

Ariadne Speaks to Walter Benjamin

—after Catullus 64

Some say it was my mother's fault:
her desire for the bull that loved her,
her penchant for disguise, and then,
after the architect designed the costume
and her need was satisfied, some
were shocked by the birth of my brother,
the Minotaur, half-man, half-beast.
Of course others blamed my brother.
That was the easy thing to do,
monstrous as he was, incapable
of eating anything unless it looked
like the human part of himself. Easy
to hate what's ugly, what crosses
that line. But no. My father is the source
of all this woe, a tyrant who loved
beauty more than gratitude, risked
keeping the possession of the gods
so that he could have that precious
animal for himself. From his vanity
and blindness came every other sin:
the Minotaur's rage, the need to contain
and feed him, my role as his warden

in the prison where we harbored
our shame. For years, I was a portrait
of idleness in a state of emergency.
You can imagine how Theseus looked
to someone like me. Golden body,
black hair, the strength of ten men
in each pull of the oar.
I had stopped hoping for an escape,
and yet I held escape in my hands.
So when he asked, I helped.
I gave him the golden ball
of thread that led him in and out
of the maze. You see,
I wanted to protect my brother,
but I wanted to destroy him, too.
When Theseus asked me
to guide him, and then leave
with him, I did, thus confusing
escape with love. Then,
I was abandoned on Naxos,
island of endless abrasions.
My father calls me traitor.
There is no royal sepulcher
waiting for me. My sorrow
is so vast that even the stars
have been disrupted. So yes,

I know something about exile.
I've seen that kind of desolation.

Walter, your writing takes
the shape of a labyrinth,

and all your life you've wished
for a map to chart your journey

through the streets you wandered,
through the archives

that you would have lived in
had they let you. Here, take this ball.

I can lead you as far as Finisterre,
edge of the known world.

Hold this thread that drags across
each mountain pass. I will get you there.



Image by Jason Reblando