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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

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

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,”²

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,³
 or Ovid's Actaeon as a student at the university, ⁴

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/>