

Idylls

by George Popovic

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2025

The Idylls is about ghosts.

The form owes itself to Theocritus, who pioneered the literary genre in 3rd-century BCE Sicily. His idylls were fragments of agrarian life—goatherds, rival singers, the rough textures and small dramas of the countryside. Quiet, earthy, often mournful.

To him I owe the form. And only spiritually, the content. Most of these are reimaginings – adaptations in a different key. Where he had the pastoral, I have the post-modern. His hills are my boroughs.

We differ geographically. These idylls are about New York City.

They're about some of my friends. Or versions of them. Or strangers I've invented as I walk past them on the street, or long to know them. They're attempts to grasp at a version of the city I always dreamed of but never quite found – a city humming with memory and meaning, late-night heartbreaks and overheard monologues, half-finished songs and subway revelations.

A city full of ghosts, and the people who try to love them.

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Idyll I

"Funny seeing you here"
Ted lumbers over the terraced steps
Stops and drops onto one knee
Undoing the clasps of his guitar case,
"Ah, look, the man with the blue guitar,"
Says the busker,
"Play us a tune beyond ourselves',
I'm done for the day,
And it's not my usual spot anyway."
Shutting the saxophone case with a stomp.

Ted sits down on the worn park bench
The August afternoon fading into Autumn evening
"What do you want to hear?"
The busker –
"Whatever happened to Danny?
Haven't seen him around
The last few weeks.
His spot over there,
By the obelisk,
You know –"
"Yeah,"
Ted sucked his teeth,
"He, uhh,"
His capo in his left hand

He caps the neck on the fifth fret

"He overdosed."

A bird chirps on a branch overhead

"Huh. Jesus."

The busker straightens up

Sobered up by the news

"Huh."

A narrowed look

A little more somber, this time

"He was young."

"Yep."

A couple of joggers pass by

Skimming the tension off the conversation

The clock on the skyline of 14th street

A digital plexus, ticks away

Somewhere down Broadway the sun is sinking

"Sing something for him, then,"

Ted wipes his brow with the back of his hand

Loosens up

Begins to strum

Something hollow

Something hallow

A melody somewhere distant

Like a face or name you see in passing

Tapping his foot

Keeping time

Humming beneath his breath

"There was this one song

Danny was working on

Back in May

'I'll be done by the end of the summer,'

He said

You remember that riff?"

The busker's eyes draw the vacant space by the obelisk,

"D minor..

B flat..

F-

something like that,"

"He said he'd put lyrics to it

It had that – that –"

He picks the strings with his right hand

As his left slides up and down the neck

"Yeah, it did,"

"And it was about that girl,

Brunette, 5'2",

Cooper Union MFA –

He'd watch her walk down Broadway,

Day in, day out

Back up, take the L to Brooklyn –

what was her name?"

The busker squints, imagining her silhouette

In the distance,

"Faye?"

Idyll II

Faye pinches the phone between her ear
And the crook of her neck,
"Did I tell you I tried to hire an Etsy witch?"
An uncomfortable laugh on the other line,
"Like, a witch off of Etsy?"
– "Ya."
A little incredulous, with a hint of gravity –
"Huh."
A drawn out inhale –
"Did it work?"
– "You know, I saw the price,
And I thought:
'Fuck it, we'll do it live.'"

*

Faye scrolls down the page,
A heading
"Binding Spell to Get Back Your Ex"
On Pinterest
The text
Advises working within the planetary hours
When the moon waxes
When it is full
Venus well-aspected
Pluto in transit

"On a piece of paper
Write a letter
Address it to yourself
Put on the voice of
The one who left
Say all of the things they would say
Were they in the room with you
Say they're sorry, say they're sad
Say the words that bind them to you."

Faye digs through her backpack for a Muji pen
And an unchristened moleskine.
She musters most of her concentration
On the page (not very much)
In her mind's eye, Aidan, there
In front of her
Standing
His arms hang limp at his sides
In his clueless way of carrying himself
"Hey, Faye.
I'm really sorry."
Aidan (a Sagittarius, Faye, a Pisces)
Even in her mind
Was never very eloquent –
"I didn't mean to hurt you when I said, like,
You should move to Brooklyn

Get a better job
Stop being so stuck on your family
Like, I really need someone who's mature
Like, career-oriented (he has a finance job),
Wears more make-up
Like, you really let yourself go
But I love you
And I want to come back
And make this work."

She gets up, letter in hand, bisects the room and
Sitting across from the shell of herself she reads
A deluded, hopeless confession aloud
In an alto, slightly caricatured
San Diego vocal fry –
"Hey, Faye,
I'm really sorry,
I didn't mean to hurt you..."
It is, suddenly, all too human
And like that Faye begins to sob
Robbed of her years, dazed,
Wounded,
Sifting simultaneously through the words
Looking for something to make worthwhile
The tit-for-tat months-long death knell
She never knew was unfolding
And every other sentence she chokes up on

The geometry of his face
The melody of his voice
And at once she is a beam of light shining through
The surface of
A pail of water shaken through
Splashing this way, that way
Pale in the face of
His glowing apparition
She overflows

And all at once
She is composed
Stuffs herself back in at the seams
Douses the letter with
The cologne he bought before he left
She gets up, goes over to the kitchen window where the fire escape is
Climbs out and sits atop the rusting skyline
Of the November evening
Sparks a lighter
Lights the corner of the letter
Aflame in the electric-glow evening of BedStuy
Watching in a remorseful panic
As it burns all the way down
A molten blossom
To the sidewalk below

There is a long pause on the phone –

"Faye? Did it work?"

A blue note

– "Not exactly."

Idyll III

The phone rings out
As he walks along the Brooklyn Bridge
Below the East River shimmers
And kicks up petulant waves beneath
The lone light of the moon above
A beep
"Hey, Amara!
I was just calling to, uhh..."
He tugs the collar of his coat up
Looks down at the water
Shoves his hands deeper into
His pockets as if
To fish out –
"Call me back!"

*

He walks along MacDougal Street
Leaving behind the long-stretched shadow
Of the arch in Washington Square
That supports the weight of the sky
The heat breaks as the sun
Abandons its aestival course
He dials her number
It rings

And rings

And rings

And

A beep –

"Amara, hey...

Listen.

Can we talk?

I haven't heard from you in weeks

And I keep

Thinking like we didn't really get

The chance

To talk about us..."

He pauses

"All you had to do was say the word

If you'd said

Something

At least

Then I'd understand

Like all you had to say

That night in Washington Square was

'Hey,

I'm not in a place

Where I can give you what you want

Or really what you need

I like you

I like this

But it's becoming too much for me

Right now
And I'm not
Saying 'Never'
Just 'Not now'
'Not like this'
Okay?'
And it'd be okay
And I'd be okay..."

He passes Cafe Reggio and sees
The silhouette of himself and her
The auburn of her hair
In a bun as she talks about her time
Translating Ming Dynasty poetry
For her MA at Bard

"And I wouldn't be thinking
'I moved to FiDi to look at fucking
Spreadsheets bursting with
Fund umbrellas
Shareclasses
Because a girl I met upstate
Lured me down here
Into the central circle of
White-collar Hell
And then
Ghosted me"

And she leans in and asks
"Are you still reading that
Anne Carson book I got you?
'Autobiography of Red'?
Or do you not like women
Who don't think you're smart
And interesting?"

*

On the corner of Metropolitan
He sits on a ledge in the back patio of
A pool-supply store turned haven to
Indie musicians who never made it
Finance-bros who've become sentient
The odd art student who got lost
On their way back to the East Village

The crowd surges at 2 AM on a Saturday
He surveys the room
And after the fourth or fifth drink
Amara walks in
They lock eyes in the tumult
And he is seen right through
He doesn't call out
Doesn't say 'Hello'

But smiles a sheepish half-small

And looks away

Outside

As he stumbles away from the bar

He dials a number

It rings

And rings –

"Hey," he says.

"Hey?"

Says a voice

"What's up?"

Half-asleep on the other end

"You good?"

"Yeah," he says,

"You were right, Rowan."

Rowan scoffs

"You gave it your best shot

But it's time to let go –

You owe yourself as much"

Idyll IV

"It always begins
And ends
With long walks
The kind where you walk
The length of Central Park
Or Riverside Drive,"
Says Danny

"That's right", says Ted
His guitar case rocks to and fro
On his back with every step
"Is this it?"

"I... think... so..."
Danny, checking his phone
Squinting into the whitewash blindness
His pupils the heads of pins

They ascend the steps to the manor house
Rick greets them at the door
He is dressed in a white button down
The felt on the lapel of his suit jacket indicates
That Ted and Danny are
Wildly underdressed
In their black turtlenecks

"Hey, good to see you, man,
Hey, nice to meet you,
Come in – there's wine in the back"
Past the cocktail dresses
Charcoal suits with no ties
They shuffle disoriented
Surrounded by international heirlooms
"That's a Vermeer,"
Someone whispers loudly over a pinot noir
They smear the marble floors of the kitchen
With the cuffs of their grass-bled khakis

"Red or white?" Asks the waiter
"Wh-red..." fumbles Danny
Ted asks if the vintage is from southern France
"It's from Northern Spain"
"Oh"
They both begin drinking for effect
"Thank you all for coming"

Rick who can cast a spell on a room
Herds the cats in their midtown suits to their seats
"Tonight I have here Anna
She curates
The Medici stringed instrument collection
Currently on display
At the Met
On loan

From the Uffizi Gallery

In Florence"

Anna discourses on

The evolution of stringed instruments

From the middle ages through

The Italian Renaissance

"Is that a lute?" whispers Danny

Following the discourse Rick

Sits at a baby Grand

In the center of the room

Around which are seated

Students from Juilliard

Lawyers

Doctors

This AI researcher at

[Big Name Tech Company]

This guy who is a portfolio manager at

[Big Name Investment Firm]

The several Tinder dates he's been on

That he's been trying to keep apart

All night

That guy or this girl whom you recognize

But are loathe to say the wrong name

So you linger on questions and wait

For them to be addressed

By someone else

"Get this," Danny says in Ted's ear

Danny was once blinded by Rick
In a TriBeca loft
When he lay waste
To the room
With his performance of Mad Rush
The long soporific repetition punctuated
By bursts of airy assonance circles
Back to delay and relay swirls
Haste with tedium
Breathless
In the light of the evening sun

And now Rick
No longer blinds
but curates
Adjusts the light
His performance is the room itself
As he weaves through

Venetian Boat Song

Op. 19, No. 6

You see yourself looking through
A slit
In the wall of
The Bridge of Sighs
At the waterfront of
The Palazzo Ducale

He plays the guests
Like oscillating arpeggios

Ted watches from the periphery
Still rocking slightly
His guitar case creaking
Like a guilty conscience

Danny has stopped checking his phone
The battery died hours ago
So did his hope of
whatever he was hoping for

In the aftermath of the performance
The guests linger on the walls
Like salamanders

"What do you do?"
"Oh how do you know Rick?"
"Do you play anything?"
Ted begins to introduce himself as Rick

The juxtaposition of
The broke Juilliard student
And the CEO of a well-known fitness company
Class disparity in minuscule
Is overturned
By her relative finesse on the piano

Chiaroscuro is obscured
By a common bond
Of quiet devotion

Restless internal
To Euterpe
The Juilliard girl—
Yes, she plays the closing piece
A short, clipped étude
By a forgotten student of Scarlatti
Which somehow says more
Than the long lecture
Or the wine
Or the Vermeer looking down at you
Or Rick himself

A pause
As she lays flat
The final keys

Then scattered clapping
Like a breeze that scatters
Dying leaves
And then erupts
Into a whirlwind

"Did you see her hands?"
Danny says, finally
"Like spiders. Or angels."

*

It is long after the performance
Everyone's collars are unbuttoned
Ties undone
Sleeves rolled up
Empty wine bottles scattered
Atop the kitchen counters
Danny is performing smalltalk
With a waifish cocktail dress
Mentioning "scordatura"
As if he knows what that means
As Ted
Stares at the shrubs in the garden
Through puffs of cigarette smoke

There is a knock on the door
"Rick? Where's Rick?"
Demands a voice

It is suddenly pandemonium
As a band of ten or fifteen storm the house
Led by Alex
With violets in her hair
"Rick get the fuck out here!"
They crowd about the drawing room
And the scene collapses in on itself
As they laugh and cajole about the tables

And the late hours are consumed
By foment and argument
And sudden riffing off
Each others lines or notes
As they play and sing and yell

Someone spills wine on the Vermeer
(Which is fine
It wasn't real anyway)

Alex kicks off her shoes
And lobs Ted's guitar
Into someone's lap

"Play something real," she says
"None of this 'classical' shit."
She kisses one of Rick's exes
Someone cheers
Rick appears, finally
The spell broken
Shirt half-unbuttoned
Barefoot like a penitent
The Juilliard girl is on the floor now
Playing something feral on the violin
Her bow splitting in the fray

Someone knocks over a table

Shatters a vase

Rick is unfazed

All the tidy distinctions—

Artist and patron

Host and guest

Performer and observer—

Collapse in crescendo

And for a moment

The night is tuned

In perfect scordatura

*

Back on Riverside Drive

The sky is a lavender blended

With streaks of gold

The air is crisp as it folds

The grass in sheets

They walk

Along the Hudson

Watch the water run downstream

Past the morning dog walkers

"It always begins

And ends

With long walks..."

Says Danny

Idyll VI

*"Your eyes are as
The brackish waters
Of Cefalu
Beneath your gaze
Green fear seizes me"*

She reads
Almost turns green herself
Not with fear but from
The second-hand embarrassment of
The naive audacity inhabiting
Her hopeless amator –
Amateur poet that he is:

*"Yours, yours, yours,
Polyphemus"*

"Cefalu," she scoffs
They went to Rockaway once –
He got sunburned on the boardwalk
And whined the whole way back

Her cursor lingers on the screen
She clicks below the body and writes:

"You loved a girl who never existed.
Sometimes I miss her."

The cursor blinks
She lingers there, for a second,
Trying to recall a line he wrote once
Then spills out

"Your prettiest remorse,
Galatea"

She hits 'Send'
Imagining him
White-collared
Maybe shirtless
Untrimmed in grey
Sweltering in an aging co-op
Romanticising Werther
Retaliating Theocritus
At thirty-seven

Outside her window the N train
Rumbles into the station

There was a time when she lived
On 48th and Broadway
A few blocks away from Schoenfeld theatre

Wishful thinking in hindsight
She got her break
On an off-Broadway production of
The Last Five Years
(Not that it ever belonged on-Broadway)
Cathy, of course
Of course, Cathy
Manic hope in a whiny vessel Cathy
Spiral-bound backwards as she sings
The audience falls in love with
An image of her
A story that only makes sense in hindsight

It's a sad song
But we still sing it;
The best stories are not always
Those that end happily

It happened that
Outside there was a man with flowers
And a box of letters addressed to her

They gather dust in the supply closet of
Her one-bed in Astoria

Over the water by the park hangs
The Hell's Gate bridge

In summer sometimes she lounges there
In a pink floral dress
And takes her students out to sing
On the green grass seas of the evening

Idyll VII

I think I might die
Ascending the orange stairwell
A pigeon flies into me
"Jesus fucking Christ!"
On the side of the overpass
Down the flow of traffic
It's just warehouses out here
With some residential buildings
A pizzeria
A deli
Not a soul in sight save
The Greenpointers
Spilling out of their Ubers
A rusted door swings open
This must be it

This warehouse is a Silenus statue
The outside is industrial decay
On the inside there is the alternate reality of
The edge-case
East village
Not-Dimes-Square
Greenpoint
Fantasy for which I had longed
A band on the first floor

Hypnotic handrums
Stirrs something ancient in my blood
Smooth jazz on the second
The walls of the adjoining rooms are splattered
With paintings and photographs for sale

Margot finds me in the midst of the din
Out of place, my hands in my pockets as I sip
Water from a paper cup
We lock eyes
"Hey! It's been a while!"
I am suddenly at ease
We catch up
It *has* been a while

We talk around subjects
Epitomize the last several months
I defrost under the red-light lamplight
I ask to see her work, she ushers me into
The adjoining room, into the far right corner
Where four framed photographs are stacked
"It's titanium palladium."
"What's that?"

I watch her greet and be greeted by
Names and faces
It is nice

They are nice

This poet, that photographer

Something about the Vietnam War

I feel like an anthropologist

I am self-conscious

But happy to lurk in her orbit

An unassuming awkward

I am a cardboard silhouette of myself

Shake hands

Smile

Exchange pleasantries

Like tokens or

Micro-transactions

When Nick is there

I sneak a polaroid of them

I keep it in my coat pocket

Watching them is like seeing a negative

They wear matching beanies

"I feel like I can't really be honest about how I feel at these things."

We trade existential ennui

Like men in their thirties

"Which one do you like?"

A girl looks down a concrete staircase

A white dress, navy bow around her waist

Her feet feel tacked on
Two-dimensional
Stuck on at wrong angles

A blonde in her twenties is gorging herself

In a Chinatown loft

Photo-realistic

About to burst into tears or puke

I am embarrassed in the third person

It is spaghetti (he is the spaghetti guy)

But I am ashamed of being in a body

A woman poses half-naked in a white button down

She strikes something seductive on the bed of

A Marriott or generic middle class hotel chain

There are several schizophrenic

Talentless pieces which

I am too bored to describe

"Chaos is the hypokeimenon of existence!"

I crack

In my Jordan Peterson voice

As we three lounge on a couch in the corner

And peoplewatch for a while

The second floor is a different kind of same

"The vibe is totally different up here."

Someone's beat up Fender warps
As a saxophone croons
And the evanescent patrons mill about
"This is my wife's first show."
"Are you an artist?"
"I work in sales
But I dabble in watercolour."
He offers me a hit from his wax pen
I regret not taking him up on it

After some time we
Walk to the G
On Greenpoint Ave
"I think I'll shuffle on a while"
We exchange our goodbyes
I watch them descend the steps to the G
Back towards civilization
In the East Village
Waiting street-level for the fading rumble
And I then stumble on
Along Greenpoint Ave
Greenpoint is a Silenus statue

Idyll X

8:15 at the WeWork on Varick Street

Milo taps away at his Macbook

Dark mode

Neon lines

Arcane characters

Fill the screen

His headphones clamped around his ears

They block out the world out while he

Churns through his

Spotify playlist

A clap on the shoulder –

Alex.

"Alex, man!"

Milo tugs the headphones off and

Lets them hang around his neck

"Jeez. You look wrecked."

Alex pulls up a chair next to Milo

At the dinner table turned hotdesk

White collar purgatory

They are the only ones in the railroad style

Workspace

The early morning light floods through

The wall to ceiling windows

Alex lifts his laptop out of his (Nomatic) backpack
Then lets out a sigh beneath his ribs

"Yeah, I was up pretty late.
I need to get a grip.
Weekend was shot.
Client demo's at noon.
And I have like ten Pull Requests
I have to review
Merge
Maybe rewrite
Because there's no time for pushback
And no one seems to get that
We should have these things called
'standards'"

Milo baits him
"Just don't write bugs, man,
No unit tests
No documentation
No containerization
(Docker scares the shit out of me)
Hell, all of my code is self-documenting
Open to interpretation
Closed for modification
Close to improvisation
At least we have a staging site

Not that we need it"

Alex takes it

"You're the reason why we have standards

Someone's going to hate you in five years

Some junior dev

Fresh out of college

When we've had our IPO

Or been acquired by some bigger fish"

Milo snorts

"Then it's Tinder for dog owners"

Turns back to his screen

"Dana okay?"

"She left."

"Shit, what?"

Alex has stopped typing

It is a trickle

He clicks mindlessly through the

Red and green minefield

Of forking paths

"Uhh, yeah,

She left a note

Said it didn't work
Couldn't work
Wanted more
Or something else--
It's not the first time"

"And if it's the last?"

"She wanted Tuscany
Not Williamsburg
Said I'm always here
Never *here*"

"Not Brooklyn Heights?"

"That's not the point--
It's all WiFi in a shoebox."

"Well, look,
You never were very good at your job
Engineer
Boyfriend..."

"But the code won't ship itself
So maybe we should build something else
Two devs and dream, right?"

"Yeah.

And then we sell for forty mill."

Idyll XI

There is no cure for love, Iakobus--
No pill nor potion nor oil nor salve,
Save the Muses,
But a sweet and gentle cure it is,
Albeit hard for mortal men to find,
As you know well, I trow, being a physician,
Knowing what it is that they know,
And you being as dear to them as I myself,
Twas this much my countryman the Cyclops
Polyphemus gleaned,
When he was in love with the nymph Galatea,
Being about the age you are now;
His love was no matter of poems, or gifts,
Or apples,
But an unbridled frenzy--
He thought little of anything else,
And time and time again would cast his longing
Into the sea,
Neglecting his work at the MTA,
Which long would sit piled on his desk,
Amidst gripe and jeer and jest,
He languished under an irate, bureaucratic glare,
As long as the slender barb of the Cyprian
Stood fixed in his breast,
Though he found a cure eventually,
And so stood on the on the shore of Battery Park,
Where the 5 train rests at the edge of the world,

And there alone at the rails above the waters,
Sang of her some such thing as this:

"O Galatea,
Girl with springtime eyes,
As fair as shore to storm-tossed sailors is,
And cool water in August's heat,
You, a shining star of this island,
There will never be another
maid such as you.

What is it that keeps you from me?
Whither do you go when the sun sets?
What drives you forth from my bed?
I sleep alone in a studio enough for two,
Off of Broadway and 12th St.,
When the Pleiades have set, and you
Nowhere to be seen.

I have loved you, girl, since that first day
We met for coffee uptown
at a hole in the wall diner,
And since that day have never ceased to love—
O Zeus, what does it matter?
I know why it is you flee.

I've got a long shag brow stretched from ear to ear,
And one large eye that sits beneath,
And a broad nose for good measure,
Upon my lip,
A limp,
A wretch,
But just as I am I make a good salary,
With benefits to boot,

And have a respectable living,
Serving the citizens of this city.
Wealth isn't more, but less, more or less,
And with what I earn, I make do,
And of all my needs, natural and necessary,
Though there are so few,
What needs have I, really?
What need have I--save you?
My garden yields a feast,
Of table greens and nightshades and legumes,
My pantry ever overflows,
My almond milk I make myself,
My labor feeds me through winter,
And I've got a few grand saved up,
For any expense ahead--
And I play the lyre like none of the other Cyclopes,
And oftentimes at night I sing of you,
Sweet apple, and myself,
But if my singing won't do,
I'll get us a couple of mezzanine seats,
For a Broadway musical,
Any you wish will do--
One about New York, I hear, is playing,
And isn't that fitting?

But come away to me and you'll have no less,
Just come and see what this island can offer--
Sleeping beneath the starless sky,
In a room with peeling wallpaper,
Where the rent is high,
The expectations higher,

But so will be your fame,
Prithee, girl, come hither,
Leave that swamp behind.
If only some stranger would sail here
On some black ship,
With white-splashing oars,
And teach me how to swim,
I'd swim to you, then, from here
Around Brooklyn's bend, Bay Ridge,
Past Canarsie, and straight to that
Provincial town of yours
On stilts over the water.
It would be faster than the A train, anyway,
And who takes the Qm15, anyhow?

Ah, κυκλωψ κυκλωψ ποι πεπετασαι τας φρένας?
Ah, only myself to blame,
I, here, a noone on land,
What purpose have I but sunrise and sunset?
No art, no craft,
Clock in, clock out;
I wander this city in a daze,
Like a wounded deer on slender tracks--
I get no rest,
Vexed coming, vexed going,
The subway rattles along still
On rusty tracks,
There is no joy in my life,
No pleasure in sight or sound,
And everything a shade of grey,

To this monoptic view.
If only I were a skilled physician,
I would treat this raging fever,
Or a sorcerer,
I would burn some sage,
And cast some such spell,
'Wryneck, wryneck, draw her hither,'
But what am I
But a bucolic bore with a desk-job
And a Muse?
Cyclops, listen here, Cyclops,
Can't you see you're daft?
Don't you know you've got the girl?
And don't stand in need of the draft,
Of a fine tail-wind to send you adrift,
Or the hull of a black ship, stranger-sent,
To carry you to her,
There are much stranger things
To have happened in this city,
Than to have loved and to have got,
So waste not a second at the seashore,
Take a bus or train, ferry even,
Walk if need be,
Your love can carry you anywhere,
Or heaven forbid you drive,
Contrive something, anything,
It doesn't matter what,
You've got your lot, Cyclops."

So it was that Polyphemus consoled his love-sickness,
In the end,
By realizing he had the very thing
He thought he lacked,
And in truth, he fared better than if he had paid
A co-pay to some such as yourself,
Iakobus.

Idyll XII

Subway Stromata

[0:00]

"Stand clear of the closing doors, please."

[0:16]

(A man gets on at Fulton st. on the uptown A train)

"This ain't no downtown train

This is an uptown train

We're going uptown

Uptown A-train y'all!"

(A woman gets on at 14th st.)

"Sup?

Uptown train."

[0:33]

(Guy gets on with a Bluetooth speaker blaring)

"Alright everybody you know

What time it is"

*

(Turns it off)

*

"Yo do you know how pissed I would be

If someone got on and starting dancing

Around the fucking subway car"

[0:45]

"If the train's delayed,
That's just the universe
Telling you to chill."

[0:53]

"Ladies and gentlemen,
I'm not here to bother you.
I'm just a man with socks.
Clean socks.
3 for \$5.
More cushion than your last relationship."

[1:35]

"Support local entrepreneurship.
That's me.
I'm the local."

[2:12]

"Y'all women out here
Manifesting a man
Like y'all ordering off Seamless."

[2:30]

“The government don’t care about you. But I do.

Here’s a mixtape.”

[3:00]

“You ain’t mad at me,

You mad at your childhood.

Don’t project that on the F train.”

[3:43]

(Woman talking on phone)

“I’m at 125th

I don’t care what time it is

f you say come over

I’m on the train.”

[4:00]

“Only real New Yorkers

Puke in yellow cabs”

[4:31]

“Stand clear of the closing doors, please.”

Idyll XIII

It looked like a desolate parking lot
Save the thin tin-roof shack at street-level
"Play it cool,
My friend's DJ-ing."
The bouncers dig in their usual way
'Who-are-you-here-to-see',
'Have-you-ever-been-here-before',
Adonis is squeamish when sober
But after a few drinks he forgets
That he is awkward and timid

He had only just met Hercules
When Hercules and his friends picked him up
At a bar in Bushwick
And what did it matter?

Reagan was busy
Collaborating with a Pratt professor
On some personal project
That didn't require her to answer
Adonis' texts
And he was out
On his own

One drink became two became four

An indefinite dyad

Logarithmic in consumption

"We're going to Basement if you want to come"

Half an invitation was all Adonis needed

They were older

Ten years his senior at least

But he'd always wanted to go

And he had nowhere to be

There was nowhere to be

He was never allowed in his father's bedroom;

In his father's bedroom there was an altar

To Elegua

His father was the kind of man

Who wore only white

Did not drink

Only during cleansing rituals

Would he smoke a dark cigar

They wait in line for half an hour

Walk across a silent courtyard

The bunker door swings open

And it is suddenly all

Smoke

Red light

A pulse
That comes from

Nowhere but circulates about the room
Packed to the brim with sweating bodies
Even in January the atmosphere is oppressive
Hercules takes his hand
And
Along with the rest of the band
They weave through the crush
A throughline through the waves
Of leather straps
Tanktops
Bare skin
Too hot down there for clothes

The club is an EDM catacomb
"You really have to let yourself feel it"
Hercules shouts muffled in his ear
Waving his arms and twisting his torso
Adonis scans the room

The closest you could come to
Berghain on the East coast

The center is a vortex of limbs
Into which Adonis is led by the hand

Stumbling
Somewhat hazy
Like a deer startled on a mountain track
Unaware of its own footing
As the ground gives way
Underneath
But Hercules leads him firm

The adjacent room is the "Play Room"
It smells of fear and longing
Proteins coagulating
And someone in need of a shower
Or a confessional

But Adonis is too bashful
He shoots a sidelong glance to see
If he might catch a glimpse
But
The Play Room door swings shut
And suddenly he thinks back
To his first encounter
Backstage

The opening night of his
Sophomore drama club production of
The Bacchae
Back then he did not know what bodies did

He did not know masculine
Could mean also mean tender

It was the sort of thing that
Lingered in a longing way
As if there were truths about himself that
He did not realize

No better place than in darkness
Safe in the haven of
These cavernous confines
All eyes down here were friendly
He takes his shirt off
Scrawny he smiles
His chest slackens
He can breathe again
And he contorts in that way he used to
Around the sprinklers at the center of the park

Hercules and his friends roar
A proud erastes in these rites

The miasma that was
The atmosphere of the club
Gives way to a chill that runs
Along his shoulders
His chest

His hair stands on end
He can feel
The molten lead rivulets
Of the longful gaze

Hercules grabs the scruff of his neck
Like a pup
Holds Adonis' head to his chest
He listens to the drumbeat in 3/4
That says
"You are mine –
Not to hold
But to shield."

Outside in polyester tents
They smoke cigarettes
On picnic benches
"So, what do you think?"

When his older brother Luis
Came out as gay
Their father cut him off like a limb
Hardly old enough to have his own roots

"It's a really good time!"
Says Adonis an octave too high
His voice is thin

When he needs to shout

It betrays his youth

Adonis sits next him

And as they talk about nothing at all

Adonis' polaroids

Hercules' advertising firm

The way gay men only need to lock eyes

He feels himself fracture

Into a beloved

Into an object of unrealised affection

Like when Hercules laughs and puts his arm

Around Adonis' waist

Or clasps his knees like a suppliant

He had never known what it was to

Be attracted to

Be attractive to

Someone who could break him if he wanted

There are flecks of grey in Hercules' beard

But his eyes betray a youth

That never lost its shimmer

"Let's go get a drink."

Hercules holds the vertex of his shoulder

And they go off alone

Inside
Adonis blinks
Red
Black
Red
Black

His head is heavy as
He stands outside the women's bathroom
Catching his breath, hand against the wall
Which is damp with condensation
Or something more intimate

He blinks
And the crowd collapses in on itself –
A folding of limbs into shadow
Music into tremor
A boy into blur

Someone brushes past him –
A stranger, or maybe Hercules,
Or maybe the first boy
Who ever looked at him too long
And called it a joke

He opens his mouth to say something –
His name?

A word?

– but the bass swallows it whole

The strobe light catches his cheekbone

His shoulder

The place where a hand might've been

"Hey, are you okay?"

Several hands drag him into

The women's bathroom

And he lets himself sink

Into the dark

Hercules tears through the nameless multiplicity

Torn in two

"Adonis!

Adonis!"

But he's nowhere to be found

As Adonis is cradled

In the lap of a mini-skirt

His after-hours daimon

Halfway between Brooklyn and 5 AM

"Are you okay?"

She asks, faintly

And he closes his eyes

Idyll XV

Tess holds her phone to her face.
Presses the buzzer three or four times.
Looks up at the fire escape on the second floor.

“Faye! Faye!”
She shouts in this shrill, playful tone.

Faye pushes past the inner door,
Swings out the heavy wooden one
That guards the brownstone.

“Shut the fuck up!”
She grins in an equally exuberant cry—
That long, drawn-out,
Somewhat whiny noise
You find from girls in their early (to mid) twenties.

Faye lunges into an embrace,
Practically tackles Tess.
Tess can smell the alcohol on her breath;
Her hair is slightly damp but warm.
They nearly stumble off the stoop
And saunter down the steps to the L
On Jefferson Street,
Right around the corner.

Tess hides a glass bottle
In a brown bag
Under her trench coat.

As they swipe,
Slide down the stairwells,
Waiting for Godot on the uptown platform,
They pass it back and forth
In silent communion.

The semester is ending soon.
Faye is working on a master copy of The Kiss.
She talks about the dissolution of boundaries,
Spirituality and ecstasy –
That gold cannot be painted,
Only implied.

Tess thinks Klimt is decadent.
Prefers Las Meninas.
Velázquez refuses illusion.
Flesh is flesh, light is light.
She is iconoclastic in her devotion to
The Gaze.

They both long to be seen in their own right.

“You never really knew Adonis, did you?”

Tess asks.

Faye squints, a little askew.

“Uhh... I met him once at a party...

In some Chinatown loft.

And we talked about photography –

He was nice –

I think he was hitting on me.”

Tess:

“We were in each other’s orbit a while.

‘Oh-you-know-Adonis-too.’

The gallery openings.

The social clubs.

You show up, you get seen.

You experiment...”

*

Through the single-paned white saloon doors,

The room pulses as people

Wind their way through the spotlights

Around pedestals of gnarled metalwork,

Seashells in Pompeian mosaics,

Terrariums preserved in epoxy.

A fragmented self-portrait

Disintegrates at the vertices.

On a side wall,
A series of oversaturated black and white photographs:
Mott Haven or Kingsbridge –
Some obscure province of the Bronx.

In the back,
A projector beams an image
Of a shirtless teen
Doing hula-hoops.
He smiles through his braces.

LONG LIVE ADONIS

Flashes,
Then dissolves into the iMovie scenescape.

“Did all these people really know him?”

“I think he managed to get around.
Or the word got out.
But it doesn’t really matter.”

“They fill in the space he left behind.”

“Ya.”

“So much untapped potential.

Like – it’s not good.

Like, it’s hardly art.

It’s just, like... interesting.”

“Ya – but it could have been great.

It’s interesting.

Like – the materials and the novelty.

And it’s got elements of composition”

On a neighboring table,

There’s a series of Polaroids

Laid out in a polymer tapestry,

Scattered helter-skelter:

The same smile.

Graffiti murals.

Red brick projects.

A circle gathers around Adonis

As he contorts and flails

In a graceful, misdirected frenzy

Around the sprinkler

At the center of an asphalt park.

His twenty-first birthday party

In the living room of his

Two-bedroom, first-generation apartment.

“His death is curated better than my fucking life.”

“Oh, hey, Reagan!”

Tess and Faye now kiss and coo:

“Oh-my-God-hey,
So-good-to-see-you,
So-glad-you-showed-up.”

Reagan:

“I’m really glad we
Were able to put this on for him.
You know, he always wanted to be in a show.
We were going to do a salon series...”

Faye:

“Ya, ya. He deserves it. Really, ya.”

Tess:

“Yeah, he really matured in his form.
Like—you can see the evolution in his thought.
The way he changes materials over time...
Nothing feels out of place.”

Reagan:

“Yeah, I remember when he started
‘Switching it up.’
Getting more ‘crafty.’
Playing with memory and preservation.
And epoxy.
Pictures to metalworks to terrariums.
Urban decay, you know.
Like when we were dating...
He really influenced me as an artist.”

*

Of course, not everyone is an enthusiast.

“Yo, the women out here are crazy.”

Tess overhears some stupefied leer.
Nearly crushes the plastic wine cup in her hand.

“Ya, mhm, uh-huh, ya.”

*

“Reagan’s so full of shit,”
Says Tess, grinding her cigarette into a ledge.

“They only dated for like a month
Before she slept with some professor from Pratt.”

“Ya, mhm...”
Says Faye,
Looking down at her shoes.

Idyll XVI

"The poet has the curse
Of never being able to say
Exactly what he wants

Even these idylls
Are painted in muted colours
No one exists anywhere
And yet the city somewhere has
The multiplicity of archetypes
And I want to say
'Shall I say I have gone at dusk
Through narrow streets
And watched the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt sleeves
Leaning out of windows'
I should have died in a rain-soaked
November trench in Belgium
A century ago
But now I write code for a living
From a WeWork
In lower Manhattan
And defer to my betters

To say that once I ran a circuit of
St. Mark's place

Shaking bystanders by their shoulders
Lingered on the steps of Union Square
Loitered Grand Central littered
With the conversations of strangers
Where I watched people board trains
I wish I could run after

That Fort Tryon
And Riverside Drive
And Battery Park
Are full of youthful ghosts
And patches of grass
Where you watch the summer sun
Sink below the Hudson

There is no substance in this city
Only light and form
A nexus of tenuous thinks
Nebulous
The veins of the subway or
The grid lines of the avenues
But there is nowhere to go

'February House'
'The Chelsea Hotel'
Only exist in our cultural subconscious
And I lay here dreaming

To say
'I am Lazarus come from the dead
Come back to tell you all
I shall tell you all'
And that I invent
Because of a chronic loneliness
In a city full of millions"

A pause
The stage light gives texture
To the contours of his face
As he waits for a slow and uncertain
But then courteous
And only sometimes if it is actually good
Raucous
Applause
The floorboards creak
Beneath the weight of his embarrassment
Offstage he gets a pat on the back
Outside KGB Bar
"Oh hey that was great!"
"Ya really loved it ya!
Really loved like ya
That one line
'Lonely men in shirt sleeves'"
And then later when he is alone
In his bedroom in the Bronx twilight thinks:
'No
That is not it at all
That is not what I meant at all'

