

Nisus and Euryalus At The Louvre
by West Ambrose

*He shook his head and smiled, as at a child
won over by an apple, as he said:
"Well then, what are we doing on this side?"*
—*Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII, Dante Alighieri (translated by Mark Musa)

I.

A beautiful man approaches you in a museum gift shop

should you

- A. Talk to him
- B. Ignore him
- C. Make a joke about Miffy dressed as van Gogh being a Trans icon
- D. Ruin his life
- E. All of The Above

should you

- A. Get better at making choices or B. Get better at not making them alone?

There's a scroll inside a scroll inside a case of glass. That's called *Preservation*. There's a scroll inside a scroll inside the center of a volcano. That's called *Progress*. There's a bundle of ash inside the ink melting letter into letter before they put the scraps through another MRI. That's called *Sappho*. What's left untranslatable is what becomes Desired. The glances we don't get a second chance at. The brushes that stiffen like blades, then retract suddenly. The words we say in dark and hollow spaces, lost to Absence, leaving us reaching, grasp after grasp, even when

it's a morning twenty years from now. Around the corner you reach for the Where will you go when— and the Did you ever love...? and So? What does that matter to—

The hem of your shirt the pluck of his —
 touch magnify emeralds

...for you instead?

and nothing else...

The time it takes to
restore an artifact is twice as
long as it usually stays on display—

You bring him home that night from the gift shop
and wrap him in your finest silks

you start by ruining his life
simply because it's the easiest
out of all the options there.

II.

So, you think van Gogh was queer?

[he lays with his head in my lap,
hangs his arms around my neck...]

I think, he says, van Gogh understands what it means
to be queer, regardless.

There's a difference?

Sometimes. Maybe I just want to grant him a shred
of privacy that the modern age would leap at to take away.

That's chivalrous. He's only been dead
a hundred and thirty years, or so.

Or so.

[lilacs, he has lips like lilac petals...]

I mean, I guess I get it— is it
because of all the suffering?

Sometimes—

[unfurling his smile

blossoms—]

Sometimes?

He says, 'I was most of all touched by Giotto
always suffering, always full of benevolence and zeal

as though he were already living in another world.’

He also loved the letters of Botticelli,
Boccaccio, Petrarch and Dante.

Right. And he didn’t need to read those
to learn to paint, either.

Maybe he did, though.

He thinks, ‘Now Petrarch lived very near here at Avignon and I
see the same cypresses and oleanders – I have tried to put
something of that into one of the gardens painted in a thick
impasto of lemon yellow and lime green—’

He paints a poem...

Because he doesn’t see it as incorrect. He reflects the words
back into the image. He opens his mind to all teachers.

There are no rules to his form.

There’s no image touched by human hands
that isn’t a poem, transmogrified...

[He kisses up the sharp
angles of my neck

pulls petals apart: wants, wants, wants...]

There’s no model for longing more than that of
wanting a teacher?

Plato and Socrates, Dante and Virgil,
Bears and Twinks etc., it’s really
coded into that language...

...All of ancient Greece and Rome?

[I brush his hair from his eyes.

Trail my mouth over his forehead, his curls,
his *soft* where I was made of *thorns*...]

Mhm. And for what it’s worth, I’ve always liked the one
about being a proverbial shaggy black dog—

...Of the family?

Of the world! Wandering aimlessly, a little

blue and unlovable, yet filled with desire
to know the marvels of

Nature and Beauty and Truth?

And Love.

It seems he loved his art
more than anything.

That I hardly believe.

Really?

Love isn't a steady partner. Instead, he loves the whole world.
He had an excess of love; he writes to his brother and
like Whitman every man becomes his brother, a comrade of the
homosocial sphere of wanderlust, suffering, and desire...

He's also disabled and mentally ill
and neurodivergent. And dreadfully poor.

[He laughs into the kiss; the vibration ripples
through my skin, into my blood...]

Yes, which can resonate with a queer audience, too.

And an excess of love,
isn't that just an excess of suffering?

[Our bodies fold, fumble,

plummet

in the winds of Spring; *were we happy, then?*]

Sometimes.

Sometimes, it's a miracle.

III.

He has such delicate hair. More luxurious than anything else you've ever been allowed
to hold—the scraps of baroque manuscripts and Japanese silks, all alone behind glass; the
unrepaired paintings and crumbling sculptures and plaster shards, stunning, unable to be
fixed; like all those years of History, who's allowed to reach out and touch? Who's allowed

to destroy in an attempt to restore? How hard do you pull when he says *Harder; fold on
fold, deliciously scattered that fine gold*; the ground is a slow moving

fragment

you

record

his sighs, inside you

burning;

your chest

pressed to his back

rocking your hips

too slowly

too softly

too slowly

rocking that bureau mazarin
clawfoot bathtub, window *shudder*
too slowly
too softly
too slowly

heat and lightning

languid then Wild

make him hard again
and then make him scream

Harder

Harder

Harder

*amidst the ashes we changed this earth
to some celestial isle—*

Skip the train terminal
before the hotel can find a number

to tell you.

Everywhere

the room was set on fire.

IV.

After Amsterdam

we keep in touch
a couple moonlit walking paths here
a few hotel bars there

longer than I expect

but shorter than

I find myself wanting

to know more about that one, he says.

We stop by the department of sculptures

Richelieu

lower ground floor
Cour Puget:

...Exhibited at the 1822 salon...

...Depicts Virgil's tragedy of...

...refugees, something in common...

...Euryalus misses his mother...

...Does he? Where did they record that?
And is that why everyone thinks he's younger?

...We don't know if the sculpture was

queer

we just never thought to...

...Doesn't tragedy make everyone younger?

...please, feel free to contact the archives across the city...

The next statue, over here...

Let him argue with the curators. It's kind of fun, mostly. He's never stuck up about it.

Worse, he's usually right.

Later, in the blue-grey surge of midnight, we watch the waves from
the back of a bistro on a pier

he asks Do you think it's a crime to not call home for years?

I shrug.

I wouldn't know, I breathe into his shoulder.

But you

you could find out.

V.

If you leave your mother
then you go to war for me
If you leave your mother
then you throw over your
sisters mistresses brides

that will twist you into
a lame animal to be shot
and buried

without a grave if you leave your mother
you leave behind
the lashes and the lashes and the lashes
that will never soften

with all your tears; if you leave your mother

then you fight with me
grit your teeth and grunt with me
flirt and punch and fuck with me
wrap me in your tourniquet and puncture me

I do, eventually.
Not well, though.

Again. Long and deep.

His legs and mine, his stomach and my spine,
fold and fold and fold; the colors mix;

Who are you, if not me? I wanted to ask.

And if not you, then who will I become?

All lavender and gray pearls,

Indistinguishable—

Breathe.

I do,

but only because
he wants me

[what is war but a memory,
that refuses to belong to the past?]

That's...a bit better.

The sweat on my forehead
drips into my eyes.

Good.

Good boy.

I reach for his lips as he speaks:

Just, just so you know,
it's been a few months, I haven't—

I'm not your keeper.

..All dead to me. Promise. But how do you—

I was built alone.
Like it that way and you know it, too.

Where will I go?

One day, where everyone I've loved
goes—somewhere else, hopefully
somewhere they belong...

he moves forward
the grind of his hips
the laurels of his fingertips
around my shoulders—

Kiss him anyways, taste how

Push down whatever resurfaces,
the sphere-head of R.E.M.
dripping,
unable to dislodge:

the night, his mouth
the spheres covered in blood

[rows and rows of them,
sharpening, sinking in;

but together, could we really have more than anyone?

Who invented hunger
if not the ravenous?]

And what about you? He asks.

What about me?

Where do you belong?

I press into him. *Harder*, I whisper
until he takes my tears in his closed fists,
all salt and watercolours and fragments, evaporating...

He does not say *I will always be with you.*

I do not say *When I refuse, follow me still,
haunt me, please.*

[Were we Autumn's lost children,
 season's changing
in each other's grasp, all the same
 so that we were
 eternally dying
in the arms of a friend;

were we happy then?]

VII.

This must work in reverse.
 Somehow, I've always believed

Virgil was trying to paint
 a picture

of what it's like to be a refugee
 and accidentally gives us a

a plethora of modern palettes
 to decipher
 our pasts

and lack of them
 ravaged by worlds that force us to choose
run or stay, run or stay
 or run again and again and again?

My brushes are dirty
 the pink berries of
 beggars and sailors
 and runaway-rough hands
crushed
 to stroke

*[sweet man,
so unheard of, it becomes your infamy...]*

that I can only tell them

Tenderness is what we seek—

If there is violence
he never caused it

if there is flames everywhere

he only did the damnable thing

the noble thing

the buried-forgotten thing

the footnote attached to an otherwise

uninteresting epic

at times

such mercurial antiquated creatures

fade from view
(this is true...)

the footprints

lost to ash

(it takes time
it takes time

it takes time)

always remerge

resplendent in their blaze

*now and sometimes
here and forever*

perfectly winged.

VII.

Go to your wars

and I'll go fight mine
alone and captured

in the husk of a pomegranate,
in the heart of a myth

surrounded by

so many strangers

weeping

[reaching...]

after Amsterdam

after France

and Italy too

I'll meet you by the tombs

take off your binder

[reaching...]

and I'll take off mine

show me your scars

and I'll put my lips along

all the bruises

we made

[reaching...]

to be free.

It scared me when it would
happen—

I scared you.

No, I was so scared *for* you
I couldn't reach you

I couldn't know if you were safe or not

I called out for you

so many times

I thought I killed you again.

[reaching...]

You only do that when you leave, he takes my hands. [His touch swims
so I guess you did.

same as always,

lilac and gold,
above me, *Protecting—*]

His touch

months from now

or years...

I'll feel it again
maybe we'll be

running

Darling, maybe you'll be

my tragic letter in the dark
my sacred messenger

torn from demise [reaching...]

[reaching...]

my shield of
clay and ivory

pleading If there is such a thing as history
then *you need to tell ours*

[If there is such a thing as history
it's not something that should be allowed
to eat you up, until you're starving blind...]

the plastered frame
that keeps our heads
from hanging

in a gallery

for the gluttoned world

to gaze upon

your body over mine:

'Torture,' 'Passion,' or 'In-Vain?'

Your body fated

as mine

[reaching...]

connected in the

knot of our hands

your body and my body

forever their question

to contend

amidst the six-thousand soldiers

[reaching...]

torrential javelins and arrows

of scholarly debate

weighing down

the poppy's head

[he picks me up, again and again, and...]

of these nine billowing circles

flames roaring

our lovegrief without end

Were we

were we

were we happy then?