

An Inquiry into the Death of Pan

by [Matthew DeLuca](#) (May 2025)



Pan Whistling At A Blackbird (Arnold Böcklin, 1863)

An Inquiry into the Death of Pan

When the order came in
I was cleaning my sheep's teeth –
his eyes were sad and
my eyes were sad and
I tickled him under the chin,
and said I'd be back soon
and he returned to the sunny field
with its tiny scattered purple flowers.

I met them with their books and records,
where we'd been gathered in the hot city.
I felt him on the breeze as they doubted
his continued existence.
Strangest of all, I thought, was that
no one else thought it strange.
A murder in the gutter or a dispute
over a legacy, these fall within the legible.
But now we had been asked to look into
what was as true as the breath we shared
and which was also known to none of us –
except some sailor had come back
with a rumor that the great god was dead.
The kind of joke he would love.

I thought of a few things to say
while many things were said:
To appreciate the question presented, one must
first ease into the infinite, abdicate
the well-padded tyrant's throne of knowing.
Be devoured
by the passing spirits and remain undevoured.
Loosen
the strictures drawn tight.

Be,
like a certain angle of sun in the morning.

What I wanted though
more than to give a speech in this
auditorium vacant of everything except
processes and procedures
was to feel the grass under my feet
beside the stream where there was
never a question of proofs, or evidence,
or who could be convinced, or how to muster
constituencies of the unwilling.

Tell it to us again, witness.
You were sailing past an island.
How hot was it? Had you eaten?
Had you been drinking? How much?
Do you have a family history of mental illness?
Do you sleepwalk? Have vivid dreams?
Did you eat lead as a child? Why
do you keep looking away? Are you
excitable?
Was it a man's voice? A woman's?
How far from shore were you? Did you
disembark and inquire further? Surely
for a matter as serious as the death
of a god—heretofore unknown in our times,
or any times—you would want
to get closer, have a look for yourself,
learn more. Wouldn't you?

So we proceeded, building our files,
indulging ourselves,
confidently compiling what was to be known,
and what was not, judicious and grave.
Nothing could have attested better,
perhaps, to the apparent absence of the god,

than those serious faces.

At nights, the day's work done,
I would walk the Tiber and hear him everywhere,
from small houses and large, laughing
out of the promiscuous dancing wicks of lamps,
apparent in colors too bold to be seen everywhere,
in the broad day, too,
flashing and unabashed, winking
in every alleyway
(anywhere the darkness somewhat recedes
between the word and the thing),
and never far from his promise,
wordless,
in the breath of every desire. I loved
his defiance of proof, all
those tedious days and nights.

I felt he must understand
what it would cost me, and win nothing
to try to convince the others. Only I
felt to blame.
What was there was there.
The others, when they felt least
and most themselves, would know,
already knew, we were playing
a silly game—
perhaps in a gasp of love,
or waking one night in the hound's teeth,
or on the ocean
with a storm coming to rest.
Pan hides only as much
as one hides in the certainties
of one's self.

It is Pan after all who inquires:
Who are you? Indolent, almost, as if

awakened from a nap, your nap, or
post-coital. Enough for a nightmare.
His eyes clear.

More walks, more long hours,
More breezeless days dreaming of sheep. The work
was done, the witnesses heard, our
papers bound up and others burned—
all of this, in the end, a selection
of what was palatable,
what was useful, to those
who had his end in mind. Tried
in absentia, and found eternally gone,
for someone's comfort, I suppose.

I heard his voice
as they closed the books on him:
How interesting, he said.
How interesting.

When I wonder

when I wonder,
when all is cast in wonder,
underneath a simple means,
like bedclothes,
with the gentry stars
in their idle hours,
in ribboned revelations perhaps.
or other times more tepid,
the fresh impossibility of vision,
and to share some small savored gift —

when striding a sunlit mile,
or when

where dread things are,
where saints abide,
observant and collecting,
with that patient worm that awaits –

when the past,
alight in a golden fugue,
unwinds from now,
a common face,
a ghostly name,
delicate and indelicate,
a contrapuntal joy,
delight –

and I wander.

If not cities, what would Eros build?

If not cities, what would
Eros build?
Perhaps what he already builds
quite often,
like a dark galaxy of water
cupped in the hand,
a shared draught of love,
that even now is without dominance
in its expanding empire,
knit of satisfaction and ease,
past the empyrean of the known
and like a curious summer rain
enjoys these local moments
without ambition or coincidence.

Daphne

Where a moment before she was
now meet a murmur of leaves,
betraying no grief along this riverside.

Around, gathered by the silence that's left,
we stand whispering, barely noticing
the luminous trail of the now-disinterested god.

Our chattering and the chattering of birds
entwine in what was her hair,
and soften back the harsh departure.

Her eyes overcome by rude bark, that, we agree,
was the cost of the god's impersonal need.
These soft pink buds are little recompense.

Sudden and strange is this withdrawn air,
and quick and marvelous is this river,
and familiar is this space in our hearts.

[Table of Contents](#)

Matthew DeLuca is a poet living in New York. He is a graduate of Boston College and Fordham University School of Law. His poems have been published in *Offcourse*, *The Amsterdam Review*, *Wild Court*, *Open Ceilings* and elsewhere.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)