

PORTRAIT OF HUNCKE (1949)

by Allen Ginsberg

II

The day and night's sleep dismayed me because I hadn't planned to leave him alone in the house without further talk with him, reassurance that he wouldn't run off with any of my valuables. The last time I'd been his host he'd done just that. Small radios were missing, cheap rugs, jackets, one at a time, with good reason – a matter of keeping him warm or getting him food. I would be petulant, I would even become secretly enraged. It didn't actually make too much difference to me, because I was too preoccupied with the charm of his company, and the misery of my own thoughts.

But the last time I'd put him up, it was a different matter. I was living in an apartment loaned from a friend, a mad "pad" in the middle of Harlem, six flights up in the sky with a view of 125th Street.

I had no preoccupation, no plans, no purpose, no real interest. This was quite unlike me, actually as I had nourished myself in the seven years following my adolescence, on a contradictory but long thought out program of intellectual self improvement. This had meant to me going down in the gutter of Times Square and Harlem. Yet suddenly, after seven years of rocking myself back and forth in the cradle of intellect and youth-wildness, I suddenly lost my curiosity. I lost my motive, my reason. I wanted to lose the sense of my own character and emerge with a voice of rock, a grave, severe sense of love of the world, an asperity and directness of passion. I wanted to make people shudder when they looked into my eye, suddenly wakened from a vast dream of the will.

Needless to say – and I am not passing judgment on the attempt itself – it had not succeeded. I gave up, I shut down the machinery, I stopped thinking, I stopped living. I never went out to see people anymore.

So there I stopped and thought no more about it, except on that level of renunciation, and lived for months in complete surprise and emptiness at the strange conclusion of my spiritual progress. What to do then, after that, I didn't know – nothing but to keep myself fed and comfortable and away from temptations to effort and ecstasy. So I stopped writing poetry, stopped using my weekly round of visits to friends, and stopped using drugs to excite my senses to eerie knowledge.

Nothing I had experienced in my life led me to expect what would happen to me in my loneliness. One day in the middle of the summer as I was walking down 125th Street, I suddenly stopped and stared around me in amazement. It was as if I had just awakened from a long dream that I'd walked around in all my life. I threw over all my preoccupations with ideas and felt so free that I didn't know who I was or where I was. The whole appearance of the world changed in a minute when I realized what had happened, and I began to look at people walking past me. They all had incredible sleepy, bestial expressions on their faces, yet no different from what they usually looked like. I suddenly understood everything vague and troubled in my mind that had been caused by the expression of people around me. Everybody I saw had something wrong with them. The apparition of an evil, sick, unconscious wild city rose before me in visible semblance, and about the dead buildings in the barren air, the bodies of the soul that built the wonderland shuffled and stalked and lurched in attitudes of immemorial nightmare all around.

When I saw people conversing around me, all their conversation, all their bodily movements, all their signs, the thoughts reflected on their faces were of fear of recognition and anguished fear that someone would take the initiative and discover their masks and lies. Therefore every tone of voice, movement of the hand, carried a negative overtone: this in the world is called coyness and shyness and politeness, or frigidity and hostility when the awareness becomes too overpowering. I felt that I would be crucified if I alluded with any insistence to the divine nature of ourselves and the physical universe. Therefore I did not speak but only stared in dumb silence.

Of the human objects, I remember that I understood in this one glance, their utility and significance. I can say that I saw not the objects but the idea behind them. The most absorbing aspect of the spectacle was the actual placement of the intelligence, for I perceived that the guiding intelligence was in the objects themselves, not in some far corner of the universe, and that the world as we see it is complete: there is nothing outside of it. It seemed also to open itself up to disclose itself to me for the moment, allowing its secret to be understood.

When I returned to my apartment my first impulse was to consult an old author, William Blake, whom I remembered from earlier days, for the then baffling beauty and directness of his observations on the divine

nature of the soul. I remembered particularly, apropos of my own astonishing moment in the street, a famous poem in which the poet wandered on the byways of London several hundred years ago,

*"and mark in every face I meet
marks of weakness, marks of woe."*

I read this poem again, but found that it did not shed any further light on what I was after, and turned idly over the pages till my eye was caught by the lines

*"seeking after that sweet golden clime
where the travelers journey is done."*

I felt at that moment a wave of such great sadness pass over me that I knew that my vision of the early afternoon had returned, and this time in such intensity that I stared stupefied with knowledge of the words written on the page, as if there had been a magical formulation of my own awakening comprehension of joy. I looked out the window at the sky above Harlem, beyond the bare, stained, brick wall of the next building, through the massive distances of the cloudless and immobile atmosphere toward the unseen stars, and felt the gigantic weight of Time.

I then found the poem "The Sick Rose" and when I came to

*"the invisible worm
that flies in the night
in the howling storm"*

and read on to

*"his dark secret love
does thy life destroy"*

I realized once more that the last and most terrible veil had been torn from my eyes, a final shuddering glimpse through death. Then I moved across the room with the gnawing pulse of animality engulfing my body with slow carnal undulations of my frame, and shrieked and collapsed in silent agony, moaning on the floor, my hands grasping and hollowed in my thighs.

SONG OF SKINS

from **ANXIETY OF WORDS: CONTEMPORARY POETRY BY
KOREAN WOMEN** (2006)

by Kim Hyesoon

trans. Don Mee Choi

*The open lips find my breasts
though they weren't told where mine were,
draining sweet water from my body.
They want to suckle again right after they've eaten.
First the saliva evaporates inside my mouth,
tears vanish from my eyes,
veins shrivel,
blood fades,
trees and plants collapse,
the Nakdong River dries up,
and its floor shrieks as it explodes.
My whole body is pumped out.
Even though you vomit what you've just eaten,
your open lips still hang onto my nipples
till my body is emptied
of everything but dry bones and skin,
till the heaven's castle splits
and the Milky Way shatters,
till I can think of nothing
and my soul withers and dies.*