

Mona Lisa and Demons at Penn Station New York

Little girl
Standing on the main Concourse at Penn Station
I failed you.
Waiting with the other waiters
For the train to Philadelphia
I watched your mother
Grip your two wrists hard
Shake you hard
Look at you hard
The relevance (if any)
Of your offence (if any)
No longer relevant.

Answer me she said.
(I think she said).
I had to lip-read
Because the metallic-voiced announcer
Announced my metallic departure
From Stairway Number Six for Philadelphia.

Six times (I counted)
That woman shook you
Like an object she objected to.
White-knuckled solitaire
Sparkling hard
As her hard anger-sparkling eyes.
And you
Grave-faced
Pigtailed
Frightened
Grieved out your ten-years-old grief
In silent unsparkling isolation.

I should have said (to her)
In my Special Child Protector's Voice
"Stop Madam
You won't break a little girl's spirit
Or even her wrists
That way Madam
But Madam
You'll break her love
Which Madam
I assure you Madam
You need Madam
More than you'll ever realise Madam."

Or maybe (to you)
In my Special Grown-Ups Defender's Voice
"Don't be sad little girl.
Your mother's not herself.
She's het up
Flustered
Tired from packing
For her Florida vacation.
(It's deadly little girl
Trying to decide what to pack
And what not to pack.)
Grown-ups little girl
Have so many things on their minds
That they almost go out of their minds.
Actually little girl
Your mother loves you actually.
- Though I guess she's got a strange way of showing it."

But I stayed silent.
Looked at your mother
With as good an imitation as I could manage
Of your hurt
Your helplessness.
She saw me.

Smiled
A demon *Mona Lisa* smile.
Linked her arm in a man's (your father's?)
Who looked as if you didn't exist
And said something funny (presumably funny)
That made your mother smile again
Her demon *Mona Lisa* smile.

Then the man
Re-counted the suitcases
Paced the Concourse
Navy-blazered
Clean-shaven
Dutiful
Perspiring
Blinking his eyes
Under his rimless spectacles
Like the perspiring
Navy-suited
Dutiful attendant
In the Louvre in Paris
Pacing out lifelong protection
To a billion dollar canvas smile.

Little girl I failed you.
I said nothing.
I shuffled off perspiring
With two over-heavy suitcases
To Stairway Number Six
For Philadelphia.
Looking back
Before I escalated to a lower level
Where the black locomotive
Hissed its steaming welcome
To all who'd escalated to a lower level
You were looking at me
Letting me know you knew I'd failed you

Like all the other forward-faring strangers on the Concourse
Who had somewhere better to go
Something better to do
Than comfort a little girl
Lost in a world
Of grown-up black locomotive hardness.

Little girl we're damned.
Mothers
Fathers
Attendants-in-waiting
Strangers in flight from love
In black locomotive plush compartments
To Philadelphia or sunny Florida.

Damned little girl. Damned.

All of us all of us damned.