

The Labyrinth

By Thomas Dylan Cohen

*I look through jaundiced eye and speak through coffee-stained teeth, no wonder
loneliness breeds a lugubrious race of wanderers and ponderers.
O! God of peregrinators of both land and mind! Cherubs of island gardens and
subterranean tunnels, help me, do not betray my story.*

It was a frigid January, my first, and every person carried the thermometer upon their coats, blindly walking, the street before them weaving a snowdrop glazed path home. My girl walked with me, arm in arm, legs marching two by two and we braved the day's frost. The oriental winter we were guests to starved us of sun, so we trudged onwards, depending on the other for warmth. Dodging somnambulists, addicts and wildly urban animals.

When I was young, my father left my mother and I. He was a wanderer too, and perhaps too much for any one woman. My mother didn't miss him and raised me alone. However, his absence was a boulder upon my youth. He knew that wanderlust is inherited and left me to lift this boulder too. I would have been a hero of my generation, if I had not fallen off this same cliff. Fate's travels lead me to the east. To an island in the middle of the world; at the center of nothing.

In my travels I had met a beautiful girl, utterly pure. There is no way to begin except in admiration. Sculpted and soft, lovely and watery. Her eyes were large enough to cause a strange multitudinous effect; seeing everything. Her narrow lips fluttered and fell like hollow-boned birds. She often laughed but without sound.

She was a seamstress, living with her extended family in one of those great patriarchal homes of the old east. Together we searched for chaos in a methodological and marble city. This proved difficult and fatiguing for the wind turned us around and around. Dizzying heights and canyons of sidewalks and curbs. She reeked of ennui, wealth, and holiness. My swiveling head fastened to her on streets of heels and black lace.

After another failed attempt to find fame, we went outside and faced another chap-lipped afternoon. Our leather boots pointed toward the yawning and hungry subway entrance. The cavernous subway in this great capital vibrates an arrhythmic heart beat; a labyrinth confusing even the light of day.

Well-lit, miles below glass and steel towers, it hums continuously with halogen tints and the millions who ride pale faced and frozen. The lights illuminate but do not warm. The ceiling low and metallic. This particular ride was characteristic in its lack of space and persecution of the senses. A wanderer's love of air and room is unrequited in

the Orient. My girl and I held each other closely and leaned against the glass door, making room each stop for more people entering than exiting. I played with a cobalt thread unweaving itself from her coat. The string a mysterious comfort and guide in this subterranean alien environment.

We decided to share music, using a head-phone splitter, uncoiling the cable carefully to not tangle or damage it. The thin white tether of our headphones uniting us in the bluish and antiseptic light. Keeping us sane in the tunnels. Our trip across the city was long and seemingly circular. The Green Line runs a ring around the city, orbiting various major organs and connecting the other arteries and veins down town. We travelled clockwise and southbound. Station after station falling into a catenary arc, effortlessly strung together like a sentence by Joyce.

A young girl next to us with amaranthine lips and short hair listened to her own music, playing absently with the chord and gazing out the window into the near emptiness. Metro riders are partial to whatever privacy their phones can provide and usually avoid all contact with anyone. The boys and girls of the underground wear the same clothes in an infamous androgyny. However, this effeminate girl noticed us and smiled shyly.

A few minutes later, this young nymphette dropped her phone, which clattered apart on the tile floor. Battery and screen separated in a crash muffled by the electric hum of the train. My girlfriend stooped to help retrieve the daidala's pieces. The purple smile reappeared on her lips. The nymphette's whole countenance glowed in contrast to her silky dark hair which webbed lazily across her forehead. A subtle energy of adolescence radiated and warmed us as if we had drunk good wine.

Brightened by this encounter, we felt cheered and brave in the cold bright lights. The last sunlight slipped behind the horizon; the train bolted over a river, southward. The mute, starless night sky flecked with a glimmer of Mars rising in the East.

When the train departs a station it leaves its sky tracks and slips again into the earthen darkness. The concrete lined tunnels arching back and forth under the frozen ground as people aboard the train avoid eye contact with foreigners. Which is why I was startled when two jet coals struck with force. Only a moment of contact before it was broken by the crowd balancing in the twisting train. Turning, I felt nauseous and strange. A peculiar double taste arose in my mouth. The icy itch of adrenaline and metal.

Facing my girl, I was unsure which face to show. It seemed hours since we had breathed fresh air and the train was rank with cigarettes and salt. I swallowed back my lunch and shut my eyes tight. She noticed the change in my health, and concern filled her face. -What? she mouthed to me. I didn't know, and still don't, but even writing this story, I see the frosted coals that pave the lowest layer of the Inferno. They follow where ever I look: like the phosphenes and phantom colors that come from rubbing tired eyes.

I whispered to my girlfriend that I needed some air. Then asked her if she saw anything peculiar at the other end of the train. She rocked forward onto her toes; stretching to see above the crowd before replying that there was nothing strange about an electric train ride through a labyrinth.

Curious, I looked again and saw a man with immense shoulders rippling under a diaphanous shirt. A two-pronged mohawk reached for the bright fluorescent above, his black leather coat absorbing and destroying its bluish light. He looked into my skull. His gel hardened hair bound up with the very night itself.

The train car sucked warmth through my wool coat as stalagmitic icicles grew between the columns of my vertebra. Shivering under layers of wool and fear.

I must have looked sour and sick because my girl slid her arm around my waist and drew close. -What is wrong? My mistress and guide in the Labyrinth asked. I turned and said nothing, my soul frozen and immobile.

Being held by love and warmth, I soon returned to myself, and realized how silly I must have looked. With each successive exit, the car opened and deepened in volume and temperature. Standing together I still felt chilled and alienated, wanting to forget the creature's stare. My closed eyelids carved with this brutish countenance.

Unexpectedly, the young girl who had dropped her phone miles before held out her two hands and offered small colorful lollipops. The best kind with bubble gum encased in the center.

She smiled kind and with love. Her white headphones danced around her threaded scarf as her eyes smiled unabashedly. It was wholesome and reached from her lips to ours, gentle and glowing. We took this touching offering. My girlfriend unwrapped hers immediately, her already sweet mouth further sweetened by sugar. We grinned and blushed in thanks. Youth's dimples overflowing with altruism and innocence.

The train slowed for our stop. Without a word we departed, glad to be free of paralysis and now drunk on our autonomy. Love rekindled in its entirety by body heat, oxygen, and lollipops. Ataraxia.

Though long ago, and the memory already fades like newspaper in the sun, certain sensual details of those encounters permeate and float to the top of my bubbling consciousness: earthen warm clothes, hastened cold breath, and the taste of my then love's lips and tongue after eating a lollipop all resist being forgotten. But many more have disappeared, more all the time. The warm seamstress, too, gone from my life. I last saw her sleeping on a beach, my wanderlust carrying me away, to, and from other desires. Doing to her what my father had done to me.

However, unsure of who or what I encountered that night, in passing or in eternity, has kept me awake. The jet eyes still trace my steps between street lights on boulevards empty and crooked. With luck, I won't meet them again. Probably, it was nothing but my own foreignness betraying us to unkind stares and random acts of hospitality. But flickering, always flickering, behind my green eyes and between the rational thoughts which allow us to live everyday, burns the blue-black flame of belief and ignorance, marking the disputed border of myth and reality.