

A silhouette of a woman's head and shoulders in profile, facing left. The background is a gradient of blue and yellow, with a bright light source on the right side, creating a glow around the woman's hair and neck. The text is overlaid on the image.

L I L I T H S T R E E T

Labyrinth

A N A R R A T I V E
P O E M

Canto I

Where the blue moon hangs over the city,
the smoke and ashes have become gritty;
a haze lurks over every alley,
there is no longer a place to parley,
where the black metronome of New York beats
a forte in wine and hard liquor, Keats
in a Greenwich café with lonesome Plath...
puddles reflect winsome rain, alley cats
disappear behind tenement decay,
and Brooklyn brownstones tempt the light of Sunday.
Here, there is one last copper saxophone.

The music weaves along the dark asphalt
if it were a dancer and would cavort,
if it were smile lines across a face,
there is a moment of lenient grace—
when it changes the mouths of passersby.
Some begin to sing, older women sigh
of how life used to be when driving for
a mile. Others hum along. There's no chore...
they'll begin next... of how it used to be...
the sedan—driving a tan mercury
on the open road with the windows down.

When the shining jazz saxophone's reed sounds,
unrelentless taunt threnody rebounds,
it drifts, like new-washed white linen bed sheets:
red music case sits open to the street.
It explodes like smoke from a cigarette
into a dimly lit bar, hedging bets
that the next new baby will be a boy,
that cutting his milk teeth will be a joy,
that after the senna and the Caf-Lib
and a cup of hard water, women's lib
will save us all from laundry detergent.

There is the feeling that under the noise
the statue lady in the crown will pose
with you for a selfie, and your uncle
will quote Emma Lazarus, Garfunkel,
Madonna while you cross over to Queens
with a camera that takes in long scenes
on the Queensboro Bridge's cantilever
design that running flanks the East River.
There is the feeling that New York will doze,
beckon you off to sleep in streetlight throes,
under the teeming night sky bright with lights.

When we are not dreaming in lilac lace
we repeat, “Monday’s child is fair of face.”
The salt and the sea have all done wonders
for lone tourists and group vacationers.
Seagulls soar up into the briny air,
Liberty is the tallest woman here;
she has not been outdone, not since berry
pie à la mode. New Yorkers have sherry
to relax when the hot scarlet sun dips
over the Atlantic. Here denim ripped
cut-off blue jeans are the norm juxtaposed

with the society pages and young
women coming out in pearls to be sung
of dressed like blue ladies, not forgetting
power of a diamond in its setting,
an engagement ring—of a bright mirage—
what is important too, like marriage;
a good gold band is crucial to success,
and a career, perhaps one in law, dress
designing, or medicine, or nursing.
The little blackbird is always singing.
Fashion never hurt anyone either.

When we have collected our diplomas,
we have studied applying force to mass,
we will have understood that physics's load,
calculus, fine art, and enigma's code
don't guarantee success, the real degree
to which our finer dogs have pedigrees,
to counter all décor, inertia
will keep us stable, thoroughly certain
and not go-to's—not inattentive, no cares.
Our horses are chestnut Thoroughbred mares.
But our thoughts are Black Stallions with coarse manes.

Canto II

A girl walked past a culvert in the rain.
She could see smoke that reminisced of pain.
A wisp rising from realms below had caught
her right off-guard, and as she watched she thought
that it was unlikely that it was mist.
She wore a Catbird bracelet on her wrist.
It seemed rather that someone was smoking
tobacco, now unseen below, cloaking
the ground with a felt plume and grey cinders.
What they were doing below the ground's turf
she could not tell late at night in New York.

She was a writer; as was her fashion,
she stopped at the next square glass bus station
and jotted this down in a small lined book.
She had several navy blue pens, took
one out, and thought, then wrote something queerly.
Then she strode up the level street quickly
to the next house and the next blue building—
the tears sliding down her face showed feeling—
to a row of apartments in yellow,
Italian red; rain drips on the fellow
in front of her from metal overhangs.

Helen ascended the stairs to her suite.
Her hair was damp in the frosty lamplight.
The white-blue aura the street lamps had glowed
now reflected in her soft eyes and nose,
her mouth and fascia, superficial
indicators of pearlescent dental
care, of expensive orthodontic work.
She was from a wealthy upholstered purse,
owning real estate, developed, and land,
defined Caucasian middle class well-tanned
tennis players: extended family.

They had a New York mansion, double courts,
and an aqua swimming pool. There was port
on a bar beside the water. She could
swim on warm days when the beating sun would
be high in the sky. Her pink curtained room
high under the white sloping eaves was soon
a lookout where she could spy all the way
to the rocky shore and the salty bay.
She could see the Statue of Liberty.
The Brooklyn Heights Promenade on the sea
and the six grey piers of Brooklyn Bridge Park,

iconic at the harbour waterfront.

Here is where the Hudson Bay River dumped
its churning waters into the ocean.

The grey statue poem slept unbroken.

Here is where New Jersey stars crossed the way
of New York's. Far across the murky bay,
her sister had always been beautiful;
she, with a candle, in deep-set window.

Helen lived alone in an apartment
in Brooklyn, and rode the bus. Indictment
of society, money's scarcity.

Somehow, Helen, with the bun at the nape
of her neck, had to wear a furry cape
made of night-dark wool to prove her net worth
was high enough to then support herself.
She had the pallid look of a poor girl:
given by her relatives, one cream pearl.
Who could only be decently clothed, say,
with a pair of denim jeans in the day?
A forest-green turtle neck might have made
a modest outfit and the bouillon grade
feasible. Should she have some hot water.

She now drew a mug from the grey cupboard
that had a deft crack left by the landlord
in the icy apartment in Brooklyn;
there was a small pile of crocheted Afghans
on the IKEA couch. A large TV
began to announce the dismal evening
news with no reprieve in sight from sterile
Covid and weather. Suddenly beryls
for sale at the local jewelry store
came on, and she looked up. Here was a stone
as green as her eyes, and set in sterling.

Canto III

The next morning Helen woke up, and stretched
under the comforter with rose duvet.
One preferred to have swaths of lace about,
so the curtains were elaborate, stout,
standing at military attention.
Collections were no longer of mention.
She took a new washcloth and washed her face,
had a croissant on a bone china plate.
Her knife clinked as she read the newspaper,
moving a stack of novels for later,
and poured a cup of German chamomile.

The bright sun was shining effortlessly,
the harbour was relinquishing blessings,
she put milk in her tea and poured some more—
a walk to the Catbird jewelry store
to look at rings would be great fun. In fact,
she was looking forward to the short lap—
the wood window boxes of white daisies,
bunched eyes--tidy purple and black pansies,
she'd go 'round the block—put on her running
shoes. She walked and passed a beige cat sunning
on the stoop of another apartment.

There was a child crying through the window.
Helen could hear a voice then saying, low:
“Helen of Troy lives.” The child stopped crying.
Helen curiously felt that dying
inside was an option until the stoop
flooded with sunlight, as a dark cloud moved.
It was no more than a daydream or fate
to, in past, upend unrequited hate,
and stage a bloody war before hovels.
She remembered the waxing of novels
in black and white: Homer’s *The Iliad*.

Helen could see little cremello heads
scrambling after her. She scratched the blunt lead
of her pencil on notebook. She had been
writing as she walked. The high call was lean—
Perrier, sing-song bubbly, and curls bobbed.
Their ma sat outside chucking pearl corn cobs,
both the child and brunette girl wrote letters—
on cement, attracting benign readers—
on the sidewalk: Here is where Homer walked!
The words were drawn comically in chalk,
in pink, blue, and yellow, in the bay dust.

Accosted by loud children in a swarm,
Helen ducked in to where the air was warm.
Catbird—an elegant store, her sleuthy
bun quivered; she entered jewellery
galore where velvet curtains, sparkly things,
cushions caught her eye, sustainable rings.
She couldn't help but gravitate toward
the prim sterling silver. She lurched forward
only to find herself clawing at thin
air, as she fell. She felt herself hit tin
and then falling and falling. Then silence.

The passageway she had fallen into
made up part of the labyrinth below
accessible from the old dumbwaiter
of a heritage building—from waiters
serving in the early 1900's,
with black and white parquet floors, with hardwood
moldings around the high ceiling and stairs.
The owners did not anticipate lair
of the underground town, a terrain deft
that had once been a musty ghost town left
by settlers in the early century.

When the dust settled she looked up at night.
Her hair had wisps escaping in the light
of what looked like stars, but they were minute
flashlights far away. Then a voice demurred,
“Sin, come here—shine your flashlight, now brighter!”
Jewellery everywhere askew, silver
in every direction, and a river
of earrings hung on her maroon sweater.
Helen could not see because of the light,
and her pupils dilated green in flight.
She could not escape from this lower law.

Canto IV

In Queensboro, from a murky prison,
there surged, of their work room, an uprising,
almost a riot, when four men escaped—
unseen and unarmed—from the dim basement.
It was a battle. Dark beneath the tow’rs
of glittering NYC’s skyscrapers,
the city that never sleeps closed one eye
and four built head-strong men willed not to die
in obscurity, their paths were woollen,
carved into the rock, their tools were stolen.
Of all the work that day, their secret sweet.

The men had laboured there for many months.
The work displayed an undivided front.
The silent light had lit their way before,
urging them, their master was the foreman.
Their work in darkness would its fruit unveil
a corridor behind the brick was stale
as it stretched on and on dug out of dirt
that gave way beneath their whispers, and curt
verbiage back and forth, the wrench and nail,
and shards of beer bottles broke path with pail.
With each foot gained, their faces, lined, anxious.

Each day in the basement revealed the path,
chipped the way forward in dulled aftermath,
prisoners in unison turned their backs;
Sin, Cos, and Tan threw down their hazel packs.
When prison guards had looked blithely away
and men shook blankets at the end of day,
there was no wind in prison, nor a breeze,
no refreshment, and the steel bars had squeezed
Achilles through their steely grey rigour,
of a prisoner, not be prisoner:
he was photogenic of chiseled brow.

