

I TIRESIAS

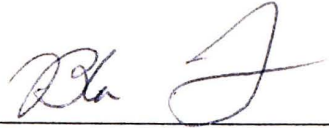
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HEATHER O'MALLEY



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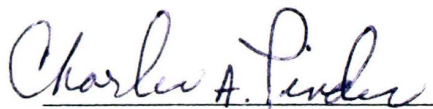


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Date 21 Jun 05

# I Tiresias

Heather O'Malley

*I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives  
Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
Homeward, and brings the sailor home from the sea.*

- The Wasteland, T. S. Eliot

*You have eyes to see with, but you do not see yourself,  
you do not see the horror shadowing every step of your life,  
the blind shame in which you live,  
you do not see where you live and who lives with you,  
lives always at your side.*

- Tiresias to Oedipus, Oedipus Rex, Sophocles

## I Tiresias

I had this dream of walking  
in an old and dark forest  
could feel the trees alive

watching me with cold,  
dirt fed minds, reaching out  
to snag my white tunic.

Their voices were clear in  
the creak of wood, rustle of branch,  
in the shudder of leaves.

I beheld these two serpents,  
helixed about each other,  
a caduceus without the wings.

I stood there and watched them twine,  
and when I saw a gap open.  
I set my staff there. That's it.

That's the dream I had. Now this,  
This is my life, my curse, mine  
and I am telling you as my friend.

I cried the first day after changing.  
That was new. I'd never wept until hiccups  
shook me, my face burning from the salt.

I don't really know if this is real or dream.  
I was a man and now I am a woman  
but in a way neither feels right.

Is my life a dream? Do I sleep now,  
dreaming my life as a woman  
or did I dream my life as a boy?

I wish I knew. I cannot think  
of any way to tell one from the other,  
that I'm not some thing of braided gender?

The only thing I can think of to return  
to my former life, the life I miss, is to  
find those snakes again, set my staff.

That old life calls to me strongly  
and so does this one. It's difficult  
to live this life of separation.

All I ever wanted was a normal life,  
without all these vagaries, to be a boy,  
a girl, either would be better than this.







## Elegy

They say, "What's in a name?"  
First, last or otherwise  
it is nothing but a term,  
some frame of reference.  
Can you change a name to  
change a life?

Can a name die?  
How do you bury a name?  
Celebrate its glories?  
Lament its faults and follies?  
How do you say good-bye  
when it is clear something remains?

## Empty Glass

He always set another place for dinner,  
laid out a plate, saucer, cup,  
folded a napkin and put utensils on it.

He never poured a drink for that place  
or served up any of his meal,  
a pat of butter, a salad or anything else.

He did this at restaurants as well,  
asking the wait staff for the extra place  
ignoring the looks cast his way.

He never answered the question why,  
when friends or others asked,  
only smiled shyly, eyes bright.

But near the end of every dinner  
he raised his glass, held a silent moment,  
bowed head with hair in his face,

to empty his glass and set it down,  
wipe his face on the napkin,  
lost to something in his past.

## Bus Ride

What do they see?  
A man in a dress?  
A sideshow freak?  
Something broken?

The bus lurches and I grab a pole,  
an old man looks at me  
with wrinkled eyes, liver spots,  
gumming slowly.

A child burbles back,  
her mother turns her,  
over her to shoulder  
to face the plastic window.

A young man leers, his dark eyes  
narrow on my legs, on my breasts,  
a slight smile turns the corners  
as they slowly rove.

A young girl in uniform,  
a fast food girl  
looks at what I wear,  
critical eyebrows.

We lurch to a stop.



## Rites

His brother's head was in the box, \*  
packed tight with old newspapers,  
ads for bras, soup, cold remedies  
pressing on the forehead, staining it.

When the moon was full,  
he would remove the head,  
place it on top of the television,  
and speak with his unquiet dead.

He would stay up all night long  
nattering to the head, rumors,  
sharing the hopes and dreams  
birthed and crushed in that last moon.

He would lovingly wash the face,  
brush the thinning hair, kiss the grin  
as the lips curled back,  
teeth protruding from flesh.

When the sun rose, he gathered  
his brother's head and nested it,  
in a weeks worth of fresh newspapers.  
He hoped his brother would forgive him.

\* From "As Simple As That" by Marilyn Nelson

## One Hundred and Eight Beads

There are one hundred and eight beads  
in the mala, one hundred and eight  
breaths to open and close  
the lungs, to reach for quiet.

Sometimes it works and she  
sits serene in the silence of mind.  
Other times she goes through the motions,  
turbulence distorting chants into noise.

She uses these beads to find  
herself, to breathe her back  
into her body, back  
into the life she fears.

One hundred and eight beads  
to hold off her terror, to tie  
it away at least for a while  
as she sits and breathes.

The rise and fall of her chest  
keeps her here, keeps her now,  
keeps her in dialogue with her hands  
sliding from bead to bead,

the texture, smooth, a few ridges  
to catch the fingers, yellow thread  
knotted, holding each bead, each breath,  
each prayer together until the end.

## Sunday Night

She lies a naked tangle in the sheets,  
clutching fabric, clutching hair,  
arching like a bow, strong and taut,  
never stopping, thrashing the bed  
until she collapses, a spent moment,  
breath short, panting like a runner,  
eyes blinking the ceiling, walls, face  
of the shy smile, reverently gazing back.



## Oak Tree

The bark is rough,  
scarred in some places  
where you can see the white  
inner flesh, wet with sap.

Its branches flare out and up,  
each new limb reaching  
for light, green soaked,  
leaves giving its fullness.

Roots burrow ever deeper  
holding on, drinking  
the vitality of dirt,  
mingling light and dark.

The heart wood must pulse,  
feeling its body expand,  
layer by layer into this  
life, warmed by the sun.

## Trying to Connect

She was different. We let her go.  
We could not justify keeping a cat  
who only seemed to attack others:  
never choosing a lap over solitude,  
never purring over an uncertain hiss.

A beautiful, black American Shorthair,  
she was different, how we did not know.  
She skittered through the house,  
swiping at ankles, our dog and her brother,  
uncomfortable even in her sleep.

We made the effort to deal with her,  
to make her more comfortable in our lives  
but she was different, we tried in vain,  
neither catnip, toys, some different food,  
would change her, make her fit in.

She clawed my hand as I pet her,  
turning and hissing something out,  
running to hide under the guest bed.  
She was different. We did not understand.  
We had to take her to the shelter.

I don't know if they put her down  
or if some new family took a chance  
on a cat we could not get to love us.  
All I know is I wept when we left her.  
She was different and more than we could bear.

## The Emperor's Tortoise

The Emperor's tortoise  
is meant to teach  
the secrets of immortality,  
three hundred years old.  
Its rough, green and brown shell  
oiled by servants until it glows,  
covered by cloth of gold.  
It is carried around on pillows,  
they rarely allow it to walk.

For rituals it is placed on a pedestal,  
its short legs move feebly in the air,  
shell resting on stone, belly flat.  
It stretches out its wrinkled head,  
eyes blinking at the pomp and circumstance,  
trying to bite a passing morsel.  
They feed it by hand, the tastiest bits,  
holding them out by delicate chopsticks  
as it sits lonely in its wooden bed.



## Lash of Memory

I forgot the memory of weeping rocks,

of water trickling down gray,  
dripping from dangling moss  
to make small pools below,

of the flash of daylight at night  
burning the image of trees before thunder  
into the hungry retina of my eyes,

of the delirious flavor of smoke  
spicing camped food, tainting  
cool draught of water with ash,

of fields in autumn,  
golden grain moving with the wind,  
birds lifting into visibility.

I forgot the memory of you,  
pale skinned, naked, laughing  
in the snow as I move above you,  
the cold banking the ardor,  
tempering the thrusting,  
to crest screaming, shivering in climax,  
to fall next to you, kissing blue lips.

I forgot the acrid smell of your anger,  
eyes returning nothing as I reached  
out to touch forgiveness,

the bitter taste of a phone buzzing dead,  
held unbelieving to my ear,  
wanting it all to not be true,

the bite of words fading to memory,  
sound bites stored forever,  
to speak when the pain fades.

I forgot until reminiscence  
tore open healed wounds  
with the lash of memory.

I forgot pain isn't forever.

## II

## Running on the Shore

I lingered there, on the shore,  
running in the sand, past a dead seal  
wrapped in seaweed, bloated and bitten,  
white eyes staring into each passerby  
the barks of sea lions drown the chiding of gulls,  
the breeze pushes against me,  
salt crusts my face, cracking, red,  
keeping me on this shore.

The air heavy with fish and wet salt,  
the unmistakable smell of the ocean,  
my nose wrinkles as I run,  
legs burning from the sinking sand,  
the water yanks my feet out and under,  
to spill me, cover my body with wave,  
pulling me out into the dark deeps  
and letting me rest in the silence of tide.

I want to cross over, to taste  
the air on that distant shore  
and know it for my own.  
Answer the call of emptiness dragging  
my eyes out farther, until they ache  
unblinking into the setting sun,  
the roll of wave stripping the sediment,  
tumbling me in the rough sand.

I spit the salt, the sand from my mouth,  
shake the foam from my stubbled head,  
pluck and toss the slimy, air pocketed  
seaweed from off of me. I lope into a run,  
mouth yearning for clean water, eyes stretching  
to where I want to be, miles from this shore,  
the pain of running, to stand on the other coast  
looking back to where I was, out my changed eyes.



## Italian

Three cloves of garlic, well crushed,  
stirred into the pasta sauce.  
Soon I'll add the sausage  
to give it that extra something.

The sauce, dark and red,  
its scent fills the house  
with hunger, with longing for  
something that is no longer there.

My father taught me to cook,  
though not with any lessons.  
I watched from round the corner,  
too afraid to stay close for long.

Basil, a little red wine.  
Some for me, some for the sauce.  
Some oregano and thyme,  
slow cooked until it is perfect.

Perfection takes time you know.  
A child does not know that;  
the weight of a fathers fist  
bears down, blackening the past.

I turn down the burner's heat  
Waiting for the flavors to  
blend, to leech the crushed herbs,  
transforming sauce to something rich.

Pain was what you taught me most,  
how to flee from quick gestures,  
how to pacify, to hide,  
to watch around corners for you.

But you sang in the kitchen,  
songs I could not understand  
sprinkling tomato with  
the only love you ever knew.

Shunyata

It grows

echoing in the space,  
lightness,  
filling the hollow, something held,

let go to fall away in a  
breath  
opening and closing, a bellows  
feeding  
as it keeps expanding into

filling life with an expansive  
emptiness,  
setting down roots where it can.

## Shopping

It overwhelmed me while I was looking for pita,  
a want,

I shopped down my list, crossing off cans of soup,  
walking slowly from item to item,  
noting crackers on sale, two for a dollar  
if you use your bonus card.

I wanted something more real than groceries,  
than couples buying pregnancy tests,  
than a woman clutching fresh peaches to her chest  
than green vested clerks checking prices on aisle five,  
than a woman holding the freezer door open looking at peas,  
than the bright red of fresh meat wrapped for sale.

## The Dance of a Thousand Nighttimes

The dance of a thousand nighttimes  
comes slowly at first,  
hesitant steps, stumble to the stage.

It begins with lifted toes,  
awakening bare feet,  
moving to the rhythm pounding in vein.

It grabs my legs, arms, contorts  
torsos slick with glistening release,  
swaying in the movements of a cobra.

I can feel the drums building,  
an emerging storm,  
feet pounding time to the flurry of hands.

The dance takes me, rides my flesh,  
intoxicates, slides me into  
moment, breath and motion.

I spin facing the wide stars,  
lost in my senses,  
feet guiding me strong and sure.

the dance awakens something furry,  
deep inside, slick with birth,  
roaring voice back into life.

The spin takes me and I fall  
panting the earth,  
eyes pulsing with my heart.

The drums sing the rhythm of blood  
awakening an urge,  
finally free to dance myself.



## Distant Drums

If a person does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears the beat of a different drummer. Let him march to the music he hears, however measured or far away. - Henry David Thoreau

I wander lost, under the evergreens,  
pick my way round rocks, over fallen trees,  
moving on tired feet, weary eyes  
try to spot the outlines of the trail,  
little more than an animal's path  
to the river I could hear ahead.

I followed the trail laid under my feet,  
not my choice to walk here,  
to crunch along fallen branches, leaves,  
trying to get closer to them, to better hear  
but they teased me cruelly,  
stayed just at the edge of hearing.

After fifteen minutes I reach an old covered bridge,  
paint on the side flaking in chunks,  
falling like leaves to drift in the water.  
I cross over, going further than I had before  
footsteps resounding, heels strike the wooden slats,  
through darkness to the opposite bank.

I turn, the path stretched behind,  
I sit down on a fallen tree to rest,  
breathing heavy from walking.  
Is this my life, picking through trees,  
beating a new trail with my feet,  
trying to lose something always with me?

I shake my head, dropping thoughts like leaves,  
a trail is too simple, sounds like a purpose,  
like a striving towards a summit.  
Life is just life, trails and paths nothing,  
but a way to shape the terrain  
of a life too big to hold.

I say goodbye to my footsteps,  
regrets turn eyes behind, words  
try to break my lips, to speak  
apologies, seek absolution from the trees.  
I stand, brush bark and dirt off, turn  
not wanting to let my life walk away.

Life apart

I could hear their singing over the din of campers,  
faint, miles away, filing the air with summoning.

Compelled to see them, to dance under that song  
which had no name yet lingered in my ears.

I needed a day off, apart from the campers  
constant demands, a time for me to simply be.

I headed into the woods, following no trail but sound,  
hearing my way through trees, guided by impulse, desire.

The expanse of trees felt comforting, welcome,  
like I belonged under the patterns of broken shade.

On the hill it grew fainter and I could feel it stretch,  
distance between song and self, I turned my feet elsewhere.

The song grew as I moved up through the wooded draw,  
a clearing of undergrowth, the trees tall, sure in their age.

I stood there, off center, gazing at the darkness of leaves  
when it crested, engulfed me under the rush of song.

My blood fevered, boiled out into motion, clothes binding,  
I tore myself naked as the first faint drops fell.

Raw to the world I danced this dryad music urging,  
feet pounding the loam, leaves scattering as birds.

My heart ached with expansion, soft rain down skin, through hair,  
rivulets down adolescent chest, weaving around faint body hair,

soaking the tangled nest, the semi hard penis moving  
in time to my steps, I smile up at the veiled sun.

The song was all I knew, pulsed within me as I  
jumped, whirled, a dervish, touching the divine, making contact.

Each pulse stretched me out, dissolved me in movement,  
spinning me into more than self, drunk with the music of trees.

My eyes beheld turning stars, other things danced with me,  
the wind dressed me in fragrance, the rain a baptism, a rebirth.

Barbed wire slammed me into flesh, back to trees, fallen leaves and dirt,  
blood washing down my thigh, blinking back to the world before.

The pain would arrive later, my clothes felt like a shroud,  
clinging to wet skin as I pulled on some human façade.

I limped along the path through the trailless maze of trees,  
back to the din of campers and into a life apart.

## The Road Goes On

Ale never washes out the taste of ash.

It's so hard to forget that weight,  
even when the light shines in the blue sky  
and the air is rich with spring,  
my hands folded deep in earth  
coaxing life from seed.

I can still feel the burden,  
smell the heat, choke on foul air,  
feel fingers round my throat.

The past holds me  
and I flail against it  
like a web on my face  
that I can't remove  
and its spider hunts me.

Friends sing and dance,  
find joy in food, ale.  
I wish I could as well  
but they never felt that,  
never felt dragged down,  
spared the worst I endured,  
for them.

It haunts my waking,  
my sleeping,  
burns my finger with memory  
until I cry  
and Rosie holds me.

I yearn for the seagulls call.

He promised me  
that when I am too tired,  
the burden too great,  
I can go west,  
birds calling me home.



## Going Home

I stare at the mirror,  
I know I need to be there  
so I close my eyes, bind my breasts,  
keeping the ace bandage taut,  
pressure, my breasts ache,  
as I create the lie of flatness,  
the clips lock into the bandage  
to keep it from unraveling on me.

Next the T-shirt, pulled tight, tucked  
into my jeans, the lines of bandage clear,  
the shirt bought for this occasion  
hangs awkwardly on me,  
forest green, heavy broadcloth,  
with pockets where my breasts should be.  
Nothing pushes out the fabric,  
you cannot see the bandage at all.

I pull my hair back with both hands,  
slick it into a tight pony tail with gel  
rinsing my fingers of the sticky residue.  
I pick up my bag and plane ticket,  
walk away from the silvered glass,  
carry them to my car, not quite ready  
for the drive to the airport, to travel  
the two thousand miles that divide us.

I do this for you.

III

## Jellyfish

They are small, eight would fit my hand,  
clear, they have a slight whiteness,  
bobbing along the tide, passively floating,  
tendrils small, reaching for something,  
unable to hurt you with their little stings.  
Still she panics until she learns how fragile.

How feral her wide eyes are,  
as she sharply snaps her cupped hand,  
the force of the water tears the jellyfish,  
separating their soft flesh into death,  
as she now plays happily in the waves, at last  
finding something that keeps her swimming.

## Visitation

Something invisible stands beside me  
itching my skin with expectant lightning

My hair moves from whispers  
too soft for my ears to understand

I want to touch, to reach out, to hear  
salutations from someone gone

Who is it who takes the time  
to visit me, to remind me  
of those I have never forgotten



Breaking up is hard to do

She wept as the sting arrived,  
the skin on the left side of her face  
showing a red palm blossoming,  
her head turning back to forward.

The pain didn't blink her back  
to now, didn't help her swallow the  
knowing, feeling the liquid weight  
of the sticky redness of life

puddled in her lap, his stringy hairs  
congealed into clumps, didn't help her  
keep from replaying the moment,  
the dry lipped kiss he gave her,

the sadness heavy in his words,  
the surprise in his eyes, the touch of thunder,  
the meaty sound of falling backwards,  
and the beginning of tears, the bitter

smell of cordite drifting to the ceiling  
in blue black wisps slipping from the barrel,  
the pounding feet, questions and accusations  
falling on her sorrow deafened ears.

## Answering Trees

I sit back against the bark,  
feel its folds and ripples,  
and I breathe in the greening air,  
fresh, smelling faintly of water and flowers.  
Across from me the sun traces lines  
through other branches, outlining and illuminating  
until the green glows with gold.

A couple tussles on the grass,  
smiling, laughing, eyes bright,  
they kiss, pulling each in close,  
a hand moving through hair.  
Do their faces contort with anger?  
Tears broken by sobs? beg for forgiveness?  
What are they like screaming in passion?

This moment in the grass,  
touched by sunlight,  
is this the truth of them?

I listen to the murmuring leaves,  
trees my only answer.

## The Mosaic

He never believed in love,  
not in an embrace, a kiss,  
not even when grunting out  
animal sounds in time  
with measured thrusts.

He knew it was a lie  
meant to bind, ensnare,  
wrap in swaddling,  
sucking sustenance  
from one pair of lips  
until boxed away  
for a pretty death.

He could never hold love  
in his hand, weigh it,  
taste it in his pores,  
grow sick in its consumption.  
How could he?

He wanted to believe,  
yet no sign ever assured,  
no kiss ever persuaded,  
repeated I love you's,  
He could speak to others  
but not his to know.

Her kiss, warm on his lips,  
lulled him into belief,  
into feeling she was  
the elusive One,  
prophesized and promised.

He held her warm in his arms,  
whispered to her of his hopes,  
feeling her strength hold him  
as they lay down together.  
Yet like the others all have, she  
dissolved like smoke in his hands  
carried away by the wind.

Breakings and screaming,  
the only remains of love.  
Picking through shattered dreams

for shards to make his mosaic,  
his altar to the desired,  
praying for the belief in true love  
lest it never believe in him.

## The Plate

The green and white plate has a chip in it,  
been there for three years  
ever since a knife was dropped  
and bounced off the edge.

It clattered from the plate down,  
spun across the table,  
dropped, wet with gravy  
onto the hard wood floor.

The knife lay there even after  
the meal had finished.  
The plate was cleaned and kept  
in memory of the event.



## A Buffoon's Pantoum

Weighed down by a cat  
Pressed into my chair  
Held by more than that  
as he nibbled on my hair

Pressed into my chair  
trying to do my work  
as he nibbled on my hair  
listening to coffee perk

trying to do my work  
purrs filling my ears  
listening to coffee perk  
half a moment from tears

purrs filling my ears  
dreams crossing my eyes  
half a moment from tears  
the memory of lies

Dreams crossing my eyes  
held by more than that  
the memory of lies  
weighed down by a cat

## Snorkeling in the Bahamas

Without knocking

I wade into the surf  
unannounced

    fins flopping  
    to knee;          to thigh;

to fall forward  
    and stretch out on the surface  
with powerful kicks

I rummage through the reef

gaze at  
    bright fish darting around shapes  
    contorted like brains  
    branching like leaves  
coral moving like fronds in the roll  
    of waves

I stop

Two Barracuda slice through the water ahead

Their glassy disk-like eyes

    cold inhuman  
weigh me  
measure gain to effort  
    as I I hang weightless  
    breathless

watching their long slender bodies  
    sway smoothly  
    strutting wetly  
under the surface  
    tooth filled maws grin

my heart   pounding  
    throbbing my chest  
as I watch them intently

Time falls

    distorted  
as my heart          ticks  
    the minutes  
as I hang there  
unsure of what to do

if they come for me  
jaws wide  
    I would die  
        struggling  
in a churn of blood and foam  
    to rest meaty in their stomachs or  
    be lost in bits on the sandy floor

with a tail flick I'm dismissed

the two glide on  
    eying me until I and they  
fade from sight

A wave dumps water down my snorkel;

I cough and spit  
air floods burning lungs  
I thrash briefly  
confused  
fight for the surface  
in a near panic look for land  
steady kicks speed  
me shoreward  
to stumble awkwardly  
up the slope of sand  
to collapse panting on the beach  
tropical sun  
    the white sand  
hot and itchy  
against my wet skin  
crawling into my shorts  
as I pant  
like the first fish to crawl from the sea

## Distance

His touch was welcome but remote,  
it meant nothing to her as hands  
explored every part of her, leaving her bare.

She didn't feel naked, even then,  
didn't feel anything as she moaned in time,  
at all of the appropriate places.

She would close her eyes, open her legs  
and picture herself anywhere else  
but in his arms, in his touch.

She wanted but nothing came of it,  
merely played the role her mother  
warned her about years ago.

Spent, he would fall upon her,  
using her breasts as pillows as he slept,  
unaware of her sobs hidden by snores.

He said he loved her, swore by God  
to do all he could to make her happy,  
but that was a burden she refused to carry.

Some lines on the night sky

1.

The geometry of ancient dreams  
hangs in the firmament  
in patterns with names  
that change across the globe.

2.

What I see  
my forefathers did not,  
though the veil does not change  
so the images of an age  
get reflected  
in the constant stars.

3.

They say the stars change place  
in the velvet expanse  
and what I see now,  
looking to the heavens,  
is not the same sky  
Alexander slept under  
as he gazed across the Indus.

4.

For me, there is no greater feeling  
than to stand and gaze at  
the spine of heaven  
holding up the weight  
of all these varied dreams.



## Endings

Endings are much better  
than the tension of hello,  
awkward and nervous,  
palm sweating, the same stories  
repeated yet again,  
pleasant smiles fading  
as introductions go  
too long, too much to bear.

Endings are simple things  
a turned back, a furrowed brow,  
slam of the phone at night,  
line dead in the others hand  
no questions, no answers,  
just silence hanging between,  
coffin lowered into  
a six foot pit dug by strangers.

No words can soothe the ache  
as time turns to other things,  
this responsibility  
fades under the weight of earth.  
Hellos bring you new pain,  
makes you sing under the lash,  
wanting, hating this game  
as each new hello cuts you again.



## The Night Of Man

Far from the night of man, he cried  
Far from the night of man  
Far from the night on man, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

Into the void it flowed, he cried  
Into the void it flowed,  
The current rushed down, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

Rivers flowed on and on, she cried  
Shaped the world with song  
Rivers broke into life, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

Life it sang her song, he cried  
Sang 'til the stars did cry  
Danced the shape of time, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

Dance to the song of life, she cried  
Dance to the song of life  
Lift up your voice, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

We gather to sing that song, he cried  
To praise the flowing void  
Creation an act of love, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.

Far from the night of man, he cried  
Far from the night of man  
Far from the night on man, he cried, she cried  
Far from the night of man.