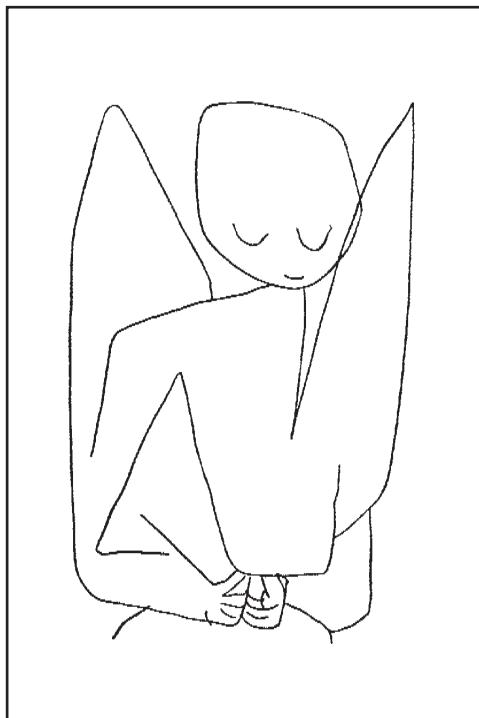


# A Small Book on Black



*Scars*  
*The Spoon*  
*Shadowboxing*  
*Pirandello's Shirt*  
*The Seal*

B L A C K

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## Scars

This hollow of dead skin  
the size of a coin  
centered on my left shin  
was a gift from the ocean—  
the sharp blade of a shell  
tore my leg open  
to show the bone that carries me.

This ragged scar on my arm  
I earned being introspective  
walking in woods—  
rusted barbed wire  
ripped through my shirt to awaken me.  
And the small white arc?  
this tiny moon over my left eye?  
—appeared from nowhere one day in the mirror.

My body reveals its history.  
I would show you  
invisible tokens  
of sorrow and joy—  
grief-scars and love-scars.  
I remember crying all day  
when my mother was  
dying. I remember  
Aunt Ruby, who took me in,  
lifted me,  
and covered my face with kisses.  
I ran to the bathroom  
and saw in the mirror  
the bee-stings of her lipstick.

When I was a boy  
I dreamed I could fly.  
It was wonderful to soar  
over my mother's house

with its locked doors  
and shuttered windows!  
Dreaming taught me  
the body is nothing,  
less than nothing,  
less than a dream.

This morning I ate the fish  
I caught last night.  
I laid the fish on the kitchen counter—  
an old, scarred, grandfather fish,  
rainbow of flesh pale with age,  
scales torn and dangling.  
With a knife I cut off the head,  
slit open the belly.  
With my fingers I removed  
brown and green entrails,  
the tiny heart. From the sink,  
the fish's ancient eye watched  
as I ran the knife over the body,  
the silver scales leaping in air.  
I cooked the fish  
in my grandfather's iron skillet,  
battered and scratched from the years.  
The hot oil smoked; the fish sizzled in the pan.  
I love my body in the morning,  
hunger raging inside me.  
The body's hunger is beautiful.  
I fill it with the wisdom of fish.  
If I could fly, I'd visit my mother  
in heaven. I'd hold her angel-hands  
in my scarred mortal hands,  
and thank her  
for giving me the world

## The Spoon

Some days I think I need nothing  
more in life than a spoon.  
With a spoon I can eat oatmeal,  
or take the medicine doctors prescribe.  
I can swat a fly sleeping on the sill  
or pound the table to get attention.  
I can point accusingly at God  
or stab the empty air repeatedly.  
Looking into the spoon's mirror,  
I can study my small face in its shiny bowl,  
or cover one eye to make half the world  
disappear. With a spoon  
I can dig a tunnel to freedom,  
spoonful by spoonful of dirt,  
or waste life catching moonlight  
and flinging it into the blackest night.

## Shadowboxing

*You are the shadow, the shadow is you,*  
William says as we walk home from the pool  
in wet bathing suits, shadowboxing.  
It's the sort of thing he says now and then,  
a koan, the Zen wisdom of his six-year-old mind.  
And of course what he has observed, or rather,  
the enlightened perspective he is wont to teach  
his increasingly absentminded, unseeing father,  
is both true and useful, and I am suddenly ashamed  
of the little regard I've had for my own shadow,  
constant companion that stretches arms wide across  
late afternoon lawns, looms at night on alley walls,  
or melts into nothing to hide from the noonday sun.  
I would ask him to teach me more, but when we  
stop on the corner, waiting to cross with the light,  
I look down at the child's shadow beside the man's:  
William's small arms hooking and jabbing, two fists  
knocking some sense into the darkness of his father's head.

## Pirandello's Shirt

In spite of the black mask  
and thin black mustache  
painted on with magic marker,  
I recognized Pirandello  
when he climbed through my window,  
meowing and curling up at my feet to nap.  
Just one or two hunks of cheese,  
a slice or two of prosciutto,  
and he follows me everywhere  
like a starving dog, racing past me  
every night on the stairs  
like an alley cat  
anxious to watch the moon rise.  
On the roof I dip some bread in wine—  
I'm willing to share—  
but his hunger is terrifying,  
especially considering the fact  
he's been dead fifty years.  
We strike a bargain,  
nothing to do with charity,  
nothing to do with gifts:  
I keep my bed,  
he sleeps perched like an owl on the garden wall.  
On Sunday mornings, he leads me  
to the edge of the cliff.  
We wait for the lone truck to roar  
from the village down to the sea,  
where the fishmonger opens his door  
and throws dozens of fish back into the water.  
Some are frozen in solid blocks  
and sink to the bottom  
like stones from a temple,  
a carved frieze of fish.  
Others break free and float on the surface,  
glinting like knives.

I tell Pirandello I've never read his plays,  
I want to know what he wants,  
why he's come back.  
If he had some message,  
I demand to hear.  
I threaten him, make a fist,  
grab his shabby suit and shake him  
until there's only a black shirt in my hand,  
which I put on to fight the chill,  
a shirt the color of night,  
the shirt that will make me invisible  
as I sit here for a thousand years  
watching the rituals of hunger,  
rituals of life and death,  
birds flying, their savage symphony,  
the dead caught in their beaks,  
the dead hanging from their talons.

## The Seal

I keep my vow  
not to break  
the plastic seal  
around the book  
I bought in Rome  
in the gift shop  
of the Villa Borghese,  
a study of Bernini's  
marble sculptures  
of mortals  
grappling with gods,  
an elegant volume  
I carried for months  
through Europe,  
unopened  
in my backpack,  
the only thing  
I brought home  
from my journey,  
something beautiful  
I believed  
could save me,  
a book to open  
like a locked door  
inside my head.  
Older now, I know  
the absurdity  
of my thinking:  
a plastic seal  
between life and death.  
It's foolish,  
but for safety  
I keep the book—  
seal unbroken—  
on the nightstand,  
always close at hand,  
buried for years  
under stacks of books  
I've opened and know by heart.