

The Mud Room

BY PAUL MULDOON

We followed the narrow track, my love, we followed the narrow
track through a valley in the Jura
to where the goats delight to tread upon the brink
of meaning. I carried my skating rink,
the folding one, plus
a pair of skates laced with convolvulus,
you a copy of the feminist Haggadah
from last year's seder. I reached for the haggaday
or hasp over the half-door of the mud room
in which, by and by, I grasped the rim
not of a quern or a chariot-wheel but a wheel
of Morbier propped like the last reel
of *The Ten Commandments* or *The Robe*.
When she turned to us from high along the scarp
and showed us her gargoyles-
face stained with red-blue soil,
I could have sworn the she-goat was walking on air,
bounding, vaulting, pausing in mid-career
to browse on a sprig of the myrtle of which she's a devotee,
never putting a foot
wrong as she led us through the atrium's
down jackets, bow and quiver, jars of gefilte fish and garum,
to the uplands
where, at dusk, a farmer spreads a layer of bland
curds on the blue-green seam
of pine-ash that runs like a schism
between bland dawn-milk and bland dusk-milk, along a corridor
smoking with the blue-green ordure
of cows, to yet another half-door that would issue

on to the altar of Jehovah-nissi.
 There our kittens, Pangur Ban and Pyewacket,
 sprawled on the horse-hair blanket I bought in Bogotá
 along with the horse-hair hackamore.
 There a wheel-felloe of ash or sycamore
 from the quadriga to which the steeds had no sooner been hitched
 than it foundered in a blue-green ditch
 with the rest of the Pharaoh's
 war-machine was perfectly preserved between two amphoras,
 one of wild birdseed, the other of Kikkoman.
 It was somewhere in this vicinity that I'd hidden the afikoman
 at last year's seder. I looked back down the Valley of the Kings
 that was flooded now by the tears of things
 and heard again that she-goat pipe
 home a herd of cows, their hullabaloo and hubbub
 at dawn or dusk, saw again her mouth stained with fraochans
 (for she is of blaeberry-browsers the paragon)
 and followed her yet again through gefilte fish and garum jars,
 crocks, cruses, saucepans, the samovar
 from turn-of-the-century
 Russia, along the blue-green path of pine-cinders
 through the myrtleberry—myrtle- or whortleberry?—underbrush
 from which an apprehensive thrush
 gave over its pre-emin . . . pre-emin . . . pre-emin . . .
 its pre-eminent voice to *une petite chanson d'Allemagne*.
 There, in the berry-laden scrub,
 was a brangle of scrap
 that had once been the body of that quadriga.
 Yet again I stood amid the drek
 and clutter
 of the mud room, the cardboard boxes from K-Mart and Caldor,
 the Hoover, the ironing-board, the ram's horn
 on which Moses called to Aaron, a pair of my da's boots so worn
 it was hard to judge where the boots came to an end
 and the world began, given how one would blend
 imperceptibly into the other, given that there was no fine
 blue-green line
 between them. Virgil's *Georgics*. Plato's *Dialogues*.
 Yet again the she-goat reared up on her hind-legs

in the Jura or the Haute-Savoie
 and perched on top of that amphora of soy
 and stared across the ravine
 that, imperceptibly, intervenes
 between the stalwart curds of daybreak
 onto which the farmer rakes
 the pine-coals from the warm hearthstone
 and the stalwart curds of dailygone.
 She reared up on her hind-legs as if to see, once and for all,
 the children of Israel negotiate the water-wall
 on their right hand
 and on their left—"Look, no hands"—
 as if a she-goat might indeed pause in mid-career to browse
 on some horse-hair blanket I bought in Valparaiso,
 on a whirligig, a scythe and strickle, a cobbler's last.
 They weighed on me now, the skating-rink and the skates laced
 with convolvulus as we followed the narrow track, my love,
 to that rugged enclave
 in the Jura, to where a she-goat might delight to tread
 upon the middle cake of matzo-bread
 that runs as neat as neat
 between unleavened morning and unleavened night.
 Yet again that she-goat had run ahead
 and yet again we followed her through the Haute-
 Savoie past a ziggurat
 of four eighty-pound bags of Sakrete,
 on the top of which she paused to expose her red-blue tongue,
 past the hearth-set of brush, tongs
 and poker bent
 out of shape, past a shale outcrop of some of the pre-eminent
 voices of the seventies—*The Pretender, Desperado,*
The Best of Spirit,
 box after cardboard box
 of all manner of schmaltz and schlock from Abba to Ultravox,
 till we heard the she-goat's own pre-eminent voice
 from across the blue-green crevasse
 that ran between the cohorts of dawn and the dusk-cohorts,
 heard her girn and grate
 upon the mishugas

of the brazen-mouthed cows
of morn and the brazen-mouthed cows of even,
their horns summoned up by a seven-
branched candlestick itself once or twice summoned up at
Shabbat.

The candelabrum, the whirligig, those boots
with their toes worn through from the raking of pine-coals
at crack of dawn and crepuscule,
the whirr of the bellows
and the dull glow
of pine-ash, the hub-cap from a Ford Sierra
blown up in—yes, siree—
a controlled explosion in Belfast, the Kaliber six-pack,
the stack of twenty copies of *The Annals of Chile* (\$21 hardback).
Again the she-goat would blare down the trail
when we paused to draw breath, as the children of Israel
might draw breath on the Sabbath,
again exhort us to follow the narrow path
that runs like a blue-green membrane
between the amphoras of soy and assorted small-headed grains,
exhort us yet again to follow
through the valley
“the narrow track to the highest good” as set forth by Epicurus,
past the hearth-set of brush, tongs and poker
bent out of shape, the ever-so-faint scent of musk,
till I happened upon the snow-swath of damask
in which I’d wrapped the afikoman. The bag of pitons.
The medicinal bottle of poteen.
Yet again something had come between
the she-goat poised on a slope on which the cattle batten
and ourselves, that rivulet
or blue-green fault
between the clabber of morn and the stalwart even-clabber.
It was time, I felt sure, to unpack the Kaliber
into the old Hotpoint fridge
in which the she-goat was wont to forage,
to toss the poster-tube—Hopper, Magritte, Grant Wood—
and clear a space in the dew-wet
underbrush in which, at long last, I might open

my folding skating-rink and, at long last, tread upon
the hub-cap of that old Sierra that could itself turn
on a sixpence, could itself turn
as precipitously as a bucket of milk in a booley-byre,
to roll up the strand of barbed-wire
hand-wrought by the King of the Chaldeans,
the one and only Joseph Glidden,
that had run between the herd
of morn and the herd
of even, when you found the little *shuinshu* covered with black
brocade

I bought for two zuzim our last day in Kyoto
and it struck me that the she-goat
had somehow managed to acquire what looked like your skates
and your *gants de chevreau*
and was performing grand jetés on the hubcap of the Ford
Zephyr.

I, meanwhile, was struggling for a foothold.
Even as I drove another piton to the hilt
in the roughcast
of a bag of Sakrete, the she-goat executed an exquisite
saut de l'ange from an outcrop of shale,
pausing to browse on a sprig of myrtle or sweet gale
in the vicinity of the bow and quiver, down jackets, Hoover,
where I hid the afikoman last Passover,
bounding, vaulting, never making a slip
as I followed her, then as now—though then I had to schlep
through the brush of skirts (maxi- and mini-)
my folding rink plus my skates laced with scammony
plus the middle of the three
cakes of matzo-bread that had, if you recall, since gone astray.
It was time, I felt sure, to unpack the Suntory
into the old fridge, to clear a space between *De Rerum Natura*
and Virgil's *Eclogues*,
a space in which, at long last, I might unlock
the rink, so I drove another piton into an eighty-pound
bag of Sakrete and flipped the half-door on the dairy-cabinet
of the old Hotpoint
and happened, my love, just happened

upon the cross-
section of Morbier and saw, once and for all, the precarious
blue-green, pine-ash path along which Isaac followed Abraham
to an altar lit by a seven-branched candelabrum,
the ram's horn, the little goat-whirligig
that left him all agog.