

when the bell of space rings
with only withered sticks clumping winter's iron earth dully.

Tennessee Williams, "Orpheus Descending" from *In the Winter of Cities* (1955), reprint in ed. by D. Roessel and N. Moschovakis (2002)

ORPHEUS DESCENDING

I

They say that the gold of the under kingdom weighs so
that heads cannot lift beneath the weight of their crowns,
hands cannot lift under jewels,
braceleted arms do not have the strength to beckon.

How could a girl with a wounded foot move through it?

They say that the atmosphere of that kingdom is suffocatingly
weighted by dust of rubies,
antiquity's dust that comes from the rubbing together of jewel and
metal, gradual, endless,
a weight that can never be lifted . . .

How could a shell with a quiver of strings break through it?

They say that no light exists in it, but now and again
there is the anguished convulsion of dark into lesser dark,
exposing momentarily, dimly,
the court's eternal session, nearly immobile,
the courtiers crushed by the golden weight of their robes,
the ladies unable to breathe beneath the weight of their blood-dark
garlands of roses,
the weight of their eyelids permitting them barely to open.

Orpheus, how could her wounded foot move through it?

II

It is all very well to remember the wonders that you have
performed in the upper kingdom,
the chasm and forest made responsively vocal,
the course of a river altered as an arm alters when it is bent at the
elbow,
the moments made to continue by the sweet vibrancy of a string
pressed by a finger . . .

But those were natural wonders compared to what you essay in the
under kingdom
and it will not be completed,
no, it will not be completed,

for you must learn, even you, what we have learned,
that some things are marked by their nature to be not completed
but only longed for and sought for a while and abandoned.

And you must learn, even you, what we have learned,
the passion there is for declivity in this world,
the impulse to fall that follows a rising fountain.

Now Orpheus, crawl, O shamefaced fugitive, crawl
back under the crumbling broken wall of yourself,
for you are not stars, sky-set in the shape of a lyre,
but the dust of those who have been dismembered by Furies!

PULSE

The tears that pass, becoming
our estate,

the well-intended counsel
wait and wait!