

PYTHIA

By CHARLIE JACOBSON

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry editor Hezekiah writes...* Pythia is a short, epic, poetic quest for two, not to be missed. Charles Jacobson is promethean in this intimate, imagistic, incidental encounter-conquest. Who's the muse who writes his stuff?—I goda get in touch. "...to sink into unguent warmth" "I took her scent and felt her breath." And maybe the best line, "An arabesque veil of smoke drifted into cloudy gray-green eyes." I was riveted by his words and the amplitude of the scene as it transcends to the divine and lapses back to the banal. (Spacing and font size are poet's own) HS

Senior editor Charles writes: What you are about to read is consummate poetry by a consummate literary artist. Just as mesmerizing as 'Pythia' are the author's extensive notes and footnotes. Once settled on the page,, he is both sculptor and archeologist. Exquisite word choice and rarefied technique put this poem in a class by itself.

Five stars.

Amidst old smoke, stale perfume, and semen of a broken night,

a seraphic voice

posed a question in the dark—

to tremble

to clinch a neck

to sink into unguent warmth

to hear a moan

in a sacred retreat.

In the green room

she lit a cigarette and gazed at the fine rain.

Yellow gloves lay on a coffee table.

I took her scent and felt her breath.

Her nostrils flared.

An arabesque veil of smoke drifted into cloudy gray-green eyes.

“Have we spoken?”

A nicotine-stained finger crossed my lips.

“Your blood is warm.”

“How old are you?”

A hot blush came to my cheek.

“I read Bishop Sheen.”

She forced a laugh

and blew a jet

from under dark lashes.

“I adore Coblenz.”

“Kiss me.”

She tasted of tobacco and stale mint.

I slid fingers to her nipples.

Her bosom swelled, a tremor crossed her face.

“The wench is dead—would you like a trip to Greece?”

(That's where I want to go)

White-velvet breasts

C-section

painted nails on a cold-hard floor.

I woke

to a curving figure in a wide-brimmed hat—

black-spike heels, cigarette and eye-liner

staring in a mirror

headlights in the drive

Shouts at the front door.

THE POET SPEAKS... *Pythia arose from an unpublished nonfiction short story, The Education of a Young Gentleman, which tells of a late night encounter with a 29-year-old married woman by a 19-year-old boy in a highly charged sexual atmosphere. It was another step in his coming of age — finding sexual partners other than his mother.*

My style tends to be sardonic with historical overtones. My first sense of literature was from the 19th century writers. My first serious foray into culture and politics was in ninth and tenth grade Latin, hence Pythia owes a debt to Catullus and Lesbia as well as Eliot and Prufrock.

Why poetry? A poem is an attempt to take the human, the historical, and the finite to the realm of the universal and infinite, which, on the face of it, is impossible using the materials of this world. Yet I try to distill feeling, emotion, what it is to be alive, and powerful moments in life, in order to create an alternative world. And I'm not above using fiction, rhythm and beauty to get at the truth.

Each word carves out a specific cultural niche. Reading a poem allows you to enter that world and those niches, albeit not always what the writer has in mind.

Above all, poetry invites you to let loose; Pythia strives for power and sensuality.

Footnotes and Notes

se references and notes helped me understand the poem and *The Education of a Young Gentleman*, the short story which gave rise to the poem.

Pythia owes a debt to the Roman poet Catullus and Lesbia as well as T.S. Eliot and Prufrock. She brings mythological form to the formlessness of modern life, the point being that the present day is an amalgam of the past.

The poem arouses a boy's expectations of achieving harmony with a muse, which the poem then quashes. The boy fails in a quest to find meaning in the muse, but comes away with a minimum amount of light and knowledge.

a. Pythia

Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, sits in a cauldron on a tripod, making her prophecies in an ecstatic trance state, like shamans, and her unintelligible utterings. The tripod was perforated with holes; and as she inhaled the vapors, her figure would seem to enlarge, her hair stood on end, her complexion changed, her heart panted, her bosom swelled and her voice became seemingly more than human. — Wiki

b. The opening scene is a bedroom of a suburban home which stands for the Sanctuary of Apollo (the god of light, knowledge and harmony) at Delphi, the navel of the ancient world.

c. Smoke and perfume correspond to the vapors at the temple at Delphi. Geologists investigating the fissures in Delphi have found a potent combination of ethane, methane, ethylene, and benzene, and others have suggested laurel leaves (oleander) and fermented honey helped Pythia achieve her trance, as drugs do today.

d. A boy enters the bedroom and interprets his encounter with Pythia by way of the classics, a possessed woman who was a vehicle for the ambiguous messages Apollo delivered at Delphi.

Through her nostrils thick with incense

The Pythia hurls a breath of flame

Panting, howling, drunk...

—Paul Valéry.

e. He reacts with fear and trembling to the question posed by the woman, a temptation to have sex with her then and there. 'Tremble' refers to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

f. In "Have we spoken," Pythia buttonholes the boy. Also see John 14:9-10 New International Version (NIV). The sacred and profane are again entangled. Pythia and the boy regard each other somewhat differently in the light (see p. below).

9 Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

g. "I read Bishop Sheen." Bishop Sheen had a pop TV show at the time. This is a Catholic house, a nod to T.S. Eliot and Christianity. 'Bishop' is also a masturbation reference, as in "beat your bishop." 'Read' is in both the active present and past tense. Catholic doctrine rails against masturbation. Pythia laughs at the joke. 'Bishop' also refers to the American poet Elizabeth Bishop.

h. "I adore Coblenz" is repartee to "I read Bishop Sheen." Coblenz/Koblenz could be misunderstood as a person, but it's a fortress at the junction of the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, a favorite haunt of the poet Jules Laforgue. Coblenz is Old world and Roman, est. 8 BCE by Drusus, who was born not long after Catullus passed. Laforgue influenced Eliot. The woman speaks with a Euro accent since Europe has been the midwife of the modern world from the ancients.

i. "Kiss me" is from The Brian Auger Oblivion Express – Compared to What, live at Baked Potato, Hollywood, 2004, at 3:35 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrkxrgTiVyk>

j. One reader thought he found a vampire vibe in the poem. I agree to the extent that Pythia exhibits a form of metempsychosis — previous lives are buried within her. They suddenly speak and then they're gone:

Thou hast committed —

Fornication? But that was in another country, and besides, the wench is dead.

The Jew of Malta

k. Greece is the location of Delphi and also refers to Lord Byron, among other things.

l. "[Mesopotamia] that's where I wanna go" is from Mesopotamia by the B52s

m. The Caesarian Section, or C-section relates to the Roman Caesarians and Julius Caesar in particular, who entertained at least one poetry reading by Catullus. Her scar marks an alternate entrance to her uterus and is a profane difference between her and the sacred virgins Mary and Pythia. 'C-section' grounds the poem and may be considered its belly button. It's exotic, like a tattoo. It adds mother, childbirth, pain and sacrifice to the equation.

n. The "cold-hard floor" in the basement of the house refers to the temple floor at Delphi. The line "on a cold-hard floor" is a play on the last line of Ezra Pound's In a Station of the Metro:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

petals on a wet, black bough

Compare my haiku with his (both violate the 5-7-5 traditional form):

White-velvet breasts

C-section

painted nails

on a cold-hard floor.

In the haiku, after a simple description of the woman, she disappears. The emotional core of the entire poem is the connection and disconnection between the boy and the woman. The last line of the haiku prefigures a hard landing for the boy; he will be left in a void.

o. Much of the power and verbal music of the poem is in monosyllables, often in 2s and 3s: old smoke, stale, night, green room, kiss me, stale mint, cold hard floor, C section, white velvet breasts, black spike heels, etc. Most lines end in a monosyllable. I deliberately veer away from the vernacular (Hemingway and company) so I can use sound to override the meaning of words. The speaking voice interrupts the narrator and adds tension, making the action and characters real.

p. The poem opens during a night of debauchment. A boy is invited or perhaps tempted to have sex in the dark. The second stanza introduces Pythia, who had extended the invitation. She appears in the guise of a muse and seduces him. In the third stanza, she gets the tipping she wants and gives him a sexual experience representative of the adult world that he wants. In the last stanza, she leaves him disillusioned, but with a tantalizing image of mature erotic beauty, to figure it out for himself.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Charlie Jacobson is a veteran with a career in computer technology and an abiding interest in philosophy and the arts. He is a published writer.