

MAYA DEREN

DIVINE HORSEMEN

The Living Gods of Haiti

DOCUMENTEXT

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22 and 23. GHEDE. These two photographs, taken six months apart and in different hounfou, show that possession is not a period of "self-expression". On the contrary, the individual's psyche is displaced by that of the loa, whose character is constant and independent of that of the person in whose body he becomes manifest.

CHAPTER VII

The White Darkness

I HAVE left possession until the end, for it is the center toward which all the roads of Voudoun converge. It is the point toward which one travels by the most visible, the most physical means, yet, for the traveler, it is itself invisible. One might speak of it as the area of a circle whose circumference can be accurately described; yet this circumference is not, itself, the circle which it defines. To know this area, one must, finally, enter.

Upon such a threshold to the unknown, it is inevitable that one should pause to glance backward to survey the area accomplished, to ascertain whether the step is without alternative or whether, perhaps, the devious configurations of this diverse terrain may not conceal some twist, some crevice referring out of this landscape. Surely there was an egress which had escaped attention; for the structure of the terrain had, at times, been so receptive, so tolerant, its contours so undulant and apparently acquiescent, as to seem almost malleable, and frequently to lack those confinements and constrictions by which one has learned to define form. Yet, in such a survey, the impact results from the contrary discovery. From no previous vantage point had this geography so clearly revealed its immaculate geometry.

From this central point surges the lavish arterial river of ancestral blood which bears all racial history forward into the contemporary moment and funnels its vast accumulations into the denim-dressed serviteur. The entire collective over time, from the demiurgic Marassa to the proverbial wisdoms or the sharp, crafty angers of the grandfather, dead but a year and a day, here is comprehended, here becomes intimate and feeds and comforts. Yet up through this same center emerge also the monumental archetypes, the loa as pillars of the moral cosmos,

each of them multi-faceted yet homogeneous, each one a marvel of diversity without digression, and these may simply parade their transcendent perfection briefly, and then leave without intimate contact. Often the loa do nothing, say nothing of any immediate consequence. Yet their very remoteness, evidence of areas invulnerable to immediate anxieties and defeats, assures the serviteur of an essential order and stability. Here it is not nearness but the *distance* between a man and his god which comforts, which assures that the good endures and will endure; for it is to such distance that man removes his divinity to isolate him from the ravages and diminution of human inadequacy, just as, in times of violence, one might secrete one's most ultimate and cherished treasure.

To be made aware, once more, that man is of divine origin and is the issue of and heir to an uncounted multitude of hearts and minds; that at the root of the universe the great imper-turbable principles of cosmic good endure; and that even under his torn shirt, his hunger, the failures of his wit and the errors of his heart, his very blood harbors these monumental loa—is to experience the major blessing with which possession rewards men's dedicated service. This major reward comprehends all minor needs, and, with its very generality, soothes all the diversity of singular fears, personal losses and private anxieties. Whatever other benefits the loa may bring—advice, prescriptions, disciplines—these are but secondary.¹

Demur, if you will, that all this is merely a reference to a man's intellectual powers. Explain that it is the "imagination" which makes him capable of conceiving beyond the reality which he knows, and that this is compounded of memories. Speak of "idealism" as source of his willingness to undergo ordeal on behalf of creative, non-material achievement. Insist that in foregoing immediate reward he seeks historical position. Add, even, that such values are engendered by the influence of father, the love of mother, the praise of men. List all those intellectual and moral qualities—vision, inspiration, imagination—which most distinguish the poet, the philosopher, the

scientist; catalogue them, name them, count and differentiate and "explain" their origins, their operation, mechanisms and motivations. The Haitian will not dispute you. When you have finished, he might shrug his shoulders, saying simply, in Creole: "All that, we call 'to have loa'."

If the major value of the loa is their very transcendence, they cannot be, simultaneously, identified with man. To survey the structure of Voudoun is to encounter everywhere this distance, this divide which no man can straddle. It is evident in the final limitations of a houngan's control over the loa who may even subjugate him, and are free to be manifest outside his province;² it is defined in the feasts which nourish no man, in the accoutrements which no man may wear; it is implied in all the calling sounds—song, drum beat, asson and langage—which are like lines thrown out, to become the cables of the bridge upon which man would cross that chasm; it is present, as physical fact, in the amnesia which makes even the sense of the loa inaccessible to the very "horse" which bore him. *To understand that the self must leave if the loa is to enter, is to understand that one cannot be man and god at once.*³

Thus the possessed benefits least of all men from his own possession. He may even suffer for it in material loss, in the sometimes painful, always exhausted physical aftermath. And to the degree that his consciousness persists into its first moments or becomes aware of the very end, he experiences an overwhelming fear. Never have I seen the face of such anguish, ordeal and blind terror as at the moment when the loa comes. All this no man would ordinarily accept. But since the collective consists of ordinary men with a normal interest in their personal welfare, it is dependent upon its ability to induce in them a moment of extraordinary dedication if it is to have access to the revitalizing forces that flow from the center. It is toward the achievement of this—toward the forcing open of the door to the source—that the entire structure of Voudoun is directed. The serviteur must be induced to surrender his ego, that the archetpye become manifest. In the growing control

accomplished by the ordeals and instructions of initiation, and in the protective vigilance of houngan and *société*, he is reassured that the personal price need not be unpredictable or excessive.⁴ In the principle of collective participation is the guarantee that the burden shall, in turn, be distributed and shared. And finally, the structure has evolved—drum beat by drum beat, movement by movement—a force which compels a man forward, and which, in even the most dedicated, must triumph against that final terror which attends the loss of self, that last convulsive recoil from the dark sense of death.⁵ It is in the ceremonial peristyle that all this is brought to a focus and that the momentum is set in motion with the first songs for Legba, Loco, Ayizan.

I can remember an evening when it was as if, with those initial salutations, the drums flung the enormous snare of their sound into the night, across the still landscape, and from every direction drew captives across the threshold into the peristyle. I was among these latecomers. The singing, which might have been desultory at first, became warmer as the stream of arrivals gradually filled the benches, the space near the walls, flooded into the corners and finally overflowed into the court. A neighboring houngan, Joe, arrives, and a chair is placed beside me for him. I compliment him on his last ceremony, which, indeed, was conducted in a very eloquent fashion, and remark that he seems to be recovered from the illness which had troubled him for some time. "Oh, I was finally able to settle my difficulties with Loco", he answers, and since he knows that I am interested in such matters, proceeds to tell me the details of his involvement. I am so concentrated on this recital that I am not aware of the songs or the drumming until Titon, who is hounganikon, shouts in anger at the crowd which has, by now, solidly blocked off the entrance to the peristyle, and I realize that they are now beating and singing the song of salutation for the flags of the *société* and the *la-place*. A path is finally cleared and this trio enters the peristyle. They salute the center-post, the drums, and Houngan Joe suspends his recital, for in a

matter of moments they will address themselves to him. As always, I enjoy watching him, for the authority and grace of his bearing. He returns to his seat and the trio balances in place before me, stepping side to side in rhythm with the drums. As I rise in answer, a sense of nervous self-consciousness overwhelms me, although I have done this many times. (I am not at all alone in this; I have seen the lips of even mambos and houngans quiver nervously in such moments.) Curtsey, turn left, two, three; curtsey, back right, two, three; curtsey, now left, two, three—mirroring the trio before me. I walk west, crossing between the *la-place* and the flags, as they walk east. I turn, curtsey, then left, curtsey, right, then back; then north; then south. We approach each other and suddenly I cannot remember what I am supposed to do, but no one can perceive this, for the *la-place* kneels, holding the hilt of the saber high. I touch it with my lips, the two flags cross over it, and I salute these also. Then, with an enormous feeling of relief at having accomplished this act properly, I return to my chair. It seems now as if the drums and the singing were louder, sharper, and I can hardly hear Joe's recital, which he has resumed.

The drums pause, finally, and I am grateful for that, although the heat of the crowded peristyle seems more intense in the silence. The people converse casually, fanning themselves with their straw hats. Suddenly, like a sharp knife plunging into the soft heat and the soft chatter, Titon's imperious voice launches the invocation to Damballah. Over the demanding, compelling rush of its syllables, the tight staccato Yanvalou beat of the *petit* sets in; now the rounder tone, the more rolling rhythm of the *seconde* slides in under it; and then one feels a vibration beneath one's feet even before one hears the beat of the *maman*, which rises as if from some unfathomable depth, as if the very earth were a drum being pounded. Hardly has hearing plunged to encompass this dark dimension, than the high clang of the iron *ogan* sets in, its wind-filled resonance abruptly flinging open all the upper regions of sound, and the very air vibrates as if with tones above and beyond the reaches of the ear's

intelligence. For a brief moment this towering architecture of sound, stretching solidly from the abyss below to the heavens above hearing, seems to advance without movement, like a tidal wave so vast that no marker exists to scale its progress for the eye. Then the chorus of voices, having, it would seem, accumulated its force in the trough concealed behind the towering crest, hurls forward over that crest, and the whole structure crashes like a cosmic surf over one's head. I find myself standing bolt upright, singing, or perhaps even screaming the song. Others about me, who had also been seated are now also standing. Most of them move forward to dance, but it is as if the shock of that inundation had completely winded me and I sink back into my seat.

Now it is the dance which suggests water. Before me the bodies of the dancers undulate with a wave-like motion, which begins at the shoulders, divides itself to run separately along the arms and down the spine, is once more unified where the palms rest upon the bent knees, and finally flows down the legs into the earth, while already the shoulders have initiated the wave which follows. The eyes are fixed on the ground, and although the head is steady, the circular movement of the shoulders seems to send it forward, to draw the body after it, over and over; and as the bodies, which began in a posture almost erect, bend toward the earth, the undulation becomes more and more horizontal, until all figures blend into a slow flowing serpentine stream circling the center-post with a fluency that belies the difficulty of the movement. What have they all found there, on that central ground, that their limbs should move with such ease and such perfection while, on the exiled outskirts, my own limbs are burdened with muscles, must ponder and delay my every will to motion? What secret source of power flows to them, rocks them and revolves them, as on a roundabout the bright steeds prance and pursue, eternally absolved of fatigue, failure and fall? I have but to rise, to step forward, become part of this glorious movement, flowing with it, its motion becoming mine, as the roll of the sea

might become the undulation of my own body. At such moments one does not move *to* the sound, one *is* the movement of the sound, created and borne by it; hence, nothing is difficult.

The drums cease; I return to my seat and only at that moment realize that I am perspiring profusely. La Merci, my domestic, is carrying my large handkerchief, and I scan the line of hounsies several times before I distinguish her face, which is ordinarily so expressive of her distinct, lively temperament, but now seems to have been planed down into a mask of anonymity blending and losing itself among the other whitekerchiefed heads. I try to attract her attention, but fail, and so rise to go toward her. I take two steps and my left leg suddenly roots, numbly, to the ground, pitching me forward. Someone's hand grasps my arm, supports me firmly, while, stunned, I freeze momentarily in this posture, seek to regain center and balance, and finally straighten out. The man who happened to have been standing there, relaxes his support. I smile my thanks and return to my seat, still shaken by this abrupt blow. Someone is sent to get the handkerchief for me. There is an unpleasant lightness in my head, as if the many parts of the brain were being gently disengaged, its solidity, its integrity being somehow imperceptibly dispersed, as a fog might be gently dispersed by a light, inconstant breeze; and as these separations occur, there are little spaces of emptiness.

Foolish to disregard the leg momentarily caught, or this strange, subtle thinning out of consciousness. These are the warning auras of possession. One knows oneself vulnerable.⁶ I begin to repeat to myself: "Hold together, hold, hold." As the drums start up again, I feel I must get away if I am to hold and I press through the crowd toward the exit, smiling, so that no one may suspect my predicament, which is as a weakness, as something I should, by now, have been able to master and regulate. At the moment I pass the short wall which marks the edge of the peristyle the sounds abruptly become fainter. The night is cool and luminous. I light a cigarette, cross the familiar

court, and wander up the road slowly. How distant the voices and the drums seem, although they are quite clear. I can hear that the round for Damballah has finished. My head is tightening, integrating, becoming solid once more. Yet this cool, quiet, private dark, where nothing demands or insists, is a gentle peace, where I would linger, where I would compose and recompose myself once more, while, in the peristyle, the processional advances, celebrating now Agassou, Agwé and Badé.

I hear, then, the first beats of the salute to Ogoun. Now I must return, for this is the guardian of the hounfor and I cannot offend the house by being absent at his salutation. I start back toward the peristyle, hurrying now, for I had wandered farther than I thought. By the time I arrive, the loa has already mounted Isnard. He is barefoot, the legs of the trousers are rolled up, so that the abrupt movements of the feet do not catch in them and trip him, and he wears a bright red handkerchief. He is pacing up and down, in a kind of anger. It is impressive. Isnard is, to begin with, tall and powerful in body; now that sense of stature is enormously reinforced by the psychic projection of the heroic loa which has infused that body. The loa walks to the drums, and, laying his hand on the skin of the *maman*, orders them silenced. He stands and waits. Titon approaches, turns in ritual salutation, kisses the earth at his feet and would withdraw, but Ogoun extends his hand in ritual greeting. I see Titon stiffen, as one might prepare to endure an onslaught. They shake right hands, and the Ogoun extends the left, the loa hand. For a moment Titon hesitates, then he meets it with his left. He staggers a moment, but regains balance and rights himself, holds his ground until his hand is released, and walks away.⁷ Now houngan Joe is greeting the loa head-of-the house. I find Titon standing beside me. He looks at me, who must go forward next, and says "Attention! Attention!" He takes my hand suddenly and digs his nail into my palm. The sharp, sudden pain restores me. He had recognized, although I had not even been aware of it, that, once more, I had become

vulnerable. As I step forward for my salutation I concentrate upon the memory of that pain, almost as one might finger an amulet at moments of crisis. It serves me well. The contact of the left hand with the loa produces only a momentary shock, which passes rapidly, like an electric current, and I, too, return to my place. Others step forward to make the ritual salutation; Titon launches a song for Ogoun, and the drumming and dance begin again.

I am troubled by this persistent vulnerability, and, pretending to see something in the court outside, I turn my back on the dancers and the drums, a gesture and means of withdrawal. The drum beat of the *maman* "breaks" and at that very moment, a man standing on the sidelines a few yards from me, keels over backward, as if stunned by a blow. The loa can come like this, without warning, as a wind. The fall has been broken by several persons standing beside the man, and they are supporting him, bracing the still dead weight of his body, so that he remains on his feet. Then his body jerks violently out of its stillness, and with a mighty wrench which knocks one of his supporters to the ground, he frees himself and hurtles forward into the dance area of the peristyle. Now the drum has caught him up, catapults him from side to side. A woman who has accidentally been jarred by the violent *débâtement*, freezes on one leg—as if this contact had been a contagion—lurches forward, is also caught up in the drums. I do not wish to watch this, and I turn my back to the peristyle. It troubles me the more, in that, with Isnard himself mounted, there is no one there now who can help these agonized creatures, no one who, with the asson, could arbitrate between the loa and the human self, which wrangle violently over possession of the bodies, as two hands might fiercely compete for a single glove.

I recall how they would sometimes cling to Isnard, how, with the sound of asson and syllables, he would gradually subdue the last ravaging tremors. It is this that must be learned, above all, I say to myself slowly: not only the power of divine

invocation, but also the tender mercy of worldly restoration; so that, to the body which must walk the earth, is returned the self that is appropriate to such dimension.

Still looking out, I say to myself, also, "This is the moment when you must make your decision." For I now know that, today, the drums, the singing, the movements—these may catch me also. I do not wish that. There is both fear and embarrassment in the idea. I know that I can leave now, that I can push out through the crowded exit, and cross the smooth, trampled court, turn up the rutted road, walk down its cool length—the sound growing more and more distant—until, in the small hut, with its thick clay walls, I might lie down, not hearing the drums at all, except for brief moments when the faint, fiftful breeze would turn in that direction. Yet to do this would be to read myself out of it altogether, in a large sense. Not that I would be subsequently excluded; not at all. Yet, in my heart, I know that somehow, it is not fair to stay only when it is easy, or pleasurable, or exalting and to withdraw in the face of discomfort. This is as much a part of it, as if, in accepting the rewards, one had contracted to endure the ordeals. There is a sense of pride, too. To run away would be a cowardice. I could resist; but I must not escape. And I can resist best, I think to myself, if I put aside the fears and nervousness; if, instead of suspecting my vulnerability, I set myself in brazen competition with all this which would compel me to its authority. With this decision I feel a resurgence of strength, of the certainty of self, and of my proper identity.

I turn back toward the dancers, and join them. I sing, converse with Ogoun. Nothing is shaken within me. After many songs Ogoun announces that he is content with the dance, and that now he will leave. He stands there a moment, then a great spasm shakes the body, jerking it off balance. But already there are several to catch Isnard as he falls, to drag his limp body to a chair where, in a moment, he slowly raises his head, looks about him with the puzzled concentration of one who wakes in a room not yet habitual and familiar, and would orient himself.

His hand rubs the arm of the chair with an almost imperceptible movement, as if he would reassure himself of its solid reality. Then, as the concentration fades from his features, fatigue sweeps over them. He rises wearily and makes for his private chamber, where, I know, he will lie down to rest for a short while before resuming his duties.

Everyone stops to rest, as if some critical moment had been passed. The drummers stroll into the courtyard to buy soda pop, grillots, biscuits. Those people who arrived late use this opportunity to exchange personal greetings with the hounsies. We all wander about, chatting. Then the drummers return to their seats and I hear Titon urging the hounsies back into the peristyle to take up their formation. Some people have already left, but the peristyle is still crowded. The next song is for Erzulie. Once more the drums and the chorus, skillfully, rapidly, in a matter of moments, construct the vast tidal wave of sound and crash its surf forward. And once more the dancers ride forward on that surf, on that sound, the rise and fall of its waves, all of them once more part of the flow of the Yanvalou together, circling the center-post with a slow undulation as of a single serpentine body.

Watching, one senses that if these are united, it is not at all because they refer to each other. They are separate, as bodies and as beings; the ground-fixed eyes and the deep crouch accentuate this sense of each of them in-turned, in-listening, moving in common to a shared sound, heard by each of them singly. When, following a "break" and having resumed the erect posture which would slowly sink earthward again, they may face each other and briefly mirror each other's movements, even then the pairs seem less to duplicate each other than to be, both, mirrors which, face to face, doubly reflect some invisible figure who dances between and who knows reality only in such mirrors. It is this which draws one in, for one rises to commit oneself neither to the dancers nor to the drummers, but to some pulse whose authority transcends all these creatures and so unites them. The total is not the sum of its parts: we do not

serve each other; but rather, together, one serves a common which comprehends all.

The drums pause; then, almost immediately, begin again, accumulating, this time, into a Mahi. This has a gay quality and is a dance step which I particularly delight in, although it rapidly tires the muscles of calves and thighs. At first the drummer is considerate and "breaks" often enough to permit the limbs to relax and rest. But as the dance goes on, these "breaks" become more rare and the sense of fun gives way to a sense of great effort. The air seems heavy and wet, and, gasping, I feel that it brings no refreshment into my laboring lungs. My heart pounds in the pulse at my temple. My legs are heavy beyond belief, the muscles contracted into an enormous ache which digs deeper with every movement. My entire being focuses on one single thought: that I must endure.

I cannot say, now, why I did not stop; except that, beneath all this is always a sense of contract: whether, in the end, one be victor or victim, it is to be in the terms one has accepted. One cannot default. So focused was I, at that time, upon the effort to endure, that I did not even mark the moment when this ceased to be difficult and I cannot say whether it was sudden or gradual but only that my awareness of it was a sudden thing, as if the pace which had seemed unbearably demanding had slipped down a notch into a slow-motion, so that my mind had time, now, to wander, to observe at leisure, what a splendid thing it was, indeed, to hear the drums, to move like this, to be able to do all this so easily, to do even more, if it pleased one, to elaborate, to extend this movement of the arms toward greater elegance, or to counterpoint that rhythm of the heel or even to make this movement to the side, this time.

As sometimes in dreams, so here I can observe myself, can note with pleasure how the full hem of my white skirt plays with the rhythms, can watch, as if in a mirror, how the smile begins with a softening of the lips, spreads imperceptibly into a radiance which, surely, is lovelier than any I have ever seen. It is when I turn, as if to a neighbor, to say, "Look! See how

lovely that is!" and see that the others are removed to a distance, withdrawn to a circle which is already watching, that I realize, like a shaft of terror struck through me, that it is no longer myself whom I watch. Yet it *is* myself, for as that terror strikes, we two are made one again, joined by and upon the point of the left leg which is as if rooted to the earth. Now there is only terror. "This is it!" Resting upon that leg I feel a strange numbness enter it from the earth itself and mount, within the very marrow of the bone, as slowly and richly as sap might mount the trunk of a tree. I say numbness, but that is inaccurate. To be precise, I must say what, even to me, is pure recollection, but not otherwise conceivable: I must call it a white darkness, its whiteness a glory and its darkness, terror. It is the terror which has the greater force, and with a supreme effort I wrench the leg loose—I must keep moving! must keep moving!—and pick up the dancing rhythm of the drums as something to grasp at, something to keep my feet from resting upon the dangerous earth. No sooner do I settle into the succor of this support than my sense of self doubles again, as in a mirror, separates to both sides of an invisible threshold, except that now the vision of the one who watches flickers, the lids flutter, the gaps between moments of sight growing greater, wider. I see the dancing one here, and next in a different place, facing another direction, and whatever lay between these moments is lost, utterly lost. I feel that the gaps will spread and widen and that I will, myself, be altogether lost in that dead space and that dead time. With a great blow the drum unites us once more upon the point of the left leg. The white darkness starts to shoot up; I wrench my foot free but the effort catapults me across what seems a vast, vast distance, and I come to rest upon a firmness of arms and bodies which would hold me up. But these have voices—great, insistent, singing voices—whose sound would smother me. With every muscle I pull loose and again plunge across a vast space and once more am no sooner poised in balance than my leg roots. So it goes: the leg fixed, then wrenched loose, the long fall across space, the rooting of the

leg again—for how long, how many times I cannot know. My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. This sound will drown me! “Why don’t they stop! Why don’t they stop!” I cannot wrench the leg free. I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound. There is nothing anywhere except this. There is no way out. The white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising, rising; is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin. It is too much, too bright, too white for me; this is its darkness. “Mercy!” I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly: “Erzulie!” The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all.⁸

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If the earth is a sphere, then the abyss below the earth is also its heavens; and the difference between them is no more than time, the time of the earth’s turning. If the earth is a vast horizontal surface reflecting, invisibly, even for each man his own proper soul, then again, the abyss below the earth is also its heavens, and the difference between them is time, the time of an eye lifting and dropping. The sun-door and the tree-root are the same thing in the same place, seen now from below and now from above and named, by the seer, for the moment of seeing.

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How could memory reach back beyond the first thing which might be remembered? How could I know a void as void, who had not yet learned substance, or darkness, who did not know light? My memory begins with sound heard distantly, addressed to me, and this I know: this is the sound of light. It is a heard light, a beam invisible but bright, scanning the void



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for substance to fix upon; and to become upon that substance light. Around the sharp directness and direction of that sound the darkness shapes itself and now it is as if I lay at the far distant end of an infinitely deep-down, sunken well. Each cell of body and brain anguishes upward and yet I cannot lift myself by my own motion; but, like some still unborn, unliving thing, am drawn up, slowly at first, by the sound’s power. Slowly still, borne on its lightless beam, as one might rise up from the bottom of the sea, so I rise up, the body growing lighter with each second, am up-borne stronger, drawn up faster, uprising swifter, mounting still higher, higher still, faster, the sound grown still stronger, its draw tighter, still swifter, become loud, loud and louder, the thundering rattle, clangoring bell, unbearable, then suddenly: surface; suddenly: air; suddenly: sound is light, dazzling white.

How clear the world looks in this first total light. How purely form it is, without, for the moment, the shadow of meaning. I see everything all at once, without the delays of succession, and each detail is equal and equally lucid, before the sense of relative importance imposes the emphasis of eyes, the obscurity of nostril which is a face. Yet, even as I look, as if to remember forever this pristine world, already the forms

become modulated into meanings, cease to be forms, become the night, the peristyle, the people. The white dresses and shirts, the asson's beaded mesh, still quivering from its labor, these blend, for a moment, with a fleeting memory of a white tent in the dark night and a trough of water. As the souls of the dead did, so have I, too, come back. I have returned. But the journey around is long and hard, alike for the strong horse, alike for the great rider.