

Fall 1980

Overtures - 1980

William Hunt

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OVERTURES



SPECIAL POETRY ISSUE

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OVERTURES

Volume II

Fall 1980

Number 2

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Kenneth Fields

STRINGING THE LYRE

Whispering a prayer for the feast day of Apollo,
The old man runs his mind along the bow,
Familiar after nineteen years. His hands
Describe the curve he has dreamt about, his eyes
Become the gleaming wood. This way and that
He turns it, and is satisfied.

Nervously

The suitors break the silence: "Who is this man?"
"What is this beggar doing with our bow?"
"And if he strings it, what then? People will say
'Look! while they hope to sway a hero's wife,
They can't even bend his bow!' " Meanwhile he stares,
As if enraptured by a distant music,
Or like a blind musician fingering
Some holy instrument, ignoring them.
"He's old and ragged and filthy, and yet something..."
"Perhaps he steals bows, or is learning to make them!"
Then arrogant, foolish laughter: "May Apollo
Give him good fortune equal to his strength
Which, we can see, is nothing!"

All at once,

As an old player balances his lyre,
Then easily pulls a string to a new peg,
So Odysseus, assuming his dark name,
The culmination of his thwarted years,
Strings the great bow, before their eyes can follow,
And plucks the string, which through the silent hall
Sends the sharp thrill of doom, like a tiny swallow.

NAUSIKAA

After awakening, naked,
Caked from my struggles with the salt god,
The first shapes

I saw were you—bright shadows
Moving at the water's edge, you and your
Young friends playing.

Of all the things I love, perhaps
I love most the curiosity
That held you
When the others fled. Did you
Catch yourself, reflected in my eyes, in
Admiration?

"So like the man I'd marry!" Yes,
Though others missed it, I noted well
That *like*. Now
That the time for our farewell
Is here, I say it in your way: if I
Were to give up

My long homecoming, which may be
Still further off, then it would be for
One like you.
There have been others: goddesses,
One may not refuse them lightly. But you,
A slender palm,

Have all that life brings before you.
The wife I long for was once like you.
Whatever
Characters we have, time and
Our choices have lined them in our faces.
So, may you see

Before you a homeward-turning
Wanderer, leaving the certainty
Of this sweet
Land; for the accomplishment
Of time, however dim, is our true home.
Princess, goodbye:

I owe my life to you, and I
Will think of you each day of it. May
God's trouble,
Which we may never escape,
Drive you to harbor in a happy life
Such as I seek.

James Paul

EVENING OPACITIES

Sparrow chorus, green day, dirt on my knees:
When you read that, it will no longer be true.
Now she tears the envelope, gives me the seeds
Of Alyssum, Marigold, Sweet William for the future.
Not so much for this spring evening, but for one
Prefigured here that we are happy for, one clear
And right, though without this us in it, we work.

The night I learned to shuffle, I had been shuffling
For ages, I said; I became a citizen of the country
Of lies, an adult. Everyone saw it in my style.
Lies like atoms in pictures, operations, partners
Composed the wrong world I set and peopled
in advance

Of knowing, as a way of closing my childhood (and
Yours too), false as the surer complications now.

Let's go—that's where all these want to take you.
Here's the house that confirms your sleepwalking ways,
Here is the face you made up for your lover long ago.
You will have a home here, when the new things
Break, here in the world of the forward-looking lies.
There is a light behind you, perhaps your birth,
That casts these dreams into your future for good.

Ou

THE RUNE POEM

At home on earth, he puts the priest's
New signs, hints to the tongue,
Trials for the mind, promises

With no pictures, next to his old
Sticksymbols for horse, money, fire.
These new letters are like his birch,

Beautiful and high and without fruit;
But he puts the things he lives with
Into this alphabet of heaven, hoping:

Hail is the whitest grain and turns
To water later. The landfeeding eel
Delights in a home circled by water.

He knows he'll never get these things
Across. He warns us that the Elk's Sedge
Burns, that seizing the thorn is evil,

But we're worried by more than what
Wounds us. Joy, he promises, won't have
Assets, complacency, the town's plenty,

And all we will have is at hand. We will
Sleep in the earth, and our covenants
Will release us to this simple exile.

INTERVALS

The daycare kids are visiting the track—there's
Only one runner, and it will take more time
Out of their long day. All the foolish kids say
They can run all the way around, and, jogging
Stiff-legged and straight-armed, they try.
Soon some are stopping to make iceballs; some
Clot around the sweatshirt the runner has dropped

On this warm February morning. The track is huge
For them, and most don't recognize the runner
When he comes around again, as if he changed
Bodies on the far side. At two-twenty they're
Bored with it, and some stop to gaze ahead, seeming
To know they must go as far again either way. Now
They have sitters to herd them along, and the kids,

Beautiful, distracted, sad, are bunched up where
They started; made happy as a birthday party,
And headed back across the parking lot to the church
Where they will spend their time in other ways.
Behind them, the runner loses himself again, counting,
Having run so far that even these slow numbers
Begin to claim each other's spaces, confused.

Cynthia Poe

BEYOND THE RED PULSE

We will eat of the many trees.
Sun will grow black
fruit, sweet and running with sap.
Birds will separate their songs
by century and culture, carefully,
and stare introspectively between
their stiff, polished toes.

Here we do not sit for rest
or pleasure, we sink in pleasure
(as one might dive into a rosy body)
to rest. And then we scratch
plans into our skins' surfaces
which will wear away,
eroding as the rain plows through
similar unending seasons.

The dark light is burning gently
through layers of skin and we loathe
it and night is a trick.
We won't stand for it, or nonsense.
The insects have gathered between us
and are planning a rational upset
of the plains. Water,
renamed not to have a name, seeps
thoughtfully between them and quiets
this poem.

BEYOND THE GREEN PULSE

is my crystal god with large eyes.
Time caught up in the web of his weird hair
like a horrified fish. He is drunk!
Emeralds pouring over his slender feet
like unbroken water, or holy beads.
He is so clean you could breathe
or bathe in his luscious blood.
You could cry for such pureness of bone.

A necessary slowing of the pulse, a still
insect-glow, a wet warmth of night,
or sex. Blue chill falling upward,
through and over the sky. The moon grows
young; it groans; it teethes on these transfigurations.
It wails; It wants to be held.
Our hands grow to accommodate, but
we are still necessarily young and our eyesight
is still failing.

BEYOND THE YELLOW PULSE

gold is woven into the hair of beauties.
They have perfect breasts, sad arms,
frightening long fingernails. And something
you can't see is scary about them.
They age before your eyes like cocoons,

perhaps? They lack lips,
perhaps. They sit on rocks, their laughter is floating
toward us, barely discernible
in this airless void. They would catch a man in the web
of their golden hair, like a horrified fish.
They would sing to him, they would stare at him.
They would never let him go.

BEYOND THE BROWN PULSE

we go deep, deep. Earthy pulse
of a sponge, a clay, that which fills
and becomes airless. Mushrooms pulsate,
vacillate, vibrate. Spores tighten
their hold on reproduction. We lie
under a rock and shiver, we have
no thoughts to speak of. None
to speak of.

Roots are wandering below the earth.
How can they glow with an unearthly light?
We hold no candle to them,
or our faces of plaster and wax.
Yet they wave gently as if directed
by sacred strings. I don't know
what we learn from them. If we cut
open their luminous mass, they flow
with a pearly milk, and swell like udders
of quiet animals from which
we may drink.

BEYOND THE BLACK PULSE

we are not allowed to speak. A hand
squeezes us but we may not scream.
We die over and over like flowers
which blossom in crude oil, and fade
and fall and rise, grinning
from the knowledge of pain once had
and forgotten. We lose our teeth
and hoard them like coins
under our pillows, and pray
that the good fairy will come to retrieve

but will not stay long, as light
makes us ache. We pull all shades.
We taste Christ's blood of sugar,
not salt. We gather bones
which grow into sunflowers, dangerous lovely weeds
angry at the polluted, over-hot dust.

BEYOND THE VIOLET PULSE

women dressed like nuns are dancing
without men. The men are in the strange garden,
calling for the growth of improved corn
and the death of too-sweet flowers
which grow only in wax and reject
sunlight. The men are trying very hard
not to cry. They are telling jokes
in languages they do not understand.
They are longing to touch
the raw, damp earth outside the garden,
beyond the tiny stone houses they dwell in,
row against row, and the silver stream
encased by greenesses. They wish
to squeeze it between their two brown hands,
the one calloused, the one smooth
as the inner paths of a baby's brain.
The women are not thinking
at all, about any
of this, as they are too busy dancing.
Their robes encase their queer slender bodies
like snakeskin; cardinals,
blue-jays, and robin red-breasts
are flying around their soft heads in a mad whirl,
spinning their hair into precious gold
and iron, raising their hair
into medieval gates, and tearing prayers
like overripe figs from their stony lips.

BEYOND THE WHITE PULSE

we wrap our parents in silk.
We eat a peach.
We polish our teeth and toenails
until we cannot tell one
from the other.
We suck milk through straws.
We burn away all warts
and peel dead skin
from our sunburned backs.
We make angels with our limbs
in the meadows of snow.
We love each other without violence,
thereby eliminating all sin.
We cast a reel out to sea
and feel delight for the large hobo's shoe
which swims toward us, more eager
than any dying fish.

BEYOND THE BLUE PULSE

stars are more, clear as a shock.
We stroke our nerves and set them upright
against what they refuse to record.
Water seeps past the cracks in every fire
and smooths every rock into place,
corrects every cave. This process
uncovers all blue that was, and is,
and will be. The song blue sings
is evident. The touch of blue
is cool and painful. The face of blue
is a skin of God.

Beyond the blue pulse
we dream of the linens we loved,
the tension before any smile we so
sagged under. We remember the thrust
of machinery and shake without feeling it.
We cause nothing, we go nowhere.
We dream of trees and their ripe red fruits.

EPILOGUE

And when we eat of the many trees
will we save the corn and feed it to the unicorn?
So long, a rainbow lures me. This is it
that lies at the bottom of a pool,
all ruddy-faced and torn, quick queen-bee lover
at the thin end of a convoluted war;
listen to the sky ripping open its head,
and recall how you loved this
at the very beginning: how your small black feet
broke open a history of animal stories,
and began to dance for the sake of the ground
which was your lesser-loved god.
It is no crime to beg its fond desire.
It will give you back to those kisses, and that hate.
It will push you away from a large, unclean book of
numbers.
It will satisfy your hunger for perfect touch.

David Ray

UNCLE WELDON

"Born in Nebraska, he worked in New York until 1951, when he moved to San Francisco. In 1955 he disappeared. His car was found near the Golden Gate Bridge; but because he had spoken both of suicide and of retiring abroad under an assumed name, his fate remains conjectural."

Note in Hayden Carruth's *The Voice That is
Great Within Us*

"Water and wind and flight, remembered words and
the act of love
Are but interruptions. And the world, like a beast,
impatient and quick,
Waits only for those that are dead. No death for you.
You are involved."
—Weldon Kees

Weldon Kees showed up last night, just before sunset, joined our party on the lawn. We were sitting under our three birches, sipping lemonade, talking about the funny characters we'd seen at the Farmers' Market, selling their melons and their fresh strawberries. He drew up a folding metal lawnchair, kept it from tipping twice, then told us where he'd been, all these years. Soon I was calling him "Uncle Weldon," and my children were gathered round him. He was a gentle man, tousled their hair as he talked. His hands were brown with liver spots and his grey hair was thinning. He liked to talk, he said; it was *nice*, for a change, to be talking English, he had learned the Carib lingo down South—and it had blessed him. "But..." (with a sigh)

"it's good to be home!" He slapped his thigh. He said he'd decided to drive across the country, "look up a few minor poets." "But why not Lowell? Merrill? All that crowd?" I said. "They'd welcome you." He held up his glass of lemonade, in dying sun. "I don't want to forget all I learned," he said. "It's what made me go, it's what saved my life." He tried to tell us the lesson he had learned, something about 'our culture.' "Thankless," he said. "It doesn't even treasure life." He said he'd had a vision of where it led at best, some drunken lonesome height about as chill and hazardous as the steel and cables of that bridge.

"But why the *bridge*?" I said, "You took such trouble to make it look as if you'd leapt, or slipped quietly into the Bay, died of your despair." Now I sighed. I'd admired the man too much not to regret his turning out a trickster.

"Despair it was," he said. "Though later, better days came on, just floated in, like simple clouds." He touched our sky, and birch leaves strayed across his face: "Once I shook it from me, life was like those simple clouds, miracles, day after day. But first I had to shake this culture from me, heartless, heartless."

"But suicide!" I said. "It wasn't fair." "Fair? Fair?"—For a moment he almost snarled, got nasty. "Who can talk of *fair* in these towns built on murder? Who can talk of *fair* in this land that worships... Well, I shan't describe it..."

He broke off talking, then began to laugh. "I forgot," he said.

"I'm talking to a minor poet. *You* know, of course. The minor league, the bitter ones, they're the ones who know, what I knew then and knew too well. Thank God I've forgotten part of it—what I knew when I left that water's edge burned deep inside me, I don't want to say like what." I thought for a moment he'd stare a bald spot into our grass. He muttered, "Sewer, sewer, it's all a sewer, I had to leave or die."

"But why make it look like death?" I asked, and thought about the myth, how he'd leaned, crouching on the rocks a final time, had his private death-row cigarette, said his death poem, then slipped into the water, another rind tossed and turned by a salty tide, dying while the light above strummed, like a harp, upon the cables of the Golden Gate, moonlight, for it was a full moon that summer night, or so I'd always visualized that scene.

"I had no taste for ovens or for guns," he mused. "But Death, it was the only way they'd let me go, you know, with *honor*."

I gave a puzzled look and nodded toward my kids... "You set a bad example, I've always thought of suicide that way... Leadership is lacking in their lives..." Weldon smiled. "If the dead," he said, "can plot careers built on Death, why can't the living? Do they think they have a monopoly? Look at Sylvia, and Anne. They schemed and plotted a *use* of Death, or abuse, for really, Death shouldn't have a use. Death is more amoral than any whore, even those toothless cannibals I saw down there....If the dead can use, misuse Death, then so can we, and live to have some joy. Or is joy outlawed? As for examples, they were set centuries ago, and bad ones, thousands, millions.

But you see, I was *committed* to my work.
Naturally I wanted it read, poem by poem,
over the dreary years. Oh hell, I was as depressed
as any of them. But I wanted to give *life* a chance,
too, don't you see?"

"I see," I said.

"You got yourself fanned by native girls,
is that how it was, just like Walter Huston
in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, drinking
tequila, eating fruit, while your life
got spun by others out into something worth
living..." "No tequila," he said. "That part
is best left for the likes of Harry Crosby. For me,
new loveliness in life, without the stuff.
My life down there was nothing hedonistic,
not, in fact, like San Francisco was...I left
the *entire* old life, not parts of it.... But more
or less you've got the right idea...
Remember how old Gandhi slept in innocence,
he swore, by young girls who served him
and yet swore that it was pure? That's the general
idea. By the way, those girls had hair glossy
as a horse's mane." He touched my daughter's braids.
"The air we breathed had not a jot of carstink in it.
I think we were even spared the fallout there."

"Your poems were read," I said. "You were taken
at your best."

"Yes, taken at my best,
not as if I'd hung around, some minor misfit
in a suburb that's earthquake prone." And then
he reminisced and grew quite wearisome, complained
a bit, and spit out a lemon seed upon the grass.
"I wish to hell they hadn't junked my Plymouth, though.
But hell, it brought the critics out!"

Uncle Weldon's gone now, but not again deep
into the Carib jungle. He's stopped in Southern
Tennessee and I got a postcard from another
minor poet who said that Weldon's staying
in his guest house for a month and starting
to write his memoirs. He's started smoking
and drinking again, first time in nearly thirty
years, he said, and seems uptight quite often.
"Sometimes," my friend wrote, "mean as hell
and sure his fame will simply disappear
as soon as *they* find out he's back
from underground, or wasn't there at all."

CONFESSIONS

Sitting on rough bark of old
cedar roots that have been twisting
around each other for a long time,
my friend and I exchanged life
stories. His mother had gone mad
and he'd lived with his rabbi uncle,
had a cousin to hate like a sibling,
a good boy who lit his father's
cigarettes with the Passover candles,
"right out of Isaac Babel."

When his mother was dying
she insisted on seeing his father
though they'd been apart for years
and she wept buckets. "It didn't
make any sense, none of it did,"
my friend said and broke a stick.
"She forgave him, and his mistress."

Then I told him of my children,
of their strange origins, parting
shots from bad marriages, how
we suffered, were dying to be happy.
"They know they're loved," I said,
"though they're scattered, free
as the winds." My friend

got up, wiped his pants
of cedar bark, spat into the brook
that had dug through the worst
of clay. "People have a lot
to keep straight," he said.
"It's a wonder we live that long."

We climbed out of the canyon, up walls.
Smudged bottles everywhere
looked at us like eyes, floated
down below, on a great green pool,
scum before the mother cave.
I wanted my confessions back.

Daisy Aldan

CONTEMPLATIONS: HORNS

We long to pierce the skull of death
with horns of light, to meet the Light.
From spiralling orbits of planets,
wisdom pours in through our invisible horns.
Moses, horned, sought, encountered the Eternal.

Deer horns: Antennae: A delicate candelabra.
The unicorn: A vector: A lighted candle with single aim.

The bare winter branches:
Horns garlanded with leaves, with flowers:
Horns adorned with fruit:
Berries, apples, plums, pomegranates.

Rivers: Horns of water
Fire: Horns of flame
Trees: Horns of mineral
Nerves: Horns of filaments

The devil may have ascending horns of flame, not Light,
or hardened descending horns that twist in earth:
Roots.

Once the Horned Ram, the Horned Bull,
the Horned Deer, the Horned God:
Now, the compassionate arms, — hands.

AMBIGUOUS CONNECTION:

The complete story

1.

Barriers in these streets;
barred the doors.
The empty envelope
without return address
has been dispatched
to the Office of Dead Letters.

Yet in the pauses rise
the images of stopped motion
called:

The Embrace

The Offense

The Dismissal

The Avalanche:

Seals for eternity
whose lineaments
time and absence
do not erase
but rather incise.

2.

Cracked the instrument:
The strings coil
like thin worms.
If you listen you will hear
the wind in the hollow
make a frail moan.

It doesn't matter
in any case
now that the hands are severed.

3.

Let us go back to the beginning:

The door opens:

The eloquent hands which take one in:

The illumined tree:

Piano music from an open window.

The ground falls away:

The rope tightens.

4.

When I arrived
you were in the kitchen:
Mouth to beak, you were feeding
a wounded crow in a cage.
Cats were circling the house.

I cried:

"There is a black crow in a cage in you.

There is a crow in a cage between us.

There is a crow with a broken wing in me.

Let the wounded crow in us be lifted up!"

The next week you came to tell me

you found the crow

you had freed, in the garden,

dead,

—neck cracked by a cat.

5.

Does it matter to the door

if it opens or closes?

Or to the empty chair that faces the linden?

Silence snakes in greyly, opens scars.

It is better to cut the telephone cord.

The train tracks

speed more swiftly back to the point of departure,

the greater the speed of the train

away from it.

6.

—"The unsent letters arrive," — she said.

—"And what of the unfinished stories?"

—"They will be taken up again.

Though we walk off in opposite directions,
we walk in a circle

back to the point of encounter
where every story is resumed."

APPARITION

A woman in her full beauty stands (or rather IS)
in a non-landscape to my right, within a light whose
origin is in herself, reining in my regard
with a net of invisible threads. Though she does not
turn in my direction, she knows I am thinking her.

Toward whom or what is she leaning in that climate
of desperate silence? Friends note how from
time to time

my eyes lose focus: I lean my head toward the right
as if listening to some inaudible music.

Though I continue to grow perceptibly older,
her aspect, her stance, and her gesture do not alter.
Will she be the last apparition, and will I enter
into that gold-spun light? And will she at last lean
toward me?

Douglas Blazek

THE PRISON

Hold to your chest your words

allow your skin to wrap around them
to seal them up

watch for the embryonic glow
your mind no longer their turnkey

they are living all the thoughts
you no longer think

your ribs abruptly separate
you try to disassociate yourself
but your words are like
convicts suddenly made
warden of the prison

you must break free
you begin to run away

then you see the wall
of one self around another self

APOLOGY OF THE ARTIST

I am here to apologize
to express sorrow over my own body
this lump before you
your arms and legs trying
to work their way in
as if entering pajamas made of meat
that tight body
within a looser body
fumbling to taste its light
the inner mouth
lunging out the outer mouth
like the back of a cave
disappearing
in its rush toward the stars
and you are left with the blue air
the trajectory
and the destination

OPENING A WINDOW LATE NIGHT

Smell of mud sleeping
cool night practicing our clenched dreams
earth of long ago speaking streams and stones
cloud messengers transferring back and forth
sharing a moon in place of the mind

IT'S LIKE LISTENING FOR A SOUND TOO HIGH OR LOW FOR THE HUMAN EAR —three essays on longing

Our eyes move in a crowd
like anxious winds
skimming surfaces
slipping a finger of air
in every notch and pulling
as if trying to open a window shade.

*

Love is a ghost ship rowing
under the sea. To ride it
we must drown. But even
drowning doesn't insure passage on
the right ship. There are other
ships down there. And the rowers
all know our name.

*

To hear the right word is to
plant the right seed. The ground
breaks and a coil snaps straight
for the stars. A vine growing
around heaven, its roots
in my heart being tugged, all
life long, upward.

Robert Dana

LOVE LETTER

Body of a woman, passions of a child,
that terrible innocence of the eyes
that makes a toy of breath...

And I whose toys were always smoke
and blood, silence and stone:
hard islands in an actual sea.

No one speaks to me.

Dear executioner,
Perhaps, at the end, all histories
are personal.

Scattered alphabets
the sun fires on a turquoise bay.

ORDERING A DEATH-MASK IN CHIMOR

This permanent face
we will wear
to face the gods...

Tissue
of silver and beaten gold
bitten turquoise for eyes

To take
the murderous suns
of paradise

Cut
into its cheeks
the spiral tattoo of breath

And into its jaw
the bone grin
of our meat-tearing teeth

Alane Rollings

ONE OF THE THINGS I DARED MYSELF TO DO

It's a long ride to where I'm from, where the landscape
landscape
is clearly unfinished and the boys have operatic voices.
Many people sent their love to you through me,
and many words fell from my mouth at random,
abandoning me, as now.
I'm not sure I know why;
you and I had taken in each other in a minute.
And I'm not sure why I wrote those six-word songs
with my tongue on the roof of my mouth
when I could do all sorts of things in several languages
and never waste any time.

Still, we made our headlong way from one sleeping hour
to the next,
living neither here nor there.
And once I'd pointed out to you the places on my body
that proved that I was female
I sang about how red you'd made my mouth
and how I hoped I'd never be the same,
then wept and got hoarse after every song.
And the only reason I never admitted it was your idea
was that I wasn't sure I wanted to explain
what you were to me then.

Think of me.

You're one of the people I never expected to exist,
full of talk about the exotic properties of our minds
and increasing our life span.

the landscape dragged away,
your breath making its way across me.
You chewed blue flowers.

Did we need mysteries older and more definite?
Assurances of more uncommon futures?
Still, I think those were the perfect days
and I never expected any answers.
Now my body takes another, inner shape
and bleeds its colors into the darkness.
I think of sand for blankness
and linen to erase the landscapes on my ankles,
in my mouth.

I think someday you'll see a blue rain
becoming gorgeous before your window.
I'll only be recording my thanks for anyone
who'll see me through my last day, and for you.
You'll be thinking of high interiors and things that
undo people,
solar burns, signatures of sand and snow that go
unnoticed.

Think of me now and then when you're making love;
I'll think of you when I've got the time.

DRESSING ROOM

(So they complain about me...)

Shoplifting at Field's the other day,
I began to feel sorry for discouraged killers.
In the days when people paid to watch the day's

compulsive acts

in the asylums, I could have taken back these stories
when nothing interesting is happening.

I invent
They say prison teaches you to eat anything,
and that there are pickpockets there eager to see
a woman

without her make-up, before she does her hair,
who rave against cold cream and platinum blonde
and throw your underwear out the window.
They say the cost of walking out is going up;
other women pull it off, but they don't get famous for it
or learn to make any useful things in prison.

The dine-and-dash gang was eating by the door
in the cafeteria. They raced off in all directions,
but I wouldn't blame the elevators. I'd have stopped, too.
The dresses in the budget store battled it out over
the floor manager

and from the dressing rooms ("One Person at a Time")
came classic lines like, "You can scream your head off.
Nobody pays any attention to screaming here."

It's no place for the porcelain-hearted,
but rat-eyed peekers say you can see a lot more
than in regular life. In the seventh-floor bathroom,
hours are primed away every minute;
the saleswoman scrubs out her panties,
sees a thousand faces, all of them double,
and makes plans for wetting the bed later on...

The way they short-change you here is out of sight
and they advertise everything—canned peas and
tampons,

axle grease and screaming lessons...

Living under false pretenses
gives me the urge to unbutton,
but here in the mirror I cannot locate myself.
I suspect my clothes of having no sense of proportion
and close my hands over stolen make-up
and love poems written on the backs of unpaid bills.
I think of my gun, at home among my fanny-shapers,
think of my hoodlum knife with the scimitar handle,
and make plans to spend the winter among the perfume
counters
spraying myself with the testers.
Joy in the jailhouses!

Do your shopping in the morning
and you may not be missed by detectives (talent scouts)
investigating the dressing rooms
(Has any woman found anything really flattering?).
What should I wear? Red vest and brown skirt,
red vest and black pants, black pants and white sweater,
red vest, brown pants, white sweater. Nothing.
The dreary possibilities. What shall I wear?
How do you get out of these revolving doors?
I walk but I never get away. And that's nothing.
I keep finding myself among men I mean nothing to,
among women—(Nothing!)—
unwilling to endanger their beauty, their incomes.
Shall I tell the whole story—"It was nothing.
Modest prostitution..."— or the modified version
I told you?

As you may have guessed,
I'm having some trouble
turning out pretty today.
But who would suspect that *nothing* I'm wearing
has ever been cleaned or pressed?
Aren't these polyesters wonderful?

Michael Davidson

HONEYMOON

*Beyond the walls of Skara Brae
the crying child in Orkney
grows strong to shape the stone.
The dirt filled streets of Orkney
blow long to create the loam.*

Even when we first met he wore a knife.
He said a guy never knows when he'll need a blade.
Once, long ago, we were going to a show
and hoped to catch a bus. It was about to pull away
so I ran into the street, leaving him behind.
The bus almost hit me and I heard his voice
far away and made of metal. Once on board,
I sat and watched him. He, unlike I,
thought a bus could kill—as if we were
wooden horses protecting lonely pot-holes.
I saw him on that corner, unable to cross.
His piercing eyes framed me in the bus' window
and I was formulated like some breathless painting.
I knew this, not the bus, could kill.

*They build the walls without mortar.
Stone by stone the coal-eyed men
stretch a mountain on a line.
Without mortar the rock-godded men
shape the earth around their town.*

He was the one that wanted
a different sort of trip:
someplace a person could get away to.
We must have driven for hours
until we saw a cloud of dirt
and in that cloud was Skara Brae.
It was an empty place
where huts must have stood,

where women carried pregnant baskets
on dark heads, sturdy with purpose.

The town is so crowded
that the dead go unnoticed.
They are allowed to properly decay.
Even those children blue and breathless
at birth have that terrible wholeness
of ripe fruit about to fall
into the dirt, behind the wall.

My husband couldn't believe the wall had no mortar.
There was stone against stone with nothing in between.
It was nearing evening when objects dissolve
into a vague oneness. He refused to accept
the existence of nothing. If there was no mortar,
there must be space. No matter how close the stones,
he needed for there to be space. As twilight died
I saw that the wall, my husband, and the knife
in his hand were growing thin—fragments filling
the area meant for nothing. The potential for absence
filled all matter. He wanted to prove there was a gap.
The blade pierced at the wall, trying to split stone lips.
The steel point scraped against ancient rock.
The wall, I had to love like a mirror of flesh.
I hated his stabs and I hated my pity. After one last thrust
the blade entered. I turned away to let dirt fill my eyes
as he cheered above the violated space. He took away
the warm void which was an egg in a weightlifter's fist.

He didn't follow as I left.
I turned again to see him struggle.
The knife was stuck in stone.
He tugged and screamed at the blade
he had never been without
to empty the space he proved was there.
I began to walk away,
hearing his voice far off and made of metal.
In the night, face covered by blowing loam,
I smiled at the joy of driving in total blackness,
knowing I could never again
be anything but whole.

Mark Perlberg

CASCO VOYAGE

The islands swam toward us out of the haze
in heat that cooked the deck of the bay steamer.
Their names were songs: Cushings & Hope & Basket;
Peaks, Chebeague, the Diamonds—the liquid disc
of the sun
dropped behind Great Diamond's dock
throughout my boyhood summers—
Jewel, with its dark, abandoned watchtower, and
Cliff Island,
both on the bay's other rim. Beyond, over the sill
of the world: England.

I dreamed of such a ride when I was a boy,
combing my island's shores
for shells and colored stones
or when I fished from rocks in green swells.
I'd have run away with anyone
who would have taken me down Casco Bay
toward the sea-blasts where the porpoise rolled.
But there were no takers.

So I returned at last, with children of my own,
paid cash at the Bay Line's window in Portland—splendid
the rush of smells: brine, engine oil, fish!
They named the place like a sign.
We sailed out with the tourists
that hottest day of the year.

We often rowed past Evergreen Landing
at the Island's tip—my brother, friends, and I—
to Pumpkin Knob. It poked its green hump
off Peaks's northeast shore.
We'd tie up to a buoy and fish in the sun,
by the Knob's great single house,
its red roof timbers down,
its pier washed out in a forgotten winter storm.
Trees splashed shadow over cold panes.

Once we reached Long Island, a pair of us pulling
across bottomless Hussey Sound.
We raced on the white beach,
crashed into surf that washed a foreign island.
Sunlight shook in diamond waves
off the water.

The only breeze that stirred for twenty miles
we made ourselves, as we moved by
capes and twists, neck and knuckles of land—
Merriconeag, Harpswell, Little Johns,
Orrs Island. "Did you know," I heard my Mother say,
"Harriet Beecher Stowe had a house on Orrs Island?"

When the captain pulled the cord in the pilot house—
we stood in its strip of shade—I saw the old wood steamers
whose whistles hooted through my long summer days.

I pointed to every nook I knew about
in our part of the bay,
and from our guide that afternoon:
"Coming in view to port—Little Mark Island.
The stone tower near shore was a shelter built
by shipwrecked sailors.
Over to starboard, that's Eagle Island.
The lone house that looks like a ship
was built by Admiral Peary, after..."

When we made the turn and steamed
back toward Portland,
I knew I had traveled toward this ride for twenty years,
not just to glimpse far-off beaches, mythical cliffs,
the still steep-sided coves,
but to seize that glistening land
where a part of me was born.

There's Mother on the porch at Hadlock's Cove:
young, brisk, ironic—splitting the air with a whistle,
hauling in her errant boys.
(I forgive you my dear dead Mother,
as I know you had forgiven me.
Measureless the distances on the wind-streaked
summer sea.)

There's Frank Finnerty: his great black lobster boat
stinks like a garbage scow.
He smiles without any bottom teeth.
And his wife with flecked, hazel eyes; her laugh
rings like a kettle banged with a ladle.
And my girl with lilting breasts
and mouth soft as air.
There—crisscrossing gleams of the night boats
and voices over the water,
and sweeping Ram Island Light: it brushed the walls
of my room punctual, scary,
nightlong in the dark of a flying summer.

G. E. Murray

TWO CHILDREN

Two children rocking on a porch of Sundays,
A vacation wind quickening them
Into blue nudes. By the pace of mid-day sun,
They resemble the instant
Before lightning splits an elm in two.

No thank you, they resemble nothing
But warm domes on that afternoon dreamless
As sand in their play shoes. They doubt
Any animal they ride could pretend
Beyond lessons of exquisite balance
Or sure pastimes of transport. They remain
Lotions pouring everywhere.

As if from time to time they sit at the center
Of running lights, in some boat, gathering
Smiles in a spray of unearthly attention,
This scene is curtailed, kept moving

Finally by the beacon of a single train
Their father once saw exacting an old night
From a childhood far away. They are
Young sleepers on that train,
Sharing a preferred berth between stations,
Bearing down, gusting like a blast from air brakes,
Too soon to vanish.

A jay flies up to where they were just rocking.
It knows we are like them.

ON THE TRAIN TO DUBUQUE

The old woman asks about penguins
rehearsing all that day
on the ridge over the Apple River.

In paling light, she knows illusion
when she abuses it,

already confusing trackside events
for acts of importance.
In the dark molding of late October,

high piles of winesaps and pumpkins
rot in the dignity
of their own fields, unexplained.

Nearing Pearl City
and its fool dream of culture's
entanglements, a few black powerlines

run overhead and unobstructed
as if drawn taut by a weight of landscape.

There are no stories now to hold onto
like riding straps, no real
amusements unveiled in reflections

speeding across chrome, speeding
against the melancholy
of this righteous cool cave of evening

curving into view. Minutes away
from the hillside neon welcome
of *Bluff Tap and Liquors*,

one more glance at the burr
clinging to an old woman's sundress,
the distances of an old woman
never again stepping off.

LOOKING TOWARD PEORIA

July's scythe levels air.
What season must we become, what
Thrush singing in it.

The bold phrasing of cornfields
Articulates nothing
But a westward leaning.
Beginning simply
With embraces and limit,
Something soon must tell us
What grows in the cold,
What requires
—in neat parenthesis—
our bones.

After supper
All talk is incidental
And straight
As a rural road.
When we take to front-porch
Fiddling, we stir
Murmurs of distance:

A leaf in millstream;
Two miles of boxcars
Chasing for home.

Rebecca Dorsey

OLIVE

The down of this quilt like quicksand,
I quickly undress to get under.
My head oozes into the mud of pillow,
My back aches:

I want it to breathe
into the mattress of my bed
flat and long, like the words
my mother uses.

My elbows bend now
as they did inside
the lace of her womb.
My hands—once, tiny bows
tied to the arrow
of her breast,
Now support the weight of my head
as they rest beneath it, folded together,
like those of a child kneeling
at the bedside praying
before sleep.

The maps of my palms press
tributaries together,
as my body begs
for one dark river, deep
like that of unborn sleep,
a blue pocket where I'll submerge
the heavy sub of this torso...

Trying to push myself back
into that blue, I find
only the whiteness of shapes.
But between these,
pulse blue arteries, lifelines
tracing the patterns, tunneling
through the space.
And it is this which the artist
must begin with, draw first—empty spaces

are just as ripe as the darkness,
like the hole of an olive
where the seed once has been.

MIDDLE RIVER

The April wind on Middle River
blows us east as we paddle on,
and begs us down a narrow creek.
Here, the water is black and calm
and the blue of sky grows
tangled with the web of cypress trees.

Around a bend, a large
decaying limb drifts by
and then, we see the body.
"Take my paddle!" I take it,
hold still, say nothing
as you lift her naked body
into our canoe.

Kneeling awkwardly,
bending over with her weight,
you place the dead girl
gently down, unfolding her
along the wet wooden floor.
We cover her body with old flannel.
You turn the canoe around, head west.

The rhythm of your breath
ripples through the silence,
like the pulsing wakes
your paddle presses
into the dark papyrus water
of the lake.

I glance at the girl lying
beneath our gray blanket,
notice that her right hand
is uncovered, and on her forefinger
she wears a small gold ring
with the insignia,
'Dulce et decorum est.'

I turn away from her,
sit on the stern, with my back
facing yours in the bow.
I dangle my feet off the edge,
feel the current as it ebbs through
each narrow strait of toe,
gazing back at the silhouettes
which follow us home.
With each stroke, I watch
your shadow being broken,
like many snapshots fading
one into another,
disappearing behind the paddle
as you spoon it into the river.

Alan Shapiro

POULNABRONE DOLMEN

—County Clare, Ireland

The low stone walls were jagged as the ground,
for miles webbing the land. And near me, huge
and bleached, in the thin rain falling without sound,
the Dolmen stood: the burial mound washed down
to these three bones, this glacial passageway,
by centuries, outlasting bones it housed.
So still, in unimaginable weight,
it seemed magnetic, pulling me to push
against it, making all my strength no more
than the pale grass that pushed up at its base.
I touched the delicate, cold grain, the hard
shadow of two thousand years, and felt
an apprehension entering my hands,
numb almost with the meaning of its shape.

That megalithic pi sign of a truth,
my own, yet deeper than the personal,
became the center of my gravity,
my endlessness made palpable: around
which I was moving as a satellite,
as if held there, to hear, as others had,
the same bleached, rigid breathing of the dead.

THE GUIDE

—St. Michan's Church, Dublin

They wait for me; a wet weight in the air
making their skin, through all the clothes they wear,
a passageway for coldness to move through.
They come no matter what the heavens do,
three times a day, for more than twenty years.
They think for all the history, to hear
the few facts I can tell them of the tombs.
But I know why they come, led down the smooth
stone current of the steps, and, in that crypt,
what they will find. Not what they now expect.

My wife lies in the churchyard in the back.
I know their curiosity, to track
in the rough leather of a dead man's face
a map of feeling life become no place,
a negative of breath, just as it's air;
to see oneself dead, or a widower.

They hope for something to get used to, but
it does no good. They get here only what
is here to get—a few shaped chunks of earth
to look at, a few facts. Their money's worth.

My weak light leads them through full darkness to
the closed caskets of the Fox brothers, who
in the ninety-eight rebellion had been killed,
drawn, quartered, and, their martyrdom fulfilled,
were put here on display. A hundred years
went by until some patriot placed near
their caskets a small but deadly wreath of flowers,
whose moist scent in the air restored the powers
of decaying to their flesh. Within a month,
their bodies all but caught up to their death.

Then through Lord Leitrim's tomb my flashlight flares,
and, glittering as far away as stars,
the gold studs of his coffin point him out:
murderer, rapist, and aristocrat,
famous for the hatred he inspired
and ignored, he raped one girl too many. Murdered
and thought unpunished still, he was thrown in
the River Liffey; the peasants giving him,
you might say, their last rites. But unconcerned,
he lies here as if nothing had occurred.

And going now into the last crypt where,
along one wall, the open caskets are,
they find that disappointment's the last surprise.
The burlap skin, the black holes of the eyes,
just artifacts, not people who had lived:
like this man, eight feet tall, his stomach slit
on a crusade, now looking like the rest,
the long black thighbones crossed upon his chest;
this woman with her head turned to one side,
an ear gone; lying near her, a small child.

There's no more to be told, or known. And yet,
in twenty years, I've never learned how not
to feel the brief expectancy they feel—
who look down for the first time to the chill
stare of the dead—that something might appear
to tame our fear. Nothing does, nothing here
can comfort us. There's only leaving now,
back up the steps through darkness, seeing how,
as I push back the door, the rain's like light
against our eyes, too sudden and too bright.

Alice Derry

LETTING GO

All night the rain's soft fists:
how deep does a bruise reach,
the soundings of one body
into another?

Eight years our words
like the skin-taut pellets
of raised knuckles.
Eight years we wore the mattress
to certain curves our bodies waited for;
even after we didn't mean it,
we crushed flesh to bone.

I am afraid to sleep
without you. As a child
probes the day's bruises,
my mind insists on our past:
the July 4th hike.
Fireworks in the distance.
You grabbed my arm: look at the field.
Hundreds of fireflies flamed,
paused and flamed,
as if it were day, as if
they fired the meadow with bloom.

THE EGG LADY

brought them to the top of the hills.
He had worried: you're so thin
the wind will take you away.
So she gathered thickness about her,
the row of tiny cottonwoods,
the warm hay nests of her hens.

How clear the nights were!
They stood close to the moon
and watched it fill every month with light,
watched the wind empty the silver stream
onto the river below. When fall reddened the valley,
their wheat chaff stung in the air.

Then he died. The wind
brought cheatgrass back to the fields,
took what it wanted of the house.
She stayed hours in the close air of the shed
while eggs rounded in the hens.
Weekly she sold them in the valley,
walking there and back with the wind until its rhythms

replaced the moon's.

From this window I can see the rock
you call the egg lady. She descends the hill,
the rounded trunk of her body, her neat kerchief.
She's earth now, a part of this valley,
or else, following a thin wail through the old house
up there
or else, following a thin wail through the old house
up there wind.

Mary Trimble

VARIATIONS, MAY

I.

Newspapers claim
the floor
where fig & ivy
sit in rows
of loamy heads
I pack into larger pottery.
Roots against the edge,
they turn in
on themselves.
I tap them free,
set them over
pebbles, water
centered for another year.

II.

At the stem
of the day, thin
sun on my face.
I want to bathe in
tentative May light
like the drowsy
copperhead I almost
stepped over last summer,
husking off a year
of life coiled
so tight it looked
like skin.

III.

Cutting back
the long taproots,
I wire bonzai
into shape,
tamp the soil down.
I will them
a small place
to be perfect in.

IV.

Dirt under my fingernails
revives the black
skin of winter
I want to strip away
like a woman
tearing bandages
from an old sheet.

V.

On the blue island
in morning light they say
is like no other,
the bride
unwraps Medea's gift,
lifts the scalding veil
up to her cheek
silk, skin
instructions in the art
of time,
one woman to another.

Sarah Roller

BETRAYALS

I

There were no words
that grew out like quills
from the soft round body
unprotected by covering.
The down of pins
usually combed back
into a single wing
fluttered along the earth,
raised quills
in momentary erection
against the foreshadowing
sky. Its profile penetrated
the space that surrounded it.

II

Now no pin down to raise
against what isn't outside
and the body limp with self-
inflicted wounds staggers
across its territory.
The tall pines mock the quills
new labor, where no words
could move the body to defend
and gestures become betrayals.

III

She raised her head from a dream
and saw the sun lay across her bed
warm as daisies covering her
with unexpected light. She swam
in the dew of light, her arms
pulling her body through the heat
upward, stretching like a stem
searching. He moved away from her
with the smallest gesture of a weapon.

Samuel Menashe

IMPROVIDENCE

Owe, do not own
What you can borrow
Live on each loan
Forget tomorrow
Why not be in debt
To one who can give
You whatever you need
It is good to abet
Another's good deed

THE FOOT

As streams spread
Through a delta
Veins on the instep
Reach the toes

The foot flows

SALT AND PEPPER

for Calvin Bedient

Here and there
White hairs appear
On my chest—
Age seasons me
Gives me zest—
I am a sage
In the making,
Sprinkled, shaking

HANDIWORK

Palm me off
Finger me
Hand me over,
Thumbs down,
Pummel me
If I frown

WALKING STICK

This stick springs
When you lean on it
It is still green
You can feel the sap
This stick gives
A spring to your walk
Old sticks snap
This stick bends like a bow
You are the arrow

ACHILLES

I am shocked
By skin that shows
Through a hole
In my sock

Shod I forgot
My heel is white
It does not bite

Mary Kinzie

NAMES FOR THESEUS

When was it I got used to names of yours
as Jujube and Rafe and Malcontent?
to signal-fire above the papered roof
and yellow cities wicked where they hid,
Brioche, in conscious compact with the view?
Afternoon clung to the jealous trees
then it was night in armor suddenly.

Your sullen kiss would lose its inclination,
the mark, Sombrero, vaguer close to dawn.
Sleep was unsure, your eyes an ocean green
whose fog obscured the axioms for weeks—
help coming as it did, Koblenz,
too early on, grappling hooks from Freud
and prose, the whole rust-hearted nineteenth century.

Then from the vaulting clock, Lamar, I ran
to glass, refused to close or recognize
blue Dämmerung with iron at its wrist.
Lightning came, then snow. One can't recall
the day, but on and off, Funeus, living
darkened like uneven lengths of twine
confusing the clear mischief of the maze,

cul-de-sac and rubble where a gate
had given on the gown-swept verges of the far
and different. In time, however, nothing came to light.
Night was two in mirror and return.
Weather roamed declaiming the same word
or you, Precision, said you could no more
and I was old and loved you as before.

THE ODD

An Homage to Saul Steinberg

The odd do not suffer,
they have all they can do with being so
alongside, edge-bled, out of range.
You sometimes see them practice
marginal and frightened
at the gangways near commercials
of your grinning national events,
that contest, say, in progress, quoits
and mobs, Odysseus and Ajax,
wits and spears to which all other
eyes are bound but theirs

who wait by definition
much too far away
their tiny arms in sockets
on the shabby bridge
where the troika won't pass
working like a wheel
of paper in an eddy
down another street,

as when, expecting nothing, nagging rain
flutters from the tepid, empty air.
A tooth with such a surface when you doze.
The tang of metal when you swallow nothing.
A small snag in the cloth somewhere. The brief
yet ghastly repetition of a common word
in your half-conscious neighborhood
like *hap* or *help* or *had*.

But they're not in the language anymore,
these predicates who took their worlds away,
these phantoms of declension
for an uninflected tongue, the sense
residual in *muff* and *brickbat*, *millet*,

punk, *tirade*, *understood old age*,
which burned the phrases all together once
in a grammar and a warfare of their own.

The odd are not these they.
Cross over. Turn the block.
That blur where the sky? the print? the ash spear?—

Written things that wander in their orbits,
yes, and the iris bottle, and an air-mail blue.

ISEULT OF BRITTANY

Reversal in the air,
conundrums of despair
whose clues are drops in pressure,
cold destructive pleasure
predictable as weather.

A riddle is its form.
Cold means the alarm
it raises in the spring,
storm, the suffering
for which we were meant.

You came upon the waves.
Music touched the mist—
silvery wet manes
by lightning kissed
as they were driven out to sea.

Now clouds fall in the pool.
The waters turn their face.
No one is to blame.
The earth has cooled
and you and I are dying.

WELCOME TO OUR DARK WORLD

To love is hard to pose in pictures
and has few shades to deepen it
on canvases or memory.
Do recollected blushes come
in reds or pinks? I don't think so.
The flush that we remember falls
across our lover's face like a fit
of dizziness in public the hue
of everyone's watching mixed with heels
all hot and umbrage at the eyes.
There is no lighting to such reflex scrutiny.
Nor can blushes come back colorful
and prime, but complicated, blurred,
careening limb to limb in sudden
sketch of simile: A cheek browns
duskily across the sepia of time
as one arm lays into my view
all apple-rounded human forearm
bounded by a rolled-up sleeve
the smug close shade earth takes in dreams
when we are sunk in summer, dust, and tea.
Remembered scenes fall bruising down a laddered
likeness, hitting every rung:
A face is dark with pleasure near me
and an arm rounds off in mellow skin
till my lips break apart to swallow
this dark aquatint of sun splints
creviced by my dimming fitful eyes
and etched across the many fiercer tones
in which I cannot have today
real skin, red blood, fair copy, nor
a spectral taste of you.

To love
is different from being near and seeing clear
which have their own enormity of title—

say, Experience. So full of things,
of meetings, and possessings, and already
gots. A closet crammed with time
and marginalia Experience
cannot get on or off on or into without.
But love is colorless and abstract;
it needs you only doesn't need you here.
Love is like thought
which we hold in our heart to help us steer
around this one last corner toward surprise.
Perhaps to have remembered is to love.
If no innate ideas of love exist,
then recollection is our sure hypothesis
from which to lay an arsenal deep
underground, a mental heart from which
we prove forth an intricate original list
launched out into this quiet night of present time.
Memory becomes a rich conjecture.
We're little Lockes with open eyes and backpacks
of surmise. Could I hold you, this instant
could not be any more irrefutable:
I turn up the porch stair at a distant border
and find a brown rug in a room half-lit
where you are not but where details of sheer
existence have assembled. Pens plates cats
and ticking clocks all set to stop.
The light is on behind another wall
and I move to a bedroom door: There *you* are.
Elbows on a pillow holding pages
riffing in the breeze since you don't see
or hear me. Suddenly I turn the edge
of all I hate to be and come into
the silent gaze of being where the air and, there,
you lie, above all there, above all you
who do not hear and I who make no sound
am breathless above all and, tired
of journeying in my invisibility,
ceremonially still above all that doesn't
lift or fall again in the interior
of love, I'm here, and take in, you.

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