

EL SUEÑO

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

Translated by

John Campion

Pyramidal
death-born shadow of earth
aimed at Heaven
a proud point of vain obelisks
pretending to scale the Stars;
but these lovely lights
—free always, always shining—
so easily evaded
the obscure war,
(whose black breath announced
the dreadful, unfettered shade)
the darkened brow
could not even reach the convex Orb
of the thrice-blessed Goddess
who shows three shining faces,
but remained
in profound imperial silence,
lord only of the air
sullied with the dense breath
it exhaled
—admitting only
submissive cries of nocturnal birds,
so deep and plangent,
the silence was not broken.

With sluggish flight
and song offensive to ears
and more when admitted to spirit,
shameful Nyctimine
leers through chinks in the sacred door
or coaxing hollows in the lofty skylight
that opens a space to her intent,
and flies at the burning holy lantern
of perpetual flame,
which she extinguishes
if she does not profane,
consuming rich matter
from the clear oil,
which from the fruit of Minerva's tree
was sweated with anguish,

forcibly yielded from the tightened press;

and those disloyal
to Bacchus' godhead,
who saw their home
changed into a field,
their weaving into vine
—no longer spinning tales,
but transformed into dishonored shapes—
form a second mist,
birds with featherless wings
fearing to be seen even in darkness;
those three diligent, I mean,
impudent Sisters, whose awful scourge
gave them dark, denuded wings,
membranes so deformed
they are mocked
by more ill-fated birds;
these with Pluto's once garrulous spy,
now a superstitious sign for the augurer,
alone, composed the dreadful-hooded choir,
intoning maxims, blacks, and longs,
(with pauses more than voice)
the notes waiting for the slow and awkward measure,
which the phlegmatic movement of the wind marked
with so slow a beat, so delayed,
it seemed, at times, to fall asleep between.

This dismal intermittent sound
of the fearful, shadowed crowd
excited notice less than it engendered sleep;
its dull, dilated rhyme
induced quiescence
and moved the members to repose;
Harpocrates, the quiet night
whose imperial will,
without malice,
all obeyed,
whispered silence to the living,
sealing darkened lips of one and all

with lightly pressing finger.

The quiet wind, the sleeping dog,
one lies still, the other
does not move an atom,
fearing murmurs,
however small,
would violate the peaceful calm
with sacrilegious sound—
the sea no longer shaken
did not rock
the blue unstable cradle
where the Sun was sleeping;
and the always silent fishes
sleeping in cavernous darkened beds
are twice mute;
among them,
the deceitful charmer Halcyon
who changed the simple lovers into fish
that now have been avenged
for she herself is changed.

In lurking hollows of the hills
with concave, ill-formed crags
—defended less by roughness
than secured by obscurity—
the somber mansion,
unknown to the wild, sure-footed hunter,
can be darkness in the midst of day,
—eclipsing both the fearless
and the timid—
here, the vulgar tribe
pays to Nature's mastery,
its universal tribute,
and though the King of beasts
pretended vigilance,
with open eyes, he was not awake.
While the one attacked by his own dogs,
illustrious monarch of former times,
now a timid stag

with up-pricked ears,
attunes (even when asleep)
to the slightest sound
from the movement of a single atom,
in the quiet, unsteady
hammock of the nest,
formed of mud and brushwood,
in the darkest part of the tree,
weightless birds sleep protected,
the wind rests
from the driving wings that stir it.

But Jupiter's noble bird
—after all a Queen—
so as not to yield entirely to rest,
which she considers vice if overly indulged,
entrusts her weight to a single foot,
and in the other grasps a small stone
—alarm clock for shallow slumber—
so that sleep would not extend too long,
before being interrupted
by her regal, pastoral care.
O the grave weight of Majesty
grants no pardon to least offence!
Perhaps this mystery
has made the crown circular,
denoting in its golden round
that zeal is no less continuous.

Sleep, at last, possessed all;
silence, occupied all;
the thief slept,
even the restless lover.

Past dead of night,
shadow diminished into halves,
when fatigued from diurnal care
not solely oppressed
by ponderous work of the body,
pleasure-weary as well;

continuous designs upon the senses,
though pleasant, also tire,
which Nature always changes,
first to one, then to another,
distributing offices destined to leisure or to labor,
unfaithful in the faithful needle's balance
with which it rules
the apparatus of the world—
thus the members occupied
with profound sweet rest,
—the senses stayed from ordinary toil—
work in the end, but lovingly,
if there be such labor,
and yield to the portrait
of life's inverted face,
which—stealthily armed
with weapons of sleep—
charges cowardly and lazily masters
both shepherd's hook and gilded scepter,
without distinguishing
sackcloth from purple robe:
all high Morpheus
grants no dispensation
to one whose three crowns
form the papal mitre,
nor to one who lives in sheds of straw,
neither to one on the undulant Danube,
nor who on a humble junk, humbly dwells:
leveling with always equal rigor,
this powerful image of death
measures sackcloth equal to brocade.

Remote, but still a part,
the soul removed
from external control
(unfolding the day for good or ill)
only dispenses to those oppressed members
of temporal death,
bequieted bones,
the wages of vegetative warmth,

the body being in calm repose,
a cadaver with a soul
(alive to death and dead to life)
the vital balance wheel
of the human clock
giving belated signs
of the latter,
if not with hands,
with arterial concert
—some small proof, pulsating,
manifests slowly from its well-regulated movement.

This heart, the member king
and center of life spirit,
with its bellow partner
—lung, whose lodestone attracts the wind,
now compressing, now dilating,
through the muscular, soft, clear conduit,
inhales the fresh air,
which takes revenge for its expulsion
by committing small robberies of vital heat,
to be mourned some time hence
for all must go to waste;
yet, the cycle repeats,
so there really is no theft—
these exceptions and
faithful witnesses
assured life,
while the senses with mute voices
and the torpid tongue, dumb
for once powerless to speak,
impugned the testimony.

And the stomach,
that most provident caterer
and alchemist,
proscribes the quantities of chyle
distilled by the food's incessant heat,
to every natural quadrant

–this mediator
between heat and phlegmatic humor,
interposed its innocent substance,
justly paying for that
which out of piety
or foolish arrogance
introduced it into
foreign wars
–this, if not the Vulcan forge,
the hearth of human warmth,
sent to the brain,
vapors of the four tempered humors,
so clear
they did not blur the simulacra
that sense gave to imagination
(which delivered them in purer form
to memory, a safer custodian
who tenaciously engraves
and carefully guards)
but gave to fantasy
the means to form
diverse images.

Just as Pharos' crystal wonder
mirrored distant vessels
plowing Neptune's reign
–revealing
in its quick-silvered moon,
their number, magnitude,
and perilous fortune
on the unstable, transparent,
winds and waters
that divide
their easy sail and grave keels–
thus, the image of all things was copied
and the invisible brush traced
from mental colors without light,
the always beautiful figures
–not only of sublunar creatures,
but also those clear

intellectual Stars—
and as far as the invisible
can be conceived,
artfully represented
and displayed them to the Soul.

Who meanwhile
(Intent on perfect essence)
contemplated her own spark
firing in the highest Being,
and thereby, thought herself almost free
of the corporeal chain
that rudely shackles
the intellectual flight,
with which she now
measures the firmament
and considers the course
of celestial bodies
that unequally gyre
—meriting penance,
for spindling rigorous calm
through misguided divination—
so she discovered herself
on the eminent summit,
before which gigantic Atlas
was dwarfed,
and Mt. Olympus, whose lofty brow
never agitated with air,
would barely skirt its sides;
since clouds that crown
the haughtiest volcano,
swelling, to intimate war on Heaven,
are (for its vast waist)
scarcely a nebulous belt
which—badly wound—
either the wind shakes loose,
or the neighboring heat of the Sun dissolves.

If that terrible mountain's body
were divided in three,

the swift eagle
that flies above
(pretending to arrange its nest
between sun rays)
could not reach the lowest part
beating two feathered sails,
nor combing the air with talons,
though it feigns to climb
the spheres of mystical height
on a rude ladder
with its two wings
—ascending the music scales
divined from atoms.

Or the two Pyramids
—vain ostentations of Memphis
and quite the architectural reach
(crowned with barbarous trophies)—
were Pharaoh's banner and tomb,
proclaiming the glories and triumphs
of the grand, always invincible city
—presently Cairo—
whose fame, muted by their magnitude,
was still imprinted
in the wind, in the very clouds,
(if not in Heaven)
by these prodigies
climbing with such art,
that to the rising eye,
the subtle point that feigns
to join the first Orb vanished
before it could be seen,
when struck with vertigo,
sight would fall precipitously
down to the spacious base,
its slow recovery from giddiness
a punishment
for giving flight to vision
—these two, solstitially aligned,
opaque bodies, at zenith

were so completely bathed with sun,
they offered no respite of shade
to the weary breath of travelers.

These, be they sacred elations
or profane hieroglyphs of blind
error, according to the Greek,
also blind,
sweet Poet
—who if by virtue of his accounts
of Ulysses and Achilles
is not reckoned
by the union of Historians,
is augmented more by glory;
since it would be easier
to seize the refulgent bolt
from the dreaded Thunderer
or the iron club from Hercules,
than a single hemistich
that kind Apollo rendered to him—
the pyramids, according to Homer,
were exterior signs of interior
dimensions of the Soul:
as the ambitious burning flame
climbs in a pyramidal point
to Heaven,
so the human mind
copies its figure
and always
aspires to the First Cause
—central point where the straight line tends,
if not both center and circumference.

These two artificial Mounts—
and that blasphemous high Tower
of which today the diverse idioms
are sorrowful signs,
dividing the people,
that Nature made one—
If compared

to the elevated mental pyramid,
they would find themselves so low
that when measuring its peak
they would perceive a sphere:
where the ambitious Soul
making a summit of her own flight,
lifted her
into the most eminent part
of her own mind.

In whose immense elevation,
the astonished, Sovereign Queen of the sublunar
was haughtily suspended in joy,
her beautiful, intellectual eyes,
free of spectacles,
(without fear of distance
or suspicious of an opaque obstacle,
which interposed might conceal some object)
freely extended through all created things,
whose incomprehensible cumulation
manifestly gave signs
of possibility to sight,
while the comprehension,
—overwhelmed by the sheer
number of objects
and its power exceeded by their size—
cowardly withdrew.

Eventually,
the impudent sight
repented its vain endeavor
to boast against an object
that exceeds in excellence
the visual lines
—against the luminous Sun,
whose fervent chastisement
punishes ray by ray
the audacious,
but now lamented, attempt

(Icarus drowned
in his own tears)
–likewise the understanding,
here mastered no less
by the immense number
of ponderous gyres
(Spherical mixture
of diverse species)
than by their qualities,
foundered on the great waves
in a sea of wonders,
and pitifully yielded
before the abundance,
since trying to see everything,
it saw nothing,
neither the ornaments
of the universe,
nor those integral members
of the dilated body,
whose perfect form
derives from actual content,
but found its gaze
wobbling from one axis,
on which rests the gyrating machine
to the opposite pole.

But one,
whose practice of living in darkness
has robbed from visible objects their color,
grows completely blind
when assailed with unexpected splendor.
–thus excess creates contrary effects;
since being unaccustomed to light prevents
directly facing the bright Sun,
to darkness itself,
which before was a dark wall to sight,
from the assault, it appeals,
shielding with hands
the weak, bedazzled eyes
from vacillating rays,

the shadow serving now
–pious mediator–
as healing instrument;
so the eyes could recover
by degrees
–natural recourse,
that induced Galen
to scrupulously regulate
the secret noxious qualities,
and by virtue of rich excess
of heat or cold,
or on account of unknown sympathies
or antipathies with which
natural causes progress,
to make the beneficial antidote
from fatal venom
–giving to suspended admiration,
through tedious forbearance of sleep
and prudent empirical attention,
certain effects of unknown cause,
(derived from experiments on brute animals);
thus, with this ultimate labor of Apollonian science,
good may perhaps be taken from the bad!

In the same way, the Soul,
astonished at the sight of what lay before,
tried to regather the attention,
still paralyzed from such portentous wonder
that had frozen the discourse
in the shapeless embryo
of a confused, ill-formed concept,
which she modeled from her embrace
of the inordinate chaos
–so profound,
that the deeper she penetrated
to order the particles,
the more universes they flung apart–
this futile attempt
to violently gird
the bounds of eternity

by holding the plethora
in her tiny cup.

Before that tempest,
the sails recoiled
from seeking faithfulness in the sea
and constancy in the wind,
while shattered
from helm to broken lateen yard,
the craft was run aground
upon the mental shore—
where divining a place for repairs,
she abandoned
the holistic pursuit of knowledge,
to embrace a rational method
of limiting the attention
to a single subject
and then advancing
through the next
and growing circle of learning
until completing the entire course
of 10 categories:
metaphysical reduction
(conceiving general principles
with mental fantasies
distilled from baser matter)
that teaches a science of universals,
artfully repairing the defect
of not being able with an intuitive act
to know all creation,
but rather ascending
from one concept to another
—necessitated by the limited vigor
of the understanding,
whose weak forces
the prolix, if restricted,
doctrine invigorates
with learned nourishment,
while filling its sails with hardy breaths,
by which, more spirited,

it haughtily aspires
to the glorious pallium
of most ardent labor,
ascending the lofty stairs
—first one, then another faculty
surmounted—until insensibly
it beholds the worthy summit,
sweet terminus of ponderous toil
(from bitter seed, fruit gratifying to taste)
and with valiant foot
treads the peak's high brow.

My understanding wanted
to follow this method
from the lowest degree
of inanimate being
(less favored
but still cherished
by Nature, the second originating cause)
and pass on to the most noble form in the hierarchy,
which was first rudely born
in the green breath
of Thetys--the first to suck
the sweet springs
from her fertile breasts,
filled with the four humors of earth,
that now attract, now diligently put aside,
expelling the superfluous,
and from the plenty
making the most useful substance its own;

then, having investigated this model—
go on to impress a more beautiful form
(endowed with both feelings
and imagination)
that could—without intention—
excite just complaint,
kindling from that spark of life
that glows even in the lowest being,
a jealousy to rise

in the most brilliant
and burning of inanimate stars,
illuminating the lofty splendors.

Thus making a foundation
of this slight body of knowledge,
pass to the supreme composition,
ordered with three corresponding lines
and a mysterious compendium
of all inferior forms:
Nature's hinge
linking the spirit on the highest throne
with the lowest subject;
not solely adorned with five senses,
but ennobled by the Sapient Potent Hand
with the three internal guides
of memory, projection, and transformation—
circle that conjoins
the Sphere and the land,
and last grace of its Eternal Author,
whose portentous web
seals this ultimate creature—
lips with dust,
precisely when it reaches to touch the heavens.
This perfect being
could be a mysterious image
from the sacred vision
of Patmos' evangelical eagle,
whose angel
(offering a word to the hungry)
with a single burning step
bridged the Stars and the Earth,
or maybe it's a copy
of that eminent statue
of most precious metal
that exhibited a haughty noble face,
but whose foundation
rested upon feet of clay
to be blown asunder in a feeble wind.
Man, I say, the greatest portent

conceived by the understanding,
seems a compendium
(Angel, plant, and brute)
in whose high lowness
all Nature participates.

Why?

Perhaps so this fortunate one
could be elevated to the divine
through loving Union.

O! never fathomed, tender mercy,
so poorly appreciated,
and unrequited.

It followed, at times, this path
by degrees. Then faltered,
when considering
the overwhelming task
of grasping the All,
especially by one
who understood not the least
effect in the Natural world:
—who could not follow
the unknown way
that directs Arethusa's crystalline stream,
detaining its road in cosmogonic circuits
—this clear headed examiner,
plunging into the wombs of Pluto,
the awful caverns of tremendous abyss,
curves through fair mead,
pleasant Elysian fields,
carrying to the triform, golden Goddess
(pathetically overturning
mountains, forests, and fields)
news of her wonderful, lost daughter;

—who did not know why
ivory figures circumscribe
the tiny flower's fragile beauty:
why colors mixed
—confounding crimson with white—

are a fragrant gala
exhaled as sweet perfume
when she unfurls her dress,
before the creative wind
to form a curved bubble
(limned with gold)
sure to increase into yet
another newborn daughter,
—just as the white seal
of the flower bud broken
displays the sweet wound
of Venus,
plucking candor from the dawn,
royal purple from the aurora,
to make rose, snow white
and white, purple
—a show that excites
the envy of those head turners
who solicit praise
from their reflections
in a forest pond,
or perhaps,
a vain projection
of feminine industry
that doubles the venom
under the veil of
a resplendent hue.

To repeat—
when the discourse is cowardly
limited to a single, autonomous object
—treated as if an unrelated thing—
knowledge flees
and the understanding turns its back
in shame;
then how could it face
the all-fearful, immense machine,
whose terrible unendurable weight
—if not supported in its own center—
would crush the back of Atlas

or flatten Hercules,
who could not judge that labor
more prodigious than investigating Nature?

Later—more determined—
it accused the cowardice
of yielding the laurel
without having entered
the harsh conflict,
and turned to the bold exemplar
of clear youth
—proud charioteer of the burning car—
whose brave, high impulse
inflamed the spirit
to ignore an example of dire warning
and boldly open the paths to illumination,
that no chastisement
could restrain.

Neither the deep blue pantheon
—moving grave for his ill-fated ashes—
nor vindictive thunderbolt
check the arrogant will
that determines, disdainingly,
to immortalize its name through ruin.
Drawing pleasure from
terror coaxing valor,
this pernicious exemplar
(turned archetype)
incites the wings to higher flight
and spells 'g-l-o-r-y'
with characters of the wreckage.
So maybe his story
should remain unpublished,
that other transgressors
will not be taught to follow.
Rather let the canny politician
cover up his deeds
with silence instead of song,
and break the chain reaction

by inflicting punishment
(on an insignificant offender)
in total secrecy,
without exposing him
to popular view:
since the dire effects of infamy,
once known,
spread like contagion;
detering this martyrdom is
better realized by the ignorant,
than by the tutored.

In every direction, the confused judgment
foundered hopelessly among the rocks
—lacking fuel, the fires dimmed,
though the body's heat continued slowly
transforming food into its own substance.
Meanwhile, the boiling turbulence
(caused by the union of static
and volatile forces in the crucible)
ceased, and, loosening the shackles of sleep,
began to free the rational throne
of the strange images
induced by the rising vapors.
Likewise, the rest-weary members
(chiding the torpid nerves)
stretched, as the tired bones
momentarily returned to the other side,
and with eyes half-open,
the senses, impeded
by the natural venom,
sweetly resisted the desire to stir,
till the last phantoms
—made of weightless vapor—
fled the now emptied brain,
and dissolved like smoke in the wind.

Thus a magic lantern
projects onto a blank wall
various false, painted figures,

produced no less by shadow
than by light.
While maintaining our reflections
through the proper distances
of informed perspective,
we pretend the fugitive shade
that vanishes in the light-of-day,
to be a multi-dimensional body,
when it is unworthy even to be a surface.

Meanwhile,
at the still point
the Father of ardent light
appeared in the East,
he bade farewell to the opposite pole
with a slant of tremulous rays;
but not before, the beautiful
placid morning Star
broke the first light,
and old Tithonus' Amazon spouse, Aurora,
(armed against darkness)
displayed her clear brow
shining with the morning,
a tender, valorous prelude
to the fiery Planet's
undisciplined advance
—reserving his veteran sparks
for the rear guard—
against the tyrannical usurper,
crowned with black laurel,
and who with awful nocturnal scepter
governed the shadows,
of which even she was terrified.

But scarcely had the radiant harbinger
waived the luminous colors in the East,
summoning a cacophony of birds
to sound the alarms,
when the tyrant Night, coward
burdened with terrible dread,

strove to make boast of her forces,
interposing the guard
of her lugubrious shroud,
receiving in it slight wounds
from light incisions—and,
since her unsatisfied valor
was a mask of fear,
she sought deliverance
more than engagement,
and blew the raucous horn,
gathering the black squadrons
to orderly retreat—
when she was assaulted
by a greater, neighboring,
plentitude of beams
that streaked the highest point
of the World's towers.

Closing the luminous circumference,
[Closing its luminous ring, ?]
the [rising?] Sun streamed
from a thousand times thousand
points of gold over blue sapphire,
a thousand golden lines
across the vast blue page;
as she fled—stumbling
on the shadows of her own horror—
with the chaotic, routed army.

That fugitive pace
attained, at last, sight of the West
and—roused by her own precipitous fall—
again maneuvered
to crown herself
with the globe's abandoned half,
while the golden Sun
adorned our Hemisphere
with skeins of judicious light
dispensing their colors
to visible things,

and restored to outward sense,
their full operation
–keeping to more certain light,
the World illuminated,
and I awake.

