

Torch Song

Orpheus returns from the tunnel
a different man, trampled by
expectations. He turns
at the last moment and sees his love
fall back as one sees a rock dropped
in water glimmer a few moments
then disappear.

* * *

The lavender ladies
are hungry for his songs; he sits
on the debris of his ruined house
and wails the coarsest blues anyone has
ever heard. They scrape wallpaper
off the heart and leave the ladies
exposed in a way they don't
permit. His blues make the
men cry and they don't want to
cry right now. This is not what
they stayed for. This is not why they
still believed. They did not go
sleepless all these nights waiting
for this ambassador of the dead.

* * *

Pelting rocks as percussion, old
school New Orleans. They are making
a masterpiece of him, a gash across
the bicep a chocolate covered
strawberry sliced open. Skin flayed
on the cheek quivering with each
note he sustains. They are screaming
insults at him but his voice rises
above theirs. All their voices
float together in a harmony only
he can hear. He is not afraid. He knows
retribution is part of the music.
And only the music interests
him. He did not see the destruction
of the hurricane or flood but he heard
its music. Only when the levees broke
and the weedy hand reached up pulling

his beloved below did he gasp at
the breach. So he played his one chit
with the masters and got his one chance
to save her. He thought it was death
to turn around but knew
when he resurfaced this was
was the only way to renew his song.
That's why he doesn't flinch
at the punishment. He knows what must
happen next. He closes his eyes and keeps
singing, seeing the world beyond the
one where he is. He knows he will
sing even when they throw his head
into the receding waters.

* * *

They say to him:
I lost my city and this is the song
you give us? I lost my savings in
the suitcase beneath the floorboards.
I lost the only house I knew. The last
time I saw my baby was three weeks
ago heading to the dome. I lay on my
roof while the buzzards circled. Give
us the hope that we desire. We have
nothing. Give me the engagement
ring I left in the soap dish when I ran
upstairs. It was my great aunt's and
she got it from her grandmother. Its
diamond was as bright as a star. We
can all sing the blues. This is nothing
special. We've heard you before turn
the clouds into grapes and the grapes
dangled down where we picked them
and stomped them for wine that we drank
all night around a fire, the juice trickling
like blood out the corners of our mouths.
We're thirsty now. Baby we're so tired don't
you tell us how tired you are.
We climbed over bodies to come to you
and they're still lying on the old stone streets.

* * *

His voice the torch ballad of wind screaming
in from the Gulf. They don't want to hear it
again. They want diversion not a reenactment
of the rain slicing in sideways or the water
rushing down the streets like a marauding army.
In the darkness of the first night the tipped over
canoes and planks looked like alligators on
the surface waiting for a hand to bite. The stink
of the clay was everywhere. They don't want
him to add to it. All through the storm their
weapons were good for nothing. Shot guns
couldn't repel force five winds and axes and machetes
couldn't cut them down. But they work on a man.

* * *

Look at him up there singing as ignorant of us
as the weather.

* * *

Bare head floating like a note in a bottle
black in a silver moon trail in the moonlight,
his neck attached to the water, the whole world
his body. A tide is carrying it out past
the oil platforms still standing like giant
spiders off the coast and tiny men who are
out there under the stars already check the damage
and begin repairs. They have hard hats and
clip boards. It's important to set things right
as soon as possible. His head drifts past toward open
ocean, singing. The men on the platforms,
distracted for a moment, listen, puzzled.
Then he's by them and they head back to work.