

Proteus

19

1
Call me Proteus. I live at the bottom of a steep cliff, down a treacherous path, at the edge of the sea. You can see me from the top of the cliff, lolling on a flat rock, staring into the endless nothing of the sea, but to reach me is difficult. You've been told that I have the answer to your question, and you are a little desperate to have this question answered. As you make your way down, you must be careful not to dislodge any loose gravel, careful not to cry out when the thorns pierce your feet. You must approach me as quietly as you can, get right up on me, get your hands on me, around my neck. You've been told that you have to hold on while you ask your question, you've been told that you can't let go. You've been told that as you hold on I will transform into the shape and form of that which most terrifies you, in order to get you to release your grip. But the promise is that if you can hold on, through your fear, I will return to his real form, and answer your question.

2.
Here's a secret: everyone, if they live long enough, will lose their way at some point. You will lose your way, you will wake up one morning and find yourself lost. This is a hard, simple truth. If it hasn't happened to you yet consider yourself lucky. When it does, when one day you look around and nothing is recognizable, when you find yourself alone in a dark wood having lost the way, you may find it easier to blame it on someone else—an errant lover, a missing father, a bad childhood. Or it may be easier to blame the map you were given—folded too many times, out of date, tiny print. But, if you are honest, you will only be able to blame yourself. If you are lucky, you will remember a story

you heard as a child, the trick of leaving a trail of breadcrumbs through the woods, the idea being that after whatever it is that is going to happen in those woods has happened, you can then retrace your steps, find your way back out.

3.
The question, then, is not how Proteus knows what most terrifies you, but how it has come to pass that you don't recognize your own innermost fears. Maybe Proteus is simply another name for "shadow"—the shadow you drag behind you with every step, except when you walk in darkness, when you yourself become the shadow.

4.
One form I take, as you hold onto me with your question, as I refuse to answer your question, as I try to terrify you into loosening your grip, as I try to terrify you by changing into the shape of that which most terrifies you, one of these terrifying forms that I change into is a waterfall.

A waterfall? Who's afraid of a waterfall?

5.
Here, God says, here is your cupful of days. If you don't believe in God, you still get your cupful of days. Some will be spent making love, some will be spent high, some will be spent reading Ulysses, and some will be spent alone. Some will be spent around a table, a meal about to be passed, a steaming bowl of rice, some sauteed kale. It's someone's birthday, someone you have known for ten, no twenty, years. To your right is a woman you slept with seven years ago—at the time you thought it might work out, but it didn't. Across from you is the woman you are with now, and at this point it could be forever, whatever that means.

Some of the days you are given will be spent in a strange city, and at the end of the day you will know that you have spoken to no one except the girl you got your coffee from, no one except her. There will always be days like this.

6.
Let's just accept that I know your innermost fear, and that I play on these fears, hoping you will let go, hoping you will give up, hoping you will stop asking your question, hoping you will lose hope. This, then, is a vision of me, of Proteus, as both torturer and tortured. I play on your fears, I want you to lose hope, but at the same time you are the one with your hands around my neck, asking your question.

7.
Some Buddhists believe that as you wander through the bardo, that realm between living and dying, you will encounter the physical manifestations of that which terrifies you, over and over they will appear before you—this is your karmic debt, and only those who are enlightened will walk unafraid. Some believe that enlightenment often comes at the moment of death, just as it can often come at the moment of birth. Most of us, though spend our given time—our handful of hours, our teaspoonful of years—hovering between these two poles, muddying the water. Monkey-mind, some call it. Samsara.

8.
A friend tells this, perhaps apocryphal, story: while living in Hawaii, a volcano erupted, and after the initial blast, which destroyed the top of the mountain and everything else in the vicinity, the lava continued to ooze slowly out, over the next several months, so slowly that you could walk up to the wall of it, put your hand on it, feel its warmth. How high was it? I imagine twenty feet, more or less. So high you'd have to tilt your head back to see the sky. The town my friend

was staying in was downhill, spared the initial blast, but the lava kept coming. Then the scientists came, to calculate its movement, to predict how long it would take to reach the village, to mark which house would be the first to be swallowed beneath the slow-motion wave. Is this better than a flood, better than a fire? It gives you time to move out what you most value, time to move everything, if you are able. If you are able you could move the entire house, but I had the idea that the island was small, the village against the sea, the only option would be to uproot the house and put it on a raft and float it to the next island. I had the idea that most simply went each day to the wall of lava, put their hands to it, hoped it would slow down, hoped it would run out of juice, hoped it would simply stop.

9.
Here I am—the maniac tied to the chair before me is Proteus. I've been told that a bomb is about to go off, potentially killing hundreds, or even thousands, of innocent people. As I hold onto Proteus, as I ask him my question, as I listen for his answer, he transforms—into a dog on a leash, into a man dancing with panties on his head, into a bruise, into a madman, into a waterfall, into a cockroach in a bowl of rice. Into a man strapped into a chair, into thirty men strapped into thirty chairs, refusing to eat, thirty tubes forced down their noses.

So here I am, my fingers tight around Proteus's neck, asking my same question, over and over, as if the answer exists, inside the maniac, inside the prisoner, inside the beloved, inside my mother, inside my father, inside me, as if the answer is there and just needs to be released.

And so here I am, holding my own head, dunking it into a bathtub full of water, repeating a meaningless question over and over, knowing that I will never get the question right.

And here I am, holding my breath, and then letting it go.

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facts about water

Blind Huber

Blind Huber (i)
11

Opaque glow where my eyes should be, what remaining light, eyelids thin against it. Soothing, as if all I pass were encrusted in wax, dipped upright—wax bush & wax bench, wax man, wax tea, waxy cup to waxy lips, my eyes now more like their eyes, morning filtered beyond translucence as the acolytes cover their queen. By the sound they will soon swarm, clockwork, the frenzied heat of wings forms droplets on the walls of their city, their city softening, now twisting just out of shape.

Swarm
12
When you see us swarm—rustle of

wingbeat, collapsed air—your mind tries to make us one, a common

intelligence, a single spirit un-tethered. You imagine us merely searching out the next

vessel, anything

that could contain us, as if the hive were just another jar. You try

to hold the ending, this unspooling, make it either

zero or many, lack

of flurry. **I was born**, you begin, & already each word makes you smaller. Look at this field—

Cosmos. **Lungwort**. Utter each & break

into thousand versions of yourself.

You can't tell your stories fast enough. The answer is not one, but also

not two.

Blind Huber (ii)
13

I sit in a body & think of a body, I picture Burnens' hands, my words make them move. I say, **plunge them into the hive**, & his hands go in. If I said, **put your head inside**, he would wear it. Think of my body, every day the same chair, angled thus. Burnens every day, think of his body, think of a hive, each bee, each thought, the hive brims with thought. **Move it into shade**, I think, & the body moves to shade. **Who's fingers**, which word, each surges from inside my head, but always returns as Burnens.

Workers (attendants)
14

Nights we lie beside her, our mouths at her belly, counting

her breaths, the buzz, the gathering, long done. We all began inside her, like those lined up

inside her now, mere
idea of ourselves
unborn. We wash her body

ceaselessly, move our tongues
until all her hairs loosen. She

roams the brood, finds
another empty cell

& fills it. Morning comes &
she calms us, keeps us inside
until the dew burns off. This
sodden

world. All winter

we huddled around her, kept her
warm. Those on the outside, those
farthest from her, died

first, their legs
gripped the others like a shawl.

Blind Huber (v)
15

Before shadows I saw the rose,
saw its thorn,
a bee navigating, never impaled.
I no longer know what is outside
my mind
& what is in.

Geometry
16

Essential,
with heaven nearly empty of

stars, with mountains still
rising from plains,

like music,

only it can't be heard.

Before wax

we'd use it to build, carve
pine resin into cells,

fields within hollow trees,
hexagons wired into

our sleep. Vein

of amber, ploughed under by ice—
golden lozenge—

we are still inside.

Burnens (i)
17

Never a question of saying, the end
never named. His words
move my hand, he speaks then
listens, the lid pried free, the
brood-hum

now open to the sky.

**They have a very nice sense of
proportion
& the space required**

for the movement of bodies. My
ruler

measures the gap, I count each
worker

& feed him the number. His words
move my hands, but I name
what is seen.

Seven Testimonies
18

1.
three a.m.—I woke up I
asked why—my

children, my family, my
leg. What happened

next? Outside on

my head & my
hands, it was cold, rainy,

a tent, there were
others, I heard

my brother, cold
water at night, they let me go

once, my hands
were always laughing.

2.
One blanket under & one to
myself,
& fifteen days of food.

One man had a heart, he asked
for a pill
to put under his tongue. They

released a dog, it bit a broom-
stick, they said they knew I was

innocent. My house was on
luck, they woke me at three



& gave me summer clothes.
We threw stones & peed,

we all lasted until six

3.
For twenty-two days, one
other thing happened—I did not

have a beard. That night in
that tent, one on each

side, the photographer
lifted the ground. The next day

to Garso, a cold tank of
water, sometimes

with ice, they were going
& coming

& then they went back, I
tried to find myself all night.

4.
I had a beard, they were men
with beards, who looked like

I remember. Two

days later, somewhere else, a dog
barking, I remember those days.
Two others

were also there. They said,
Did that happen to you? I
remember

two days, laughing

5.
On the way to the toilet
count five & pee—no one

told me why. One night I
woke up, they chose

& start giving, I had
five to forget—

they gave me three more.

Forty days later & he was
the one, he took the body of

the dead to the gates

6.
I am a farmer, twenty-two on the
ground—my hands, my feet

his fists, his blood, the cell &

the hood. They told me to
undress. I removed my underwear

I walked naked in front
The door closed to breathe

the door opened a crack

The third day would want
the third day she want

my hand outstretched—to kiss,
to touch—

until I could see & was still

7.
Did you ever see? Yes. Did
this happen? Yes.

Do you recognize this?
Yes, I saw she had

a sister. Did you ever
see? Where

did this happen? In the
showers? Did you do this,

to be with men? Yes. Yes.
Yes. I had to do

this, I was naked, yes,
she came to me & wanted

me. Did you see
this cloth? Did you see this

cloth? Do you know

where this was? Do you recognize
this? Do you? Did you?

