

Richard Hoffman

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE SIRENS

It makes no difference
if their songs enthrall you

or you're only rowing
over there to ask them,

for pity's sake, to shut up;
the rocks never move,

and winds and currents
change the approach

so it is never as it was,
and never as it is on charts.

PROCEDURE

1. Return to your birthplace. But before you do, become as solitary as you can wherever you are.
2. Repeat your name aloud until you understand it only as a sound you make.
3. Set out for your native ground. Travel overland if possible, by water if necessary.
4. Note each obstacle on your way, along with each resistance you experience inside yourself. For example, do you need money? A passport? Another language? Particular items of clothing? A profession of faith or allegiance? Is your lack of resolve an inability to foresee benefit? Is it fear? Procrastination?
5. Immediately upon your arrival, drink the local water. Eat food grown there.
6. Pinch the earth between your thumb and fingers. (If you are right-handed, use your left hand, and vice-versa.) Sniff that earth. Note both smell and texture.
7. Attend to the question that will now arise, coherent, in your mind. Be undisturbed until you can clearly speak it.
8. Remain in that place for a length of time roughly equal to the time it took to get there, whispering your question over and over until you hear the music in it.
9. Turn to your left and walk in widening counter-clockwise circles.
10. Ask your question of the first person you meet.
11. Listen carefully to the reply.
12. Thank that person with some sort of gift.
13. Heed what you now understand, including what doubts remain.

AGAINST THOSE WEALTHY VIA PUBLIC MISCHIEF

(adapted from Alciati's *Book of Emblems**, Emblem 89)

Avarice in check, the country at peace,
does not please everyone. Those who fish

for eels, for example, who know how to slice
one into segments thin as paper dollars

for sushi or paste, must find some way
to roil the placid water and churn the bottom

to be successful. (To stir the muck religion
makes a good long stick, or bogus history

wed to rhetoric.) They know just how.
They have fished for eels a thousand years.

*Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum liber* or *Book of Emblems*, a collection of 212 Latin emblem poems, was first published in 1531, and was expanded in various editions during the author's lifetime.