

## The Phenomenology of Leaving

“He hit me again. This was at that big hotel on the shore, in a room whose details have completely escaped my memory. He hit me, not hard, and then he sat on the bed and cried and asked me to sit next to him, pray with him. Later, he patted my hand (he had work to do, he said), and the room released me of all the necessary words that were not being spoken. I went down to the sand with a towel and my bag. I felt dull and flat and full of shattered visions. It was one of those gray spring days. A little cold. Gulls curling in the air. I lay on my towel with my head on my arms and fell quickly into a miraculous sleep, a dreamless sleep...and then, what seemed a short time later, I woke. I looked up at the hotel and felt a pulling, this came very suddenly, a pulling to rise, to leave my towel and go, I can't really explain it, to go up to the top and see what there was to see. I crossed the sand, entered, walked quickly through the lobby—white square floor tiles and green plants and mirrors set at angles against the walls, giving one the impression of obliquity, instability, a kind of proneness. My ears popped in the elevator as I rose. At the top was a large circular room with a circular chandelier hanging from a white circular disc, itself hanging from the center of the ceiling (also circular). Circles, it was a room of circles. Tall windows stretched along the room's circumference. I was told—by whom? I have no idea—that from this vantage one could observe two hundred and eighty degrees of the sea. The room was empty. I walked up to the windows and looked down. The sun had emerged. Scattered figures at the shoreline were silver shapes skipping, and the sea beyond seemed to hold still, as if it were an endless sheet of hammered steel reflecting this new sun at a million gleaming points. There were no shadows—where were the shadows? It was a scene without shadows, nothing but light and color. Wasn't it Klee who said that color is the place where our minds and the universe meet? The yellow of the sand, the blue of the sea, those silver shapes skipping, the gray clouds tinged with brightness, offshore now, retreating—these things seemed to be not of substance but of color itself. And I gave in to these colors, surrendered to their vibrations, entered their soft envelopments, plunged into their mystery, as one might enter the sea itself. I'm not sure this will make

sense to you, but it was as if I had actually become these things that I saw. It was as if my consciousness were suddenly wholly saturated with—how shall I put this?—with the immensity of an implacable reality. I read once—I think it was Bergson—that we are able to remember everything that happens to us, everything, in fact, that is happening anywhere in the universe, down to the smallest detail. The shift of a single grain of sand, the sound of a gull feather falling softly on a distant shore, the play of light on a leaf’s edge, every word spoken, even the reverberations of another’s thoughts. We are that open, that permeable to sensations. So our brains, according to this theory, must defend us from the onrush, must keep us from becoming entirely overwhelmed by what is essentially an endless and voluminous onslaught of mostly useless information. (You are probably doing this now. Even these words will be lost to you, like yesterday’s clouds.) Only that which is most important is taken in, remembered. But up there, I experienced no filter, no inhibitions. I was completely open. But I was also calm. Yes, I felt an amazing calmness, as if I were standing in the eye of the hurricane of my memories of this time. It’s strange to talk like this, I know, but that was how I felt up there.”

“I don’t think what you are saying is strange at all.”

“Thank you for saying that, thank you. I stood up there for a long time, resting my forehead against the window and scanning the shore. And I saw her. I cannot describe the woman, not in any detail, but I knew her, I knew her deeply, as one knows one’s own thoughts, one’s own memories. She was lying on my towel, a white towel with green stripes running lengthwise, it was definitely my towel. I found this quite odd, as you might imagine. And then as I watched, she rose and brushed the sand from her knees. She looked up at me. Her hair blowing all around. She was very small, but her eyes were two clear drops of aquamarine. I swear it was as if she could see me through the windows up there. I even flinched, pulled back, as one does before a raised hand, a threat of violence. Then she turned and found what appeared to be a small stick, a piece of driftwood, and began to spell a word in the sand, a single word. This did not take long. She worked quickly. And then she dropped the stick and stood with her hands on her hips and looked up at me with something like expectation. But I could not read the word. I wanted so badly to read it. My eyes followed the lines. There was nothing shadowy or obscure about their shapes, but I could not bring them into focus. The content of her message had been obliterated by the form itself. It was as if the markings formed not a word at all, only its referent. Does this make sense to you? The patterns of the lines—the word was composed only of lines, like an ancient language—somehow evoked their own harmonies. I’m not really sure what I’m saying, or maybe what I’m trying to tell you is that I knew the word, but I could not read it.”

“The experience of any kind of trauma, any kind of terror, and its aftermath, cannot be arranged into a linguistic system of letters and words and other symbols, so we are

left with the lingering traces of our perceptions at some somatic, iconic level, in our skin, our organs, our cells.”

“That’s right. I think that’s right. Perhaps that was why a part of me wanted to stay up there, lingering in the concentration of her gaze, in that measureless realm of inexpressibility, but I knew I had to go down, to lose myself once again in the world of space and time. So I left the room of concentric circles—shed it, really, as a snake sheds its skin—and somehow found my way into the elevator, retraced my steps through the hotel’s lobby, past those strange slanting mirrors which gave one the sense of flying, and walked quickly across the sand to where I had left my towel...and then, much to my surprise, I woke—for a second time, I woke. Children were playing near the waves, and the clouds had drifted offshore, leaving a sky wiped so clean you felt wrapped up in it, wrapped up in the blueness. I looked up at the hotel. I rose, brushed the sand from my knees. The wind was blowing. With my hand I moved the hair out of my face. I turned and found a piece of driftwood...”

“Yes.”

“...and I began to spell the word...”

“Yes.”

“...a single word. Five letters. You of course already know the word I spelled.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I’m not creating mysteries here. I mean—I meant—to convey a perfect clarity. It took me only a few seconds. Writing the word was easy, effortless, like performing an act already mastered. And then I dropped the stick, and I stood, a little off to the side, I’m sure you can imagine it, with the sea behind me, the hotel looming before me, my whole future spread out now with a greater certainty, a greater lightness. I stood with my hands on my hips, looking at the dazzling windows up there. And then I turned and began to collect my things.”

Note: “I felt dull and flat and full of shattered visions”: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (New York and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1963), 63.