete base, ignored the myth that *Zeus*, in the form of a swan, was the one who raped Leda. Bliss, like ekphrasis,

is violence – a fake; an eavesdropping; an onset; rainy torpor; a silence. Winnicott, to the gratitude of Jewish mothers everywhere, theorized that the best possible mom was one whose mastery over her child gradually erodes so that the child takes up

exactly when she fails. A nicer way of saying this is that bliss invites reproduction. Before depression took Robert's life, he and Clara had three more children. The prospect of grandchildren made her father reconcile. “Sometimes,” Bob recalled

her telling him, “I seem to you a child.” Robert's deceptively simple *Kinderszenen*, tr. “Scenes from Childhood,” includes a meandering piece *Träumerei* (Dreaming) that fathered expressionism; Vladimir Horowitz's favorite, who played it as an encore

for *Horowitz in Moscow* (1986), the first time he had set foot into the Soviet Union since 1925 when he played for peanuts while the Bolsheviks gunned down the Whites, at 83y/o, his technique faltering perhaps but virtuosity unperturbed, the crowd wept

visibly. Horowitz was gay. In 1933 he was married to Wanda Toscanini, who fiercely maintained him until his death. Ken Leedom, who acted as Horowitz's assistant and partner for five years, is quoted on the NYTimes as saying: “He was a difficult man,

He had an anger in him that was unbelievable. The number of meals I've had thrown on the floor or in my lap. He'd pick up the tablecloth and just pull it off the table,

and all the food would go flying. But then he was calm and sweet.” But we

have not been invited to those banquets of mastery. Our rage is too subtle, or not subtle enough. Married to ideas of progress, my parents had built their union on the claptrap of affection: action films, Mozart, worrying, and occasional sex.

“I don’t think,” I tell my father, “I’ll marry.” He smirks. O world, wherefore do you not requite my love? In his diaries, Kafka ragged on about how ugly Felice Bauer was; then, commiserating, proposed; backed off; died of pneumonia; leaving

his papers to Max Brod to burn; left us burning.

2.

Our banquet's excellent, a five-course menu which starts with Maine lobster with ham along crab claw, birdnest, and dried scallop (or tofu, for the conscience among us) then after that we have shark-fin soup, or its less expensive substitution

tofu. Sharks can replace their teeth but not their fins. When finned, the shark cannot to defend itself or breathe; it drowns as it is pecked at. I know this from the research on the unsustainability of finning for an assignment in middle school, but I eat the fin

anyway. It tastes – I describe it here because so that you will have no excuse to – like exactly what it is: shoestrings, of collagen and gelatin, at \$400 per kg. All taste is determined by its environs: brown soup warmed with lean meat, ambient slurps

of conversation as we eat, our culture, politics, faiths, upbringings, neuroses; attempts to address ourselves; likewise we consume the banal and, swallowing the soup, spit differences (cf. Bourdieu et al.) that subtly master our lives. How was the shark

caught? The shark, whose name is Mark, was bought from a fishery and left to rot. Then his fin was shipped to San Jose, where it was served with a moray. "*Caveat audiens*," moaned Mark's ghost, "my mother on her deathbed said, 'avoid the shade,

the floating mesh; for land-seraphs scour your flesh.' But rashly I disobeyed her words. (Divorcing deeds from words, I took to J.H. Prynne.) As I wandered along the Caribbean, lured by meat that bled from bins, those nincompoops

caught my fin. I thrashed around while the seraphs squared my body, mocking my gills and my sharp molar pride. Then I submerged. The sea displaced my weight and spoiled my body like rust. And I decided, with my last breath, to sing

but my unheard song bled, feebly, as my snout turned against the sun, and pressure hugged the consciousness out of me, and my eyes, distended, saw my wrath become *witness* – quite ironic, you see, that I only understood Geoffrey Hill when I died –

and that indignity, I feel, is salvaged by your company, and the friendship we have assembled before the Diet of Angels." "I think I feel you, dude," replies the moray from California, who is similarly bummed out but really thinks Mark

is being totally not chill about the whole "dying as food" thing. Its death hurt a lot too, because what sort of consciousness wants to be digested into a separate being? It swam in water, and there was not. There's this Wavves song, the surf-rock

outfit from San Diego whose lead singer has a really shitty haircut, and in a verse he (the moray recalls) whines *I think I'm crying / maybe I'm thirsty / I think I must be drunk* with wonderment at how much water we hold, in what parts of our bodies,

and California is in perpetual drought even as it's cornered by the sea. In San Diego, where I have never been, children arrive from Chihuahua, Fresno, Rabat, or Taipei by air or sea, to the place that adults cannot see. There they live in airport hangars, tall

domed ceilings scattered blue by gases in the Earth's atmosphere, which is how Hajar, the oldest of them all, explains to them the color of the sky. Here, the city lights are hidden. By Mt. Palomar's shield, before the Anza-Borrego, lies Julian – the town

where each autumn Hajar journeys to by foot. She parts the fresh damp leaves, kicks away the worn marl of corrugated fences, and laying down a plush blue towel watches yellow warblers forage among the trees. Daylight is an itinerant guest;

molting, gone. A cocoon of stars spins itself out like an elegy, and towards it she rises to designate immortal continuity. What stupor of vicissitudes, and by displacement, her own! With one hand on her breast, and the other hand deliberating

the damp topsoil to liberate the argillaceous ("clay-containing") odors, what a *Nature* study christened *petrichor*, "not a fixed chemical entity, but the integral odor of rain." Things she lost to *christening*: five siblings, a mother, statehood, the crooked right

edge of an iconic Byzantine pendant made by her third brother, the bratty one. "Do you like it?" he said. "No," she said. The lacquer was off, the babe resembled a misshapen chipmunk. Slapping the pendant off her hands, he tossed the chain

into the marshes, cried *I hate you so much*. She stared him down, saying, "I will offer no vain slight, no false or half-earned praise, nor excuse a cheap veneer; for my object is beauty, and with you I share nothing less than love." The damp soil rubs against

her palms; *petrichor* is, the scholars argue, akin to blood. Above her, the stars move imperceptibly, assigning her the terms of her defeat, chastise her for what unseen damage she has wrought – that means, she concludes, they're listening. Departure is

the blooded darkness pervading even light, everything we ruin by imagining what else they could have been. The other kids, breaking ground for a shrine in a glass-house, decided that a girl would play the priest. Tying on a poplin blindfold, she sang:

*As sunlight flecks/ across these solemn graves,/ the tales we tell about the dead/ soon  
will usurp the waves.// For daylight's open reach,/ makes blank the human will/  
as meager as a summer-ant,/ lean as a swallow's bill.// Life seeks joy in liberty,/ yet*

*matter can't increase, / so what does matter is that we / can rest when we do cease.//  
A newlywed fiddles with the ring,/ a widow laughs at her wedding dress;/ what  
natural currents bring / humanity will redress.// So all discoveries are just old facts:/*

*like sand in an hourglass / new postulates record how time / shifts away the old  
recycled mass.// A useful strategy is/ to not architect but contemplate/ our schism  
from the sun / as the hour's growing late – //The other kids are pissed off, glancing*

at each other to confirm their rage. Who the heck asked for a sermon? They paid her for a retro Pindaric, lyrics to chant and nod along to, not this design critique. And here Hajar is mouthing: *so that we the living,/ not long out from the cot/will now*

*be cradled by embers,/ saved in ash from rot.//* That's it, they say, knuckle-punch her into the sea! and the children's sparse kingdom – as her long braided tresses brush against her body, aloft – bursts into sweet fire / as her mouth looms over the sea /

iris / silver / smegma / snot-green / urea / mother / suffering / bliss / mirror / sizzling  
fat / concavity / sorrow / risk / abject / exchange / amniotic fluid / catharsis / baths  
of western stars / osmosis / C / see / scene / sheets / small / hidden / light / alone /

I down the soup to scald my tongue. The banquet falls silent but for the emcee  
gesturing into the mic, her voice so clipped it feels less like sound than touch  
and I could do without being touched. I want my silence to become remarkable

as non-response, for my dad to prod me like *you alright, son?* and I'd say *of course*,  
thrust each affective speech-act beyond the hint of redemption; because nothing  
has been explained, what I can't ignore, how stupid I can act, what powers I have,

and the butter knife feels, in my hands, cold like life. I imagine slitting my wrists  
with it, just to say: *I, too, have prodded at my mortality.* This is my secret.

I nurse it publicly, like a big blue bruise, shuddering on the verge of tears to probe

what there is to cry about, what can be shaken out of me. In Horowitz's rendition  
of "Dreaming," his magic is to break the chords so preciously that they move; let fall  
with sad volition. Suppose one reached out as I fell, by some invisible ligand

I could conform to them and through some unfathomable process bring about  
a third; hug our snoring rapture; and from that same old unhealed cut purge  
the congealed blood; so would we, in shared fever, distract each other enough

to carry on, be carried upon? That we would, in the midst of our life sentences,  
catch whom each other spoke of. The silence between songs, the pitch  
room for preponderance as the raw fingertips kiss farewell from the sound

would be carefully prepared. The first girl I slept with loved the sporting thighs  
of alpine skiers, a bulwark against the fragility of a coming body, a body sorely  
needing to come, needing another body to. As if the sole splendor of fucking

was to make it conspicuous (her clit the apsis of each simple stroke; her chassis  
the peripheral anchor, shuddering) seemed a betrayal of our physical range.

Then it is morning. My muscles sore, and sweat has ruined my literary blush. How

soon can I get fucked up on this wine that tastes just like vinegar? As the emcee  
ascends on-stage, the photographer changes his camera's focus mode to AF-S (single  
area focus) to project a red light beam from his Speedlight onto the subject, which



is quicker than the camera's white "AF Assist" lamp, but can't track moving subjects. The emcee's speech is not unmoving, but gains a comic character given the little I care about the couple. "The years they dated," they say, "we saw them grow

and improve. Martha was the one who first noticed, slack-jawed, his perfect pecs, a Phi Beta Kappa degree from the University of Hong Kong. We ministered occasion for them to smooch in the electrical closet. In Zurich, they skied. She bought them

golf clubs (never used). He lost pounds on keto, then gained them back on sausage links and baklava; started interval training: strength in guise of health. She switched from Mac to Ubuntu; him from Xanax to Lexapro. She got a job, then a similar but

better job, with more hours and responsibilities. He presided over the office pet lynx for his startup's fun committee. On off days, she professed Assyrian and Scala as a community adjunct. Quotes from border ballads adorn the plates you dine upon.

Never fall in love with the person you love. Never love, but find someone who loves you at least more than you love them, so we may all love them as much as they do us knowing what we are, will be, will ever want. OK, Cupid – in quadratic time match

all of us to no one but exactly the person we like the most, among the partners who know what we're really worth. Everyone is engaged! After those shifting sympathies 'the ordeal,' we guarantee, 'is over,' replenished by excesses of the faithful present

our skin glows softly as waxwork. And there are always boys, boys on the back-burner whose pretty jaws will draw our eye and nothing more, for at night we steal with them away to that unsigned compact outside the body – the imagination. Tonight, we have

memoized each lover, made all other forms of life redundant, and under the control of our spiritual conscience summarized that we are happy. If you aren't happy, you must learn to be happy. We are happy, so happy, we are so happy for you two!"

4.

I excuse myself. To my feet the waitresses harry me along the clutter of my mind. At the bathroom mirror, cicadas in the air-conditioning vents mock my discomfiture while my shadow faintly falls upon the tiles. The world is alive, nauseous, and

silent. I watch my reflection raise his eyebrows with affirming intensity yet I am still unsure that there would be no affect in this new guise as there was none in the last – if only the glass would instead of tracing me reveal itself!

But if only my worst features were to be removed I think my soul would only lose the pained opacity of their exact expense. Instead I allow my face to be teased by my fingers, streaking through my hair. A fly buzzes on my wrist

as if embarrassed at his helpless knowledge of its inquiry. On the rear casement the air perspires, blots the filigree shards of light that skies have scraped from the scaffolds of my mind, sulci and gyri, the thick impasto whose engulfment

was his subject. Before him my body collapses prostrate as I catch and carouse his wanting body. Sleek and balding, he is carrying a cane he does not seem to use. And raising my arms, he bites into my garments and snags them off –

“I identify,” he says, “as a public man. Thanks to our generation, it’s never been easier to become a public man. Last year at the Pride Parade, I saw the brand new people hold their phones up and kiss us, cheering *Thank You, Thank You, Thank You* –

the construction workers, sex-positive evangelists, data scientists, asset managers, front office grunts, infantry tuners, user-experience engineers, lingerie novelists, hype men, sales strats, licensed practical nurses, chief actuaries, entertainment monitors – rise

as a panorama of rabbis from their corners of civic thought, each compartment fed from the same capillary of taste and opinion, all eyeing each other warily, all with stakes in hand, governed by a zero-sum game whose optimal consolation is

to realize exactly what you can ransom away from the world. The only suffering you may name is its pathology, an external exposition which you must at all times condemn and be condemned against. From this well you may sip and quench

your immortal thirst –” and, pinning me down, etched with gray stubble my cock, eking juice from its crown. “For your self is nothing but yourself, nor can your suffering mean more than its pathology. And life, like suffrage, can’t help but disappoint

even when its lack would leave you inconsolable. In dreams begin repositories.  
There is no country for rhapsodic men – now,  
now, calm down –” seeing me kick my feet and whimper in ecstasy

*fuck my life wide open*

“I will grant you more riches than you can bear, and more tastes  
than even riches can bear. My *own* tastes are vanilla but for a single kink:  
specificity. Once I pleased myself seeing you strip and shower. Now I require

furniture, research chemicals, and German idealism. Hold this rod and count to 10  
then ram it into me.” “And what if I don’t want to?” “We’re already waiting.”

I sink into him, and reaching through the oesophagus my fist

rip

his jaw, dripping with bile, met his mouth with mine, his effusions mixed  
with all my life. My arm slid out of him. “Let go,” he said, “for something as old as I  
you will never share permanently.” I slept well, as fat as a grave.

My body had kidnapped everything that I loved.

I crash into the porcelain bidet, while my outstretched hand turns the faucet not a gasp escapes. My mouth is caked with vomit but the shirt is miraculously unscathed. Nor has, as I emerge into the wedding hall, time passed. *Clap, clap.*

Either applause is, Brecht protests, failure of the audience; or tragedy, as Levinas said, can never be tragic enough. And the resuming chatter that diverts us from both the portended, sweaty exile of lust, and all talk of natural ends sneers at us and says no more...

My mother locks herself in the bath as my sister and I listen: there she is embarrassed by us, for without us she may be herself and make herself beautiful, and so we may act justified to hate her, and switch her bathroom lights on & off. "Given 2 persons /

Alone together / In a room / Chances are / One of them would / Have / Invented / Torture. // There's room." All poets write themselves room to fit in. I wrote to give my father cancer. In the poem I described my father's sleep as not his rest

but snoring that destroyed my own. Imagined that the polyps would sprout shadows inside his lung, mocking with nursery wonderment their destruction; him dying, never quite alive, as pleural worms flayed his veins and drank his blood. Named it

"The Kraken." And of course my family tacked it proudly on the fridge. My family, who offered me the right to precocity but not the gifts, live like ghosts. My siblings would complain about a bright speck throbbing between their eyes, and mid-speech

collapse, snort and tremble without volition, as if what possessed them was trying to peel them from our coherence and all of us could do nothing but watch, pity, and learn. In a waking trance I repeat the steely vowels of my name – *Alfred, Alfred,*

*Alfred Tennyson,* – until my tongue drowns all the meanings of the word and savors its waking substance. My father who drank, and, seeing our cook burn himself alive, drank more to best his suffering. Eldest sons slighted by our fathers, we were taught

an attitude to decay: admonish it, but make do. When the black blood he spread finished him, I grieved for a new lease of life. Then for my best friend, who darkly understood me: I saw him out to sea, I heard no more. That silver, intestate sea.

For him I survived, I succeeded the spell of my private life like a smile through clenched teeth. For years I had been rehearsing my death for myself and, dying, I recited my twenties in perfect meter. O feet, that are might,

if you trample me, show me the seams! As how, in the microcosm of *I*, one molecule of transfer-RNA in its living cell shaped to negotiate the dialects of codons and peptides, while naïve to both, nevertheless seams the acidic chain of life –

repetitive, non-unique, and mostly unread – these patterns of occasion I will pass through to invent myself. The lights are dimming, beckoning us to dance. Through the corridor a throng of revelers emerge as if drunk. Most are; they let liquid

avail them, submerge our red cheeks in red. The wool on my jacket sheds an irradiated haze. The groom perches on the bride, his wooing  
done.

Hugs are embraced, fastening us into their orbit. *There must* (my father winnows the spokes of my fresh-cut hair) *be something wrong* (my father coughs, so stubborn a sound that my eyes still dart for a bald head when I know,

of course I know, he is estranged) *with me*. I am being intensely observed, even as he turns away. “Look,” I overhear him muttering, “look at them,” by which he means *have you thought about marri–* about what? *–well, does this scene*

*or, now, my assemblage of the scene, oblige you to hold moral some commitment to affection?* As the music changes, the unfamiliar rhythm hurries eagerly to the dancers lithe and gauche. *At a funeral*, I answer, *do I dream about dying?*