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MAY DAY

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Robert Kelly

MAY DAY

Poems 2003-2005

[for copyright page:]

Some of these poems were first printed elsewhere ... for example in *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (Joel Kovel), *Conjunctions* (Bradford Morrow), *Elixir* (Zia Inayat Khan), *First Intensity* (Lee Chapman), *The Modern Review* (Simone dos Anjos and Pietro Aman), *Irish Poetry Review* (Peter Sirr), *The Bard Papers* (Alexandra Dumont), *New Politics* (Marvin Mandell and Betty Reid Mandell) *The 2007 Alhambra Poetry Calendar* (Shafiq Naz).

For the selection and ordering of some of these poems, I owe a debt to the tuneful ears and lucid reading of Simone dos Anjos, one that must be paid someday in a coin not yet uttered by a republic not yet freed, when Rilke's angels show us how to rule ourselves.

Skies?

We make those lights.

Nature is our half-remembered dream.

for Charlotte

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ELEGIES FOR OSIRIS

I want the new thing
 the disclosure
 men among the trees
 crow feathers in their caps
 protecting order,

the long legato of Vivica Genaux
 embracing a castrato aria from *Artaxerxes*

Johann Adolf Hasse

reborn every morning
 chanting at you dull as monks
 prioritizing rapture

o such language darling
 you whose spokes are longer than the wheel
 so must spin in the air of agreement

—the sun is clear this morning,
 bene volente — frictionless in almost
 fall.

Beneath their Aqua Velva chins
 the channelers grunt and strain to pass
 a licit message — where *do* words come from,
 Equivoque, where does the lighter get its flame,
 plastic Prometheus of so many pockets,

you mean it's ok to tell the truth —
 only to your mother, and she is deaf.
 Dead? Words, where from, will you,
 disclose?

A narrow place where everything is born,
 they call it *so.ma*, freshness, the gap
 between any notice and the next
 — any moment you might be speaking Turkish—
 truth touches you in the night
 you roll over, truth caresses the pillow
 where later you'll fall asleep and dream,
 messages everywhere.

The thing that happens is the naked mind,
 blue sky after days of rain.

Central disorder
 rapture bound around her ankles
 strum the catgut she uses to connect
 the botryoidal mindset
 with her prancing feet — ripe ripe
 and movely ripe, clusters
 of frost sweetened grapes
 chastened to the ice-wine
 of November rivers,
 I am yours.

 You wait there
 storming at the Sea Gate
 enraged at me but still
 sharing my pizza, one wedge
 for two appetites.

But the air's dry now, my sparrow,
 and pale delight is back
 the haunted shade inside your clothes

the pale shadow that is your skin
 now tell me what divine opacity
 casts that shade and from what light

Now summon from the yew trees to appear
 medium demons of high magic, Saltarellus,
 Sequoius, Quousquinus, they know their jobs,
 they can have you on your back in no time
 interviewing the immortal stars

to make them answer. They hardly know
 what they're saying, and you're no better,
 you live for these moments of pure jive
 when every word is shining ruby
 tail light in rain.

Circle me with light,
 there you are, young glory,
 one foot past the other
 like a goat going over a rope bridge,
 be like the bird but don't fly,
 be like the moon but don't fall

as she my sister does night after night
 excruciating slow.

In all those pages find me one new thing,
anything, name of an angel,
lips of a woman you (not I) kissed in dream —
a kiss is strange, a wordless speaking
in the other's mouth,

and the sun writes only shadows on the ground,
tell me, lover, one new thing,
that's all, fox in a thicket it could be, a hunter
dead beside his rifle, a green
feather in his hat band rolled from his head,
and not far away you hear a waterfall.

LOVECRAFT

To write the alien, the language of otherness, to link the morphemes of the imaginable unknown into the barely sayable. Did Lovecraft *hear* his eldritch incantations, or did he compose them by typography alone, what looks weird as a token of weird sound? The graphemes of weirdness, consonant combinations not found in English, in the safe Western Languages, they look scary, Etruscan, from the crepuscular phase of language, language before it was human. He used the eye sense to convey pictorially the weirdness and *nausea* of the words his characters overhear. He tries by over-writing to induce nausea in the reader -- more especially the readerly reader, the sage friend he yearned for all his life. His overwriting is meant to produce the same sort of vertiginous unease, disorientation, nausea, horror that his characters are experiencing. Death by prose. It is effective, disturbing — not least because it is so easily ridiculed by those who don't experience the horror — just as fugitive accounts of meetings with extraterrestrials, angels, phantoms, ghosts are greeted with derision by those to whom unhappy voyants make their incoherent confession.

THE FLIES OF OCTOBER

The flies of October
have awkward wings,
what happens to them,
they change like the jaws

of salmon leaping
up the last time,
the body changes
on us, October,

the buzz they make
changes too, the angle
of their wings
controls the pitch

the lazy bebop
of dying time
makes them frantic
against the glass

they collide, fall
dodder on the windowsill,
come back full force
to find anything

over on the tabletop
lull juddering
on the edge of a book
the flies of October

cannot read,
even our hearts
are closed to them
just as ours are

to one another,
why do we hate them
so much, a dozen
of us lovers around

the table who don't
know each other's names
watch the flies of October
bother us

with all their dying,
other people's lives
are such a pain
to be part of,

when they intrude
on the hollow place
inside us from which
every feeling

we thought we'd banished.

A THEORY OF LEAF MANAGEMENT

Don't have to call anybody today
 the Saturday leaves relax the lawn.
 Lawn is a human word

a mere
 colonial attitude, who owns the green

one wants a superior machine
 and a schoolboy learning a fountain pen
 a schoolgirl singing to her backpack

one needs a lot of time
 and that's all time is, a lot of it
 continuously going nowhere fast,

there must be a machine
 that works better than a fountain pen
 it's Saturday the schoolboy
 learns to kiss the schoolgirl by thinking

before he gets out of bed about it
 one sleeps in a bed one walks
 upon a lawn, ownership is evident
 in all human affairs, the practice
 of the heart is hard practice,
 sophomores,

one owns actually nothing
 and even one's bones are only loans.

The hands he plans to touch her with
 are no more his than she is hers —
 this is what the leaves would be thinking
 as they rustle towards universal
 consciousness though they are kalpas
 away from it still,

leaves on the wife's
 flowerbed where the dwarf salvias
 which have been red since early June
 finally lost their scarlet blossoms
 soon ago while one's back was turned,

don't have to call they come
 at a touch the plant is closed

the worker bees are god knows where
 soldiering up the foothills of winter
 with ominous expectations,

Plutarch

has nothing to say about their case,
 whatever autumn is an omen for
 and why can't people read what
 anything means, let alone bees,

but who after all is asking,
 the leaves are easy, flowers dead,
 bees gone, birds well fed,
 the schoolboy examines his fingertips
 to see if any trace of who he touched
 is still left there to drive the fountain pen
 in some interesting direction
 rape or rapture or dog with something
 in its teeth the way words do one writes
 with one's fountain pen and the ink
 is blue and the sky goes away every night
 and there one is alone with meager skills,

her back was turned to him, she didn't see
 the way he stared at her belly when
 the bare midriff currently in fashion
 revealed skin and shaped one's mind
 to the interesting body of the other
 but away from the sexual machinery
 towards this tender yielding tummy meat

no questions asked, here
 there are no explanations, he plans
 to bury his little face in her
 some day not soon to come when
 all the stars are right again or when
 his stupid pen runs out of ink,

maybe the schoolboy thinks he could
 become the schoolgirl's backpack
 and nestle amatively close against
 the gentle scoliosis of her small
 like Charles Fourier penning a treatise,

one owns no ideas of one's own, one's all
 ideas tend to own one or so the analysts

of the inevident wrote down a century ago
 in violet ink or in Vienna with fountain pens
 still status symbols on their way to
 the elucidation of what such animals dream

as the smallest god of all redeems their sleep
 from common property and owning it,
 one's neurosis one's symptoms one's cure
 interminably deferred across the decades
 over Bifrost the myth between here and now
 and somewhere godly else,

that bridge
 is broken now, but the schoolboy's lust
 has enough ink left in it to thrust
 the rusty girders up against the sky
 and build that bridge again, and from her side
 the schoolgirl of the actual will build
 to meet her phantom other, *Other To Her*

is that span's name, they may join
 somewhere above the Skagerrak say,
 between a self and a self there is nothing
 to decide, certainly no narrative, no
 universal consciousness, no moon, no
 backpack dangling from no moon,
 no back caressed by his impostor fingers,

the state of this art has no neighbors,
 only certain grumpy ink-stained Trolls
 who live beneath any bridge, even
 the newest, beneath the blue glossy
 warpaint of the steel superstructure
 go ahead, shame the sky with bright ideas,

already shiny cars can roll from New
 Amsterdam rabbiting south
 to sleep this night she thinks he plans
 in the virgin hardwood forests of Elk
 Neck across the river from New Sweden
 where Gott sei Dank! there is a bridge already,

not everything has to be built from scratch
 but it's Saturday, her back feels lonely
 uncaressed, no backpack, no school, no moon,
 no words except the ones she wishes,

the words she wishes one would send
coarsely scribbled with one's tyro fountain pen
but schoolboys like scarlet flowers of the sage
are kalpas away from saying what they mean.

REMBRANDT'S RAISING OF LAZARUS, 1642

Of course he'd be coming
from the ground. Follow
Christ's eyebeam to find
the resurrected man,

somebody's brother,
somebody's lover, look
where Christ tells him
to come out.

And suddenly
he is with us again,
mostly just a face
is what we see, i.e.,

an identity.
This was Lazarus.
This man died
until he heard a voice

denying his understanding
up to now of his dark condition.
The voice said to do something,
come, come out

of where you think you are.
The face of Lazarus
peels off the ground.
Already he begins to tell

the story he'll be telling year after year
interpreting, maybe finally even
understanding the way he was,
the place he was, the thing

that happened to him and then
the thing that happened to that.

I was dead and then was not —
who else can say that but me?

We're tired of hearing your story
but we love your face,

THE POOR LAND OF TYROL

I must be close to dying
 since the water tastes like wine
 the moon is as bright as the sun
 and the sun is in my arms

it isn't normal to see wind
 and different countries passing by
 but what is not normal
 knows how to be natural

everybody laughing everybody in tears
 and the window flushes with foreignness
 and everything is here
 even the cities, even the people

I dream about are around me when I wake
 I see them coming over the hill
 wolves trotting in and out of their steps
 and half a dozen blue jays scream bonjour.

*

What do I know about music,
 it's years since I tasted water
 even longer since I tasted wine

the moon is a kukri these nights
 those curved knives the Gurkas use
 you can buy in mountain markets

and I can stare into the sunlight
 the way I never could before
 as if I knew how to live in this place

things keep sending me messages
 I bestir myself to read
 but sometimes I would rather sleep

or cast horoscopes for unknown men
 mapping the space between their eyes
 onto Gesenius's edition of the Torah

chanting out loud what wisdom comes
pouring from the eyes of strangers
and what does this one really know

she knows everything left out of the Bible,
Rembrandt was ashamed to show her
since beauty has nothing to do with what we do

and we have to keep doing
doing is the dog that chases us
and watches with those loving Irish eyes

all dogs have them
bliss or bite, it's all just a machine
and the whole system folds up into your pocket

because the circumference is nowhere
as the Bishop of Brixen remarked
coming down over the Brenner Pass

entering the valley of the ice cold river they call Etsch.

*

If he kept going he'd get to Bolzano
like Musil and Schnitzler and me

where we duly fell in love with the stone elephant
in the hotel park, Italian moonshine

and guitars insist on playing *im dunklen Laub*
the way they always are in poetry,

ardor and boredom and at night we ride
to German-speaking pizzerias in the vineyards

doubting God and arguing about Dante
just like those who are still alive.

Because everything you think
here comes to life.

It is a property of the clear blue water
in the little Karersee

that the yellow flowers deep in it
do not at all turn green.

THE POLITICS OF YOU

I meant a politics unwinding
 the machinery, the bluegreen
 feeling that just happens
 when a thing is finished
 even if it's not finished well
 or something's put away
 into its place and the mind is clear
 for a minute or two, losing
 your colonies after losing a war
 no more Togo no more Kamerun
 I mean where are my legs
 to stand, why is the earth
 denied to those it bore?
 A Latin question, the kind
 old poems ask and colleges
 yawn over for a thousand years,
 don't get me wrong I'm asking
 for you to be beside me
 to live in touch as some men live in hope,
 a cathedral is never finished
 always a ruin, the great abbey
 open to the instruction of the wind,
 a roofless love, the woman I forgot
 some called her turquoise
 because her eyes were ocean
 in that sallow place, *cubicula*
locanda saw Apollinaire
 rooms for rent in Latin
 for the students, nobody knows
 how Flemish I really am
 but those who have felt
 my damp mustache sur la nuque
 and breathed in my fantasizing breath,
 Christ stumbling into Brussels
 in Ensor's painting, and I am all
 the other faces, mask under mask
 until the simplest skin touches
 you and goes to heaven, how easy
 such a politics could be if we had a little
 bungalow right near the beach
 and money is only good in drugstores
 on toothpaste and Vaseline and soap
 and we eat whatever the fishermen catch
 and they catch whatever we throw away,

this is the art history museum please
you follow the footsteps of the visitors
and see what they see, what they look at
longest must be the best, write it down
as your dissertation, who are you
to go against the current of the world?
I was a salmon once and look at me now
with a twisted jaw and full of lust
and the only way for me to move is up,
if you love me there is plenty to eat
shadows and warm tabernacles
and even among the avalanches
the rhythm of all things is our salvation,
we ride our world between our legs,
people fear me often when we meet
because some text is crumbling
from my mouth, reservoir and baptistery
and gentle old stone basin in a cloister
all the ruses of water, *o mirror*
of your stillness, hazardous face –
when the wind blows I see
what I will look like when I'm old
but I could be your beast until the end,
I saw my death year cut in plain marble
simple serif letters and numbers
like a tombstone in Switzerland, so many
graves I have had already, so many
certainties resurrected me in some
outlandish name that always feels
like hands, running my finger
on the glazed wood after the ice storm
when the dark morning was full of keen,
edges and lucidities and the power failed
and everything that stretched out
was sheathed in ice, describe me,
describe me, I want to come alive
as your imagination, I don't want
to do all the work, you too
become my symbolist, give birth to me.

TWELFTH NIGHT

The dream people need me
 and I need them. They come
 and move outside the tent of sleep
 I see their shapes moving
 on the pale fabric wall, shades
 cast by the dawn light
 and I know they come for me again

I wake to inscribe their necessities
 which are our histories, without them
 I would not have a word in my mouth,
 they bring a star this morning, and they bring
 an old French province, a Belgian beer,
 a person wanders naked in the woods
 she uses her body to show the way, show
 me the way, she shows and is the way.

Words if interrupted turn back into body,
 she says Wake up, the phones are dead
 the amaryllis blossoms in the dining room
 so learn a new language every day
 the more you know the more the clothing
 falls away, it is a little Gnostic gospel,
 it is a man frying fish for you beside the lake
 blue as childhood and birds are there
 no less blue, I know because it's here
 when I wake up, who else could bring
 these things outside my window, could bring
 the window for me to look through,
 name the woman and tell me the language
 that's using both of us now, only seems
 like mother tongue, it is brassy dialect
 of somewhere else, some other god
 crept onto the altar last night,
 there is always another color hidden
 inside what we see, like a girl with
 an amber lozenge in her mouth
 you'll never know the taste of
 till you kiss her but she runs away.

Support me by the fabric
 I mean the factory of dream
 by which we are clothed
 and dare to walk along the road

from this town to another
without apology for our feebleness
nakedness, only two legs,
only two hands, how will I ever.

And that is the little glory of us
we have to invent calculus every day
and learn a new language
that calls itself Greek again
but this Plato is not like I remember
and his Socrates is nailed to a barn door
and his Alcibiades is a girl in the woods
running naked as a fox or a forgetting,

IDENTITY

Who am I, asked the man
with the martini.
I don't know, I've never
known what your kind of
people really are, it always

seems to be snowing
in front of overbright
Christmas shopping windows
downtown money
in my jacket

why are you asking,
and why me?
I don't actually drink.
It's all relative,
Gilgamesh, Madame Curie, names

get around and life is suddenly
over, wouldn't you say?
I wouldn't say anything.
Your secret's safe with me.
Why are the vitrines so bright,

why is everything so deadly
desirable? I feel like
I want to get bought too,
please. In red silk, with
gold thread, with music.

HISTORY LESSON

Judge the signs the old
equivocations, chessmen
upright in the squareless now

each one knowing how to move
and where to go, red ivory and white
ivory, fight against each other

they do not need our hands
to make their moves
or our brains to contend, no,

signs struggle against signs.

= = = =

Some words I say come out all wrong
and mean their opposite, or not even that,
some other word northeast of what I say
or cut from different wood. Beech
not birch. All words are wood,
be clear on that, the only lumber
some people get to work with or to burn.
The old printers carved big letters
out of maple to print their headlines with
and we're no different, wooden language
the louder we speak, oversimplified
philosophy or outright lies to make you
love me, what else does anybody care
about, love love love, Foucault's asshole
Sartre's cigarette, the love that carves
or brands the poor runic alphabet
deep into the practice of desire.

EARLY DUTCH BREAKFAST PAINTINGS

want my wall. The gleam
in butter, the luster
of a herring's muscle
laid out on a winter morning,
Judean desert of a slab
of cracked wheat bread.
I care about you
because you came after
in time for me.
The saints were all gone
by the hour I was born.
Or no, maybe they had
hidden themselves
in ordinary things.
Saint Lemonslice.
Saint Piece-of-Cheese.
Worship with our eyes
the yummy circumstance
of house and table,
makes the property of
reverence stay keen in us,
and our appetites
guru us to good
just following our eyes.
The sheen of the loaf's
slick crust. Inside
the ornate pewter flagon
schemes the hidden wine.
Painting a picture of a thing
is always a religious act.
This is the terrible secret
hidden in Western art.
What Clara Peeters must
have meant with her
oversize hunk of bread,
her delicate little fish.

====

Tumult spirit. Hegel-headed monster
unsettling empery. Mere girl
imaginaire.

 We are eaten
finally by the mouth we kiss,
cannibal language, afterlife
of the afterlife.

 One touch of you
usually lasts two or three days.

But my whole life is an emergency
and sometimes I need you suddenly
my arm around your southern alps

you stand beside me like a dentist
intimately related with my pain
but not feeling it. How could you
find room for it in all your own?

= = = =

Young lionesses patrol
the living room. We
could live without florists,
but not without flowers.
The young lionesses
stretch along the sofas
leap onto the buffet, sleep
anywhere the sun lay.
Why is there so much
living in your life
the visitors demanded.
She answered trimming
the stems to fit the blue
glass vase or vase,
it all just overflows
and the fridge is crowded too,
you should see the breadbox
and the poor telephone
has forgotten how to sleep.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF HELL

the numbers are all put away
in the back of the mind
where they come from

and are safe there again
like ivory chessmen in their box

and we grew, grew
obedient to the words
that made us –

where are the diagrams,
the meek qabbalah of your guesses

where is your house,
that thing that looks like a number

and your shoes fit barely
under the sofa by the window
and there is no cat anywhere,

are you listening to me,
I am not good for you.
I have brought you to Hell

a place we have constructed
together,
 leave me,
leave with your accurate children
who take the form of old men

the words made us
and unmake us

listen my love
is laceration

sea without number.

= = = =

You read me shallowly these days
the sun said to the wading pool.
Once you were eloquent and deep.

What can I do, the rays of you and
others like you have diminished me,
sky is the most dangerous text

and the more I read the less I knew,
the less I was, grew lean and turbid
–but still the children understand me

they know my feeble perils too
how I can drown a man but not
set fire to a single piece of paper

some meager lover sent his love.

AN ELEGY FOR WOLVES

Everything will be with you already
all the while you go on waiting
there is another sturgeon swimming
peacefully towards you this second
her belly charged with eggs for you
you get to understand, knowledge is caviar
the old man said, swinging his racket on the roof
testing once again (so many years)
the Ghibelline light. No one wants it
because when the General knows you have it,
you're a marked woman, the old man said,
or man as it happens, you are a shadow
cast by candles on a gold mosaic wall
and you last no longer than the morning.

And there was snow in Venice this year
on the little bridge with the Hebrew street sign
telling how you find the House of Study,
that fervent observation the others call 'prayer.'
Snow on old tile, dangerous, snow
settling on water, a dream dreaming a dream.

This little book, questo librettino, I got it
 from my German mother, my Jewish mother
 as it happens if the truth be known, o knowledge
 of all days compressed in this, this night also
 the snow is spoken, and so I read

*Henry Menaced by Wolves; or, Prayer Never
 Goes Unanswered*, who knows who wrote it,
 a long walk home he had of it,
 not even counting the snowflakes,
 their eyes all round him, their breaths
 observable in every shrub
 as little puffs of bluish steam
 sifting through foliage, low to the ground,
 the bushes breathing, and the boy decided
 Mamma told me God is everywhere
 so those are His eyes I see all round me
 gold as His crucifixes hot as candle wax
 I will not fear except with that praiseworthy
 fear of God they say is proper
 though I have never felt it yet, maybe this
 is it now, since God is a baby in a manger
 far littler than me, or God is an old man

bound and fettered, tied to a cross
and dying, pity and not terror
is what comes of that, but those yellow
eyes are on me now, they must be He,
how many eyes you have o Lord!
The better to behold you, sang the wolves
and waited.

I don't recollect
what became of little Henry after that,
the old man said, the years have bound me
to this chair I made once for another,
and then they took my books away
across this interminable room, long
out of armshot, shadows for breakfast
and a bird on the roof of the garage
for lunch, is it time for my ravioli yet,
my glory?

His daughter was his wife.
The ambulance got lost on the canal,
no matter, he felt better after eating,
went to his desk and later managed

to play some tennis for a quarter-hour
lobbing the ball against the house wall
all alone, no one to play with, pale
Tyrolean sky, just his instruments alone
and the mosaic in which he stands
fixed for a thousand years but only
as a shadow is, until the next
dose of medicine goes down, Lenin calls,
Christmas trees thrown out after Candlemas,
their tinsel and angel hair still on them
cluttering the bonfires with threads of light.

BRAHMS, STRING QUARTET N0.1 in c, Op.51

What could I have expected?
The glass was empty, the waiter

who seemed so friendly before
was nowhere to be found. Look at me,

somebody, I am here. The chairs
do their slow acrobatics, legs in the air

on tabletops and I still haven't paid
my bill, doesn't anybody care?

Here I am fat as a cello, loud as one too,
loving people right and left.

It is said that the dead take a long
time to recognize their new condition.

Is that where we are now?
The music is so alive,

all the listeners are dead. At the end
the canals will stretch out in the cold,

we will be born again
We float along so close I can

reach out and stroke the sunrise
and follow with my fingertips

the coursework of the brick.
And then the wall will end

and the canal debouch into the dark sea
which for all its marriages never

learns to speak one human language
not even this.

= = = =

When boys were named Lester and girls were called Kate
I set out walking on my big fat feet
in too-tight old brown shoes and wanderlust

and all I thought I was on my way to find
was a nice red leather armchair
by a fireplace and a cat asleep in my lap

that sometimes became a girl named Kate
who'd look away from the interesting flames and kiss me
saying Lester, honey, read me from that book

and lo and behold the book was open on my lap
and words appeared that I could read out loud
and as long as I read new words kept appearing

and Kate would love me and listen and fall asleep
all book and cat and woman so I'd sleep too
and leave behind for a while my famous aching feet.

OBLATION

I sent you the wrong version of the poem,
the one that had me in it.
I was supposed to hide behind the rose.
Behind the stone, the barn, the new garage.
Since I move with an animal's desire
I should disappear like one,
Damascus road and no one knows,

I thought I saw myself approaching me,
a big man with a book in his hand,
and looking at me the way I look at you,
and was afraid. Did he mean
to join with me and leave no room
for me to vary from the pattern,
terrible monogamy of being oneself?

1878 BROWN STREET

The garden in the mind is extension. The mysterious absence of definition in the distance between the blue hydrangea and the pussy willow by the alley picket fence is explained today: the yard was very small. It was not the forty or so vague pretty green feet to the fence, but maybe fifteen. The corner of the garage almost reached the hydrangea, just a narrow cement path I now remember. The garage is designed for the stubby cars of 1928. Everything is small. So the remembered vista is enlarged by absence alone – nothing added (memory was at least that honest) except distance. The actual remembered particulars are stretched out to cover an imagined extent.

Or: not imagined. Remembered with a child's distance. Walking the few steps from the alleyway to the stores on the other side of Avenue S, past Haring Street, I recall what a significant walk that seemed to me when I lived there. So the garden too had a child's legs to measure it, far, far, from the little patch of grass around the hydrangea, I can feel it in my fingers, to the gaunt picket fence.

In fact there is nothing there. Some later owner tore all the ivy down and replaced the old burgundy brick with a parti-colored imitation fieldstone. Rooted up the deep red roses by the Mulhare's wall and the pussy willow and the blue hydrangea that all summer was the center of my world. Paved the whole thing over with cement. Patio. Empty now, dirty cement, late winter on earth. Desolate. So it's a bare thirty feet now from the shabby iron fence at the alleyway and the shabby back wall of the house, where a porch or platform hangs off the second story, and a narrow staircase leads up to it. My parents' bedroom. And the window of my little room is still a window, but one of my parents' windows is a door now, the way onto the porch. But the downstairs window of the bathroom is still a window, and it looks as if it is the same old pebbled glass! The light is on in the bathroom though it's early afternoon, the light is yellowish in the rainy light of the day.

No one answers the door when I knock, but an expensive little dog barks steadily, and noses apart the vertical blind that shield the window of what was once my living room, where I am stretched out in a green tapestry armchair with a green ottoman, I am reading Stevenson and eating Christmas mints sixty years ago. The dog barks, it knows a ghost is in the room, a ghost at the window, a ghost at the door. The dog barks and no one comes, and we go away. What could I have said? No hydrangea flowers in the no blue Chinese vase on the no black lacquered table in the window. No explanation. Memory too is a terrible country where there is no explanation.

= = = = =

We say he went to heaven
or heaven happened to him
right here, like Foucauld
in Africa, blood over white

sometimes the comedy
comes first, Marx's
patterned lute that sang
the looms of Lombardy

all work and no stained glass
the gods exist to take
this pain away, gold filigreed
their skins of lapis blue

Marx's lute in Mao's fingers
no one understands
power is the choosing not to tell
or not to kill

I am in the sky, it said,
winged, of either sex
as your body may have need
my six wings all hovering

they cover us both
the wrap, finale, apocalypse
of all our skin
unwrapping mystery

to spill this ordinary thing.

A WRITING WITH JOHN CLARE

Taste told me it *is from* a place
 across the river from what animals call *heaven*
 but we, lacking *a* teacher to breathe such
inspiration deep into our rough *nature*
can't be sure that what the ordinary
 weathers *bestow, tho* generous
 the way *nature's* gifts so often are
 with terrors and *beauties*, isn't enough
 to kill a man with longing
where a taste of *the other* side
is suddenly *given*, a light that *warms*
the dull ideas we have *of the soul*
 and its business, and forces instead
 a kind of balsam from our lowest places
to flow upwards in us, *with* some
 chemicals working with *that enchanting*
'thusiastic glow. Now this chemistry
that throbs inside *the bosom*, this sulfur
 ardent as goldfinch here or meadow saffron
 is just what catches fire *when the curious eye*
 decides that what it sees
 beyond what it can see is
 where the whole animal must go,
 the me of me, and each of its *glances*
 opens a strange door, wind rushes out
 that smells of all we need, a gleam
 in there *on beautiful things that give delight*
objects not *of earth or air or sea or sky*
 but are here too, earthier than dirt,
 meatier than flesh, some engines beyond
 the senses *that bring the very senses* to
 inside-out themselves and go beyond
 their simple seeing, the sound inside the taste,
 the endless mountain vistas that open up
 in every touch. Beyond the border
 of the eye that lives *in the sight* is that sweet
 as yet invisibility that is the actual power
 that compels the bashful mind *to relish*
what it sees – *but all is night to the gross clown*
 – we need to close our eyes to read *nature's*
unfolded book, and in that doubled seeing,
 sight hiding inside sight, the animal goes
 wild with pleasure, pleasure, which is our
 single purpose in a grieving world.

lamb fat and basil, warm yogurt sauce
with olive oil attuning the fragments,
salt and cinnamon, to examine the leaf
until you forget all about death and the crow
hollers at you from the hill don't leave yet
the movie is only beginning, just cup
your empty hand over your empty ears
and listen to the dancers, their heavy grace
pounding on the stage, on the hollow ground,
listen, and what does it mean when birds
start talking and you start understanding
and the subway map seems unfamiliar
and the gorgeous overpass at Smith-9th Street
looks out over endless Ukrainian grasslands,
and you wake up before dawn at all asking
suppose all this while I was wrong, suppose
everything really is different, I was born
with the wrong bones and don't have a clue,
and you get up and stare out the window
we all have windows, I pray we all have windows,
and you see something out there, anything
a cat or a fence or a car singing to itself
and you say this is my clue, this, and go back
to sleep and never know it and you wake
with us in a world full of clues, everything
everywhere gibbering and making signs
read me, read me and weep, read me, *omnia
exeunt in mysterium*, everything that exists
is grounded in mystery and this mystery
holds your hand and kisses the nape of your neck
and whispers Darling, there is a whole
number smaller than one, there is an animal
you can catch in any woods, you can hitch it
to a wagon you can learn how to build
and it will draw you slowly to a place
with no shadow where you can learn one
other thing, and the very one you love
will press that beloved hand of theirs firmly
on your bare skin and tell you yes
you love me for a reason, I am your reason,
since every secret is hidden in the other,
begin with the other, the scary person even you
can hear at night rummaging around and moaning
under the ruins of the burnt down church, no moon.

SCIENCE

Science explains nothing
but holds all together as
many things as it can count

science is a basket
not a religion he said
a cat as big as a cat

the moon the size of the moon
science is the same as poetry
only it uses the wrong words.

THE DAYBED

He was the one who understood, having read
Clausewitz, and Rommel's forged diaries –

the essence of warfare is always metaphor,
diaper-changing facility in every john.

Keep alarming the opposition by simple
evidence: a stone that did not kill Abel,

a sword that left Holofernes untouched,
asleep, dreaming of nice Jewish girls,

their opulent smiles, their promises.
I want to give you what you gave me,

a piece of furniture you found on the street,
but you used it, you lay down in it

a thousand nights till it was yours
then you had boyfriends drag it to my place

and ever since it shapes how I lie down
and how I sleep, dreaming of rusty swords.

Now I have to give you some cushioned thing
infested with my life, my imagery

to agitate your sleep. Memories
of things we heard each other say –

the words get inside our bodies and repeat
till we spend our lives trying to practice

all the lunacies they specified,
the lies we told us on the telephone.

THE VALUE

It costs as much as a cup
of espresso on a marble-topped
table in Avignon among scarlet
oleanders or the new Airbus
on its way to Geneva or as much
as Mozart on the road to Prague
in the beautiful novella by Mörike
or as much as the third woman
on the right in that photograph
of the cheese factory girls
or as much as the whole color
black which they say is not a color
at all but the absence of one,
then it costs as much as absence,
an aluminum coin,
or as a heron over a pine tree,
or a bus on fire.

OR

he turned on the gas jet
and found that he was dead.
Or was the stove just out of gas?
He flicked a switch
and no light came on,
opened the door and no breeze blew in.
For a final test
he went out and walked in the rain
and didn't get wet.
This must be death
but why does it have no feelings?
Why is death just a repertory of incapacities?

And why is the rain
as beautiful as ever
everything silvery and close and full of promise
and why was there this happiness inside him
all around him walking in the rain,
and nobody spoke to him and everybody smiled,
not that there were so many of them,
no, he was mostly alone
on a mostly empty street.

By now he had forgotten
where his house was
and then a little later
what a house is in the first place,
strange bulky shapes along the silver road.
Evidently the dead have no need of houses
he thought, or it thought for him, he thought
I think the rain is thinking for me now.

OPEN THEORY

1.

The information arrives --
 that is what it does
 by nature. You yield to it.
 A grackle flies by.

2.

The conversation is always beginning.
 Flower, say in Oahu,
 or say you haven't reached
 even an island then
 mid-ocean flower

name its parts
 its parentage
 how from Thessaly
 with one blue eye and one amber
 and wanting to be a girl

or from the middle ocean wall
 cast this flower down
 to whomsoever these tidings come
 and delicately open it
 sepal by sepal of course each
 soft petal a hard alphabet

decipher this.

Or fallen tree whose heartwood's hale
 still the morning by what lightning felled?

3.

a Latin inquisition
 among the ads
 all they sell is sex and medicine
 when I will be beautiful again
 and meet with one amber eye and one
 blue as this sound I'm looking at
 tearing the flower him from him

4.

but in the Cave the sibyl's sister
 spreads oak leaves on the moss
 to give her bed a prickly ease
 beneath her lover's tumbling caress

sea-poppy, rugose rose
 the smell of them stands out to sea
 if once you find the island

the isles I know they have such lovely eyes
 in theory sequences crystal contradictions

it was the way she looked at me
 for eyes are hands and lay themselves upon
 the dubious witnesses of skin
 their blue hands their amber hands

5.
 to see one thing and think another
 is a different color
 in her sea-cave dreaming of her father

the whole city was built above a lake
 no one saw but she heard moving
 lapping underneath her in the night
 and sometimes she'd wake wet from it
 tall ships sailing furtive white in dawnlight

leaving for the much-marketed orient
 to renew her by their absences alone
 ample-witted information so many children
 kayak all the way to the sun
 our brother common laborer aloft

6.
 I picked me out a different god
 a nightly rondure and a hip with heart
 or where does information flow?

hand on her belly he fell asleep
 and spent his dreamland counting colors
 always the same chemicals copper sulfur
 charity, always the same disorder
 of the eyes the keen observation turned
 scorpion-wise to sting its Dante,
 for we propagate by looking on us
 and we ecstasy by smile
 leaving Hawaii on the morning side
 for a place where it is always evening
 harbingers haggle in the public trees

7.

this does not issue in the amative
this is not about desire or the whim
by which an island's penetrated
or fish chosen for the evening meal
no, it is a boat alone
on an ocean of mere imputation
and you can see it clearly in the sun glare
but not see who's in it
till it's too close to shore
for you to turn away
if even then you can discern
the algebra of these long last visitors
your conquistadors your amateurs

8.

let the little gods you pray to smash the boat
before their foot steps land on virgin shingle
but here they are, unrecognized, in triumph
taking to themselves all the colors of your eyes
smell of sunrise, seaweed,
a complicated synthesis they tried to make you dream
so they could grasp it from you when you wake.

A HORSE IS NOT A USUAL MENACE

there have been so many though.
 Buddenhagen's cows. All those
 north Germans lean and bitter that I knew
 we ate eggy pancakes in their boarding houses,
 spare men lovelessly devout.

I have prejudices. Baltic. Riding horses.
 I love those places. Can I be beautiful again
 the way the rain was if I be not wet?
 Silver trays and salvias red as rockets,
 fluttermice on mountain garden,

the wood is wet and what secret
 is hidden in your body? Why do I wake
 to you of all people after such a storm?
 You will weep upon my page if I let you,
 you sky, good morning, goldfinch.

And you me of me,
 lurking in my underwear
 to wield a day against the world and make
 some sense of it that never has been
 said. And sometimes let it be true.

Body is the leaf
 and spirit is the soft green pod
 and what's the pea inside?
 We have no name yet for that seed,
 the pulse of life, the scattered
 remnant in our midst of something
 inconceivable, something of which
 Being is just the husk.

The feathered snake went in before us
 soaring to that gap behind the sun,
 the other side of anything you say.

====

Your ideas get in your way
your taste gets in your way
your appetites and preferences
likes and dislikes attitudes and sentiments
all get in your way.
And your love gets in your way
and your hope gets in your way
so what are you going to do?

You can't get rid of everything,
even your face gets in your way.
What will you do?
Jump over your shadow
and see over the wall,
let him help you see,
a shadow is a man without a face.

AFTERMATH AT ARLES

remembering Gustaf Sobin

In the arena
alone with the sun
we tried to talk
ourselves into now.

But then was too strong.
Stone upon stone serried
back up to the sky
where no one sits

ever watching
what does not happen.
That is the sorrow, isn't it,
when God is dead

there is no witness.
This structure is for mourning,
to focus time's ellipses
around us, bend us

to mingle with the unrelenting
day. Nothing to say
about pigeons sailing in and out.
We talked about what is left

when language is gone,

THE TEAR

Let the carriers of beginnings find
in the core of their split logs
no frog in a private hell but
an image of the other side of sleep

inside of the tesseract no
child has danced the image
inside the actual tear that
seeps from the miraculous icon's eye

in Russia somewhere with all the magics
where men die in snow slush of spring thaw
when all the belief systems lapse
in the spring flood, glee of spring rain

waking topological remorse.
A place I never was is terrible.
The denial of pubis and pelvis
of brain and middle ear

why can't I let the little world know me
to split the stick and find the answer
Gnostic-perfect as a leering suitor
come to seduce me to her pleasure

a field full of people in this waterdrop.

THE SLATES OF LA BORNE

Closets

Napoleon's ghost stands in every closet, that's who you listen to when the wind walks sipping shadow in the nursery or attic, the mad small man from yet a stranger island.

Stay in the closet and do it to me she said, because the fox fur tickled and the old shearling coat was warm and no one missed her, but her absence fell as a dark spell like the morning mail... Touched them gently, using for once only their own fingers. *A piece of slate.* A snail crossing a national frontier.

Sel Fin

Fine salt is something different. It sings. It is determined to be grocer and garden. It is deer. Sometimes I wonder where the animals are going. They're always on the move. Or the sea even worse.

The salt seems to be everywhere, yet valuable. Yet it would not cost much nowadays though it does. To pay a woman's weight in salt for example would not be all that costly even with fine salt. Even a large woman. Nowadays salt seems to be for some strange reason cheap, relatively, though it is the most precious of all minerals I think. And it is just as useful and needed as before.

Sometimes what we really need is right there. Ground fine, easy to absorb. Sparrows are chirping outside eating bread and cereal given. Salt everywhere. Wagtails, magpies, jays are common local birds. Birds are the salt of the sky. As you are the salt of the earth. You know who you are.

Amber

Amber. Something it says. Forgive me a lot. Not scrimshaw, jigsaw. Scallop cut. Dovetail. Rabbet. Such auguries amaze that blue flag of a strange country we call the sky. A vanished country. Tree. Be me a while and then you'll see. Ungenerously clothed and hid. Tree sap stump a shallow bisque. Opal. Murmuring beast. Listen.

Amber becomes earwax in mortals. Words become amber when they fall. Let words fall into muck. Into mouth, always wet, always messy, a mouth. Nice muck outside of water and leaf mulch and bark and dead stuff and ordure and time, mostly time. Fall words into muck and let. Let time take time. Let time talk.

A boy and a girl walk down the word talking. His shirt is loose her pants are snug it is Friday feeling in the rainy air. This is amber of them. This is amber. They are in white. White is the meaning of amber. Red is the meaning of white.

Cordon.

Cordon. A wild man or a bear. Some particulars left from the war. Surplus plus an anarchist. So many things repeat and keep from knowing. Knowing is a kind of wolf, knowing has yellow eyes. In the middle of anything thick, knowing waits. It can walk on grass but it can't protect particulars from sudden. Rain or rockfall. Spelt. Lawn mowers and hedge thinners are useful but not interior. Police armed with nutcrackers because of how dancers decide. Police means city. City means a pile of earth to lift house or houses over marsh or plain. What happens. Protection. I put my arms around you. Put arms around something. Later they go away. The arms stay. The arm that lingers makes the sound of something staying. Moving but staying. Simple, like a soup inside its bowl. Or a plate waiting.

Scales

How far will numbers take him. He's always asking with his hands lifting and lifting. What time is it he'd say or what's the temperature tell me in Fahrenheit. So many w-words or as the Romans would say so many q's. Numbers are never a road. Numbers are never anywhere.

Never anywhere to begin with so where could they go? Numbers have no somewhere else. That is why people weigh things, to learn the numbers of the hereness of each thing.

Numbers are never somewhere else, numbers have no else.

Numbers are more like a mustache. A mustache itself is like a dog on the lawn. And a lawn is always a kind of remembering, isn't it. Answer me. Let the stupid barbell fall.

Line

A beeline from the terrace of "Les Mouflons" past the steeple of the little church in La Moussière leads to the left or eastern corner of La Frasse, elevation 1220 meters, simple as a chess pawn in shape, that lifts south of us and hides the hamlet of Essert-Romand where many years ago a girl in a red dress leaped over a stone fence on her way to bring us all our portions of la tartiflette, the cherished casserole of the region.

The Mortal Factor

There is an astrological calculation to reveal the native's death date. Method: examine by computer ten thousand charts of people dead of 'natural' causes late in life. List all common elements: aspects, angles, relationships of any kind, between birth chart and chart of moment of death. Test for such elements in all the charts. Use a hundred thousand. The resulting common element(s) will be called the *mortal factor*, and you will be able to plot it, predict it, in every chart. Apply it to one's own chart.

At the end of these calculations, one's own death date will appear to be tomorrow morning, early, when everyone is asleep, much too soon for you to announce the newly discovered mortal factor to the world. You sit there, trying to take it in, the bitter irony of going to all that trouble to discover the date when the date is just about to announce itself. There is a knock at the door. A man is there when you open it, someone you have never seen before but you guess his business.

"We always stop them just before they give the simple mathematical solution away. There is another, more complicated, set of relations which yields an easy calculation that reveals the time of death for those who die suddenly, by catastrophe or mischance. And that one too we will inhibit you from disclosing. Be happy for a night that you, Columbus of death, have found what you were looking for, and that you have discovered the key of mortality with which, tomorrow, while your wife and cat are still asleep, Death will unlock your door, and lock it again after you set forth."

Wood.

Wood. When pale is just behind you. Takes you by the naked elbow and wood has not much by way of hand. At night wood is stars. Trees leave. They go to another place and leave their shadows behind. Sudden woodmen take these shadows and cut them into uniform lengths and burn them. No heat comes from such fires, or not much. In the afternoon people wear hats and observe races of horses or other swift animals. They think they see trees through which the dogs or foxes run. They say: that grey (or even silver) horse over there with a girl on its back that is standing by a large old linden tree, that one. But no one sees what they're pointing to. The tree is not back yet and the girl not born. There was a man with a hornbeam leaf in his pocket. But even that gave him no right to talk about wood. Or decide where it went or goes or will, or when it will come back, will it?

PARMENIDES: *ON BUDDING BEING*

Overtaken from the Greekish
though he was not Greek

not that at all, all
words are in a different language
from what the man speaks

the woman speaks,

there is no native language,
Parmenides says his language was horses
a white horse and a black
horse on the ecliptic,
subject and verb his horses were

you need them
stallion and mare
to make a proposition

dyadic not dualist
he says they carried me

as far as my heart had it
in me to desire

because the heart needs
what is not here

to turn it into
what is here and goes and returns

for my heart was
not a palace but a path

for what does any heart desire
but to be gone?

What can a heart know of standing still?
It is the one that never stops,
one of the horses,

and *placeless* the desire
already we are
are on the way

(To be is to be gone)

Now let us suppose the teacher said
that every word means only *now* –
like a telephoto lens compressing depth
language squeezes time

language itself
knows nothing of the intervening years –
be speaking now innocent of history

because two horses cannot carry one man
there must have been a vehicle
contrivance in which on which, as if a maiden
arrayed for the wedding or a warrior
carried dying home, they carried him
to the appointment,

enthymeme in the argument,
for all our SUVs we do not know
the car in which he rode,
although we're always seeing Krishna the charioteer
or Athena the charioteer
riding before us saying *What you see as me
is what you are*
we forget the chariot in which we ride,
o woe is me if I forget the Chariot
(for the name of the chariot is my name)

left out, it rusts in the rain,
we call that time, or villainy.
The history.

I have heard men talk about this text of his
so I am ignorant of most of what it means

because what it means
is mostly what it meant
to those who came on it
before me

(but he said the horses were both mares,
he said that equal love would carry us,
Lilith and Eve brought Adam to the castle
where the silence around them they named God
and when it did not answer supposed 'his' wrath)

for the text cannot read its readers
cannot self-inscribe their reading
resorbing the gestures of their understanding

and so it comes, virgin at last, to the lap.

Blameless you read, but not much boon
since you can know only what it says
on this day in September
when the secret spring begins

the secret hands that milk the winter.

====

Imagine the other side of poetry,
what you'd see if you look back at us
through *that* glass, us standing here
like nervous lovers in a glum hotel
in some famous capital we've read about
all our lives and here it is outside
all round us and the column with the admiral
on it casts his shadow in this very room,
we are a part of history after all, touch me,
I am real, we make each other somehow
into something accurate if small,
the long shadow of the admiral lays
itself down across our very bed
where one of us smokes and one of us
waits but for what, since everything
is here already, everything done?

HOW PINDAR WORKS

*His ode is like a
haiku with a hole in it*

the hero falls through
falls upward through the dawn wind
of his own coming to be,

coming with words in his mouth and some bright
shining thing in his hand,

how well he uses what he has or what he is,
the genetic calculus scatters backward
patter of gravel
falling with apparently no pattern
but a hero rises

like a river from the rock
like a hawk hammering the sky

backwards, backwards
from great consequences
intuit *a tergo* simplex causes

as he beats back through his millennium
grace by grace, for was he not in fact the one
old Lincoln had in mind when he wished
one day in Illinois to be a girl instead
and wear starched dimity and tell lies
that would make the preacher blush

and switch through the sexes through the tenses through the doors
until every room on earth belonged to his light tread

and have done (*pour en finir*) with all
the useful lies of politics forever,
Abramendax, who split
our country so bloody deep
we still make the mirror crack and bleed
when he looks into it,

o it is vengeance enough to be born
and not everyone God loves is born with rubies
studding his bassinette and a snake
crushed in his little hands

and yet the hero is, snake after snake until the stars
relent and daylight comes, he falls forward now
into the blue aorist of distance,
a yachtsman conniving with bootleggers
fetching raunchy rum to Amagansett

where the blondes are, ditzy by the pool
in the filmy eternity of women's clothes,
Achilles, Lincolnetta, all the glory-dazzled travesties
that live for war, girls on Harleys, ladies eyelined
choking the chill stems of martinis

and then a birth or two later
he's in our age
pounding doubles off the wall at Fenway
or scalawagging budget lines through Washington
a scarlet story and man among men,
a wound made by music,

that heals in our hearts.

= = = =

The day I stopped sounding like myself
and became a rough draft of somebody else.

It was like having a mild stroke you only
know about weeks later when your left eye
looks weird in the mirror and you can't read

Portuguese any more. *O but the nights*

when the women who like this new man

come up from the subways to know me,

I translate Rilke for them a while then they

enlace me tight in fleshy arguments, their

birthparts console me for having been born.

NINE BAGATELLES

First I was dying then I was dead.
 Before all that I remember nothing,
 he said, something hurt me like a color
 then it was gone and a lull came on.
 How was the journey for you, he said.

*

Foundering despots look for help
 from poets and sentimentalists.
 Bhang-crazed Sufis sit around
 in Cairo mourning King Farouk.
 The sun cracks on any pyramid
 and Thales' celebrated water flows
 out of the egg of time. *River,*
river, all my days one poet rants.
 Another sneers at such drivel then
 wonders if he didn't just say it himself.

*

(Conversation Among Roses)

I was always the one who left,
 before the touch grew cold
 and the words thickened
 on all sides with explanations
 nobody needed and nobody
 believed. Only the gullible flowers
 in their vases live so quick
 a life that love outlives them.

*

But I held the spindle
 in my left hand
 and wound like woman
 my life around the stick

and this was my torch
 that led me while I slept
 under waterfalls and walked

along the narrow path
 between the eyelid and the eye.

*

But what they touched
 came later, brushed
 against the coats hung in the hallway
 and spoke with each one

a man's weather stays in his clothes
 and answers in his absence
 when a wise man asks

He had hurt himself with listening
 He went out of his mind's way
 to taste the other road

the dust of it still on his tongue:
 what language is.

*

Language is the muttering of slaves
 bent to their oars churning
 a dark ship through incomprehensible seas.

*

Folding trees up
 neatly into treatises,

translate the whole argument
 back into Greek

insoluble because the birds
 that sang to Anaximenes

have changed their chromosomes
 and walk among us now.

Philosophy is the science of forgetting.

*

God is what flees before us
 and makes us follow, hurrying
 past the church and through the market,
 past money and past river,

past all the foreign languages,
church bells, cute students
of dead sciences, parks,
fields, prairies, seas,
hum of bees around the empty hive.

*

Raleigh in the night before his execution
wrote his thousand-page *History of the World*
dedicated to the queen who sentenced him to die.

THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Smell the incense of a missed connection
hold that fruit to your lips the melon of absence
the empty signifier nailed to the sky
above all love the city wall

the curtain of our skin
flaps from the collarbone
a sorry flag with no crescent on it
just the everlasting sun over the yardarm

and we poised for the night's first drink
like Turks besieging Byzantium
but where did she get all that music
and who carved her harp

from elm wood was it or acacia
the thorn that we suck honey from
John John you dip it in the desert
for all vascular plants grow from music

as in the orient Gamelan it's in the space
between the sounds where men grew wings
and flew away from the City
as the ground suddenly abandons the dancers

the old priest waddles says no
no dancing in church no dance in heaven,
heaven is sitting still, honey
lucent thick and glowing in the comb.

CAMPO DEI FIORI 1600

The martyrdom, the men
who set the pyre burning,
the miracle workers who plied the crowd
healing dog distemper,

the pious nuns who watched a brother burn,
Field of the Flowers, Holy Rome,
and God knows what they were thinking
if they were thinking

and who knows what God was thinking,
his pearly fingernails overhead we read as sky
into which the smoke of all our love and learning
passes as it burns away,

a lean little man called Brown is burning
whose crime was to try to measure
thinking, the shadows of ideas,
touched the terrible shadow of God.

MAKING GOLD

Midnight came and stayed. Sappho
 kissed me
 lightly on the corner of my mouth
 I touched her hip it was enough
 to get the brightness started.

He is bright, they said. Grandfather
 went to Australia they said,
 grandfather found gold.

He set to work to find the gold around the house.
 He was bright, he looked for it,
 either it was not so bright and did not gleam
 and so could not be found or
 it was bright as books say but was not there,

no gold, no grandfather, no home.
 So he dug beneath the mulberry tree out front
 and under the hydrangea in the garden
 till they said to him Stop digging
 the War has begun
 we need all the earth for Trenches
 and he was afraid.

He was not bright enough to know yet
 that adults always lie,
 pay no attention to what they say,
 never rely on them, they are buried
 in their own ground,
 he was not bright enough yet to dig them up,
 dig them out of their own dirt
 so he believed them and stopped digging.

Deep below the mulberry tree the gold still is gleaming
 dreaming of daylight,
 dreaming of war,
 Sappho kissed every metal too,
 lightly at the corner of her mouth
 while her lips pronounced its name,

Chrysea I love you she said
 and I answered that is not my name I love you too.

CHATEAU

Behind the tapestries must be windows
since there's a draft, but the Owner
doesn't want you looking out,
he doesn't want that kind of light.

Look instead at what the weaving shows:
Diana at her bath, her hoyden nymphs
splash about her. In a clump of willow trees
far off a little face appears: Actaeon
it must be, eternal beholder, caught already
in the trap of the visible. Fatal.

The whole scene stretched across the wall
narrows for you into that pale,
unsuccessfully hidden face: your own.

= = = =

Suppose I took the colors from my face
took away the bones and hair

bones and hair arrange on white
to spell a subtle word

in Arabic perhaps, *resurrection*
of the body is what it would mean

a knife edge to walk along
to the mountain lost in the sky

we see only the shadow of it
and call this shadow the light.

IN THE WESTERN REGION

Another language is so far away.

The first night the unsuitable duvet
too heavy and so sleek. The next night

that sycamore leaf pasted to the windowpane
by wind and rain – eerie, almost uncanny

its pointy little fingers but you can't tell why.
So many rooms, coins left for chambermaids.

You knew you were where it wanted you to be
but who was driving? Was it that woman,

she looked so like a young fox
and talked about Habermas all the way home?

Even you never thought there'd be so many hills.

...

You were at a performance of *Fidelio*,
afternoon, the famous floating opera on the lake.

His gloomy prison has to work its spell
under constant sunlight. Far beyond the action

some swans were spotted moving towards the shore.
She kept telling you fine points of the plot,

whispering translations of the interminable talk
between the slices of music. Music needs no story,

shut up you tried to tell her with your smile,
your fingers appraising the dome of her left kneecap.

Does the king know his subjects are suffering?
Does the bedstead know how beautifully you cry?

Which one is you and which is me?
And why are all these Austrians applauding?

NERO WOLFE'S LAST CASE

The thing I have to do
I don't do now.
Intersect, is all.
The way a flower

(*ich bin keine
Blume*) catches
her attention even
when she doesn't

like it, dyed
marigold or azure
mum, shame
on colors!

and the vascular
families the way
they also intersect,
Farbers and Blooms

all cherrypie and charity,
you call *that* an absolute?
Simple explanation helps:
the deed was dismal,

the day Thursday,
the donor doubtful,
the dinner grisly,
the doctor girlish,

the dog dead.
My plane even didn't
land till Sabbath
when the organs

of the Christians swell
with unaccountable
presumption roaring
the complacency of calculus

(Bentham's, felicific)
stuffed ballot boxes,
lobster roe.
I hate this town.

It was my car
but I let him drive.
Always south
around these parts,

the sun always
in my eyes, I left
my sleep on the plane,
sat alert and counted

cats and homeless men
till we reached the door.
O god that door, purple,
double-winged,

stained glass grapes
of Tuscany ditzzy fanlight
over it I went in
and am here still.

I'm writing you
because I don't believe
in letters but it's nice
in the library

the smell of cigarettes
and leather, like a gay bar
without the sweat,
I put a pillow on the phone

and locked the door.
This is where the murder
is supposed to be.
(Good name for our planet.)

Since I'm alone I guess
I'm to be the victim.
Fair enough but already
I'm sweating (smelllessly)

wondering which book
has my number, or will
the big terrestrial globe
explode with mortal gas,

is it even seeping now,
 are my lips blue? But you
 never cared about my mouth
 except for what it said.

All that language and no spit.
 I have been here an hour
 reading Plutarch's Lives,
 pretending to be thinking.

Snake in the drawer?
 Poison polish on the Louis-Quinze?
 The ceiling will collapse.
 The floor gives way.

This ballpoint pen
 my only weapon.
 It seems to me this very room
 I've lived in all my life,

these books my books,
 these hands my hands,
 just like Shakespeare
 grey all afternoon and

the light is gone now.
 Heron of Alexandria
 made a room that thinks
 for you, it tells you also

when it's time to die.
 Nero tested it on some meek
 philosopher who spent
 three months on a treatise:

Hunting Clouds with Caged Birds
 then slit his wrists in the tub en suite.
 Heron built a steam-driven
 float for a carnival parade

that knew its own way
 and led the multitudes along
 who gladly followed
 and still will do

any prosperous machine.

Heron baked a knife
inside a loaf of bread
that leapt out at you

when you passed a magnet by,
but whatever good was that?
I am done with science,
dying men have used up all their grace.

I am alone with what I've done
and thought and said
and thought I said, a quiet
brownstone mind mixed up with living.

The page in front of me
describes the pointless travels
of Cosmopleutes the Curious
till I know how little

I myself have lived.
Not even Madagascar
for Christ's sake. So little
in fact I begin to suspect

I never got around to being born.
Fetus-fatuous I spent my days
mumbling heartfelt pronouns
that stood for no imaginable

nouns or names or you.
Out of the wall or bookcase
someone comes now
with skilful hand to murder the unborn.

ANCIENT FOUNTAIN

The water says: a leper
drank from me and was not healed

but his thirst was gone.
Then a cat lapped from me

and still could speak
only the language of cats.

Yet am I not a marvel, a miracle?
Things meet me and take me in

but I do not change them –
I deign to whatever is.

Can you say that? I stood there
abashed before its inoffensiveness.

The first rule of medicine: do no harm.
Until that moment I had not known

I was a physician but now the roses
blossom on every skin

till I kiss them off one by one
and swallow the sickness of the world.

But the water said
(how humble how insolent water's word)

are you sure you can do that?
When you pass along this way

all the cats get leprosy
and the lepers mew, you mix things up

because you have too many words–
be like me until you have just one.

= = = =

Let the conquistador of the moment
wash up on his islands, the arts
administrator revive the retro-
trash she needs to make the now-
negating statements all museums
seem to live for. Today ago.

Now sells but never can be bought,
and by the time they package it
it's dust, Pompeii, your aunt's
church calendar with Saint Andrew
dying on a crisscross crucifix
over her gateleg table bearing one
nameless baby's long ago bronze shoe.

SOMETHING YOUR MOTHER GAVE YOU

Where does the dream fit
 inside the little box of waking?
 Was it something your mother gave you
 from beyond the grave, as they say,
 though why would anything be there
 in particular, past the iron angels
 and the blunt crosses made of stone
 to look like logs?

 However
 will you understand these pictures
 you wake up with between your ears?

Daytime religions provide no explanations.
 Dreams may be no more than movies—
 but you show them to yourself, you made them
 maybe, downloaded them from bedlam
 but who knows.

 And while you watch
 you are no one but the watcher.

You are the night.

 But now the morning
 sprawls around you, houses, trucks,
 the ordinary miracles of space unpacked
 and you can't quite get it yet, can't get
 to the street with your head so full of
 pictures.

 The world was ransacked
 while you slept and all the necessary things
 are missing out here now but still in you.
 You walk around as if you were in a museum,
 not understanding one single thing you see.

YOUR DARK RED CAPE*for C*

Because you are quiet, love, and dignified
but now chorus happens and old Italian men
in undershirts on city stoops begin to sing
no reason for anything, eat an orange,

God is a leper we hurry past in the street,
music sticks to us like the smell of adultery
one brings home fearful of detection
on one's clothes. Confused. Music confuses,

the grammar gets lost, the tower sings,
somebody sets somebody's brother on fire,
the playground fills with terrorists,
we don't know, we just don't know.

Sometimes it sounds like Auden, doesn't it,
that Homer of one thing after another, nothing
much mattered but all of it does, terribly,
the inuring, the summing up, nine of them

singing all at once, end of Act One, Rossini
flees by night to Paris, trying to find
something he doesn't know how to do.
Something all his own. Something they can't sing.

WALKING TO AUSCHWITZ

for Carey Harrison

He never had a grandfather
 he could never walk to the old house
 where one comes from,
 one comes from nowhere.
 That is what one looks at
 when one looks out one fine morning
 and says I will go there.
 (I had no grandfather,
 I could not walk there,
 no trolley to that place.)
 I will walk there along the tracks,
 railroad or through the forest
 dimidiated farmlands, axis acreage.
 He was gone before I knew.
 Later scant understanding seeped
 so poorly through the world
 of what kind of place it was
 to which the old man was brought
 and from which at the end he was spilled
 out to make his way along
 the chartered roads, with others,
 bearing blue numbers from
 that same series, sequence, broken galaxy
 released into winter.

2.

It is impossible. The cards fall wrong, queens
 buried under kings, we'll never get there,
 the lady with the wheel holds back the sky.
 I can't find the way. No grandfather,
 no house. He owned lots in Babylon,
 that's all I know. A civil engineer
 with acreage in Bethpage, Wantagh,
 Babylon. Property. We can have things.
 We can map shadows on the earth
 and play at dice to own the shadows.
 Where the bull's blood drained into soil,
 where rites were practiced, ill-grasped
 by those who worked them, screams
 of the slaughtered. Property means this.
 We bleed from what we own. And all
 my father ever owned was the blue

shadow on the moon, face of the moon,
 Levanah, I'd look up past the brick wall
 and ask the moon, Are you my grandfather,
 his face lost even deeper than winter?

3.

Strange man, think you can walk there
 along the tracks: photo shows it:
 freight train juddering by out of focus
 in a scanty shimmer of snow
 slowly passing the eyes, coming
 out of Budapest due north on foot
 only mountains in your way, the roads
 go every which way between you and
 him. The him you never had
 so have to meet there, here, on the face
 of the earth, *pnei ha-aretz*, from which
 we measure how high is up.
 And the road above the coal mine goes.

4.

The tracks led underground, slipping
 inside the smallest hill
 and in the dark, he followed
 thinking: this is what we call a tunnel,
 it goes through, it goes through
 even the biggest mountain. Remember
 Mont Blanc. Or the sinister
 tunnel at St Dié beneath the Vosges
 where you choke on fumes for seven miles
 and think of sky. No sky
 any more. When a man walks
 the place that is remembered
 there is no sky. But why do the tracks
 keep going down?

5.

Intention.

Intention is a tunnel.
 When you walk somewhere
 you walk through a tunnel.
 He saw a blue light far ahead
 and went for it, the way we do,
 easy, I love blue, the soul's own color,
 and in the old subways once a mile
 the light was blue. Easy going:

his feet had some while back picked up
 the measure of the sleepers, he stepped
 easy on the wooden ties, easy
 from wood to wood between the metal,
 alchemic road, so dark. I am a calendar
 he thought, my pages flutter under ground,
 I make time with my feet,
 measure, moonless measure of a man
 meaning something, trying to do something
 that has meaning, sharp as a violin
 escaping from the cello in Mozart,
 never get out, never get out.
 A blue light he followed since he saw.
 Measure of men under ground,
 lost runes they read with their fingers
 trail along the old stone walls,
 who knows who dug out such descendings?
 See with fingertips, touch to make real,
 touch if you believe, always doubt,
 the light goes out, on again, the blue
 condition you propose to follow.

K.428

6.

There she is, it is a woman,
 one of so many
 but this one is here,

I see her face
 her bare shoulders
 press against my cheek

women are paratactic
 one and then another
 linkless on a dark road.

7.

Where to lead him
 that was her worry
 (her business, fault,
 fate, responsibility)
 a man's destiny
 is a woman's
 responsibility,
 that is the nature of the dream,
 the sad old scripture we call Lilith's Dream

ich bin die schöne Lau
she said, bluish,

an inland mermaid,
lukewarm lady

wherever I am
something streams.

She wanted really
to be sitting by the fire
in a taffeta housecoat
reading folk tales
out of Hebel's *Little
Treasure Chest* but
here she was in Slovak cold
naked in blue light
leading a man no longer young
into a dark place no longer earth
in a world no longer real.

Is this the road to Krakow
over the border, is there a border
that teaches me where I want to go
(he wanted to know), I am looking
for my grandfather
dead sixty years, on this very road,
did you know him, in winter
they sent him from Birkenau
to make his way in cotton clothes
his stripes were blue like you
and no food, no food to Budapest
from which I come, did you,
maybe it was this very winter
where I meet you, isn't winter
what lasts always, tell me.
Speak to me. But the woman
(he could see only her shoulder,
I could see him watching
only her shoulder) could say
nothing, I do not speak
any language of the living,
she thought (I could see her
thinking) I speak Etruscan,
Lydian, Old Basque,
nobody will ever know

more than the shoulder
of me or what I know
flashing in blue light
under the earth like a
dolphin's fin flashing
like a rabbi calling God
to help him, a man
starfish splayed out
on the electric fence,
let my shoulder guide you
through all the images of pain
to where the pain is born.

He could hear her thinking.
But no man knows
what thinking thinks.
It is an arrow, like the one
Sloterdijk says Heidegger drew,
one of many, an arrow
hurrying into the bow
hurrying towards an ever
vanishing horizon.
To be is to be gone.

Clink of gravel against the rail,
prithivi he heard
where you are
the earth before the earth
you find again.

But his feet understood
how to walk in the dark.
The obstacle becomes the road.
The blue light is gone now,
extinguished when she didn't speak.
A man's body knows
well enough where to go.

Aitatxi, your grandfather,
he heard something finally,
more echo than her voice,
more slish of gravel
under his feet than echo.

8.
When the camp was abandoned and the Nazis fled

the prisoners were led on frozen marches here and there
 and so many died along the way the camp
 that had been the hearth of death became the core
 of a star whose mortal arms spread out, Poland,
 Germany, Bohemia, Slovakia. Once (Sima Vaisman
 tells this) the straggling wretches were just a field
 away from the border but no one knew, the guards
 were still there, still enough ammunition to kill
 the ones who fell to their knees or just lay down.
 But grandfather kept going. Budapest. And now
 grandson was walking back, to reverse
 the flow of murder, reverse the stupid brutal
 caravan of time, the insane circus that keeps running
 even after the mustachioed clown is dead.
 It never ends. Hence the walking. He walks
 against the rain, the snow, against winter, against war,
 against commodity, brutality, who knows
 why he walks, the blue light keeps him going,
 the blue light that not even he can see.

9.

Then one day he is there. It had to be winter now
 because it was winter then. Blood is time.
 Remembrance is a kind of blood. Blood
 is what the Saxons called the milk of swords.
 Rain is somehow connected. He has a fever.
 I am a fever in the calendar, he thinks,
 the numbers run me, I am spelled
 by what I pass. Here is the snow.
 Here are the famous fences.

He sees the walls. The bricks
 that look older than Lascaux.
 This is the deepest place he'll ever know,
 where he came out of the blue lady's
 hole in the ground to see the stars
 and there were no stars. The stars
 are irrelevant, we see with our bodies
 not with light. Our legs understand.
 I am a calendar torn out leaf by leaf
 I am a day lost on the road
 a road lost in the forest. All I know
 is how to walk. Bless you,
 strange man. Every footstep
 is an arrival. Make the body smart.
 Make the skin never forget.

10.

They say it's like saying a rosary
 bones in the dark
 or like a room you heard about
 but were never in,
 they say it's also like amber,
 like cheese, like a Miles Davis thing
 you heard and hated
 but can't stop
 you can't call it humming,
 it's like the rain.
 He was there for the rain
 the snow, cold, all the discomforts
 of the authentic,
 the clock on the tower,
 broken radio, the dead horse
 on Reid Avenue
 one hundred years ago
 when my grandfather died.
 A hundred years. The other one,
 the one who wouldn't hold a bird in his hand.

11.

Between the first gate and the second.
 Birkenau, meadow of birch trees.
 The gate, like Breughel's devil
 wide-spread wings welcoming to hell.
 Open mouth. Close my mind,
 deliver us into memory,
 the horizon keeps running away.
 How dare you quote Heidegger in this place?
 Another meadower,
 the sun is dead
 caught in the hedge
 killed by the badger
 hung up by the shrike,
 the orphan earth
 grows brash.
 Children bold.
 Men doubtful.
 Women cold.
 Where is my father, my father said.

12.

The worst things were the churches that we passed,

Christ trying to escape from the cross,
 or like Jesus in Moishe Nadir's story
 trying to get out of the stained glass window
 and get back to his brother Jews, minyan,
 to die with them, in that company.
 It's time for prayer. He didn't pray
 along the way. The worst things were the churches,
 the schools, the breweries, the neat hotels.
 The worst things were the houses,
 the cars that passed us and the cars that stopped.
 Go back. All I can do is try to change
 directions. Break the pattern. Chop
 down the birch trees. No, they're gone already.

13.

So you're back from your outrageous pilgrimage—
 walking anywhere at all is walking there
 I said.

No it's not, he said, you don't
 meet her along the way unless the way
 you've taken takes you to the worst place of all
 and you walk only half-conscious to see
 where death comes from.

Folly, I said,
 death comes from everywhere and everything.
 Fool you, he said, not this kind of death,
 not this special death that spoils the past
 along with all you love, the death
 that wipes out Hölderlin and Brahms,
 Dürer and Nietzsche, leaves nothing
 but an old man dying in a cotton shirt
 praying to a god that death spoils too.
 After this death no one listens, no one prays.
 That's why I had to go, to reverse the flow.
 Nothing is left of all we loved but love.
 Or just some pity to sense with my legs
 the only trace I have of him, to wear his shadow
 and let it take me through the dark.
 I look down at my feet and see his scars.