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Author(s): Anna Jackson

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## Reading Virgil, the First *Eclogue*, On a Salary

ANNA JACKSON

In exile from my jasmine-covered hut with mildewed carpet on the floor, and exiled from the body that I used to live in, with the treasured scab on my left knee, my honey-flavored finger, and the glassy hairs across my arms, I am a ghost of who I was. I asked my father once, when I had only just grown up, whether he missed the child I was, and he said no he didn't, and I asked if he would choose to be young once again, if that meant never having us, and he said yes he would. And I was even then in exile from my childhood, as I now am exiled from that questing, questioning self I had become, exiled into an adulthood that's pretty much the adulthood I dreamed of then: I sit and type on my white laptop at a small, white, wooden desk, and fill the screen with my increasing lines.

There is an essay by a poet, Joshua Clover, which discusses writing on a salary when he was used to writing piece by piece, and getting paid by word count. Writing on a salary is more like walking through a swish department store, he writes, and all the clouds of perfume in the air dispersed by those nostalgic atomizers settle on you as you pass. There settle on him, everywhere he goes, atoms of salary. They settle if he writes or not, and when he sleeps, and when he peers down on container ships. And equally, as he explains, his sense of discipline is also aerosolized. He feels, he writes, in thrall to "money's dream"—a dream

ARION 24.1 SPRING/SUMMER 2016

of constant productivity—and feels it  
 “more insistently than my own waking life.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s nothing settles on a child. It is  
 no dream of money for a child, just wanting life  
 to be more *real*. It’s all pretend, when you’re  
 a child, the school you run, the pupils that  
 you teach, the lesson plans, the natural history and  
 the penmanship, all as unreal as flying.  
 That was something I half thought I *might*  
 achieve. Instead

I got told off for climbing trees.  
 I could have got quite good at climbing trees,  
 but if I could have looked ahead, I might  
 have practised dancing. By the time  
 it mattered more to dance than fly, the other  
 children somehow had already learned—  
 it was too late for me. How can  
 a child ever catch up and have a childhood  
 when they always, every minute, get pushed  
 onwards, leaving every last minute behind?  
 What moment is it I am exiled *from*, when any  
 moment I might look back at was dying  
 from the start—  
 a goat just newly born abandoned  
 on bare flint, the mother goat  
 by desperate goatherds driven on?

And now, adulthood. I do not believe that it is  
 education leads the child down narrow paths  
 till all the playfulness is left behind, the art,  
 the songs, the skipping rhymes. I look  
 at lambs who leap up onto upturned troughs  
 while sheep around them step from one  
 patch of the field on to the next, or  
 kittens darting at the twitching tail behind  
 an irritated adult cat. When I was twelve,

and hardly any friends still wanted to pretend,  
just when our games were starting  
to get really *good*, I made myself a promise  
not to change. I thought I could walk into  
adulthood and still be who I was,  
just later on in time.

Then love takes over for a while, and what  
was going to be real—the work, the making of a life—  
becomes a curious distraction from  
the sudden vivid passion for one person  
then another. There was the night  
when Lisa dropped me off down by the docks  
where in a warehouse filled with salvaged  
lockers lived a boy  
I had a passion for—she  
waited in the street below, and if  
it turned out I was going to stay, I'd take  
my red dress off, and wave it out  
the bathroom window . . .  
There is no freedom without marriage.

And then you settle, and the salary atoms  
settle on you like a fragrant cloud.  
And always, there is work to do . . .  
I worry, were there times it might have made  
a difference, if I had been more at home?  
There was a time when things all fell apart,  
for me because they fell apart for  
first my son, and then my daughter.  
And there was nothing I could do, but cry  
until the raindrops on the windscreen of my car  
so filled my view at last I turned  
the windscreen wipers on, and drove back home.

About the time I asked my father if he missed the child  
I was, I read a Borges story called “A Secret Miracle,”<sup>2</sup>

about a dramatist sentenced to death  
 before he's had the time to write the play  
 that after all the plays that he has written, will be  
 the one he wants to be remembered for.

And so he prays to God to grant  
 a stay of execution—just the time  
 he needs to write his play—but still the next day  
 dawns, he's led before the firing squad,  
 the bullets fire.

And *this* is when time stops, his time begins, and  
 one year later when he's thought the whole play out,  
 the bullets complete their trajectory.

Each second that we live in always is  
 an instant from its end. But things  
 accrue, a life accrues, and every second  
 I am richer than the one before,  
 my memory containing more and more  
 the longer that I live. Materially, too,  
 I am more prosperous, the  
 mortgage paying off, house prices  
 on the rise, a deck built out the back where  
 we can sit and read, one neighbour's goat  
 arriving for a bite of hedge (she also likes  
 our irises), the other neighbour's  
 cats patrolling that part of our  
 bank they claim as theirs, the tui  
 hanging off our flax singing their songs,  
 the chickens, hearing us outside,  
 emerging from the coop, abandoning  
 their baths.

Sometimes on weekends I sneak into work  
 and knowing that no interruption  
 will confine my thoughts, I write of oceans  
 leaving their fish beached upon my path,<sup>3</sup>  
 or Ovid's Actaeon as a student at the university, <sup>4</sup>

becoming once again a stag in flight,  
a flight that feeds on fear, across  
a road, beyond the park, into  
the night, and the night air . . .

But sooner shall light stags thus feed in air, or  
seas their fish leave naked on the strand  
than I can ever now return  
to my old jasmine-covered hut  
I once crawled into any time I liked—a more  
commodius studio apartment stands  
there now, and with a view not  
over ginger plant grown wild,  
a strangled stream, the willow tree  
I used to climb, but a paved pool  
and landscaped grounds.

The guinea-pigs are long since gone  
of course, my hen who followed me about  
and who I loved so much, and all  
the cats, departed, one by one,  
and with them, though  
I'm living still, the child I was.

Yet here, this evening, those days live in me  
and much of what I loved then I love now.  
An apple tastes as good to me  
as it did then, I've chestnut-flavoured  
yoghurt in the fridge, and at the bottom  
of the garden, on the perches in their coop, are my  
five hens, and to the hen beside her  
each hen murmurs as they roost, as from the hills  
the lengthening shadows fall.

NOTES

1. Joshua Clover, "Unfree Verse," *Poetry Foundation*, April 15, 2016.
2. Jorge Luis Borges, "A Secret Miracle," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. (New York 1964).
3. Anna Jackson, "The fish and I," in *Thicket* (Auckland 2011).
4. Anna Jackson, "Out of bounds," c. 1996. "He stared back down at her in horror. He couldn't move, her eyes impaled him. Then as he stood there, he felt her gaze slowly pull at him. Out of his forehead he felt her gaze wrench bone, she pulled it out of him like a bird pulling a worm out of the ground, it pulled, pulled from him, and burst into branches of horn. Then she pulled at his neck with her gaze and stretched it up from his shoulders, she pointed his ears, lengthened his arms into thin legs, turned his hands into hooves, and all his body grew covered over with short, spotted fur" etc. The story does sort of end with him flying. Unpublished, but temporarily available as a footnote for this poem:

<https://footnoteforvirgilpoem.wordpress.com/>