The Freakiest Dungeon in the Castle: The Interiority of Confinement

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The Freakiest Dungeon in the Castle: The Interiority of Confinement

by Madeline Valentine

Above
Detail from 1st panel of Persephone the Wanderer 32.5" x 30"
Madeline Valentine

Persephone the Wanderer

I think I can remember being dead
Many times, in winter,
I approached Zeus.
Tell me, I would ask him,
How can I endure the earth?

The Greek goddess Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. As the story goes, while Persephone was gathering flowers with her maidens one day, Hades burst forth from the earth below in a golden chariot, abducted the girl, and carried her to the underworld to be his wife and Queen. When Demeter (the goddess of grain) learned what had happened to her daughter, her despair was so great that it devastated the soil and caused the first winter. In other versions of the story, Demeter is a vengeful mother – deliberately destroying the earth, holding the world hostage until her daughter is returned.

Hermes, guide to the underworld, is sent to rescue Persephone. Before Hermes sets her free, she eats a pomegranate seed – the food of the dead, its bright red color a symbol of the blood that all dead souls desire. Persephone leaves but the seeds condemn her to return each year to the land of the dead.

The myth of Persephone captivates Louise Gluck. She wrote a collection of poems on the theme of death titled Averno that focused on the story. Describing the moment Persephone emerges from the underworld, Gluck wrote:

Persephone returns home
stained with red juice like a character in Hawthorne—

In the myth, Persephone is not given a personality beyond that of the passive victim. More often the tale focuses on either Demeter or the dramatic moment of Persephone’s abduction. In some stories Persephone has no name. She is often called “Kore” (maiden), as though authors want us to see her symbolically rather than literally. But where the myth is silent, artists and poets have stepped in to fill the gaps. Throughout history, artists have depicted Persephone’s descent into hell.

“There is a division at the heart of Persephone,” writes Madeline Miller in her novel Song of Achilles, “who is at once the bringer of spring and the terrifying Queen of the dead. Her story is rich with symbolic and allegorical resonance about death and rebirth. She is the incarnation of that ancient saying (supposed to make a sad man happy and a happy man sad): This too shall pass.”
Madeline Valentine

Above
Above
Descension

In September 2015, I checked myself into a psychiatric hospital in New York City. I was eight months pregnant and had suffered many months of severe mental instability (later diagnosed as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and subsequent depression). Admission required a series of interviews and took hours. I was taken through many evaluation rooms and saw many doctors. With each interview, I seemed to lose something—leaving my husband and father at the entry of the first room, then surrendering any sharp or dangerous objects as well as any personal items (wedding ring, wallet). At last, I removed my clothes, giving them to a nurse who put them in a locker and exchanged them for hospital scrubs and slipper socks. I recall feeling like a child in my oversized shirt and pants, surrendering myself to the care of others.

I remember being offered a snack of a graham cracker when it was all done. I refused it. Not because I wasn’t hungry and not because I was on any kind of hunger strike. But because I was reminded of Persephone; I could not eat lest I become a part of this place.

Gluck warns:
You drift between earth and death
Which seem, finally,
Strangely alike.

My descent into a psychic netherworld began early in my pregnancy. After experiencing complications, I became convinced my child would die. I obsessively monitored every twinge in my abdomen, every drop of unwanted blood, sure it was the harbinger of fetal death. I thought of nothing else, keeping constant watch over my body, lest I endorse a miscarriage. I became superstitious. I saw everything as an omen of good or bad. I compulsively envisioned terrible things happening to me and my child. I saw myself jumping in front of oncoming trains. I stayed away from kitchen knives. I stood on the third floor of my parents’ apartment and imagined what my corpse would look like after the fall. By the time I entered the hospital, I was not sure I could make the trip without killing myself and my child.

Traveling to the psychiatric ward felt like a hellish descent. With each intake interview I was admitted one step farther into the large hospital-complex of sub-basements, stairwells, corridors, and, finally, the locked ward itself. Here, visitors were required to use a phone outside a heavy, windowless door to call the nurses’ station inside for admittance. Like a kind of Cerberus, a nurse scanned the live security video then buzzed them in. Patients were reprimanded if they loitered too close to the door. Some of the more unruly patients, in fits of antagonism, stood by the door yelling obscenities or pounding their fists against it until they got a reaction from the staff —usually restraint or medication.

The interior of the psychiatric hospital was a cognitive and spiritual wilderness but visually it was mundane. The ward was clean but worn; scrubbed to something raw, but not softened. Long hallways with doors opened into bedrooms, most shared, some single. Singles were occupied by patients who could not tolerate a roommate - the woman who sang constantly and whose head was haphazardly shaved. They told me to stay in my room when she was in the common area because she once attacked a pregnant woman on the ward. I later found out her child died in a terrible accident. They told me to stay away from the man who listened to his radio’s in-between stations while screaming the dictations of his psychoses.

Not everything inside the ward was chaotic. Some moments were relatively untroubled, almost tranquil. I made a friend named Eddie who had been a first responder on 9/11. Eddie was tormented by the trauma and guilt of having survived, a guilt made unendurable each year on the anniversary. He had swallowed two bottles of pills to try to get rid of the pictures. He said the smell of the burning rubble haunted him like a reeking apparition. We talked in the evenings, not about anything profound, just about whatever happened to be on TV. His wife and teenaged kids visited him every day as my husband did me.

I roomed with an older woman from Jamaica recovering from an episode of acute psychosis. By the time I met her she had been in the hospital for 5 months and her schizophrenia had receded. She liked to show me pictures of her handsome adult son and would “tsssk” when patients had tantrums in the hallway.

I spent a month inside the ward and then transferred to an outpatient facility at another uptown hospital. The days consisted of 8-hour group therapy sessions and coping skills. I would return home each evening on the subway, a heavily pregnant woman alone on a packed train. When I reascended onto the streets of Queens felt like a resurrection.

My recovery was slow and painful. Two months after my admittance to the hospital, I gave birth to a beautiful, healthy son. I now consider myself stronger than I ever had been before.
**The Cosmic Impersonality of Fate**

It is normal to want to recount traumatic events as melodrama -- to project myth onto experience. The desire to find some great meaning in the terrible things that happen is always present. But ultimate healing comes when survival is paired with the ability to objectivity look back and understand the nuance of the trauma -- to question the quality of evil that has been experienced.

Modern interpretations of Greek mythology often depict Hades as evil and demonic. But although the ancients may have seen him as gloomy and frightening, they never saw Hades as “evil.” He was not responsible for death and suffering, but merely charged with the shepherding of souls that had left their bodies. His was a necessary, if melancholy job.

Hades was no more a villain than any other ancient abductor -- Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo. In fact, maybe less so. Hades had first requested a bride from his brother Zeus. Zeus nominated Persephone and, knowing the girl’s mother would never approve, conspired in the abduction. Hades took the girl with her father’s permission—as polite as it gets for divine unions, but small consolation, of course, for Persephone.

According to Maurice Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster*, calamity disrupts chronology: “When... disaster comes upon us, it does not come... The disaster is imminent but...there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time and space for its accomplishment.” To relive Persephone’s fate is to adopt and inhabit a kind of afterlife. Internalizing her story is to adopt a disguise, a fiction, a way of speaking that is both indirect and poetic. To survive a disaster is to enter into an odd and almost phobic relation with it: we both think of it and we do not. We feel that it has touched and changed everything but yet we remain whole. We are caught between remembering and forgetting, between drama and stoicism, both compelled and repulsed by the ghosts of memory. Once the apex of the crisis is over, the process of recovery (whether mental or physical) is slow and mundane. It is the little acts that enable the healing. It took me four years to recover, through therapy sessions, self-help books, and wholesome everyday activities. However, the greatest balm for my suffering was caring for my young son. The small tasks involved with new motherhood acted as a tangible mantra. With each day, the cyclical routine of feedings, diaper changes and domestic chores, allowed me some peace.

My desire to express the terror of the ordeal was present even as it was happening. My experience felt huge and all-encompassing. I was a pregnant woman fighting for her life. And yet my experience was incredibly small. I was only one of many. The doctors and psychiatrists had seen patients before me and would care for many after.

In recounting my experience, I can cast myself as Persephone – an unwilling victim dragged into a pit of hell, consumed by the fires of mental illness, and somehow tainted. As Persephone must return annually to hell, the mark of this memory will never leave me. I can also cast myself as Demeter – the mother, who, spurned by fate, seeks vengeance through destruction, my unborn child the hostage of the demon of my illness. This illness was itself a kind of Hades, something out of my control that descended upon me. To the degree that it was a part of me, I was my own Hades, and the grim world the psych ward my domain.

At root in all myth is the cosmic impersonality of fate. My experience was both evil and not. I was both victim and perpetrator. I survived this ordeal but am forever changed by it. To tackle this project, I feel that to convey nuance is the challenge. While my experience was fraught with drama, I want to avoid the explicit in depicting it. Maximalist approaches often obscure the intimacy and humanity that truly touch us. I sought to transform a big experience and narrative to something small.

**Vermeer’s Depictions of Domestic Intimacy**

Johannes Vermeer, along with other 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painters including Jan Steen, Gerard Terborch, Nicolas Maes, Pieter de Hooch were known as the genre painters, and depicted intimate scenes of domestic life. Their subjects, often women, are shown doing household chores, studying, resting, cooking, reading or simply staring into space. Attention is focused on costume and setting. Vermeer, alone, particularly excelled at evoking stillness and intimacy. He began his career in the early 1650s painting large-scale biblical and mythological scenes, but most of his later paintings—the ones for which he is most famous—depict scenes of daily life of the interior. His paintings invite a meditative response from the viewer. Comparing Vermeer’s paintings with others of the same
time and subject, one is struck by a unique quietude. What makes Vermeer’s paintings so special?

During the Renaissance, an academic hierarchy categorized paintings according to their subject matter (genre) and adopted a system in accord with the intellectual values of the time. Within this hierarchy, works were placed into categories: history painting, portraiture, genre painting, landscape and still life. Figurative depiction of the human form was believed to be the highest form of artistic expression, with the intellectual aim of reclaiming the ideology and moral code of antiquity. History painting was given the title “grand” genre, and was considered to be the highest form of art. Most history paintings depicted religious scenes. Often allegorical, these were seen as uplifting and morally affirming. While genre painters considered human form and experience, their narratives were not considered intellectually inspired. Genre painters depicted figures and scenes of no specific identity, while portraiture featured historical figures, mythical beings, and wealthy, powerful patrons.

The term genre painting arose in 18th century France and was meant to describe specialized works of a certain kind - flowers, animals, middle-class life. The term was used derogatively by advocates of the “ideal” or “grand manner” in art. But by the late 19th century, when the Swiss critic Jacob Burckhardt wrote Netherland Genre Painting (1874), the term was meant more approvingly and was defined in the way we now understand it.

Genre painters did not seek original subject matter. In fact, they were happy to reference other painters directly, copying the subject matter in their own distinct style. We then compare the quality of these styles. When looking at tapestries adorning tables, we note how each painter conveys the impression of weight and richness with different brush strokes, color, and detail. We consider a figure’s stance and gaze. We observe how folds in dresses are created with dashes of light.

Nicolas Maes’ The Idle Servant is emblematic of a genre painting of the time. It depicts a complex interior space with rooms in the foreground and background. A trio of figures (two women and a man) sits in the back, engaged in a conversation. The lady of the house stands in the foreground. Her maid sits asleep with her head resting on her hand and a mess of crockery at her feet. The standing lady looks directly at the viewer, her hand pointing the sleeping servant, a smile on her face, her head cocked. The narrative of the tableau is clear and almost reminiscent of vaudeville in its whimsicality: the sleeping servant caught in the act! The Idle Servant is a classic example of the genre form in its use of comic narrative in its depiction of the scenarios of everyday life.

Johannes Vermeer transcended the technical limits of genre painting through his use of camera obscura. The results were paintings that looked almost unbelievably real, with an accuracy of spatial dimension beyond what could be seen with the naked eye. But his lasting appeal is due not only to his flawless technique but to the serenity and dignity with which he imbued his work. Vermeer infused his works with meanings shrouded in mystery. He rarely explained the context of his subject, or showed emotion through gestures or facial expression, but preferred instead to allow us to contemplate the significance of the composition of the scene, to ask questions and imagine narratives. His paintings create a dialogue. In contemplating a Vermeer we arrive at a greater understanding of our own feelings and the nature of our relationship to others.

A Woman Asleep (c. 1657) is probably Vermeer’s earliest genre painting. It depicts a sleeping woman in a confined setting between a heavily-laden table and a half-opened door leading into a light-filled room. The earth tones and deep reds of the palette and the unusual composition are reminiscent of paintings by Maes, who influenced Vermeer at this stage of his career. However, unlike Maes, Vermeer
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Above

Vermeer, Johannes. *A Woman Asleep*
neither explains the narrative nor provides a commentary about the woman.

This was not always the case. X-radiographs reveal that Vermeer had initially included a dog in the doorway, a gentleman in the back room (see figure 1), and compositional elements thematically related to the woman’s melancholic, slothful appearance. But Vermeer painted out these figures, leaving the viewer alone with the woman in a darkened and claustrophobic chamber without any explanation for her weighty, despondent, mood. The elimination of these elements provides an important insight into Vermeer’s thought process. They reveal that he sought a poetic image rather than explicit narrative. The viewer, guided by the unusual spatial arrangement, is allowed great latitude in

**Fig. 1**
X-radiograph of Woman Asleep

**Above**

Above
Vermeer, Johannes, *Woman Holding a Balance.*
1662–1663, National Gallery of Art, London.
interpreting the scene. The effect is that we can almost imagine a “do not disturb” sign above the woman asleep. We feel we have the privilege to witness a private moment. Vermeer’s genius lies in his ability to calm restless spirit in order to glimpse truth and beauty.

**DEPICTING PSYCHIC UNREST**

How then, does one bring the qualities of genre painting to psychic unrest, where truth and beauty are not present? With severe psychic pain comes distortion of time and place. The sufferer’s impression of setting and intimate details of daily life are skewed and cannot be trusted. What would define the traditional genre painting is thrown out of whack. Little details are off. The sufferer questions the truths both within her and around her and rearranges them accordingly.

To convey this, I chose to distort the interior spaces of my images with shifting angles and unfixed edges. Everything is marred by confusion. To show the space truthfully was not important. I chose not to research Mount Sinai or the Upper East Side. I didn’t look for any pictures of the facility’s interior. I wanted my memory to dictate the floor plan. I became an unreliable narrator, with a recollection skewed by time and psychic distance. The spaces, at times, do not make sense. Similarly, I chose not to depict an accurate likeness of any of my fellow patients. Their specific characteristics were not important.

I borrowed from Vermeer by turning figures’ faces from the viewer, obscuring some altogether. In the *Lacemaker* (1669-1670), he shows a woman absorbed in her delicate task. The *Milkmaid* (1660) depicts a kitchen maid, her eyes lowered in concentration, carefully pouring milk from a jug into an earthenware bowl. She is all humility and modest introspection. *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-1663) shows an equally attentive woman holding a scale, literally weighing, while metaphorically appearing to consider the value of things. She is pregnant, and perhaps her impeding birth is causing her to reflect on matters of mortality?

A picture of Michelangelo’s The Last Judgement hangs on the wall behind her. She is serene and poised, a half-smile on her face. Weak sunlight falls upon her head-covering and the trim of her robe, illuminating her delicate fingers holding the scale.

None of the magnificent elements so unique to Vermeer are present in my pieces. No gentle natural light, no lush textured detail, no textiles, no objects of ornamentation that make the rooms cozy and pleasing; none of the domesticity of the traditional genre painting. My images do not take place in an intimate domestic setting, but rather in a simulated domestic one. My faces are grotesque and
ambiguous, not peaceful and serene.

Like Vermeer’s interiors, my paintings explore visual confinement, and the narrative nature of subject-with-in-space. My subjects are not absorbed in mundane tasks but in the daily chore of mental illness and psychic uncertainty. They are similarly attentive but to very different things. The walls of the psych ward are subjects themselves, just as Vermeer’s rooms define the tone and setting of his paintings. To be confined is to have a love/hate relationship to the physical barriers of your prison: the walls are both there to protect you and to prevent your escape, and like the buzzer-system itself, guards of this netherworld. Mental patients perform rote tasks and group exercises, not unlike the responsibilities of servants.

I chose Vermeer as a guiding light because I wanted to avoid explicit depictions of my experience. I wanted to tell a story, but within the form of intimate interior; to convey the terror of my ordeal not by hitting the viewer over the head with emotion but rather depicting the objective, collective feeling of being lost.

Most importantly, I sought to convey ambiguity. Just as Vermeer often eliminated what would have given easy answers to the mysteries of his paintings, I chose not to depict the dramatic and shocking but rather the absence of it. Or as Billy Collins describes it in his poem Musee des Beaux Arts Revisited, “the small prosaic touch.”

As far as mental anguish goes, the old painters were no fools. They understood how the mind, the freakiest dungeon in the castle, can effortlessly imagine a crab with the face of a priest or an end table complete with genitals.

And they knew that the truly monstrous lies not so much in the wildly shocking, a skeleton spinning a wheels of fire, say, but in the small prosaic touch added to a tableau of the hellish, the detail at the heart of the horrid.

In Bosch’s The Temptation of St. Anthony, for instance, how it is not so much the boar-faced man in the pea-green dress that frightens, but the white mandolin he carries, not the hooded corpse in a basket, but the way the basket is rigged to hang from a bare branch;

how, what must have driven St. Anthony to the mossy brink of despair

Above and Left
Prosaic details from series Persephone the Wanderer.
was not the big, angry-looking fish
in the central panel,
the one with the two mouselike creatures
conferring on its tail,
but rather what the fish is wearing;
a kind of pale orange officer’s cape
and, over that,
a metal body-helmet secured by silvery wires,
a sensible buckled chin strap,
and, yes, the ultimate test of faith—the tiny sword that hangs from
the thing,
that nightmare carp,
secure in its brown leather scabbard.

My first painting of the series is an interior. A pregnant woman in a pink dress lays on a bed in a sparse, tri-colored room. A laptop computer and a bowl of fruit sit on the mauve wall-to-wall carpeting. The woman’s head is turned away from the viewer and is mostly obscured, with only her nose and one eye visible. She is looking up, almost squinting, at a painting of a posed cherubic child holding
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The chair and table in the first room of the third panel are both mauve, as is the framed image on the wall. Yellow light emerges in the third panel creating optical green, guiding the viewer's attention into the fourth surrealist landscape, and then at last the yellow of the final piece. I have executed illustrations for a missing text, a story glimpsed but not told, revealed yet withheld. In the process I have domesticated a near tragedy.

While this series of five paintings is not exactly narrative, it is nevertheless sequential. Color guides the viewer from one piece into the next. The pink hues of the first panel lead into the more saturated pink tones of the second. The chair and table in the first room of the third panel are both mauve, as is the framed image on the wall. Yellow light emerges in the third panel creating optical green, guiding the viewer's attention into the fourth surrealist landscape, and then at last the yellow of the final piece. I have executed illustrations for a missing text, a story glimpsed but not told, revealed yet withheld. In the process I have domesticated a near tragedy.
a playing card. A door leads to an empty kitchen behind her. This is my Persephone in the process of being dragged down to hell. She has eaten the pomegranate seed. The picture of the child serves as a both a golden chalice and the portal to the florid landscape of her suffering.

**PSYCHIC LANDSCAPE**

In depicting the ornate psychic landscape of my obsessions and compulsions, I departed from interiors and took inspiration from Northern Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch, specifically his lesser-known single panel The Temptation of St. Anthony (1490) (not to be confused with Bosch’s triptych of the same name described in Billy Collins’ poem.) Bosch’s Saint Anthony is a man hunched in a fetal position beneath a tree on a picturesque hill beset by small monstrous creatures. His eyes are wild with an unknown emotion.

I borrowed elements of this composition but chose to not to feature a main figure. I filled the environment with the demons of my despair – amorphous forms reflecting my fears of toxic fertility and unwelcome growth. I painted tumors, mold, and fungus, all things that grow without nurture, or things that disrupt what is wholesome. Three fetuses in various stages of development are blooming among them.

In order to stabilize these elements in a time and place I added landmarks from my neighborhood park in
The third painting of the series is of a hospital hallway. Three doorways along the wall, and a nurse’s station at the end. The first doorway leads into a room in which a figure with long brown hair sits in a corner chair. She is hunched, not unlike Bosch’s Saint Anthony, and she finger-combs her long hair with her eyes closed. Like Bosch’s St. Anthony, her emotion is ambiguous. She is an indiscernible figure of unrest. Behind her hangs two paintings. In one, a small frame holds a pink image reminiscent of the playground in the toxic fertility landscape. The other larger frame holds a picture reminiscent of the grass in the fourth image. The second room shows a figure sitting on the bed, the door obstructing his head.
The fourth painting of the series is the most abstract. Essentially a dreamscape, it shows our apartment building in Queens alone in a Daliesque desert. A sinking (or rising?) sun appears on a horizon line that is shared with malevolent spears, perhaps representing the dichotomy of an uncertain future. A direct visual link to the Persephone myth of the series is a hole at the very center of this painting. In the foreground, images of fertility lie amongst classical sculpture of a child and a woman. As in a dream, these disparate images stand alone while also pointing toward a definite emotion, invoking isolation, fear, and decay.

The final painting is meant to depict the banality of the psych ward. The day-to-day reality of my time there was distinct in its dullness. We spent lots of time in front of the television. This painting depicts the alluring glow of the tv – a portal, perhaps, to the world outside, alone in an otherwise drab room empty but for one figure whose back is turned to us. And yet, despite the potential distraction, she clearly faces the wall, unable to step outside her internal angst.

This cycle of paintings does not resolve itself in the way my own experience did. In fact, it leaves the viewer wondering what will come next. I did not want to provide a definite ending but wanted rather to encapsulate the fear and uncertainty of my experience. The truth is that when I was overcome with mental anguish, in the depths of the hell of despair in the psych ward, I didn’t know if I would ever emerge. In a way, part of me never did.

While this series of five paintings is not exactly narrative, it is nevertheless sequential. Color guides the viewer from one piece into the next. The pink hues of the first panel lead into the more saturated pink tones of the second. The chair and table in the first room of the third panel are both mauve, as is the framed image on the wall. Yellow light emerges in the third panel creating optical green, guiding the viewer’s attention into the fourth surrealist landscape, and then at last the yellow of the final piece. I have executed illustrations for a missing text, a story glimpsed but not told, revealed yet withheld. In the process I have domesticated a near tragedy.
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This book was created at Washington University in St. Louis, in the MFA Illustration and Visual Culture program in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, in the spring of 2021.

The body text is set in Dolly Pro, designed by Underware. The title text is set in Maple Black, designed by Eric Olsen. The book was designed and typeset by Madeline Valentine, based on a page design by Ben Kiel. Text editing by D.B. Dowd, John Hendrix, Audra Hubbell, and Heidi Kolk. Production and binding was completed by Advertisers Printing, St. Louis, Missouri. This book is printed on Cougar and 100lb text.