

Interrupted half way through

Wendy Shaw

Interrupted half way through,
like a sunken ship, the goods
covered in barnacles and barricades:
the Romans invented concrete
to make themselves permanent,
we are told, but they fail to point out
that, as with all attempts at permanence,

they failed.

Vitruvius already knew the dangers
Of mixing concrete with sea sand,
Where the salt will make the plaster crumble
And yet how many times
In İstanbul as a child I collected
seashells from the sidewalks where cats
set them loose,
My city of crumbling sidewalks:
You were my Rome, unapologetic,
Your stone cobblestones drowned now

in concrete.

38

İstanbul has come to wear a concrete shroud.
Concrete happens through the acceleration
Of the accretion of sediment that eventually
Turns everything to stone, and stone to dust,
Dust to emotion, emotion to tears,
Stacked as a cross-section of broken bowls
Filled with clay, slowly settling over centuries –
And in the dust, the details layered and lapsed,
Lime mixed with water replaces time with heat,
No different than adding fire to earth
Which makes glass. Which is liquid

and yet breaks.

We call it a pot or a vase, and the flowers are on them,
The flowers are in them, now fresh, now wilting.
It was once the custom, in places where Persian spread
Like flowers grown from their wind-blown seeds,
To draw the flowers
Not in the singular perfection of each bud, each vein,
Each bug, as would the engravers of our custom –
An Albrecht or a Rachel or a Maria –
Not in the way they looked, but in the way God
Sees them without sight, in their crystal form
Rosebuds like stars like the cupula over your head,

All divine. And yet one flower, its stem broken,
Memento Mori. The perfection of flowers not only
In their freshness, but also

in their fading.

Have you heard of the sunken harbor of İstanbul's port,
Dug up, ships in place, now covered in concrete,¹
Gone as if never there, never discovered, frozen
As though in the maritime here and there of wares:
Oil in the *lekythos*
 and grain in the *pitbos*
 and water in the *hydria*
 and wine in *amphorae*
 that had no base
and so could not be set down until

empty.

A container is no more than a shell for the contained.
O my ancient beloved, we do not know
How bright burned the oil in your *kandil*
 How dark the pitch in your *bokka's* ink,
 How slender the flower of your *gülabdan*
 How thick the musk of your *buhardan*,
 How sweet the wine of your *ibrik*,
 How wet the water of your *sürahi*,
 How lush the fruit of your *testi*,
How thirsty the lips,
 How satisfied the tongue,
 How loud the laughter.

History becomes the accretion of things that stick
to other things. The fire of words is their arbitrary glue
And you can slice it open, or it might break,
Like a geode, baring its stalactite shimmers on the

half shell.

Everything is interrupted
halfway through; is it possible
to not be interrupted, in what
may appear to be the beginning,
or the end, but might have been
after all, half way? You never know,
like Schroedinger's cat, you never
know, when death comes, you
never know if it would have been

¹ Sara Bonini Baraldi, Daniel David Shoup and Luca Zan: "When Megaprojects Meet Archaeology: A Research Framework and Case Study From Yenikapi, İstanbul", in: *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2017), pp. 1-22, <https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2012/12/40000-artefacts-unearthed-in-marmarayhtml#r3mXRyTgSA1PJVuV:97>.

halfway when

interrupted.

Nothing can be interrupted
half way through. We have one half
that is the known, and the other half,
the unknown. And the known seems
as though it were solid, and the
unknown lighter than air, but
it is the liquid of imagination
that binds them: concrete is

forever.

Diamonds are forever.
Nothing lasts forever.
You cannot keep things
forever, even if they are beautiful.
Forever always is interrupted
halfway through, and even if the thing
doesn't die,

you do.

Aristotle says of the murex,
that spiny seashell
a cheap prize in your childhood
collection – what do seashells teach us
after all, if not of a beautiful afterlife
in which homes and bones
become things in a box–

Of the murex, Aristotle says,

The murex lives for about fifty days
after capture; during this period, they
feed off one another,

an orgiastic struggle of tongues without limbs,

as there grows on the shell a kind of sea-weed
or sea-moss; if any food is thrown
to them during this period, it is said to be done
not to keep them alive, but to make them weigh more.
To shell-fish in general drought is unwholesome.²

Drought is unwholesome as well to the drowned
in the sunken boat, though they don't know it
it makes the broken wares, the ones melted into
water, frozen. Oh, you think the elements are
essential, solid melts to liquid, becomes air sublime?
That there is an essence in clay,

² Aristotle: *History of the Animals*.

and an essence in fire, and an essence in water?

No.

I will tell you this.

In Spain, there in the palace

Which talks to you in poems and not in history,

There is a *mirador* that looks at you and says,

It is a palace of glass such that he who sees it
Thinks it is a bottomless sea that terrifies him.³

And there is a fountain of lions that will tell you this:

I am like a globe of water that to men
Shines forth brilliantly and does not conceal itself:
A great sea, enclosed by shores
Of the most beautiful, select marble.
My waters are melted pearls that, on ice
You see running...⁴

You can take it for a fact that droplets are but melted pearls
skittling across ice, because nothing stays solid

forever.

Porcelain melts

At one thousand and eight hundred and forty degrees

Centigrade, which is around four hundred degrees higher

Than the melting point of glass. Thus,

When interrupted half way through, so

As not to get quite so hot and drip away like melted pearls

On ice, the pot bends and melds with the fire bricks that

Hold it, the glaze, which is glass, having become fully liquid,

Flows. The pot, now a body fainting, frozen,

A flower, forever wilting, half way

Interrupted.

³ Ibn Zamrak (1333-1393), translated from the Arabic and quoted in José Miguel Puerta Vilchez: *Consuelo López-Morillas*, trans., *Aesthetics in Arabic Thought*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, p. 81.

⁴ Ibn Zamrak, translated and quoted in Olga Bush: "When My Beholder Ponders," Poetic Epigraphy in the Alhambra", in: *Artibus Asiae* 66, 2 (2006), p. 58.