

Practice for the Afterlife:

Clothing Myself

Margaret Parker

Poetry performed in a transparent robe fluttering with images of the artist's work sewn on like leaves, while the artist moved through the 11 rooms of a house filled with artwork by women, for the exhibition, "Dear Womanhouse, What Now?" at Art Kettle, in Manchester, MI. 2018

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Practice for the Afterlife – Clothing myself

1. making it

*I'm practicing
I'm preparing
procrastinating
stuttering*

*no, that's not it
try again....*

I'll clothe myself in beauty
I'll stitch it with my own hands
I'll fit it to my own body
patterned after my own life

mixed with colors
I use again and again
ultramarine, lemon yellow
alizarin crimson, mars black

sprung from visions behind my eye,
battered against my breast bone,
pushed their way out onto paper,
squeezed out in ink, brushed on with sable,

then erased, torn up, pasted back together
till they ooze blood or toxic turpentine,
until they're finally finished, or just left behind
stacked up in the corner, stored in steel drawers,

pressed behind glass, lost on the hard drive,
sold off, given away, or kept for myself
filling up my studio
above the family store.

2. Father's Loss

*I'm practicing
I'm preparing
shape-shifting
snake-handling*

*ok, let's see
where this goes....*

stubborn as my father,
abundant as my mother,
I learned to pattern my life after
the unpardonable dreams of artists.

At the age of 9
my father watched his father
collapse, dead,
at the dinner table

this was something he never got over
he couldn't speak about his father
without dissolving in tears
and walking away

all the Parker family stories
were cut off, amputated
we were left mute, adrift
unknowing

what I learned
from my father's loss
was to pay attention to the need
for the Afterlife.

That a path must be prepared,
the steps swept
with eyes wide open
ears ready to listen

3. practicing

*I've been practicing
I've been preparing
memorizing
maze running*

*I can hardly wait
to start again....*

I'll practice until all the mistakes are made,
till all the seams are on the outside,
practice all the wrong notes
till the right ones ring through

practice like this -

build a circular tunnel, with 5 doorways of red, white, black,
yellow, or blue; circling 4 inner doors into the multicolor center,
that's open to the sky. Call it C'ood, like searching for the common good

might have to practice this -

the double explosion collapses in hours, unraveling consequences for days, for months,
for years, when two flight paths cross and crash civilization. Must be called Twin Towers

practice this with anyone -

invite them to arrange 12 curves in 12 shades of blue,
then collect the strands of photographs that record our shared experience of color.
Call it the DNA of Blue

4. new gods

*Yes, practice
yes, prepare
then step into the screen
fingers on the keyboard*

wait, stop

why did I come this way?

because all the paintings
must be photographed,
because now the camera
links to the computer

because images are
stored, resized, re-colored,
and transcendently
reborn there

because it's playing
with the new gods to see
how I, the maker, can
reshape elastic infinity....

yes, this feels like
shaky ground
yes, there is still a
real world out there

where the printing press
evolved to the cotton gin
then the automobile
now unmanned drones drop bombs....

but we're still
the inquisitive humans,
our hands built for making
our minds eager to solve

see how clear the shrunken image
printed on the fabric is?
how the frayed edge
can be sealed with glue

how the needle
pricks through the silk
to attach with thread
my idea to its making

yes, I play with the
dangerous digital gods
to see what art

now can be

5. each room

*when I practice
when I prepare
I follow mother
up the stairs*

*going from
room to room...*

each room a turbulence
of dreams to be folded
pressed back into drawers
a temple in the making

each window an escape into
falling snow or lilac blooms
where chickadees fly through
a wild meandering

each man shakes himself awake
to wash, eat, leave the house
to work to his capacity
success in the assuming

each empty page a silence
where my own thoughts undress
to demand of me their
shivering vision a seeing

each expectation hiding
behind his eye or mine
comes alive in the child's face
two histories colliding

each trip up then down the stairs
rings out in the cadence

of my footsteps' fall and rise
the circle of my going

each place at the table
set in the family ring, each one
growing into someone new
someone unknowing

each night up to the bedroom
wrestling match of lust or love,
aversion, test or tears
ends in sleep's embracing

each full moon's burning
scimitar of light shocks me
awake to discover
my own orbit, moving

6. suddenly old

*So I'm practicing
I'm preparing
paying bills
doing taxes*

*hoping for
second sight...*

suddenly I'm old.... meaning I see
like an owl in 360 degrees with
eyes of a fly with a thousand lenses
images stored in a thousand honeycomb chambers

sticky and elastic with meaning.
Now, to my amazement,
their original meanings
have fallen away

what have I unearthed?

what is this rope of viridian green?
but strands of images that seem to lead me
into the Afterlife

follow Eve's Garden
ecstasy of openness, sexual love as the Oneness of the Universe,
back to our earliest beginnings, two humans unite in pleasure

follow Shirts and Skins
after terrorist attacks, war's invasions, torture for revenge
t-shirts are cut into new definitions of what it means to be human

follow American Inheritance
a pyramid of color builds the ever-expanding inheritance of slavery that all
Americans share. How can we un-build this soul crushing system?

7. the path

*I'm still practicing
still preparing
but I can't see the path
I can't find my way*

*nothing to do but
keep going....*

What do we have, after all,
but images of this life
to teach us about the next?
Now they do the seeing, they do the predicting

images satisfy an unquenchable need
they build a bridge
to the path I've chosen,
inherited, can't stop

won't give up,
selfishly must finish
even when the baby's crying

when the husband's angry

when the friends disappear
when the parents are dead -
and when the dreams shrink
to hard wrinkled peas

I string them into a necklace
of unforgetting
ready for the chartreuse spring
when they'll spring back to life.

8. burning bush

*still I practice
still I prepare
stitching it together
fitting it to my body*

*ready to slip into
this new skin....*

art prepares for death and sneaks around
behind it, beauty laughs at death
and can't be killed, sorrow told
becomes a fabric of steel

war's flames scald and burn
all of us,

slavery denied continues to enslave
all of us,

when guns become our bread and butter
we'll be crying bullets,

when capitalism turns into cannibalism
it feeds on our children,

laying waste to the planet,
we all go homeless.

A father passed into death,
a daughter is still listening.

Sometimes I become a burning bush
my leaves are flames, watch out -
I don't stop burning, I fling out
this burning rope for you to catch