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# The World by Memory and Conjecture

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# THE WORLD BY MEMORY AND CONJECTURE: POEMS

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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April 15, 2014

  
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INTERVIEWER

In a prose poem in *Provinces* entitled “A Philosopher’s Home” you attribute “the passionate zeal of a photo-reporter” to God. Does this describe your ideal of God as witness, and is it an ideal of what the poet can try to do?

MILOSZ

Yes. Though I should also say that the poet is like a mouse in an enormous cheese excited by how much cheese there is to eat.

— *The Art of Poetry* No. 70 (The Paris Review, Winter 1994)

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### The Source and the Current: Some Thoughts on Poems and Poetry

Poetry, as you have probably observed by now, is made of language. That is to say, language is the body of poetry; it gives a poem both its corporeal space and its efficacy in the world. Past this basic point, any attempt to define what poetry is or how it works begins to meet serious difficulties. For example: what sets a poem apart from any other form of linguistic expression? Prose may take on elements of poetry or vice versa, but even allowing for overlap, what essential difference makes that distinction cogent to begin with? Poetry involves a deliberate arrangement of language for musical or rhetorical effect, but so does every verbal composition, to some degree — and anyway, that does not account for something singular to the experience of reading, hearing, or writing *a poem*, whatever governing purpose or property all that arranging must presumably be in the service of.

“Traditionally, and for many people even today, poems have been admired chiefly for their craftsmanship and musicality, the handsomeness of language and the abundance of similes, along with the patterning and the rhymes,” writes Linda Gregg (“Finding”). “I respect and enjoy all that,” she goes on, “but I would not have worked so hard and so long at my poetry if it were primarily the production of well-made objects, just as I would not have sacrificed so much for love if love were mostly about pleasure.” Like Gregg, I do respect and enjoy the technical craft of sound, sense, and imagery that make up the aesthetic experience of a poem. I would not even call those features secondary, or decorative, or anything like that; in fact, I think they are

absolutely essential to a poem's success as poetry. But in the poetry I am most interested in, they are important mainly for the other work they allow the poem to accomplish.

Wallace Stevens, a maestro of the aesthetic experience if ever there were one, writes that the poet's "function is to make his imagination [the readers'] and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (29). Here Stevens gives us poetry as a kind of conductor of imagination, both the conduit of the poet's and the director of the readers'. Joseph Brodsky called poetry "accelerated thinking," and I think this speaks to the same phenomenon: to me it seems that this acceleration takes place in both the mind of the poet and the mind of the reader, and for the duration of the poem, the momentum is simultaneous. Through the medium of the poem, the motion of one mind is transferred to another, and whatever the poet's thought connects, the reader's thought connects as well.

This, I think, is the heart of poetry and the real source of its power: the engine-work of particular minds, transferred, via the poem, across space and time. Skillful word choices can create layered semantic resonances as well as subtle or striking sound effects. Patterns of rhyme or repetition can build a powerful music of their own, which is deeply, primarily pleasurable, and often quite memorable besides. To me, though, these structural elements matter most in that they enable the poet to direct just how the imagination moves through the lines and phrases of the poem. The structure of the poem gives the mind's journey a pace, a duration, and a texture. It is the thread along which connections are made.

This property of poetry is what allows poems to do the deeper, more significant searching Gregg writes about in her essay "The Art of Finding," quoted above. By giving form to the path of imagination, poetry is able to manifest human experience with great honesty and nuance, and

to impart it to others with remarkable fidelity. It is also, I think, why poems are compelling even in translation. Of course some translations make much better reading than others, but when a translation is powerful, it is not only because the translator absorbed the raw conceptual material and happened to be able to summarize it in a new, pleasing arrangement of English sound and idiom. A sense of the poem's line of thought, and the development of that line across the shape of the poem, persists across languages.

It even persists in fragments. The distinctive, individual styles of the Greek lyric poets, for example, carry through in relatively complete poems and brief scraps alike. As Guy Davenport writes of Archilochus, "Even in the tattered version we have ... a good half of [the fragments] beyond conjecture as to context ... the extraordinary form of his mind is discernible" (2). One can as good as lock eyes with the Archilochus who says, through Davenport, "Like Odysseus under the ram/You have clung under your lovers/And your love of lust," and from lines like these, the sense of connection is so strong that one can even be compelled by the phantom poem around a one-word fragment like "grape" (6, 69). Likewise, one can hear Sappho's voice in the few multistanzaic fragments we have, but also in shorter snatches like (in Anne Carson's translations) "having come from heaven wrapped in a purple cloak" or "I would not think to touch the sky with two arms" (113, 109). Aeolic Greek may only require one or two compound participles to express the subtleties of these ideas; even so, the imagination of the poet carries through, and its presence opens up a world.

\*\*\*

Let me revisit that first statement: poetry, though language, embodies imagination. In this way, it is able to carry such subtle shades and turns that the meaning of a poem — that is to say, the total



imaginative experience of it — may be difficult to report by any other means. One can talk about the poem, what it says and how it achieves its effects, with varying degrees of success. A general summary of the content may be possible, but may or may not be pertinent. By virtue of the way that poems draw the thread of thought *around* and *through* the apprehensible language of which they are composed, that central current of the poem may well be wholly appreciable to both poet and reader, yet all but impossible to paraphrase.

What this means to a *poet* is that the writing of the poem itself can provide a sort of medium or territory for ideas that they have not entirely articulated to themselves. A poet may begin a poem with a single image or sound and explore from there, with no clear purpose yet in mind. Certainly this is what I usually do. The significance of the proto-poem, assuming there is one, may make itself clear as a poem later, even though the finished piece might still resist a comprehensive explication. Asked how he knew when a poem was done, Charles Wright said, “When I feel a theory about it coming on” (“Art”). Concerning the initial fascination that sometimes leads a curious poet to the discovery of the whole poem, Mark Doty writes (70):

Our metaphors go on ahead of us; they know before we do. And thank goodness for that, for if I were dependent on other ways of coming to knowledge I think I’d be a very slow study. I need something to serve as a container for emotion and idea, a vessel that can hold what’s too slippery or charged or difficult to touch . . . I can’t choose what’s going to serve as a compelling image for me. But I’ve learned to trust that part of my imagination . . . to watch for the signs of fascination, the sense of compelled attention (*Look at me*, something seems to say, *closely*) that indicates that there’s something I need to attend to. Sometimes it seems to me as if metaphor were the advance guard of the mind; something in us reaches out, into the landscape in front of us, looking for the right vessel, the right vehicle, for whatever will serve.

Almost all of the poems in this collection began this way: not with an outline or a general theory, but with an image or phrase or particular twist of thought that caught my attention and

did not let go. Through play and exploration and many, many drafts, poems arose. This is not to say that the poems have nothing to do with the interests, concerns, or convictions of my conscious thinking; they have everything to do with them. But when the poem in progress touches on these issues, it is usually because the thread of imagination, working its way through the materials of the mind, naturally works its own way to what matters. Often it does so obliquely, and always on its own terms. I would have it no other way. I could say this no better than Charles Simic, who (in a letter to Charles Wright) put it as follows (“Narrative” 73):

Poetry is an utterance that no paraphrase can exhaust because poetry is not about ideas but about the music of chance. Poetry proclaims that there's something more real than ideas, something that remains, as it were, always stubbornly unformulated, but which we as readers of poetry have no trouble experiencing and savoring in poems we love. For me, images and metaphors, what we see and what we imagine, their perpetual undermining of each other, their paradox, their ambiguity, their slyness, their mind boggling wisdom and comedy gets at the core of our existence because our existence, too, cannot be paraphrased.

\*\*\*

But a last word about definitions. Jorge Luis Borges writes (149):

Pater wrote that all the arts aspire to the condition of music, perhaps because in music meaning is form, since we are not able to recount a melody in the way we can recount the outline of a short story. If we accept this statement, poetry would be a hybrid art—the subjection of a set of abstract symbols which is language to musical ends. Dictionaries are to blame for this erroneous concept. It is often forgotten that they are artificial repositories, put together well after the languages they define. The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature. The Dane who pronounced the name of Thor or the Saxon who uttered the name of Thunor did not know whether these words represented the god of thunder or the rumble that is heard after the lightning flash. Poetry wants to return to that ancient magic.

Like its linguistic components, poetry itself preexists any attempt at definition, and in fact seems to have arisen everywhere there has been a language to manifest it. With that in mind, I

suspect the rest of this thesis will be able to speak more honestly and accurately for my own engagement with poetry, its success or lack thereof.

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# THE WORLD BY MEMORY AND CONJECTURE

POEMS

Maggie Colvett  
April 15, 2014

# VOIE

The unseen oracle of Métro  
is seated in each of her wire-grilled shrines,  
from which she divines  
the unseeable surface.

She summons and states  
every station:

*"Saint-Lazare?  
Saint-Lazare."*

*"Madeleine?  
Madeleine."*

*"Concorde?  
Concorde."*

and by her voice  
the world,  
which has been narrow as a train,  
is opened.

## MESSENGERS

First the arrow shot through space,  
its line of flight  
grazing the curved earth,

leaving a tremor in tall grass,  
a scatter of gravel,  
or, by chance,

the snap of a branch. Then  
the ripple, little rustle  
of shoulders brushing,

heads turning in treetops,  
pools, crevasses,  
beds of moldering leaves,

in veins of leaves, in tunnels —  
thousands turning,  
a circle of them miles wide —

and the airless start  
of thousands pausing,  
listening.

If I tried to grab that shaft  
its feathers  
would shred my hand to the bone.

\*

Another in a field — thick air,  
rough leaves where sunlight  
creases and collects

to be twirled up again  
in drifts of insects,

each little body blazing —

walks slowly, weighted  
in all that gold  
like one swimming with his clothes on.

Gnats and moths falter  
behind him, batted from flight  
by the force of his strides.

His steps sink deep in the ground,  
shifting the grains,  
altering them

through layers of clay and silt,  
down through the water  
at rest in its limestone channels,

down to the mantle that holds  
the fiery churning,  
the agonized flesh of the stone.

If he placed his hand on my shoulder —



## MORNING WITHOUT SNOW

After the blizzard and thaw, salt blossomed  
over our windshields, crystallized like frost,  
veiling the world in a geodesic lace  
that wouldn't melt, but smeared,  
leaving salt streaks on the face of the day.  
In the hard freeze, everything lit with the dawn;  
we chipped blue sparks from the glass  
with sharp air in our throats  
and our own warm breath on our faces.  
After the blizzard, we drove through clouds.

## BETWEEN SEASONS

Gray fields, gray sky. No glint on the rocks in the pasture.  
Grass curled to white bristles. The ground beneath it  
muddied and blurred after snow, turning colors like a bruise.  
The neighbor's calves who came to the fence to meet me  
are grown and gone. The jimsonweed has no smell, white stalks  
and black maces, shivering skeletons. Wind whips the gatechain.  
I hear my mother's guineas cawing and screeching,  
chasing each other in and out of the barn, half-running,  
half-flying. The ones she raised from pussywillow keets  
and gave reign of the farm. Whose nests she's never found.  
The last of last year's garden skitters across the yard,  
lighter than the wind. A few sunflowers hang by their roots,  
slumped over the high fence, heads swaying wearily.  
This is all too much for them. By their feet, an old okra pod,  
overgrown and left to the weather, now dried to white paper,  
has cracked on its flutes and bloomed like a bird of paradise.  
It's going to rain soon. The light is heavy with it.

## LIVING ABROAD

That was the marvelous year.  
I wore the same coat every morning.  
I walked through the city alone  
While the sun was rising,  
Watching the streets resume  
Their lines and borders.  
After rain, lights hung in the pavement,  
brighter than anything, suspended  
Over a bottomless darkness.  
All edges trembled with secrets.  
I wrote letters in such wet ink  
The words flashed for a second  
And shimmered,  
Then settled into black.  
I sent them to no one.  
I bought groceries with fistfuls of change.  
I went days without speaking.  
Love was beginning to hang around  
Anonymously,  
Like an unremarkable stranger,  
Only brushing my heart with its shoulder  
From time to time.  
I lived by the station. All night,  
Trains ran through my dreams.

## THE SALT-MARSH HOUR

The devil comes to my room  
In the person of a wading bird.  
He stands in the dark  
All shins and sharp edges  
Like a thing impaled in the level ground.

He skates his feet through the carpet,  
Trailing his ankles behind him,  
Leaving ridges of yellow  
That do not ripple or fade.  
He takes a listless pleasure in it,  
As dragging a stick over fenceposts.

He breaks the square of light  
That falls from the window, and I see  
He has done the knees in snakeskin,  
Which is just like him.

Through the clicking of his beak  
He speaks to me plainly.

Once I lay in fear of him. Now I answer,  
Sitting upright in a crumple of sheets,  
Naked and bleary, familiar as a wife.

I have started again the conversation  
We have rehearsed and rehearsed:

*I should have been a cloud of silt,  
I say, a little drift  
Swirled up in brackish water,  
Old shells kicked up to glitter and disperse.  
I should have been a smokeless, ashless fire.*

And the devil says, I am a heron,  
An egret, a bittern, a crane.  
I stand in the shallows and strike  
And swallow whatever I spear.

Your moon and your brackish water  
Wash over my back,  
And I coil my neck.  
I retire to tree and reedbeds.

The devil comes to my side  
With his wings half-furled,  
And I bury my hand in his shoulders.

I feel the shiver of damp  
That rolls over oiled feathers.  
A cold bracelet rises  
Up to my wrist as my fingers  
Brush the hard spines by the skin,  
Stroking the body, pressing into  
The warm and rounded weight.

# SOUTH CROSS

I.

In Berlin all week  
because the trains to Warsaw  
don't run on Easter Sunday,  
I was measured by streetlights  
nimbused in falling snow,  
drawing out their blue  
and silver streaks  
below the faint red eyes  
of narrow towers.  
At night the clouds  
assumed the same shade  
as in the day, diffusing  
the lamps below  
to a constant brightness,  
dampening sun behind  
to a constant dimness.

Under the low, dark sky,  
the streets, glassed  
with slush and dirty water,  
mirrored those lights such  
that the space below my feet  
seemed larger than  
the space above them,  
hanging secret and  
untouchable.

City trains the only lights  
I could cross into,  
the longest rides  
always late at night,  
in the direction  
I already called *home*,  
toward Ostkreuz.

In the still, bright interior

of the S-Bahn,  
I formed my throat  
around the names of stations,  
not exhaling,  
though they still came out  
like whispers: *Ostbahnhof*,  
*Südkreuz*, *Potsdamer Platz*,  
names I could nearly see into,  
but not quite penetrate,  
with a heavy, hard-edged grace  
like the tile signs  
that named old platforms  
in shimmering blackletter.

During the long divide,  
you've heard, there were stations  
where old rails obliged  
the western trains to pass,  
where the platform  
rolled by without stopping,  
unlit, silent, serious with guards.

In the still, bright place  
with changes still to go,  
I whispered *Südkreuz*.

I whispered  
so it wouldn't disappear.

II.

All summer in Tennessee  
it rained and rained.  
Driving back from Johnson City,  
making the usual turns  
on Austin Springs,  
where the road snakes over  
and pavement breaks  
near the Sullivan County line,

I met a storm,  
and the passage flooded.

In sliding hills  
I couldn't see past the bends  
or through the trees,  
though the mountains must have been  
where they always were,

horizon folding and folding  
out of my sight, unaffected.

No shoulder on the narrow road:  
to the left, sheared rock,  
to the right, the ditch,  
and I had to drive.  
Marking the way by signs,  
Deer Path and Copper Hill,  
Cash Hollow, Candle Knob,  
I kept my spine upright.

The still, bright place  
is smaller than my body, now;  
I cannot move around inside it.  
I held it in my ribs.

Headlights lost in water,  
I gripped the wheel  
and in the dark and pounding night  
I whispered *Südkreuz*.



## A DISCLOSURE

Doubled in the shower,  
shaving an obscure zone  
of the back of the knee,

when my razor caught the edge  
of an unseen divot  
and blood spilled into the water.

It swirled over yellowed enamel,  
tracing little eddies,  
blossoming, increasing

until it seemed to fill the tub.  
While I stared, shampoo  
dripped a line of crooked pearls

across the bloom. Then all at once  
it dissolved: the water  
ran pink, then clear,

and what I might have divined  
from that emanation  
disappeared, unread.

When I stood, soap flowed  
down my back and my thighs,  
and the razor's notch

started to burn.

# GRANBY ROW, 5 A.M.

*Manchester, February 2013*

Half a million people here and still  
this hour finds a way to be deserted,  
or whatever's on the other side of deserted,  
what it is when a place is haunted  
by all that's yet to arrive.

I am the only one alive,  
the rest subsumed in shapes of buildings,  
shades of bridges, or else sealed in one of the cars  
that now and again sail like phantoms  
over clear, wide, empty streets. The sky  
has no color, neither stars nor clouds,  
but something is making the streetlights fade  
as, on the sidewalk, bright-edged fragments  
change from gold to silver

and will soon again be glass,  
green and blue-green and dark, dark brown  
where days ago a shattering startled me awake,  
echoing below ferocious voices.

## IN POLAND, BRIEFLY AND ALONE

It's snowing in Kraków and I am lost  
on streets too fine for the map  
I bought in Warsaw, before it was midnight,

here probably because last fall in Knoxville  
I heard this Polish poet  
step, for a moment, out of translation,

addressing the woman two rows ahead  
at the reading, speaking a poem for her  
in quick dark vowels, felt deep like a whisper,

and I sensed another luminosity  
shift through the room, moving by something  
other than names, breaking deep

from the place behind naming. Here my French  
does nothing, my Latin does nothing.  
I learned Greek to talk to the old gods,

but they called me first, don't forget,  
in a strange sort of glimmer  
below the surface of letters, beneath

and untouchable, hanging like streetlights  
mirrored in rained-on city streets.  
Here it is snowing and I am hunched

under a backpack of papers, lifting  
a wheeled suitcase over the slush,  
trying to read through the dark:

streets for Marka, Tomasz, Jana—  
books and saints I should know of all orders.  
I am looking for Świętego Krzyża, the shape

of those letters, whose sound I can't guess.  
I am writing them over and over

in my closed mouth, reciting, unknowing,

Holy Cross Holy Cross Holy Cross.  
Big flakes plume my hair and my coat,  
droplets star my glasses. The lights of Kraków

are somewhere I can't reach. I take little steps,  
afraid to slide on ice. City where I'll skate  
for a few days, then disappear,

moving parallel to memory, untouched  
by litanies I do not know. That comes after,  
on other voices, through the names. I am looking

for Świętego Krzyża, and I am cold. I remember  
those deer I saw from the train, crossing the wide  
white hills by the edge of pine forest—so many,

and what *were* they? They looked small as dogs,  
unless it's the scale of the trees  
I couldn't understand. Distantly icicles fall

from an ancient roof to an iced-over gutter.  
It is night, and everything glistens.  
Every sound is a bell.

## A SUMMONS

One day Mnemosyne suddenly parted a curtain  
And stood there in front of you and said  
Will you hold this basket of Japanese pears,

And you did not say no. Your arms dipped  
With the weight, they smelled musty-sweet  
Mixed with earth from the hands that picked them.

She said will you have the late light falling  
Through a distant window, crossing the dust,  
Changing and changed by it, spinning a slanted

Yellow ghost that trembles with the shadows  
Of passing birds, and you saw it trembling.  
She said will you bear the blue of the Aegean

Or the Ionian or possibly the Tyrrhenian  
For ten years, each drawn impossibly long  
By the thought of home, and you did not say.

She said will you take this sleepless night  
And the deepening ache at the back of the socket  
Where images drag themselves over and over,

And before you could speak she said will you carry  
The names of the absent and all of the names  
Of the names of the absent, their freight, their worlds,

And right then she seized you by the jaw  
And clenched you in her titan hand and told you  
You are mine and I will take you

And every joy, every sweetness,  
Every inconsolable terror on this earth  
I will press into you the second you meet my eye,

And what could you say. You'd heard your name.  
You'd learned to read. You knew about poetry.  
Your mouth was full of her materials.

# ENCOUNTERS

## I.

On a park bench under the budding cherry  
a woman with freckled shoulders sits  
pulling long stitches across the hem  
of the dress she's wearing.

She reels an inch of fabric at a time,  
webbing it taut over thin, hard fingers  
while the free hand circles  
to embroider

(red thread, a white dress)

a delicate pattern of ferns.

She has been here for hours  
and will you risk looking too long at her?

If she lifts her head will you shudder away  
from her patient, steady eyes?

## II.

In old mountains, hard and still  
yet knuckled with latent force  
like the back of an animal,

low to their foothills, the starker edges  
of their traumatic birth  
healed over, leaving only its magnificence;

on a high bald,  
a meadow symphonic with insects,  
clear ground above locust woods,

a lion

heavy and present,  
broad feet breaking wet stems,  
sending processions of startled grasshoppers,

his fur the color of winter grass,  
nose hard as a horse's,  
tail thick and strong as a bull's.

His quartz eyes want nothing  
and will you believe them?

To what should he return?  
What scene deserves him

more than this?

## THRIFT STORE PHOTOGRAPH

Whoever took this  
loved you a lot, silver boy:  
I can tell by the way you're turning  
someone admired you

by the half-shut blinds  
where once this light  
fell in bars that broke  
across your shoulders,

and by the way  
you don't squint or grin  
at the presence  
that happens upon you:

even now, as a scratch  
at the edge of the print  
begins to cross your hand,  
you look out evenly,

not quite smiling,  
as though about to nod  
hello  
before drawing the shade.



## AFTER AFTER SAPPHO

Today again that whirring  
and I turn because all bicycles  
are your bicycle

after some secret cloth  
some lining of the world  
got caught between your spokes and twisted

everything: leaves and streets  
went swirling in your wake,  
tall strange lady

whose brilliant spinning  
made all light fly from that  
untouchable center,

stillness of all turning fixed  
by the cool gravity  
that pulls me to it always oh

if you could hear my voice go low  
to speak of you,  
even here, even now

## FIRES ARE BURNING EVERY DAY

One winter in Manchester,  
I lived behind the city's central station,  
right by the hub where the railways split  
and spread like vines, sprawling out  
between the buildings on high trellises.  
Someone leaving for Plymouth or Swansea  
or passing another stop on the way to Newcastle  
might have glanced out and seen me:  
a morning face on the seventh floor  
checking the clouds for rain,  
the evening glow of a desk lamp  
through crooked blinds.

I didn't mind the sound, a nightly presence  
all my life in Tennessee, familiar  
and lulling as crickets. Once, though,  
this enormous roaring startled me awake  
— a helicopter, I thought, maybe an earthquake,  
something worth getting up for.  
Just past the window,  
an unreally massive freight train  
was dragging itself down the rails,  
going unbearably slowly, grinding against them  
with a terrible grumble and screele,  
its wheels pouring sparks  
as though every car were strapped with fireworks  
and the force of them all was just enough  
to keep the train rolling forward.

The brakes, I thought, but the train kept coming,  
the sparks kept streaming, a sharp hard orange  
like a shaft of sunset through breaks in dark clouds.  
And that grinding echoed and echoed  
in alley walls, doubled and doubled, amplified.  
Was this supposed to be happening?

In jeans pulled from the floor  
and a coat zipped over my nightshirt,

I hurried down the stairs,  
like a child who wakes to snow  
or a flurry of meteors, sure it won't last  
and needing to see. Out in the freezing air,  
my little alley blazed like a forge:  
you could see each brick of each wall  
gleaming like a perfect square of light,  
every bolt of the trestle in blistered high relief  
while all the grains of the asphalt  
flickered and flared. I watched for a while,  
alone, and surprised to be —  
nobody could have been sleeping through it.

I think I'd expected to see this woman  
who I'd often seen, who was always there  
in the arch of the door when I came back late,  
always leaning against the wall  
in the same red sweatshirt. Every night,  
she'd given an acknowledging flick  
of her cigarette hand, a half-nod, a half-smile  
that barely parted her lips.

I could imagine how the new orange light  
might thread her black braids,  
shimmer the skin around her freckles,  
and how the little glow of her cigarette  
might answer that fire,  
how the smoke on her breath  
might catch the light for a moment  
and twirl it in the air  
between her and the train,

and that I might say something to make her turn,  
make the light glance across her piercings  
and briefly edge the gap in her teeth.  
Then we'd have been silent,  
only glancing from time to time,  
daring each other to believe what we were seeing.

Later I heard her called Felicia.

## THE COMMUTER

I placed my hands in front of me. The world moved.  
The road unwound. I lifted and lowered my foot.

The place for my hands was in front of me.  
The place gave me work. I was needed.

The air moved around me. It reeled in and out.  
I spoke as I needed to speak.

At night the trainsong pulled the train  
and wear spun the wheels on the rails.

There were no windows but I knew glass  
by the sound of its shaking. My eyes were waiting.

Time sent me to sleep. Time woke me.  
World spooled and unspooled. I was necessary.

## CRITIQUE OF PLANTS

Blue dawn lingered late in the morning,  
clinging to the west side of the house,

and just before noon you'd see the frost,  
unchecked, had spread itself

across the brick like silver ivy,  
branching into finely ordered filigrees

as if its ridges were the vesicles of leaves.  
They weren't leaves, though,

and when the sun found it, the frost didn't act like ivy:  
it wouldn't wither in branches

but dissolved from itself altogether:  
not at all like a vine,

which will clutch its dead dry siphon  
to a wall or a tree forever,

the frost renounced its clasping right away,  
displacing all its color to the brick,

scattering its glitter through the grain,  
bleeding deeper purple from the clay.

## WHAT THE RIVER'S MOUTH FEEDS IS NOT THE RIVER

Heron composed on a roof like a blue glass bottle  
Sits churning water and salt flesh: seaweed  
Hangs from his beak, entwined in a late crab's legs.  
The bird's own feet appear as the sun bows low behind him  
And he shits in silhouette. He fills himself and empties  
According to his body. This has been his work here  
For an age — the age of herons — and so it will go on  
Until his epoch sinks, as all do, into silt: as it was  
Before I came here, so too when I am gone, for my own age  
Is vanishing. Here soon enough will be another crab,  
Another bird, another sun: each as true, essentially,  
As the last.

## MORNING AUSPICES

Ask my birds where the gods have gone.  
Hear the air howl in the throats of my roosters,  
purple and green in the new-startled sun.  
Witness them coming, blood-combed and bull-breasted,  
splendid and sudden as lords of war.  
Ask what their long curved knives are for.

See my hens take deliberate dancer's steps.  
Watch their necks snap like whips  
to devour the water bugs! Bodies delight them  
and darken their yolks.  
In their rattling throats  
the long low purr of the world is rising,  
taking on melody, breaking to caw.  
Remember their hawks' eyes, their dinosaurs' feet.  
They sleep a dark mass of heavy heat.  
Ask my birds where the gods have gone.

## SEASONALS

ferried on the breeze  
was she dark-lipped and fertile  
did bucks come running

did they catch a whiff  
of her luscious hindquarters  
that dank sexy heat

did her reeling scent  
overpower the warning  
scents that propelled it

though who by her moan  
her provocative lowing  
could hear other sounds

what was it to them  
to the bucks who came running  
what was it to see

two squares of forest  
break away and manifest  
as printed jackets

two men raise her legs  
suspend her over the ground  
and lower her back

one brace her shoulders  
and one kneel between her legs  
attending to her

slitting tail to breast  
and thrusting a thick red arm  
in her cooling gut

so to deliver  
her liver; also her lungs



heart stomach kidneys

what did the bucks see  
do they know about kidneys  
or camouflage print

what was it to them  
who would be choicer prizes  
who lingered to watch

her soft white belly,  
nearly bloodless, gathered by  
jacketed strangers

# SHELL DIVER AND OCTOPUS

*Tako to ama*, Hokusai (woodcut, 1814)

I found a way to move without a body.  
A moon-eyed monster taught me how to dive.

Through mottled glass I watched him move.  
He slid like a mercury cloud, an inverse swan.

Long fangs of light sank after me  
until they reached their tips and disappeared.

He came to me.  
I wrestled in his arms.

He took me by the neck  
and pushed the breath into my mouth.

He let me touch his perfect eye.  
An ocean shivered and tensed beneath my palm.

That iris was so dark  
the floor seemed luminous around it.

He was nausea, silk and power, dark webs  
and brilliant arms. He was a mass of swans.

He is nowhere in this bed  
of armless, eyeless oysters.

I dive and dive and find only  
these handfuls of pearls,

as little and hard as the bones  
in a swimmer's wrist.

## SCOPS OWL IN NEW YORK

You're a scops owl  
so move as a scops owl:

being a quick and subtle thing,  
a secret of no consequence,

a stranger among strangers,  
you've nothing to fear.

Nothing here belongs to you,  
and so there is no place that isn't yours:

if your eyes ache, find pockets of night  
under plywood, sealed into hollowed-out corners,

or else by the warm inner seams  
of winter hoods, mingled with the hair

of patient women. There is no end  
of habitable spaces; any perch you see

is yours to hold. So go:  
dine on mice or souvlaki,

hoot softly, or shriek,  
or sing, or speak.

But watch out for that wind  
that parts the buildings:

it'll snag you at your edges  
where you're brittle as a nail,

it'll rip you like a flier, or an old leaf,  
and scatter you straight to the ground.

Is that how you fell in this freezing puddle,  
bristling under the streetlight,

every thread of your silhouette  
lit like a trembling filament?

Well? Was it the wind?  
Or did for a moment you feel yourself

feathers and claws,  
and shudder,

and slip?

## SUDDEN MEMORY OF A FRAGMENT OF ARCHILOCHUS

A jar of strawberries, sliced thin and dried,  
labeled in the very hand  
from the letters I got when I lived in England.  
I did not write back on paper then.

*Whittles*  
*to carry*

*I repulse*

Strawberries, sliced thin, darken and curl  
into rosepetals. Their aridity  
puckers my tongue. They hurt,  
then sweeten. They leave a long burn.

*Your great kindness*

(The translator notes the papyrus is ruined.)

*Kindness.*

## A SMALL AND ARTLESS GRACE

Sometimes I still think of that girl I saw  
in the grass at the edge of the playground  
of the school I'd gone to years before  
and passed, sometimes, as an adult  
walking home to my first apartment.  
It was spring, and she sat cross-legged  
in her cotton sundress, ripping the teeth  
from the heads of yellow dandelions.  
I thought, at first, she was making wishes  
or fortunes, but she went too quickly  
to weigh the signification of each tiny petal,  
tearing bunches and smashing them, hard,  
and laughing, too happy to care  
who loved her, who loved her not.  
I envied her the anger in that joy, the certainty,  
even knowing how quickly it shatters  
and buries its shards in the heart.  
I've known a few grown people to preserve it,  
but that takes style, an assurance of motion  
which I have always lacked. I'm clumsy,  
always regretting the second before the wreck—  
the glass mid-fall, the door mid-swing  
with the keys on the vanishing side—  
always too late to stop it, and too soon  
to pull it off. The wrong thing said,  
false in the air and utterly irrevocable.  
The juice tipping into the coffee. A few  
play off even these with deliberate flair—  
an incredible thought to me, inexpert,  
inelegant, always standing dumb at the site,  
unsure what it is I'm supposed to do.  
Trying to read the pieces on the floor,  
trying the knob again, again, alone  
with the nothing it comes to. Sipping a little  
of the turbid coffee. Looking into the cup  
and, alone, sipping a little more.

## AUTUMN AS A KIND OF PROMISE

The scaled, coiled rubber of a broken bicycle tire  
has been lying by the road in a crumpled twist.

How a snake must hurt before she casts her skin.  
How her eyes cloud over, her muscles ache.

It is not how a salamander lifts  
new feet to the bank, and turns, and gasps

to see her face flame-red in the water.  
It is waiting to be a snake, to unclench the bones

so much constrained, to feel each grain of dirt  
passing under your belly. To be a cicada, to leave yourself

yourself, flying and singing. Sun and gutter water  
daily alter the bicycle tire, piece by intangible

piece. Not for the last time, leaves turn flame-red  
and brittle. Not for the last time, snakes and cicadas

find dark, closed places for winter.

## ABOUT A BOAT

Floating, now, on another stratus,  
peering through the glass bottom of memory,  
I see the river spread across the ground  
like a dead snake, its violence reduced  
to a slight passive shimmer,  
the trees around it parting soft as grass.  
I know the little bleached boat, a rowboat,  
spinning rudderless through the bends,  
and in it, the entire form of a girl.  
She is spread low on the floor,  
completely below the level  
of the water lapping the wooden walls.  
She stares at a sky that is one  
undifferentiated cloud,  
gray and unbroken, a ceiling.  
It seals the sun and rain  
and all that exuberant springtime  
behind itself. It seals the geese  
out of heaven. It seals her in the boat.  
She tilts her head to the side,  
hearing a riot of water and listening  
for the separate, shining notes  
of single drops striking single drops  
with all the force of the current.  
Trees quiver above like a field in slight wind.  
The boat turns slowly, crookedly,  
reversing on itself. I can't read  
the face of the girl. She is so small.



# MIRABILIS

## I.

One summer of constant storms, the wind and rain  
chasing each other over the pastures,  
cycling back and back  
with tireless overdetermination,  
returning so many nights and afternoons  
they seemed to be acting on some long memory,  
a promise of not only seasons, but years,  
somebody's debt or retribution  
paid in superabundance.  
The summer the garden flourished,  
then collapsed on itself, overspent,  
buckled with overweighted fruit,  
pale vines sprawled over dark, thick grass.  
The summer the greenhouses shattered  
and flew out over the highway in deadly shards.  
The summer loose ground was spirited off  
in red and black channels, bright rivulets running  
over the sidewalk and into my shoes, crossing my ankles  
with drops that dried dark as scabs.  
Rain ate the soil from the new orchard,  
exposing the roots of the saplings, unearthing  
fragments of the house that stood there once—  
late-fifties ostraka, old crosses of pipe—  
closing old fissures and opening new ones.

Every day the fronts would come back,  
brandishing thunder and lightning, ready  
to overwhelm the air for a while,  
just long enough to remind us that they could.  
And then the yellow light, the dampened light  
of afternoon turning to evening after the storm,  
when I saw a signal brightness flare  
from puddles, from asphalt, from edges of clouds,  
suffusing the house and overgrown fields,  
fabric of wet shirts clinging to shoulders,  
new leaves spreading from young fruit trees.

II.

Winter again, a hardened fierceness  
coming into the air, felt deeper and surer  
in the changed world, after all that the summer  
altered, all that the storms revealed.  
chill running into the nerves and veins  
that the rain exposed, the force of the cold  
understood in the bones that the year laid bare:  
disclosed, for a moment, then closed again,  
felt like memories, now, here and not here,

there and not there, what the water opened.  
Winter pressing itself to the hearts of things  
with a sharp and silent power, imbuing them all  
with the force with which they will surge again  
or else be destroyed, fractured and fragmented,  
broken apart from their very centers.

How glass-edged prisms of frost break the leaves,  
how freezing air burns the throats that gasp it.  
White, white stars in an unmisted sky.

## ANGELS' SHARE

The unrippled stillness of varnish. The effects  
of certain pigments. The copper of copper.  
The bronze of bronze. The colorlessness  
of silver. The cold, hard materiality  
of Corinthian brass, relinquishing the name  
to an airy secret. The tensile strength of nets.  
The lattice weave of papyrus. The body  
of Sappho, loosed for good. The body of Whitman,  
rendered. (The body of Keats is the devil's cut.)  
The runner's knees. The drummer's hearing.  
Th' expense of spirit. The Buddha in the road.  
Wisdom. Teeth. Appendices. Innumerable piano strings.  
The color of bruises. The color under scars.

# OUTBOUND

Two stories in this quiet, empty train:  
one to meet the platform,  
another for the stairs,  
which are in every car,  
to meet.

Take any seat.

The floor is scuffed.  
The seats are worn  
with patient wear.

It is comfortable here.

\*

There is a passenger who boards the upper floor.  
He enters through the windows  
when the train is still.

He came in with the sun.  
He has taken every seat.  
He'll travel with you.

\*

The train doesn't hurry.  
The glass is old. The lights  
are older.

Look outside:  
the world moves in honey,  
the world stops in amber.

Look now: the city softens  
into gold; it softens  
into honeycomb; it breaks  
and melts away.

Here is the brush,  
the hard grass, the pebbled soil,  
the accident country that wills itself  
from untendable spaces.

Here is the pollen that grows,  
and blows, and settles;  
that settles in liquid,  
in lattice,  
in stone.

\*

These are the outskirts:  
the land sends its hard gold wires sunward.

They are hardened with patience  
and certainty.

The train doesn't hurry.  
The rails aren't going  
anywhere.

## WINTER IN APRIL

These are the small days. Night closes in in the middle of the afternoon, pulling it shut hours before the sun draws down the sky. You walk huddled into yourself through rain and no rain. Morning stretches into the dark where sleep deserts you and the clock tells only bad news; dawn falls like a frost that is heavier than a year of snow, heavy even as the shadows your eyes have gathered with their long staring. These days are diminishing, drawn down and toward a final shutting, a private solstice. Oh, they will open again: the fires and flares of October are coming, long paths through gold forests, long days with the languorous joy of happier dreams; the meteor streaks of November are coming, the Leonid lights are already on their way through the still, cold dark, soon to cross an unclouded sky of late constellations, the warm breath that rises from reddened faces.

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