

“THE GREAT ONES

always make it look so easy.”  
—sitcom second banana, as a sex god whips out his  
lighter and a sex goddess offers her cigarette

Thunderclaps (inside of which an intercontinental flight’s a toothpick  
in a Tarzan yell) and blasts of marrow-shivering electrical gashes  
muscle in from the north: a weather appropriate to The Great Ones.  
Maybe they’ll favor us by uttering some echoing pronouncement  
—ethics, stocks and bonds, world war, a really great new mousse  
that’s suddenly appeared for them as readily as manna fallen overnight.  
While *we* climb over the side of the bed each morning, little cliff edge,  
little lemming. While *we* cough gobs of lung-mess  
into tissues and study these viscous shapes like soothsayers.  
(*Bloodworms. Hummingbird bowels. A drear prognostication.*)  
When The Great Ones labor, the dross of the world is alchemically  
begreathed to match: Sir William Herschel, needy of a telescope mirror  
three feet in diameter (with no existing foundry that would risk the task),  
constructed himself an inexpensive mold of pounded horse dung,  
as if his were a vision exalted enough to lift up such *rejecta*  
into kinship with the stars. While the rest of us stumble about  
and wonder how our own few burlap sacks of pared-off calluses  
and menses-slough and hair-loss start to add up  
toward a life. The Great Ones: “courage” comes to mind, then even that  
intended adulation fails when I think of Mrs. Pankhurst  
on a plank bed being funnel-fed  
against her fervent hunger-striking wishes—four detectives  
bear their bull strength on the struggling suffragette  
to still her spasms, as a day-nurse works  
a tube in and another pours  
their pigmash down her forced throat (legal, alimentary  
rape is what it comes to: and her own continued,  
conscienceful refusal). While the rest of us  
aren’t always strong enough to lift the phone  
for its single beetle of news, its single carrion beetle  
bearing an ash of news in its chitinous horns

between the dark and the wires. And for how many words of his *Dictionary*  
 did Samuel Johnson personally write definitions  
 (“plagued the while by ill health and the death of his wife,”  
 as one source puts it)?—43,500; while the two words  
 “cervical” “tumor” press their pincers into the gray myrrh of my brain,  
 and stay, and grow, and won’t make room for any others. How many  
 runaways did Sojourner Truth deliver?—while today  
 the weight of the thought of my sister  
 strapped down in the hospital is an anvil in my head,  
 just her, you see how weak and small I am,  
 just that one pea-sized leak in the hull to worry about,  
 and I can’t move—an anvil’s in my head.  
 The Great Ones: oysters rockefeller and plutonium,  
 The Great Ones: Mount Parnassus, and my tongue is so dry.  
 The Great Ones: silver chalices, so dry  
 I can’t, The Great Ones: papal dispensation, dry I can’t begin,  
 The Great Ones: shantung silk, I can’t begin a prayer,  
 my tongue so dry I can’t begin a prayer, The Great Ones:  
 sex in weightlessness above the Earth and civet musk and Pentateuch,  
 I can’t begin a prayer to ask for anything,  
 The Great Ones: born absolved, The Great Ones: 60,000 television  
 channels,  
 ask for anything, Olympic gold, Miss Universe, The Great Ones  
 carved of marble, ask for anything though if,  
 The Great Ones truffles and paté, I could,  
 though if I could, The Great Ones oratorio, The Great Ones  
 unanimity, though if I could I’d ask for something,  
 strong enough to lift the phone, The Great Ones: ships  
 with sandalwood and dancing apes, to add up toward a life,  
 The Great Ones: never grieve, or if they do  
 the heavens weep, to ask for something, manna, stars,  
 so modest as reprieve.