

# MONICA MOODY

*and other poems*

JACK  
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### **about the author**

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## METAMORPHOSES

### I.

It's all a to-do, isn't it? All fuss,  
The deep red of what you normally get  
On a worn-soft evening, if the rain stops.

There's no substance, or reality, no  
Suggestion which cancels out exceptions,  
Whether given or taken by nightfall.

That is what you think when you see the rose  
Colored like an overripe peach, orange,  
Tinged with pale blood against the sky's dim gray.

Its fires shoot up and surround the vase,  
The windows, the grimy sill, rose-colored  
Cleansing irrelevant to the East Wind,

Which blows now as it always has, beyond  
The pane against which the weaker petals  
Rest, their stems stooped over, effervescent

Nevertheless. It's that border that keeps  
The two apart, the East Wind and the weak-  
Yet-dancing, wincing only at the breeze.

### II.

I dreamt about impermanence and woke  
To find a world of solid things balking  
When I rolled, unwell, onto the cold floor.

The peach-colored rose: that was my dream,  
So vivid I was winded, and no help  
Waking in the heavy air of August.

Ah, it's a sweet world; I'm too sensitive.  
A rose of any color is enough.  
Whether it's given or not, I'm giving.

Down the glass the air that turned to rain runs  
In patterns just unintelligible,  
Like some music whose words you knew,

But no tune. How the elemental turns  
Contingent is what raises the small bumps  
Of the skin, or of water on the glass.

It's like the actual peach, overripe  
And soft, unwieldy in the hand, too much  
In the mouth, repellent, face-contorting.

Speaking now of how it can give color  
Which pleases me in my dream is not quite  
Redemptive, not quite salvation. Not yet.

The watery drips from the skin, the glass,  
The peach; I find myself looking in these  
For a response, like a distant church bell,

Or an owl in the night, in a place  
Unfamiliar, which any place can be,  
I suppose, in the dark blue of what is.

### III.

And it is dark blue, worth remembering.  
No accounting for its black persistence,  
For how it enshrouds the slight populace

In lack of hue, the last concomitance  
Of fear and awe, the last overwhelming.  
But do not forget the peach-colored rose,

Which stands among its kind at the window,  
Untrammeled yet by death, holding forth, gold  
For some witnesses, from some slants of light,

And still so close to the wind that blows just  
Past the pilloried glass, pockmarked with age,  
Doing what it was meant, no doubt, to do.

And it is age, not time, that tumbles down  
And binds us to the earth. Time would give us  
Space, the less human, savage thing, against

Which we would fight, human against savage,  
True savage, red blood coursing, humanly  
Vaunted as sublime, powerful agents

Of unearthly expanse, all-seeing down  
On a slight little thing, man or woman,  
Which hurls rocks with a tool, hostile and skilled,

But which, despite its skill, wanted to tell  
Stories, not become a part of one, tamed  
By the teller, one foolishly trusted

When he wears imposing ornaments.  
Breathing now, the tale becomes much clearer.  
I am dreaming still, the roses, the war,

The savage countenance: it really is  
All a fuss, or seems so. I am too thin  
For these large, hyperborean concerns.

And what is worse, or seems worse: stupidly  
These dreams rock the little boat on which I  
Have always depended, though it too strikes

Me now as a dream of a darker kind.  
Is everything so? Demand just a sigh  
In response and you become a tyrant.

Everything, whatever form, flees from me.  
The world is upset by too much stirring  
Within it, and dried bones rise from the dirt.

#### **IV.**

True rose, *Urpflanze*, high on a high hill,  
Stop all my dreaming and keep me nightly  
In your flames, constantly cool orange blood.

Keep my bones wrapped up in flesh and skin,  
Away from the dirt which was your first home,  
And mine. But lay down with me when I do;

I can hardly stand these red thoughts of us,  
Somehow together, when I have the chance  
To flee. I am yours, but I am frightened.

## MONICA MOODY RIDES AGAIN

Presage: *Monica Moody, cavorting with seas,  
Riding as high as might sugar kelp please.  
Stoking the engine, festooning the sand,  
Seeing through seasons on ancestral land.  
Monica Moody, the world in her hand.*

### I. *Wishing the End*

Balancing on the bladderwrack, eyeing  
Her feet for shards of glass and buried hooks,  
Trying nevertheless to gain a sense  
Of the weather. Now she begins to weep  
For want of what she cannot keep. Airplanes  
Fly over her head. The weeds slosh around  
Beneath. Monica dressed herself today  
For love, yet walks alone along the beach.  
She is thinking of April and the rains  
That come, not yet seeing the season shine.  
Dread of death is one kind of sin; hoping  
For rain, another. The sun doesn't ask  
That you bathe beneath it, only that you  
Let grow what wishes to. Monica knows  
What she desires, and it is not growth.  
She eyes the glass and the hooks, the seaweed  
Forming a mass that wraps around her feet,  
And dragging her out to sea, the raw scent  
Of relief as sweet as when the rains roar,  
The briny swells evoking petrichor.

## II. *Courtier's Distress*

Impetuous as the waves which crash above,  
Yet green beneath the hoary surface, all  
Of her wishes still rage for room to seethe.  
Monica Moody, still trying to breathe,  
Goes limp, falls farther, a *sprezzatura*  
Meant not for the court, but for the weather,  
And the sea which is its source. Damnable  
Human impressions of divinity,  
Yet still the whites of her eyes gone purple,  
A royal hue takes over, everything goes  
Dark, dark, dark; three times she begs for release,  
Regret filling her heart and seawater  
Filling her lungs. The confusion, the rage,  
For a moment, stops: The queen is the sea  
And the sea meant death in Monica's heart,  
Since to submit was to be swallowed up  
By the frothing chop, the queen's flowing hair  
Sprinkled with ointment made of seagulls' squawks.  
To stand on the beach was to attend court,  
And beg favor. No love can survive this.

## III. *Another Mistress*

Elizabeth is a string of islands  
Trailing between the sound and the bay,  
Tapering off in rough water; the Cape's  
Maleficence drains down and makes trouble.  
She blends and bleeds with the water around  
Her; Monica floats along her side, below,  
As always, the surface. Goats, cattle, more



Roam her craggy hills, the mountain range shaped  
By her curves as she lay on her side, bed  
Sheets bunched up around her feet, the warmth too  
Cloying when already such livestock and  
Monica demand her attention, or  
At least room somewhere in her range, her bed,  
Wherever the sea must stop, though the chop  
May crash on the shore. No matter, she thinks,  
Allowing the tide to rise and recede,  
And singing aloud, expressing her breed,  
“I am Elizabeth, who rides across  
Seas.” And Monica Moody, rapt in awe,  
Feels herself at once within and apart.

**Coda.**        *No Remorse, No Epiphany*

Others might ask, “How deep does the sea  
Run? Are there rivers buried like the blood  
Of the Earth?” It does not matter until  
You are there and the pressure pushes you  
Down, down, down into dark. Monica,  
What have you done? You look up at the last  
Glimmer of light and it shines in your eyes,  
Betraying the vestiges of outcomes  
Other than this. New England contained more  
Than you knew, and other countries besides.  
The travel only ceases when you fall  
Down, and let yourself be taken. Not mere  
Reticence, but insolence, too, led you  
To the shore and hopelessness dragged you in.  
But now, no more rage, no more tears; they too

Are salt water and mix with Atlantic  
Anger, which could bury us all, given  
The will to flounder, the will to sink. And  
Monica Moody, the world in her hands,  
Neither likes what she sees, nor understands.

## MEETING THE MASTER

A brief exchange after a long reading.  
You were tired, your chin tucked in your chest.  
From where I stood, thought I could see your old  
heart tossing, “like a threshing bamboo grove.”  
The stories of your kindness did not match  
this grizzled countenance, this old man’s dread  
of company, which suffers family  
well, though reluctantly, knowing time spent  
alone by the beach was time much better  
spent. Thought, too, you looked like my father will  
one day no doubt look, if he grows a beard,  
keeps adding on years away from the booze,  
somehow turns into a Caribbean  
son of a painter, doesn’t age too fast.  
He will speak like you did, low-toned and calm,  
with a storm, long since weathered, still raging.  
It’s part of the battle for an old soul.  
Somehow I feel it in me, too, even  
in this happy life, with friends and a home.  
The line moved along. I shuffled closer.

The nerves kept pulsing. What was I to say?  
How could we speak, with a long list of friends  
you were obliged to attend to? What cause  
would you have to give me any of your  
time?

*Is it like I imagine it, old  
age? Do you feel time speeding up, minutes  
flitting by faster? Even you, who slows  
even the fleetest feet down to a sea-  
worthy clip, must sometimes think that it all  
went by too quickly, must want it all back.*

At last I approached, slim volume in hand,  
trembling worse, not because you expect much,  
(I know I'm just another outstretched hand)  
but simply at the weight of things, your prize,  
whatever else you might care to mention.  
Relief washed over me (like the ocean  
we both lived on as children, some thousands  
of miles, decades apart, though by it we're  
both blessed nevertheless) when my teacher  
leaned in to you, his teacher, and described  
me as worthy, in some way, of regard.  
You raised your head with what looked like effort,  
extended your hand, spoke quietly, "If  
he thinks you're good, you must really be good."  
And I smiled, unsure of how to seem  
grateful, when all I'm used to is pining.  
You signed the book, gave another nod, and  
off I went, back into the old crowd, hands  
clutching the proof, toward some smiling friends, who  
waited and understood. "But not enough."

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