

Paddy McAloon, I Trawl The Megahertz

I am telling myself the story of my life,
stranger than song or fiction.
We start with the joyful mysteries,
before the appearance of ether,
trying to capture the elusive:
the farm where the crippled horses heal,
the woods where autumn is reversed,
and the longing for bliss in the arms
of some beloved from the past.
I said 'Your daddy loves you'.
I said 'Your daddy loves you very much';
he just doesn't want to live with us anymore'.

The plane comes down behind enemy lines
and you don't speak the language.
A girl takes pity on you:
she is Mother Theresa walking among the poor,
and her eyes have attained night vision.
In an orchard, drenched in blue light,
she changes your bandages and soothes you.
All day her voice is balm,
then she lowers you into the sunset.
Hers is the wing span of the quotidian angel,
so her feet are sore from the walk
to the well of human kindness,
but she gives you a name and you grow into it.
Whether a tramp of the low road or a prince,
riding through Wagnerian opera,
you learn some, if not all, of the language.
And these are the footsteps you follow
- the tracks of impossible love.

12 days in Paris,
and I am awaiting for life to start.
In the lobby of the Hotel Charlemagne
they are hanging photographs
of Rap artists and minor royalty.
All cigarettes have been air-brushed from these pictures,
making everyone a liar,
and saving no-one from their folly.
As proud as Lucifer, I do nothing to hide
my kerosene dress and flint eyes
- which with one steady look, are able to restore
to these images their carcinogenic threat.
So what if this is largely bravado?
I have only 12 days in Paris
and I'm waiting for life to start.
I'm setting out my stall behind a sheet of dark hair,
and you, the hostage of crazed hormones,
will be driven to say:
'I am the next poet laureate
and she is the cherry madonna,
and all of the summer is hers.'

At first I don't notice you,
or the colour of your hair,
or your readiness to laugh.
I am tying a shoelace,
or finding the pavement fascinating
when the comet thrills the sky.
Ever the dull alchemist.
I have before me all the necessary elements:
it is their combination that eludes me.
Forgive me ... I am sleepwalking.

I am jangling along to some song of the moment,
suffering its sweetness,
luxuriating in its feeble approximation of starlight.
Meanwhile there is a real world ...
trains are late, doctors are breaking bad news,
but I am living in a lullaby.

You might be huddled in a doorway on the make,
or just getting by, but I don't see it.
You are my one shot at glory.
Soon I will read in your expression
warmth, encouragement, assent.
From an acorn of interest
I will cultivate whole forests of affection.
I will analyse your gestures
like centuries of scholars
pouring over Jesus' words.
Anything that doesn't fit my narrow interpretation
I will carelessly discard.
For I am careless... I'm shameless... and -
('Mayday, Mayday, watch the needle leave the dial')
I am reckless,
I am telling myself the story of my life.

Soon, I will make you a co-conspirator:
if I am dizzy I will call it rapture;
if I am low I will attribute it to your absence,
noting your tidal effect upon my moods.
Oblivious to the opinions of neighbours
I will bark at the moon like a dog.
In short, I'm asking to be scalded.
It is the onset of fever.

Yesterday they took a census.
Boasting, I said 'I live two doors down from joy.'
Today, bewildered and sarcastic, I phone them and ask
'Isn't it obvious? This slum is empty.'

Repeat after me: happiness is only a habit.
I am listening to the face in the mirror
but I don't think I believe what she's telling me.
Her words are modern, but her eyes have been weeping
in gardens and grottoes since the Middle Ages.
This is the aftermath of fever.
I cool the palms of my hands upon the bars
of an imaginary iron gate.
Only by an extreme act of will can I avoid
becoming a character in a country song:
'Lord, y'gave me nothin', then y'took it all away.'
These are the sorrowful mysteries,
and I have to pay attention.
In a chamber of my heart sits an accountant.
He is frowning and waving red paper at me.
I go to the window for air.
I catch the scent of apples,
I hunger for a taste,
but I can't see the orchard for the rain.

There are two ways of looking at this.
The first is to accept that you are gone,
and to light a candle at the shrine of amnesia.
(I could even cheat).
In the subterranean world of anaesthetics
sad white canoes are forever sailing downstream
in the early hours of the morning.

'Tell the stars I'm coming,
make them leave a space for me;
whether bones, or dust,
or ashes once among them I'll be free.'
It may make a glamorous song
but it's dark train of thought
with too many carriages.

There is, of course,
another way of looking at this:
'Your daddy loves you,' I said
'Your daddy loves you very much;
he just doesn't want to live with us anymore.'
I am telling myself the story of my life.

By day and night, fancy electronic dishes
are trained on the heavens.
They are listening for smudged echoes
of the moment of creation.
They are listening for the ghost of a chance.
They may help us make sense of who we are
and where we came from;
and, as a compassionate side effect,
teach us that nothing is ever lost.

So... I rake the sky.
I listen hard.
I trawl the megahertz.
But the net isn't fine enough,
and I miss you
- a swan sailing between two continents,
a ghost immune to radar.

Still, my eyes are fixed upon
the place I last saw you,
your signal urgent but breaking,
before you became cotton in a blizzard,
a plane coming down behind enemy lines.