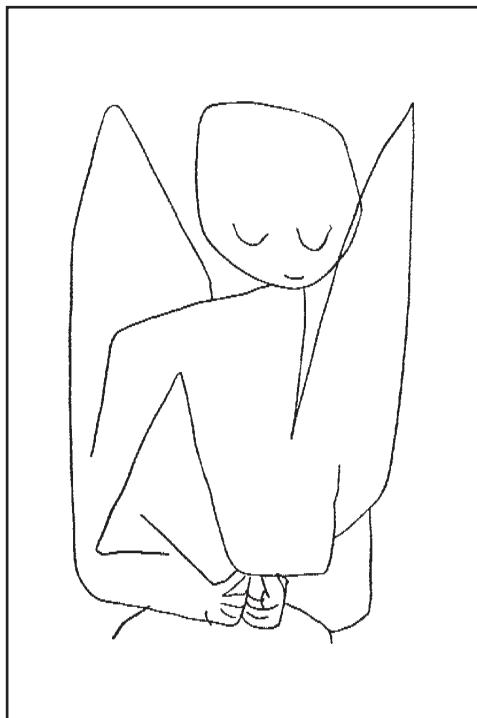


A Small Book on Red



*Cherries in the Snow
King of Hearts
Carnavalet and the Cognac Jay
Ars Poetica
The Answer*

R E D

Cherries in the Snow

My mother never appeared in public
without lipstick. If we were going out,
I'd have to wait by the door until
she painted her lips and turned
from the hallway mirror,
put on her gloves and picked up her purse,
opening the purse to see
if she'd remembered tissues.

After lunch in a restaurant
she might ask,
“Do I need lipstick?”

If I said yes,
she would discretely turn
and refresh her faded lips.

Opening the black and gold canister,
she'd peer in a round compact
as if she were looking into another world.
Then she'd touch her lips to a tissue.

Whenever I went searching
in her coat pocket or purse
for coins or candy
I'd find, crumpled, those small white tissues
covered with bloodred kisses.

I'd slip them into my pocket,
along with the stones and feathers
I thought, back then, I'd keep.

King of Hearts

Though you are gone,
I found you today
lying free and lonely
under the table, unseen
among the scattered toys,

even though I ceaselessly
warn your grandchildren
not to lose a single card,
knowing they'll want them all
when they gather to play.

Kneeling, I saw your face—
the sword and the crown—
and did not return the card to the pack,
but slipped it in my shirt pocket,
and patted my heart for luck.

At the Carnavalet and the Cognacq-Jay

I show my late father Voltaire's writing chair—
comfortable, not too big or soft,
resting on curved legs with tiny wheels
and brilliantly rigged with two
pivoting mechanical iron arms,
one holding a reading panel
for manuscripts, the other
a desk with drawers for ink and pens.

I could live in that chair
for the rest of my life,
I tell my father,
then show him Proust's room—
the cork-lined walls,
the tiny bed of dreams,
the drop-leaf rosewood writing desk
where the novelist built
a “cathedral of words.”

I point out the lamp with its green shade,
the hardback notebooks
on the nightstand.

I tell my father Proust's handwriting
was nearly as bad as mine,
and he says

that's because writing flows like rapids,
not like something printed or typed.

My father invites me to look at Napoleon's
mahogany campaign box
with its “necessaries”—
crystal glasses, silver razor,
ebony vials of cologne,
gold mirror, ivory snuff box.

Fancier, he says,
than what he was used to,
back when he was a soldier in battle.
I look at his eyes, so blue.

When I was growing up in Virginia,
my father regaled me
with a thousand war stories,
more about comrades and travel,
than dying and battle
—stories I still remember verbatim today.

About his faith,
the rock on which he stood,
he was a man of few words,
like the boy acolyte he was,
assisting in preparing communion
at Saint Andrew's Church.

My father let his life bear witness—
the courtesy of his tested heart,
the tears and kindness.

If only in that, I pray we are the same.

As we descend the winding staircase
beneath the Carnavalet's chandeliers
he asks if I'm hungry.

We walk two blocks to
our favorite little bistro for lunch.

We've already eaten there three times this week.

From the dreamy menu,
we ask for escargot,
rabbit leg, steak tartare,
lamb with herbs, duck confit,

—unlike the soup he always ordered,
so harsh were his lessons from the Depression.
We devour huge bowls of chocolate mousse
and over coffee

he asks about my sabbatical, if I miss my family.
I love Paris,

but it's hard being so far from Laura.
And I miss the children—
their laughter and wisdom.

He says he felt the same,
all those Air-Force years he was away,

flying around the world,
his military life so far from us.
We touch our glasses
of Eaux de Vie—
I'm drinking plum, he's sipping pear—
and smile at the paradoxical truth:
even now, knowing what we know,
neither of us wants to leave the Marais
and go home. After lunch we walk
down Rue Elzevir to the Cognacq-Jay,
where my father grows rhapsodic
over the Canaletto paintings of the Grand Canal.
My father's been everywhere,
but never to Venice, city of dreams.
In his honeyed Southern voice
he tells me Venice looks very different
from where he lives now.
I tell him maybe we could
book an overnight train and go there.
We could sleep in the narrow bunks,
like soldiers in army cots.
His eyes brighten. "Maybe," he says.
He leans closer to the Canaletto and the canal,
almost touching the canvas with his nose
to see the master's brushstrokes,
light on water and royal palaces,
the black gondolas, sky, and majestic clouds.
My father and I
didn't talk like this when
we were younger and he was alive—
we were too different;
but now we talk all the time,
and understand each other perfectly.

Ars Poetica

When I think of writing poems
I get lonely and think of my dog,
her last days on earth
when she shivered and trembled.
When she was young she loved to swim.
Summer mornings, before the heat came,
I'd stand with my mug of coffee
and throw the stick
far out into the black water of the lake,
and she'd heave her big black body
after it in desperation, always bringing
it back, the stick, the love. All night
she'd lay beneath my desk, sleeping
as I wrote, lightning flashing
in the storm of the mind. I remember
when she was so small I could hold her
in one hand as I worked,
how I learned to type with one finger—
all I needed to write.

The Answer

Tonight, looking for the answer,
I must have killed an hour
flipping through philosophy and poetry books,
every few minutes opening and reading a different title.
I anxiously searched all the places I keep books—
looking in the kitchen, the boys' rooms,
checking the laundry room and workshop,
before going outside finally to the curb
to search through books tossed
in the backseat of the car.
Snow fell straight down in windless silence.
The keys in my left hand jingled like very small bells.
I stopped and tried to remember
what I'd come into the night looking for.