

In the Mouth of the Crocodile

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Espergesia

(Written and performed by Diamanda Galás)

Please begin watching at 12:21 minutes:

<http://vimeo.com/55924497>

Mana

The mother
stands
between her children
and the sun.
The hot blaze
warms them.

But when she is dying,
and they are suspended only
by the thread of spiders weaving
directly beneath the orb,
Flesh burns
Eyes turn black

Hands stretch out
Tongues crack and bleed
and ask the passing stranger,
"Where am I?"
"You are standing on the earth, my child."
"But where?"
"You are standing on it."
"But what is it?"
"No one really knows, my dear.
But you really should keep moving.
The crocodiles come at midday."

I lay down on the land.
My flesh bubbles.
Twisted nails burst up
from the ash of the world
And fix me,
soundless,

Comes the buzzard comes the scorpion
comes the jackal comes the crocodile.
The pterodactyl whispers,
"Move on, you are in the way:
Run, or die."

And now
the once ceaseless spinning of the mana stops
No more for us
the moon;
Her face is gone;

and with it- our reflection.

Jungles of lunatics
that eat the fallen
can not spare me;
they too are running,
and stain the earth
with bloody footprints,
Boy too old!

And now an angry mouth has found you,
"Mana! Mana!"

The world rolls over
without a sigh.
Mother! Mother!
Goodbye.

HEX

I will not presume to speak for anyone else, so that I will say simply that, as I get older, the presence of death becomes stronger and stronger in my life.

With the smell of urea in the blood, I wake up, do my daily tasks, make coffee for my mother, since we both awake at 4am, and proceed, wondering how she is today, wondering how long I will have her, and the fear is an everyday fear, but, since we live together now, I see it as part of my life rather than separate from it.

In this same way, I cannot separate what I make from the reality of my life.

I *must* do the work I do in order to survive.

I do not do it for anyone else, until it is performed, and even then I am completely alone, hoping there is some empathy for the work, that I will not be interrupted by someone who is tired, or jaded.

The day begins and I try to justify the time that exists left with a diary of work.

Please believe me, believe me, for when I go away, I shall not come back. My god has blessed me during life but afterwards I am as the mounds of clay that are invisible.

The ancient Greeks did not believe in an afterlife; perhaps that is why they were so prolific. It is why the talk of death is so present in daily conversation.

Did you see that crow? It flew over Marikaki's door this morning. It is bad very bad.

At my funeral, hold me up standing, and burn me, I said. Why is cremation invisible?

Why do we run from the body upon its death. "Get the bag, get the bag, cover it cover it." Or let us witness it made up to resemble that of a healthy person.

But do we witness the dead as they are? Some cultures put the body on the rock and leave it to be devoured by birds. And so many bury it in the ground to be eaten by the worm.

And so do many of us Greeks, who much later take the bones and wash them with lemon juice and leave them in the sun until they are dry, and then put them inside their tiny tomb.

But we know what death is, don't we?

And the soulbird? Will it take my soul? Where will it take me?

I cannot count on this. I must leave my mark before I go.

I return to the morning, when I can think best. I must treasure it before my spirit is spread through the house and I am everywhere, or lost.

As in the act of composition, of singing, of committing oneself intransigently to a poem which spells a part of my life, I see a malediction.

I grab this poem, press it to my heart and read it many times. If the meter is strange I decide if it is rhythmically decipherable to me, and then get started. I begin at the piano, pick a low note, or a very high note to shatter the space before me and enter the poem.

I do now *presume*.

Say it many times through this space you call your own.
Say it many times until it finds you; little soulbird, are you there?
Take me to the home of the poet. Now the rhythm begins.
It is a command. Where am I going?

I am going to a new place of compassion, to the great god who understands me and keeps me, talons in the earth, and neck askew, a bird stretching towards the heavens, like the voice.

Now your nails are in the keyboard, between the keys, seek the tones between the semitones that stab the floor, and you have found the ground of the poem, the penetrable ground from which you can scream the poem.

Now speak it softly to a child, as if it were written by an angel that came to you and blessed you: "Dear sister, we were together on that day."

Infinite tenderness.

And now, "Have mercy on my soul!!!" The words cut and bleed, each syllable served upon a razor blade. "Bleed you bastard. I have your hands on the table and now I cut each finger with great precision to save my life. *Bleed*: you have tried to bury me alive but I will cut off your fingers so I may free myself from the curse of your tribe, of *you*, who has tried to steal my every step."

Now I drag your body to a dank and filthy place. *Succio*.
I make sure you will *never* be discovered
and I return to my home and clean clean clean.

Katharizo Katharizo. I must make it clean
to make my way upon this slate.

Hammer hammer hammer
until the curse wears the fingers of the enemy around your neck.
To Exthros.

You break the room.
The bird flies out.
And you are free.

Now you can see the sun
outside your window.
The little sounds of joy at morning, the

tiny sounds you could not hear before.
The mourning is over.
And the day begins.
AMAN.

AMAN

Again I ask, how is the daily fear of death communicated? The artist has the ability to realize this in her medium if she has a vocabulary to do so, and a sufficient fear. If the fear is anemic, probably nothing interesting will happen. She will not draw the growing burned thing with enough discolorations to convey anything. She must have 400 screams near her jugular, or she will sound like a bad experimental sound artist, ah ee a o oo. The vocabulary for communication grows or shrinks every day and the composer who does not know this is singing an old song in an old way.

A sound poet needs a big vocabulary if very few intelligible words are used. Even if her poems concentrate solely upon the mouth of a crocodile, for twenty years, she can do it if she has the vocabulary to make a perfect entrance into that mouth.

There is nothing lazy compositionally about limiting the subject of a poem, just as there is nothing lazy about limiting the vocabulary of sound if that vocabulary is permuted interestingly.

Now trying to do one poem about the earth, per say, and throwing in every sound since kindergarten is probably a stupid thing to do. Doing a poem about the earth sounds obnoxious to start with, but who am I to insist?

However, the subjects of death and the vocal instrument seem the same to me. The word "aman," used by a dying soldier on the battlefield in Greece and Anatolia may come from the word, mana, or "mother." This is the most terrifying word in the Greek language. The *amanethes* are the refugee laments of the survivors or the dying of the Holokaftoma, the immolations of the Greeks, the Assyrians, and the Armenians, the Azeris, and other ethnic groups, by the Turks.

The *amanethes* is part of the *moiroloi*, the death singing. And are part of an elaborate death ritual, that must be conducted in a proper burial. If the burial is not correct, there is a great risk that the dead become the undead, the "unburied" or the *vrykola*, translated to English as "werewolf," who must walk the soil at night looking for completion.

However, an improper burial also refers to the *kind* of death visited upon the deceased. If he has been murdered, the oath of revenge must be part of the *moiroloi*... and the revenge taken within a particular period of time, or he becomes a *vrykola*, committing foul acts and howling for rest.

Lucan's *Erichthro*, the Thessalian witch, would call up dead soldiers to ask them all that goes below, and would only send them back to the grave if they answered her questions sufficiently. "*Ti tous lene oi kato kato?*" What are they saying below?

The *moirologists* speak directly to the dead and in strange voices, after waiting for the priest to finish incarnating the dead into a nameless Christ yet again. They are often considered dirty heretics and outlaws by many, and are poor women from another part of the rocks who are paid for this performance.

In black dress and veil, they are often seen sitting on a doorstep drinking ouzo, smoking gauloises or camels, oblivious to the flies, and have as their companions goats, chickens and rifles.

My mother asked me years ago, why I sang the way I do, and then told me about them and said it must be a genetic inheritance. I was, of course, terribly proud, but I cannot smoke gauloises, and until I do, I cannot call myself a proper moiroloi singer.

LON CHANEY AND MARIA EWING: THE OPERATIC PERFORMER

It has been said that Lon Chaney was Hollywood's finest actor. As I have recently discovered many of his films with minimal makeup, I have been astonished to see an emphatic style of performance that I have seen nowhere else except from Conrad Veidt -- albeit Veidt's expressionist tradition was more soloistic -- or the theatres of the East.

Chaney's parents were deafmutes (I use an expression unpopular today to show the stigma and isolation of this population at the time). He considered fingertapping, facial and eye expression to be his first medium of communication and speaking, his second. The second form was used in business circles or with acquaintances outside the home, but home was where he could be himself.

And in his films one can see a use of the hands, body, facial and eye expression and elasticity that speak to a mandate to communicate to those for whom sound is unavailable. The eyes, sometimes looking at a subject from the corners, the hand gestures completely different from anything else seen on film, the muscles of the cheeks constantly working, the huge laughter, all, and then the subtle to unsubtle uses of makeup to define each character, created a pantomimic performance which has still not received the note deserved.

I believe this is because he intentionally chose the roles of outsiders, whom he fleshed out with his virtuosity of expression for his audience, as if to say, "this could be you," or "this IS you." Prisoners, cripples, mariners, gamblers, circus clowns or freaks, all the roles were fingertaps for those without a voice in society. He brought tears to people who had never understood the humanity of these people.

But it was *his own studio* that marketed him within the HORROR genre, and for this reason, we do not hear of him the way we hear of 'real' geniuses like Charlie Chaplin.

(In my field I could not understand this better. Being labeled as a vocal freak who discusses unpopular subjects is a kind of free ticket for recording companies who will say, "You are lucky we distribute your records at all," which they do not.)

I see Chaney as an operatic performer, a performer who is required by his audience to communicate all the intricacies of human emotion with the use of minimal words (those only partially decipherable through lipreading and by the screen text).

In Chaney's massively elastic face and body one could read in a paragraph, love, greed, kindness, hate, remorse, and scathing sarcasm. And a massive intelligence.

In the vocal operatic world -- a world in which the word is generally a springboard for a musical phrase -- the mandates of changing amplitude, timbre, vibrato, sprechstimme, sprechgesang, coloratura, size and projection of sound, all serve the narrative, and only a virtuoso can do this with the hopes of being understood.

In this sense one might compare Lon Chaney's silent world with the work of soprano Maria Ewing in the Richard Strauss opera *Salome*.

A challenge, a limitation, is laid before each artist, and each must summon all the craft within his/her discipline in order to be understood. In Salome, Ewing actually changes the vocal writing to include sprechgesang and sprechstimme (these are not expressly forbidden by the score, but we had not heard them employed here). She employs these traditions alongside high notes that are delivered like shrieks more than operatic tones. But she returns immediately to lines of verismo singing quite identifiable in the operatic world, so she enhances the vocabulary available to the role of Salome, which is a difficult role to understand. This is a woman who is obsessed with making love with St John the Baptist, and when he will not have her, she has him decapitated so she may at least make love to his skull.

For most, this role is difficult to understand. The role of Salome is that of a witch, heretic, or blasphemer, but *certainly* a necrophiliac when lust forces her hand.

Salome chastises the head of St John the Baptist again and again, for not looking at her, and the few words howl and then sing in a lyric pianissimo. When in the sudden blackness she makes love to the head of the corpse, she shocks most of her audience, who see this behavior as unhuman. Especially because of those pianissimos. She is at once horrific and beatific.

Chaney does the opposite in his most extreme roles, by choosing to show that a madman is still capable of human feeling, after all the wrong he has done.

Pathos in roles such as these is rigorous. It requires a superior virtuosity because it redefines what is considered to be behavior resulting from experience outside the confines of the normative human.

THE ART OF CRITICISM

As those of us who know anything about the world will attest, criticism is best conducted at the bar: "Oh God, it's that hag again. What is she wearing this time? Her mother's toupee. It's real hair, too, bitch, so show some respect."

In the bar can be found the essence of true criticism. Lest one be fooled by the fools of the academy, this is a savage practice, akin to cannibalism, and the best critical writing is, of course, composed with the blood of the victim, encased within a syringe and a 23 gauge needle.

In the bar one must spare nothing. Impalare, the nailing of the victim upon the tree, is the only way to systematically detail the innumerable failings of his corpse and what was known of his mind. It is, of course, possible to keep him alive a little longer in order to interrogate him, and more thoroughly exsanguinate all doubt; and the most famous bastions of criticism do this with a smile of the crocodile and the cooing of a dove.

The Aztecs and the Greeks chose only the most beautiful, the most uncanny, to sacrifice, and these victims were pampered enormously before the ceremonious removal of their hearts.

Nothing other than the dismemberment of the most lovely and most envied would regale the crowd.

Entertainment has always been presented as sacred and profane, and the great leader knows that generous helpings of both best tender the crowd before a law is changed.

MORPHINE (2010)

There is no cure for loneliness
But itself.
The wide glare of day?
Endless.

The night was luxurious.
And with it,
All your dead friends,
Who kept you warm.

But then the day begins
A car, a bird, the bell rings
"Wake up, sucker!"
The Happy People Are At Your Door!

This is the hour of *smiles*.
This is the hour and there
are another twelve
that tell you:
"You have lost and
will *not* recover
Your god is gone:
he is gone
forever."

The light is piercing
Even though
through the burnt holes of your black curtains
will emerge
some sign of *life*
someone is passing
that knows your name
that someone
that you hate
that knows
you are awake.

Who will not leave you
because waking up
is all you do for most of the day.
BLACK TAPE IS GONE!
Where is it?

"Look again!"

Block the *light*
It burns your retina
It burns your brain
It burns your skin.

The shout of dawn:
"Find it!"
There..
"There it is."
Black-taped and
Whole again
the noise is louder
and there are people laughing
They are *SAYING*,
'Good Morning!'
They are giddy
minnows floating
atop a sea of dumbness.

The bell rings
And you smile
the smile of the man
who holds the
key,
"Keep ringing buddy!"
They want to take you
Out of here
They know what's good for you
is anything *but you*

And you are **rich**
You are **RICHER STILL**
with knowing that your living death is a death with dreams....
that no
confidence man
can pry away

They may be all you have
these thoughts, these
memories, these dreams--these
hallucinations
of the things
you
could
have done,
what you

might

 have
become
all just impossible but only
 just
out of grasp.

The thought is the deed!
The deed is out of grasp!
Out of the fingers, sweaty
 but
fully-fleshed
still comes to you
like a

 gift
unwrapped.

And wise men know
that the *thing* is always better
than the thing
itself.

The bell
has stopped its ringing.
And there is another
roll of tape.
The minutes pass.
You have locked the windows:
There was a noise.

and now you are
 airless
like a bat
with a human face.

It whispers.
*"Once I was a fool
like you...
but having been forever scarred
by the smiles of stupid people
smile myself now
forever downwards
like the smile of Death,
the great reliever.*

For what is *lonely*
is really

lonely *just*

for a

man.

Not

for

a

God.

MICHAUX AND MY BLOOD BROTHERS

I would like to imagine a reading by Michaux hammering Je Rame into the skull of his enemy. From Cesar Vallejo, or Gottfried Benn, from whom I have only heard lectures, and more from Paul Celan, his later, suicidal work. His understanding that only as a Shade could he meet his mother in the underworld meant a heightened distancing from the world in order to commit the act. Celan's realization took years to emerge -- he lived in a state of physical, linguistic, and psychological dislocation, and I have heard from eminent poets that this later writing is unintelligible.

I could not disagree more. The dead sound of his voice reading TODESFUGUE should point towards the progressively more traumatic poems that succeed it.

Again the voice. The observations during World War I of the medic and doctor, Alfred Wolfsohn, who had heard the screams of soldiers with torn limbs in the state of amputation, or others with burned flesh, need enter the world of *theatre*; the work of Grotowski, of course Artaud, of the Expressionists Kokoschka, the Schrei, Geist, and Ich theatres, Murnau, Caligari -- all considered words as the result of electrical human power.

The vocabulary of the great Cathy Berberian, whose arsenal of sound has been pilfered by new music composers, including her husband, to the extent that it became a rarefied "new music" form, and lost its' essential power; this happened only because she died blind, impoverished, and young; or she would have continued her research.

The work of Pierre Henry, of GRM, of Nicolas Guerin, Richard Zvonar, Dave Hunt and other electronic composers, has redefined the possibility of the theatre of the voice completely. The vocalist as composer must continually find more ways of expressing herself, for needless repetition from project to project to product implies the same message as one given years before. New jungles of sound await and can be heard, and must be realized, whether on tape cassettes initially in bathrooms, or in state-of-the-art studios.

The possibilities when imagined should be realized as soon as possible, so the conceptualization of sound by the mind has validity. I often imagine the most interesting sonic possibilities while resting FAR from the studio.

I have also tried to hear the rhythms of Theodore Roethke, Tristan Corbiere, Gerard de Nerval, Henri Michaux, Ingeborg Bachmann, Miguel Huezco Mixco, many poets and writers. The rhythms of their work are like lullabies to me, because I have *often* needed to know that my thoughts were reasonable or at least *communally* unreasonable.

Ending: Selection of MAN AND WOMAN ENTER THE CANCER WARD