THE WORLD BY MEMORY AND CONJECTURE: POEMS

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

Maggie Colvett
The Honors College
University Honors Scholars
East Tennessee State University

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Maggie Colvett, Author

Jessie Graves, Faculty Mentor

Thomas Crofts, Faculty Reader

Marty Fitzgerald, Faculty Reader
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.

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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, primally 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.

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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.

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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.
Works Cited


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.
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, crystalled 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 screeling, 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 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.
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, Tomasza, 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 insconsolable 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?
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 desklamp
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 screel,
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.
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.
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
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.
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.
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
you 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

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.
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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“Autumn as a Kind of Promise”: Still: The Journal (Issue 15, June 2014)
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