

## metaxu iv

Oyvind Fahlström in Memorium  
from Degrees of Unsolvability  
Catherine Christer Hennix

1976-1979

born,	sit
first	stream
by	solitary
the tall	falling
olive tree	snow
.....	.....
and,	gate
then,	stone
by	bridges
the Sea	evening
	time

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## a mercy

Toni Morrison

2008

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, a minha mãe, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my pretty ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top. As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires. Lina is correct. Florens, she says, it's 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady? So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking—no matter the itch of the sealing wax. I am lettered but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to any who stop me.

My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing frights me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation. From the day you dis-

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appear I dream and plot. To learn where you are and how to be there. I want to run across the trail through the beech and white pine but I am asking myself which way? Who will tell me? Who lives in the wilderness between this farm and you and will they help me or harm me? What about the boneless bears in the valley? Remember? How when they move their pelt sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play which we misread and give back fear and anger. Giant birds also are nesting out there bigger than cows, Lina says, and not all natives are like her, she says, so watch out. A praying savage, neighbors call her, because she is once churchgoing yet she bathes herself every day and Christians never do. Undemeath she wears bright blue beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small. More than fear of loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear pathless night. How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark? Now at last there is a way. I have orders. It is arranged. I will see your mouth and trail my fingers down. You will rest your chin in my hair again while I breathe into your shoulder in and out, in and out. I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness trembles me. To get to you I must leave the only home, the only people I know. Lina says from the state of my teeth I am maybe seven or eight when I am brought here. We boil wild plums for jam and cake eight times since then, so I must be sixteen. Before this place I spend my days picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds, my nights on the floor of the cookhouse with a minha mãe. We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and write. We are forbidden to leave the place so the four of us hide near the marsh. My mother, me, her little boy and Reverend Father. He is forbidden to do this but he teaches us anyway watching out for wicked Virginians and Protestants who want to catch

him. If they do he will be in prison or pay money or both. He has two books and a slate. We have sticks to draw through sand, pebbles to shape words on smooth flat rock. When the letters are memory we make whole words. I am faster than my mother and her baby boy is no good at all. Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. Lina says the place of my talking on stone is Mary's Land where Sir does business. So that is where my mother and her baby boy are buried. Or will be if they ever decide to rest. Sleeping on the cookhouse floor with them is not as nice as sleeping in the broken sleigh with Lina. In cold weather we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together under pelts. We don't smell the cow flops because they are frozen and we are deep under fur. In summer if our hammocks are hit by mosquitoes Lina makes a cool place to sleep out of branches. You never like a hammock and prefer the ground even in rain when Sir offers you the storehouse. Sorrow no more sleeps near the fireplace. The men helping you, Will and Scully, never live the night here because their master does not allow it. You remember them, how they would not take orders from you until Sir makes them? He could do that since they are exchange for land under lease from Sir. Lina says Sir has a clever way of getting without giving. I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes



the balance due. As soon as tobacco leaf is hanging to dry Reverend Father takes me on a ferry, then a ketch, then a boat and bundles me between his boxes of books and food. The second day it becomes hurting cold and I am happy I have a cloak however thin. Reverend Father excuses himself to go elsewhere on the boat and tells me to stay exact where I am. A woman comes to me and says stand up. I do and she takes my cloak from my shoulders. Then my wooden shoes. She walks away. Reverend Father turns a pale red color when he returns and learns what happens. He rushes all about asking where and who but can find no answer. Finally he takes rags, strips of sailcloth lying about and wraps my feet. Now I am knowing that unlike with Senhor, priests are unlove here. A sailor spits into the sea when Reverend Father asks him for help. Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see. When I arrive here I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire where sinners bubble and singe forever. But the ice comes first, he says. And when I see knives of it hanging from the houses and trees and feel the white air burn my face I am certain the fire is coming. Then Lina smiles when she looks at me and wraps me for warmth. Mistress looks away. Nor is Sorrow happy to see me. She flaps her hand in front of her face as though bees are bothering her. She is ever strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully laugh and deny. Lina believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. When I ask what reason she says he is a man. Mistress says nothing. Neither do I. But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand.

## white phosphorus

Alice Notley

1988

"Whose heart" "might be lost" "Whose mask is this?" "Who has a mask, & a heart?" "Has your money?" "been published, been shown?" "Who can & can't breathe?" "Who went" "to Vietnam?" ("We know who died there") "This was then" "is now." "Whose heart?" "All our heart" "the national heart" "Whose mask?" "has its own heart?" "A mother's" "mask" "Whose money?" "do we mean?" "A woman's money?" "Woman's money?" "Who went" "to Vietnam?" "& just died of it?" "A son" "Evolved?" "a man" "evolved" "a woman" "into America" "into the" "just before now" "It was just before now..." "When men made the forms" "& women made the Air" ("& now no one does that, & who can breathe now?") "Who cares, in the Air?" ("All our poems, women's were there," "there, too invisible" "and now" "become male" "acceptable") "Accepted." "And they're welcoming us" "among" "their forms" "among their forms only" ("what forms might we have made?" "which ones did" "we make?") "Whose heart is lost?" "oh not mine, & not my darling's" "Or only our whole heart?" "not mine, & not my warrior's" ("has your money?" "been accepted?") "And this is what happened," "he went to a war" "old style, he went" "to that war" "No one cared" "that he went there" "as no one cared" "what was lost" "with our air"