

Collected Poems

Volume II

Edward Locke

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FOR ELISABETH AND JANET

FOR DAVID

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1918, 1928

Today I was born. Ten years ago, the death of Apollinaire
Turned France to the knees it rose from on Charlemagne's
Crowning. Few knew or cared then, since full homily,
Like the buckling legs of the chief warrior hit in the brains,
Receives that message far too tardily – the timing
Is off, and the body is late for its only death. What has died,
We must leave to future confirmation; I, securely past birth,
Will more affirmingly compose because Apollinaire
Wiped away rhetoric, although he knew its worth.

And soon I will escape Apollinaire, for all his innovation
In octosyllables, grace, caesuras and the zest of meter:
The old, when new, turned classic the moment it was born –
History invents nothing but what already is fleeter
Than generation after generation crampedly miming.
How could I, who will write a thousand rhythms,
Worry if what I brought is twentieth-century turned?
Today I am firmly gened. Obediently, I will contribute
That uniqueness each infant has already learned.

BEGINNING WITH BRECCIA

I...inspected his feet that they should be worthy of
the nails..and with maps I made him familiar with
the topography of Golgotha. – Wilfred Owen

It is the image *breccia* the poet imagines, failing:
Clothes gemmed on a washline (instead of the symbol
Of lapidary virtues sticking high from the heart) –
Absurdly, the rope, window to pole, seems fibrous rock;
It clamps and stiffens extruding garments
Above many of the checkerwork tenement roofs.

An absorbing moon, misted by cloudlets of teenager trousers:
Wash-Monday hooks the poet's spirit as when he helped
his mother
String the alley wind with shirts and bras and pillowcovers.
"I am the clothespinned line of the world," the metaphysical
conceit-child boasts to Mom:
"Everything hangs on me." Immediately she scoffs, "Slang!"
How dormant dust rose from her broom like Pegasus
On a wintry night, how the ghost of Chopin cramped
Into the synagogue rear with the old women
On freezing mornings, and held her hand, will be narrated
One day in the private testament of her son to his only son
For whom the father soaks pages spotless so translation may
begin afresh and crisp.

Who now lovingly chides the student of seventeenth-century
studies?
"Oh, damn," he mutters. "A poem again about slums.
It's like the eternal return of things. I'm trapped;
I'm ritualizing the city when I meant a country hymn."
Manglings of metaphor haunt the writer seated
On the front bench of the torah-cleansed room.
Men exhibit the scrolls as he mourns for parents deceased.
His mother's eyes pinprick the back of his neck.

CASTINGS

Furiously noble,
Religious beyond belief,
Hamlet the star of *Hamlet*
Sips wine on New Year's Eve
Across the table from me.

I tell him I am he
At age seventy-two
(Never when young):
Curiously stable, though
Ambitious beyond relief.

His festive lips wear
The value of Ophelia's blush;
I, drinking water,
That American champagne,
Show her later paleness.

I ask him his thoughts
Since Fortinbras,
For a concordant reign,
In a warlike fit,
Hanged Horatio.

He replies, few people
Understood his passion
Since his friend's death,
But every New Year,
As with me this evening,

He welcomes and vets
The holiday with
A different mortal, one copacetic
And who has read each critic
Telling his cause awry.

Rapacious, he wishes to know
About resolutions I pledge:
Does he give creative guidance?
Did I mourn his loss? His bite?
His abbreviated achievements?

As I gaze back with languor,
He vanishes, though no cock crows.
Yet here I comprehend,
All contumely aside, our lives
Each year beyond the play:

One, we become our dead fathers.
Two, we wonder if any part of us
Has been murdered. Three,
Our soliloquies are our truth-seeking
Juries. Four, the day will arrive

When we depend solely
On the revelations of others.
Five, celebratory as they are,
We weep to touch more
Than warrior-nightmare lines

In the short waking of Shakespeare;
There is a time for Gertrude
And the influence of Hermione
And even the confluence of witches:
Now the birth image of this New Year

When we toast the imprinting mothers,
Our tolerant, tutoring mothers
With no clue to their brash son's puns,
And whose private love and tale
Inevitably fall between his cracks.

And surely Hamlet has left me
For another interview with Gertrude.
She needs no words of Shakespeare now.
As her son sits with tragedy in his face,
She drinks whatever he offers her.

TETHER

And a Voice said: "All over the universe they have finished
a day of happiness." – Black Elk Speaks

On their final day – their last wish being that the Voice
Creep out of the glyph they term an evening meadow –
Cords of wrinkled men will hesitate,
Then crate for death whatever carried their elation:
Questionable power, or conquest,
Or moments of children, or theatricality,
While stands of women in the same inchoateness
Will each sunset succumb to felicity.

The old buckaroos will refer to disease
By its given stage name, while their matinee audience
Gapes on, until the ritual dance
Ceases after buffing the skin till raw,
Eyewhites frictioning toward red,
Jaundice silently, intensively, rising inside
Like a sun in its own heatstroke.
In those intervals of undeniability and valor,
Sick women frequently will seem to await
Some joy, potentially tender,
Ventilating itself via early morning
And barely peeping yet believing its arrival
Because nothing newly born
Separated last night's dream from today's enfoldings.

It is daybreak in a woman's breast.
Most elderly ranch wranglers feel it in arm muscles
And in eyes going asexual and,
If mountain poets, in a fist-shut deafness
To snow glissading on snow as raw weight
Rather than as their meter tumbles.
But many women inhale the warning of fatal illness

In its first non-millennial hours
Like a young mare, in dawn's prevenient ray
Trotting from her barn onto April grass –
Away from mice and hay and dampness,
Circling with an interim rope
Around her neck for a sense of home –
Sniffs in air pregnant with chill
The creation of her centrality.

SHELTER VOLUNTEER

Her light that never shone put out much darkness in me.
At sixty, she had good vision in bad corners.
Dressed in a battered housecoat, she plunged vitamins through
 my gullet
Like stocking trout in a May brook
To build it to vivacity;
She nurtured my arms with bandages when I landed drunk or
 frightened or flinty;
Handsome never emerged from behind her face's poverty.

She ate with me as silently as a rag fluttering to the snow.

NIGHT COMES EVEN TO CONEY ISLAND

Cruise ships never near, but bleed a slick of oil.
The beach at evening darkens to this lady's strands
Of Egyptian romance; she is the hotel's eldest lodger, limping,
And she turns for home as at Abu Simbel the tourists
Crumble, barely muttering goodbye to statues rescued
From the river and from history that are but slightly illuminated.
Regally, though unphotographed, she leaves the boardwalk
To the monolithic silence of archives unlikely to be discerned.

Rameses and she are each eve terraneously reborn.
His loneliness is roughcut until dusk murmuring *Salaam*
Aleichem
Joins him. His losses have been unutterable.
Adjusting for time, and comfortable with the idea of tomorrow,
She, as if his favored queen, beds down at midnight less an hour.
The unguents of recollected generations freshen her
Like the Nile breeze; her old-age creases are templed in
With signs of nostalgia dominating each nook, each wall.

When she dies this night, when later this woman dies,
No doubt the nearby pollution-embalming tides
Will exodus through the book of Coney Island dead
And transport her to that spouse paramount who, while alive,
Placed her where they overlooked no different land together.
Hush now to her skin sallower than water birds,
To her upper and lower lips disjoining and uniting. *Aleichem*
Salaam.
The sandman as pharaoh as husband smoothes her return.

FOR AN ANTHROPOLOGIST

for Margaret Mead

We gave her our bedroom,
But had opened the window –
And the winter storm midnight to dawn,
No respecter of scholarship, chilling
Even the Titan of dealing with the elements,
Howled through like the fracas
Should Pelion crash onto Ossa: poor thing,
Too weak to shut the tight sash, shut out the wail,
She wouldn't rouse us.

Next day, for the iced winding drive south
To Central Park, she emerged
With her handy walking stick thrust
Forward with the energy
And uplift of Pelion hurled
Onto Ossa. But Margaret, cold
From exposure, why not have rapped upon
Our that-night door? For you never paused trying
To awaken the world.

GENDER SHADOWS

When I was slithering through junior high,
older vandals and jocks were drifting
outside moored candy stores
in Brooklyn twilights clad like us
in dirty gray yet spotty polo shirts.
Jaws nibbled what tried to break them.
Guys lounged on the lidded trash cans
with the sufferance of undiscovered moons –
but let one adolescent girl flame by,
chain-smoking gangs hallelujah'd
into ovation, whoop-de-do with yowl,
giving a great hand, then rumbling
tight-gutted Hem grunts
as if feverish thunder, dropping its pants,

turned its head aside and coughed;
the passing attraction would pause,
grin but refuse to ordain
such moronic acolytic vigil –
what the affable temptress wouldn't
comprehend, couldn't,
was their lack of compliment,
their devildom fanfare:
that cynical applause implied
each demoiselle parading
had the *clap* –
for messages boys send
are war and lugubrious affront.

I, suspicious of Bibles already,
confirmed when thirteen
that no female chomped first

in that male pit-paradise:
surely Adam, with the unhinged jaw
of the serpent who devoured freshness,
taunted Eve to bite or be spattered
with insult. So she ate cleanly,
with a borrowed hunger.

I observed young ladies often
hissed at combatively, lyingly,
by these Adam-teens
scaled to constrictor breadth,
yet one hot evening I brought –
caught by the trick, leering –
to the jest's uproariousness,
my palm up to my palm.
For I was of the neighborhood.

BONA FIDES

My loyalty comes at no high price:
A spurt of decency and I invest
Huge globules of fealty, expectancy,
And even – in the risk/reward ratio
Of daily exchange – transfusions.
I discern interest. A *killing* of the nicest kind.
Intrigue my fancy (or desperation)
With questions about my wife or son
Or my irrecusable beliefs, and I
From the fairiest tale of subject to king
And from the highest hill of stand-by-me
Will not let you down.

The most anticlimactic transition in the world
Is to a corpse. And yet what channeled power!
The dead direct incredible tons
Of the sure-enough to them –
Surely this is truth in packaging.
We hold the future to be self-evident
In unforgetfulness; the newly widowed ask,
How many months of torture lie ahead (who dares
Tell them the cost of the perhaps infinite years?).
And yet, times shorten should a gentle minute aid;
Then, like aspirin in the blood, a thinning begins –
We clot a little less.

PURCHASE

I still shove birthday gifts on friends long ghosts;
Buddies in graves have anniversaries
Of birth-death dates: I spend our over-time
Recalling and commemorating these.

For both informing days, I buy *myself*
A book, and in its reading grip, pronounce
No magic contents, inspiration, prayer,
But facts, just stuff, like lists of lists, just nouns –

Statistics, children's names, what wood burns best –
To shore up memories which still pervade
All we once knew. And if we duplicate
Or miss some oak, not being Berkeley's God,

Yet like Spinoza's in an abstract snare,
We hold our share of substance when we share.

DÉJÀ VU

I've seen this phrase before. But not in France.
Perhaps in prior lives, or libraries,
Or tears only a Champollion could read.
I even wrote a poem about it once.

Each wept *cannot recall* brings back Egyptian
Embalming griefs: natrons against neglecting
Massed pyramids that helped them recollect
How self-preserving myths were once forgotten.

Thieves smashed the jade pharaonic trinket-ring
To snippets, too engrossed to glue old seals –
Then pestered Egyptologists come paste
And resurrect a once forgotten king!

Ra Born-of flaunted Hollywood-like sets
Upon the dateless dunes where glass-slick schools
Now teach their gamins Sputnik slides, ignoring
Dynasts a once forgotten king forgets:

His tomb is harrowed to the mask and bone
(Golden the one, the other seasoned rock)
Encased inside museums with fading cards.
The once forgotten king forgets again.

A GARLAND OF SIX POSIES

Sweet child, lean closely toward the plant:
A shape, a stance, a warning of death,
That symbol, that sight, that noon's grant,
All figure-weaved within one lover's breath.

Lover, ah, sweet lover.

The tulips forge significant forms –
Their colors vary but the curve continues
Till contours interweave the storms
Of lovers' arguments with lovers' sinews.

Lover, ah, sweet lover.

Chrysanthemums, hard to pronounce,
Announce themselves in upright petaling:
Our talking trembles, errors pounce
From knotted joyfulness that twists to sing.

Lover, ah, sweet lover.

Forget-me-nots? Impossibilities.
Who can recall the first forever-hour
Inviolable with mysteries?
Some blooms die, too demanding for a flower.

Lover, ah, sweet lover.

The white rose and the red, red rose,
Though signifying beauty, English war,
Retreat from meanings others chose.
They emphasize their own lost metaphor.

Lover, ah, sweet lover.

The daisy, once the day's eye,
Commons itself beyond the reach of seeing –
So frankly does it multiply,

Create a private loss in too much being.
 Lover, ah, sweet lover.

Each buttercup keeps the world from it,
And seeks the places other flowers shun,
Awaiting, from a surrounded pit,
The intimate appraisal of the sun.
 Lover, ah, sweet lover.

PILOT WHALES ASHORE

Seven whales stranded, and more to come.
Hulking above back-noise surf,
The creatures are washed down in their bellies,
But the blowhole's dry,
The grit in the thrashing tails tenacious,
The lower jaw wavering,
Delicate putty lining the mouth
Flaking in corners.
They are like apartment complexes lived in
Suddenly awry, the landlord a broken man –
The plumbing gone berserk,
Foundations cracking.

We tumble, fretting, to the sight from town
To pour ocean water over the eyes,
To no avail,
While we recall with shipmate admiration
Our common races – those genetic,
And on sea watches when we are lucky,
Rollicking surface.
Crowds of us stare at the dying of the grotesques.
These slippery mammals unshakable and unrollable,
These trammed offerings to crabs and sand spiders,
These horrors of deviation,
Threaten by example
Our temporarily higher than sea-level heads,
Our own overstanding of brutes
And their churned brains,
Our own flukey minds still not adapted
To all wave-lengths,
All directions.

When we retire but return at evening,
Those bulks remain aground,

Encased against deep sky patterns
Like Melville before sailing to Liverpool,
At night previewing himself trapped aboard,
Fearful, beggared in his moleskin jacket
And cold in the rigging –
When only words point to compasses that save.
Now dusk enshrines the background hills entirely.
Planets journey where cosmic lost and found
Over the surviving able-bodied whales
Amble without agenda;
Above these dead,
Not even the Seven Sisters weep for one each.

MAKE IT FRESH

The vacant mollusk husk covers its gob
Of sea bed. The sand glitters with wrenched
Offspring, litter of nacre, bivalved
Unisexual collapse, and calcium molehills
All so curvaceous, the low current must be enamored,
For it rubs against them continuously.

What have these torsions to say now? Only form.
But the hermit crab grows, and what he doffs
Is outworn, and what he enters he couldn't
Brag of, though it fits. The crab is impressed
But not overwhelmed by the mourning pearl-wash
And straining nooks of his gabled mansion.
He fills it with his life and carries on.

THE SWANS

I know of a Greek maze that is a single straight line.
– Borges

Chats fly.
There's no contesting
their wantings:
they dart
(like topsy checkmarks, turvy notes
of bellflowers,
and still gay
in pursuit of songs
ahead high on hillsides),
fleeing down-lingering nests.

All swans
are otherwise, where
a lapped lake
lies perched
between slopings: discordant airs
from earth's slipshod
webwork of echoings
enforce
a throat-catching
for these landed insiders.

Within
airborne blue corridors,
clouds reflect,
gauze-necked, inlet-specked,
the lake without circumference
where two swan forms
orient
(towards one

unended path),
each the white center always.

In death
their awkward bodies,
involutely mazed,
draw and
seethe with tiny repulsive beasts,
but, ah, their down
floats skyward
northward,
subsiding then
like a great moose-calming snow.

TUNDRA MEDITATION

We dwell in the white riches of the north – it's all peaks and ice;
The equation of pressure and height suddenly looms
When the mist's crossed out. But even tropics

Bear vapor's incessant changes; jacarandas hybridize
To humus there, and bees transform in hives
To liquid dust. In that sultry passion,

Nothing clings except as we are recollected,
While here, though tundra memory is highly wrought,
It is a frozen, barely cultured remembrance –

True, golden flowers shed pollen
Over permafrost; harp seal and glacier
Gaze across the lapse of sea, and calve:

Chunks of icefall chip into fragile blue and, before dirt clings,
The blue spectrally floats beyond reach like ur-skies
When first termed heaven. But distantly off

Is the landscape that nurtured the earliest earthlings;
The tropics know change as the glacier doesn't.
Only the growing tree can see into its heartwood.

HUSK

They lie in the sea, ink-blots of bone,
Legless drifters; speechless currents wave
These seashells deeper toward eel and slime.
Plagued eyes contrive them as a semaphore for home:
A moribund crab responds, entering his grave

(Embodied before him by an unsought unknown)
Which he will bear upon him into death.
Mute, the sheath shucks off, benignly,
Echo encores it had chambered thinly,
Enwraps the crab's infatuated breath

And, thinking itself forever never alone,
Prances in the compact atmosphere, full –
While on sand, as chipped ovoid, crimped oblate,
The awashed crowded shells, where tides abut,
Abandoned, issue their unanswered call.

WHEN NO MITE AMBLES IN

When no mite ambles in,
I wonder if the spider
Seats to a distant corner
To try another spin,

Or if, enmeshed, he digs
In further at the border,
Waits for the quick shiver,
And starves through all eight legs.

I ponder – where's the throb?
And, as a comrade plodder,
If I will run, alter,
Or die into my web.

REPARTEE

...in the air my troops of hawks soar up on high, and when they are lost in the sight of men, then they attend upon and converse with the gods.... – Izaak Walton

A bird of prey, or a puma – which?
Strength in clouds or force in a ditch?

Existence is a reply. I have molded
A cheetah, leashed and blindfolded,

Then, black linen raised, used him to pounce.
His tastes went tame. And once

An adamantine tiger turned his shabby fear
Toward me and, symmetry breaking like a mirror,

Cried, or seemed to cry, or tried, "I am played out."
I've seen with all gazelles and zebras in a rout

On Kenya plains, a lion with an aging pride
Turn aside,

And doubt. Who has falcon fierceness, what land animal
Ruffles others even when talents and eyes fail?

When the lion shakes its mane, what has it proved?
But the hawk returns to a hand gloved.

The cheetah runs for bad or good,
But the carried hawk thinks in the hood.

THE EAGLE

The eagle screams a territorial wrath.
Head downward from heaven like the glide
Of light, he snatches a hare from the hare's path

Into the deep deliverance of his talons,
Not knowing poisons those innards hide,
The chemical chain which will destroy his balance,

Will bleach his wings, his sex, will tumble his eyes
Into the rays of sunset. We who sprayed
These insect-raptor-destroyers which cannot choose,

Must be already dead. How else explain it?
Young Robert Browning's gone who joyed
At an eagle feather, and based his life upon it;

Gone, too, the Hebrews with their dissidents
When with those angel'd eagle-hands
Jacob wrestled, and for that perseverance

Became Israel. Israel. Within this vast
Polluting of our streaming minds,
What name might we become? Dust storms have massed

And cleaved low clouds, a shaken-through tableau
Of cursed antagonistic winds:
Except they bless me, I will not let them go,

Nor mock nor bury the burdens of a birth
That seeks its updraft until it finds
Perpetual peace that it must offer earth.

SHE MISTAKES HIM FOR THE GOD OF DEATH

Hier ist nichts rein!

But it is Bacchus. Ariadne, ever in Knossos threads,
Dreads
Never sleeping with Theseus again.
But she must remain
Where he led her, in a tearful maze
A guest on Naxos, that merely jelly-smashing rock,
Dolphins as her clock
And yesterday as her wake-up call.

Tell
Bacchus to wait for the clue to transfiguration; on this
Island there can be no revelation, no grape, nor kiss.
She cannot be saved here, though soon resplendent
Yet despondent Bacchus and she will be hauled to clouds
by powers
Stronger than each. For the next few hours,
They may only walk by the Minotaur-black sea,
She
Listening like a dubious whelk opening to rinsing,
He excitedly, rapidly whispering, convincing
Ariadne she must, for a god and magical woman to blend,
Comprehend early – at the start of their tragicomic era's
castrations –
That despair which is the Cretan nation's
Truest heritage: to know what monsters lost
Cost.

ON THE PROPOSITION THAT IF ANGELS COULD SING, THEY WOULD SING MOZART

The red sun
Lowers into the heartbreaking crystal
Of the Rhine.

Stormtroopers in one rampage
Destructure the nearly-complete dusk.
We hear the astral din of shattering glass.
In Speyer, a burning torah
Forelights the tottering assimilated
Friday evening walk
Toward prayers for the already scrolled.

Broken edges in panes apparition into every sleep.
Will the blight in the world be descried this time
Loudly, *at last this hour?* elders demand of dawn.

The game of pulling the beards of Jews
Commences to efface townships
As the old men sabbath-age into death.
Placards remind living and dead
That *verboden* has desecrated the concert
Scheduled by Jewish musicians who will neither begin nor
complete –
As if in anticipation –
The unfinished requiem Mozart offered.
In morning, most fallen signs, partially smashed,
Begin to sit shivah, quiet to the windy elegies
The gaping shopwindows recite.

Mothers, thinking of a thousand cuts,

Hold muted children inside.
Few are given the right to run.

Mozart nameless in the grave:
That named horror, if it could occur to him,
Would only have made his invisible choruses fiercer,
As now from synagogue flames arise
Voices of even more vivid specters.

TALLEYRAND RUMINATES

Bad luck she hath, / who breaks the ceiling
mirror of her bath. – Isak Dineson

Madame de Staël erected in her home
Looking glass everywhere, that walls saw walls.
When impudent myopic gossips came
To compliment her for not spreading tales,
To fawn – yet strut, the mirrors stared
And saw through them beyond their costumed wills,
And when they left, polite and unimpaired,
The mirrors told their secrets to Madame.
She listened, was advantaged, noted, feared.

Upon the corner of the closet room
An oval mirror drooped which could reflect
Heartquakes of bathers – not mere soap and steam;
There I, less used to act than to react,
Who on her every naked thought would hang,
Would squirm enfogged, nor ever contradict.

Above her bed a speculum would sing
Whatever in that stateroom waked or slept –
Like wine that marinates the grower's tongue:
A grateful spice, yet one that overstepped.
Though never confidential in my chat,
She knew I wasted and my insides wept.

"Be Foreign Minister," she stated with éclat.
Napoleon smiled. And I arose and was.
And swore an oath I was no democrat:
"Yet we by modern modes should re-dispose,

Our governing imply new liberties –
Each state depict consenting legal ways –"
Here Buonaparte rose. He bowed his au revours
To all; gripping my arm, he grinned this phrase:
"What if the glass not crack but the body does?"

POINT

The new year sign's recrudescence is this –
Pregnant symbol, a more crowded meaning:
No start stays intact. Take this kiss
On New Year's Eve. Let's examine this.

I know a tale of a bloke and his hat.
Aboard the cruise, the girlfriend stares
Abhorringly. He sees, and seizes that
Chapeau, tosses it overboard. That's that.

I heard a legend which mattered, say, much:
When the court of Bali amassed
For slaying by the imperialist Dutch,
Each swordsman, helpless against the bullet's smutch,
Fell dead toward the invading soldiery
In otherwise spotless finery. The women held firm
Till starchily grounded, and one threw jewelry –
Which hit no Dutch, yet scoured each shamefully.

O Nusa Tenggara's, and you, bare-headed man,
Teach me in the smooch of enjoyment
(As clocks shout year's close to me, a man
The child of ease and elegant Manhattan,
Hating the overthrow of every latest hour),
What muffled meanings plead, the truth of Dives:
A loss of expectation – hat or power;
The jest of sorrow in the gesture's power
To surrender richness that in truth deprives;
To know how a moment so completely ends –

Though in Boston, in Bali, this new year thrives
As sometimes a larch falls, somewhere a heron dives.

TO THE COMMISSIONER FOR QUIETING DISAFFECTION

Thank you for exonerating Li Po.
He may be a veteran of drink, and insufficiently gung ho
In everything but poetry and its ballyhoo,

But he reveals the benefits of voluminous traveling:
He signs our lakes as folios of praise; his deference to king
Bows humbly on these scrolls with each diphthong.

He is both Buddhist and Taoist in stereopticon,
Probing each secret pining in Heaven and Man,
And as for affection, ask his wife – or any courtesan.

And isn't there no difference between his expressive page
And a creative patriotism? At home while on pilgrimage,
The nightingale of language explicates its cage.

DIARY ENTRY OF THE EMPEROR WU-TSUNG

who died from an overdose of immortality pills

Today it was my obsession to be arbitrary.
I forced each pathway of watered-down Buddhist blood to exude
Toward the midriff Chialing, the cross-over Chungnan,
To end in a trance and regionally vanish
The way the fatigued transvestite sun draws on
Its rouge at dusk, kisses its horizon, and droops
As if bodiless into a black silk midnight.

I burn acolytes
In winds of each essential direction – they can join
Their smoky joints to the Heavenly Kings of the Four Quarters!
So let each mendicant slurp
In the begging-dish
Of his prayer.
I banish here all monks to their massed debates,
All nuns to their titular charms,
And I laugh how, from the hypnotic Lhasa holytides above
 Himalayan white,
The drone *Om* slinks southward
To seduce impoverished saffron adolescents
Into boring longings.

I am, I propose, no ranting lord but a droll tyrant,
Monomaniacal monarch donating to the universe the Tao
Of his endowed, towering, palatial will –
There is a mental pharmacology that gives a finite finish
To the shantung couches of the Immortals,
Whose unreachable concubines we are;
There rests the sitting ashes of our revered Lao-Tzu –
There let me for the foreordainable future embrace him
With that compulsion with which a withering self-knowledge
Inflicts harshly what it cannot rescind.

DIRTY McGUINNISS SHARES A FLOWER

I

My name is Dirty McGuinniss.
I'm a bench reader; I goes to the seat of things.
I'm a pensive salami.
My grammar's street New Yorkese via New Orleans,
and my ponderings, zoned aristocracy.
I'm a narrating cold-weather blues man
and here's my childhood story, three blaes
from the straight sax:

From one racially shimmering aurora to another,
when I moves to the northern blights
I was musical already;
I was all of twelve and goes to school humming.

Then one interlude, when dusk, the star-dotted cretin,
lays over the Big Apple in its usual gaping, half-toothful way
of a grin, below Brownsville's lazy not-ultra-bright galaxies,
he and I proves past-bedtime boys about to battle
has two logical brains
enough to make one hairsplitting fight.

He, black, eleven or so, glares Canis Major over the ground;
I, white and still twelve, gazes my best Orion-belt stare
as if I has three eyes.
Neither pounces.
We mythic lizards, longitudinally threatening,
twists our own warning warring fingers,
muscles ready to salt-pretzel
night into day and back again,
when with his right hand suddenly
he rips one of the not-many-flowers in Brooklyn
right out from the earth!

II

That gonzo gladiator gobbles huge petals
bloodcurdlingly one by one,
chewingly all lips and no smile –
while my vitals stew in each bite.
I then without thinking thrusts my arm
as if to unbuckle the Milky Way and let the universe
drop plop on him, wham, but he surprisingly hands me
a half-calyx left!

O, our eyes are beady,
threaded to each other on the wax strings of fear,
or like two broken street lamps –
glass mingled with glass on the curbstones –
two in the dark but one in shattering.
I munches that suspicious flower
(zinnia, marigold, poison mushroom, who cares)
and, high on my toes, swallows three sepals
like Cerberus in hell devouring some terrified black saint.

III

Scholars' studies analyze and digest aborigines
sharing a meal,
its vast significance as amity, sex, prayer, humiliation
like going to the bathroom, subterranean violence –
but none as stomach queasiness and the runs to end a quarrel.

Now unspoken and unamended does each race part,
the environment ruined,
rays of lamplight decomposing upon the cement
until, on one transgeneration after-schoolday
after the roll call of our next incarnation,
we as junior high school graduates maybe,
below Con Edison proud of repairs – teaching night
what created light could be,

confronts each other with a bag of jelly sandwiches
exchange-wise, and notebooks decorated in dandelion,
and we trades information
like what people calls us
and bananas and baseball scores
and our eyes like soft plums,
the swept gutters reflecting soft plums of clouds
and our feet shardless on the sidewalk
less toe to toe than pointedly together
under a sleeping constellation
astronomers figure must be there but have not yet named.

DIRTY McGUINNISS COMFORTS A FRIEND

Life won't let me alone.
If it isn't one thing – it's my brother.
Dirty, he's dead.

Bleep, I says. Rich kiddo,
You're tipsy, I declaims. Makes two.

Old amicus,
I came to the club from visiting
The hospital, that is,
Visiting my brother.

I comforts, Good distinction.
He's crying. I pipes, Your brother got
The hairiest toes I ever seen.
Then quiet; we breathes. I inquisitions,
He took death lying down?

Yes. Like the roadmap of sleep
Was stamped *Death* in every folded corner.
And in the mildewed center.

I shuffles. I quote him:
Death's Terra Incognita, yah –

And Terra's terror's cognate!

He smiles.
The sax leaps to my hand.
Juice it, I says. Ain't you the best on
48th?

For nine weeks, the coma
Sped through him, creasing,

Angling him
Like a breeze over a high lake
Chevrons a resisting surface,
Aligning his lower
And lower
Layers.
A coma! But he wouldn't go,
Not completely.

Sadly I says, Bop. I reprises,
Bloop.

I pleaded, though I doubt
He heard, Lingering
Can't be your sole method.
The wires, the plastic-brown worms
Infesting your nose –
Dirty,
He didn't have the balls
To die without me.

Right, I joins. I segues into, Right.
I says, Hell is filthy socks.

Billions of people since earth began
Slack off with less bother, I complained.
I orated. I cadenza'd with hits.
You were born naturally,
Can't you die the same way?
Don't you suffer shame? Are you asking me
To de-electrocute you?

Ooooooh, I says. A biggie. Billions.

Jazz this down:
Physicians, judges, brothers,
Are like roaches at midnight

Fleeing when the light bulb
Lightgrenades the walls;
They're afraid of what some vague Nobodaddy will chord.
If no instruction's written,
Destruct the nothing, I say,
Score death the way of least suffering.

Splat!, I solos. My eyes fold into
latitudes.
Then quiet; we breathes.
The gig is over, I says.
Then quiet; we breathes.

Standing alone, outraged,
And sniffing, I admit, I leaned over,
Pulled out a cord. Literally unplugged him!
He was gone already.

Further disquisitioning, I says,
Yesterday I sits on the shore.
A thin tiny girl, six maybe, walks by in
front of her parents.
She runs to me, booms her arms around
my neck.
We's in love! She strolls on, in front of
her parents.
Zow! Goodbye!
We was two deaf composers at the same
piano.

Listen, Beethoven, I see death directionless
As if I never journeyed
To a hospital and its official structure,
But to a brother suddenly stationless
In a subway line with no tracks.
Listen, sickbed rules surrounding him were –

I bursts in – strewn,

Fetid, holed, life-worn socks!

Right.

We decided, I says.
We pulled the plug on death.
We was loved.

Look through the window, Dirty,
How dawn unprongs us from the power of night.
Maybe some centuries ahead,
Some top dog jazzman will stumble across
Our New Yorker graves of granite, lift
Our disarticulated bones
Like broken metopes on a Greek hill,
And make a long, connected theme
Of them.
Skedaddle home now.
Wash up and soak up.
Undergo the sleep of the just
Sleeping.

My overcoat leaps to me.
I goes. I got a longish note in my head.

DIRTY McGUINNISS LECTURES STONE SOBER

Now, God's an optometrist
when he makes the potato,
regulates visions
of the potato
(though, when making mankind,
he *was* a potato),
yet, positivists who've
a deductive potato
weighed in each pot, glean
the unself-made potato
stems from orgiastic forces
outside the potato
that mashes rakishness
into predestination of potato
(Stone! Have one more drink,
you half-baked potato!);
palterers knows
it's all hot potato.
So in South America, where humans
first made much of potato,
freezing and baking fifty
kinds of potato,
churchly conquistadors come,
converts the potato
to Inquisition cuisine,
and thus the potato,
gorgeted, cuirassed,
escapes the potato-
lumpy Andes
tawny as fried potato,
to Europe's ports round as
half a potato.

As for the appeal
of peeled potato,

the juice, the rhizomes,
the gobble of potato,
the chameleon sleight
of hand of a slight potato,
spud, chip or mickey,
or yam potato,
packed in jute
with lots of potato,
theatrical in tavern
as half-lit potato,
or, soup-pantry-wise,
the stock potato –
the reasons we respect
kin skin of all potato
is that when Nature
offers of the potato,
shoots corms in corners
through pellicle of potato,
and groups sups, smiling,
around done potato,
arguing and chanting,
steaming the potato,
drinking stewed drains
of seeping potato,
feasting the family on
common food – potato,
children learns earnest
from the reliable potato,
native tribes turns fertile
on ground of potato,
dark people grows roots
like eyes of potato.

BRIGHT EVENING

for Anne and Mickey

I trace my direct knowledge of crime
To my Assistant Scoutmaster's moral wife
Whose father was barber to Murder
Incorporated hit-men in their prime –
Now merely senile thieves. Life as life

Mattered much to these hoods – if the life
Was theirs. They gunned you in a pool hall,
Recalls my eye-witness Scouting chum,
Through the back hair, that your eyes popped off
From your head:
 gone your total recall.

Her miraculous moment, she avers,
Was sashaying with a gangster dandy
To Coney Island: since sissies who owned
Concessions (caterpillar ride or midget cars
Ramming) paid off the mob, she rode free!

Free on the garish Ferris Wheel, that globe
Where fearful enjoyment will not steepen
Or slide – though her friend appeared to weep
To his holster: suspended high, no rats to rub
Out here!

(Yes, some horizons never deepen.)

Ferris Wheel! "To heights," she confected,
Smiling, "above *Nathan's* franks – my guy's rod
In his belt, and I near Orion;

In every go-around, I was protected,
Ineradicable even by God!"

Long years ended, and all the dearer
Are those dicey eons – coolly dehumanized,
But like the squealer bribedcop-pushed
Out the Half-Moon Hotel window, nearer
To where I lived,
 more crackerjack-prized.

PIERROT

I knocked at a star which said, "Come in" –
 Its knob broke off in my hand;
I rang the moon's bell – it was out –
 Yelled I, "I understand!";
Ah, the key to your brass heart, I gasped –
You locked it from inside;
And now the impotent world's arage,
 My calling card's a bride.

BERTHS

My friends, let us love what we love.
– Van Gogh

Look, Brooklyn, we've had a steep beginning,
But I'm grateful for five-foot-two inches of tremendous
shortness,
A nose I can really breathe through,

A complexion Italian-dark but a pourer of ketchup on
spaghetti,
With only a fraction of Dante's involvements and judgments.
Hedonist, luck's conductor yet never railroaded,

My leading credo is originality (and I say it
Over and over): women have flocked to me
With bells on, money slumps in my lap and jingles me,

Good health enjoys being in my body
And on Sunday mental stability swills champagne in my
brains.
All virtues of Stoicism sweet-sugarplum my hands!

I would live forever if somebody else didn't need the space.
Meanwhile, at night, should any female Galileo
Ask where the sexy moonbeams have sped,

She may telescope into my comforter,
Peer into zodiac allegories there,
But never publish in *Scientific American* what she learns.

A Sagittarius of sparrows flies over my Brooklyn flat
And notices the quiver in my fourth-floor lungs:

Brooklyn, maybe we will burrow ultimately across the
Hudson

To where exiled Dantes weep to America in triplicate
That for factions, to err is human and to forgive,
Divisive; we meanwhile somewhat echo

That Florentine wanderer's realms inside
Our own divinity of downtown, midtown, uptown –
From hell to the figuring out of the train map to the bleary
bliss

Where no gods hear our rhymes, but the to-be-moribund listen
To the New York barely-understandable disembodied voice
Calling out the stops that will end three times with the stars:

*Here all we know of uneasy labor,
Here is all we know of the stations of loss,
Here all we know of desire,*

As we subway through our borough's cavernous mind
Where, though no guide calm our fears,
The last exit inescapably is a forming constellation.

BEFORE THE VOYAGE

I love all of this Greece....Wherever you look, a joy lies buried. – Hölderlin

The dawn in Phrygian flames slips out toward Greece;
Outlandish creeds as myth invasions buckle still
Before Olympus; far off, Tibetan scrolls
Rotating jazz-flicked, player-pianoing
Near Everest; Aleppo's figbrown domes;
Medina sandstorms whirling boasts of dunes
Westward toward Samos beach (though Allah's frown
Blows most back under nervous goatskin tents,
For bedouin sleep) – all these, past dolphin leaps,
Backstroke among Aegean strands and drown.

In four weeks, Areopagitic stone –
Finite goodbyes on stelae sepulchers,
Mycenae beehive tombs where Agamemnon
Under a golden mask smiles secretly
Near shields, Troy-spattered, lined with boar tusk rings –
Receive my textbook-felt examining;
I captured antique theorems long since
Like microscopic slides – now I shall bear
Back to Apollo a stain-trapped heritage
Tinctured with gold laws of the Renaissance.

I've studied half my life to make some sense
Of life, and half of that Parmenides,
Theocritus and Sappho, Hesiod,
And more than most, grim Dionysian plays –
Lately my mind in nightmare steals dark-cloaked
Into the Epidaurean mountainside
To see if choruses have turned burlesque;
I lean, a blinded Sophoclean king

Reciting odes in REM staccato bursts
To audiences moonlight-arabesque:

In chronicles clepsydra rhythms mask,
My A. D. trilogies of dreams course through
Without award, while deities erupt
In farces where one owns a walk-on part;
Huge cloudbursts from a *deus ex machina*
Wet Athens' colonies; at dawn on temple bells,
Bull-moons are bathed in blood till every plea
Croaks in church patter of a modern day,
While Socrates' poisoned, flag-worn breast subsides
Like one continued burial at sea.

What if new-modeled Marathon tones me
With wash runoff instead of hallowed streams?
If Naxos' Ariadne realizes
It's Theseus who's becoming lost? What if
Aglaia's girdles are the mere paved paths
I pass through every week on Boston Common?
I know one Turk-fired block in some curved hole
In a bleak corner of the Parthenon:
It grasps its place like the Acropolis
Hugs Greece – it prattles to that powdered hall

No architect Asclepius could heal,
How sculpture, friezes, colonnades,
Are still esteemed by all as worshipped rock,
Part-Pericles in his more gracious reign,
Yet it – no matter that sunned heights inspire,
Or told how its support confirms the rest –
Searches spillovers for their yesterday,
And through the filter of Olympic brooks
And dews, remembering how gods refined,
Weeps as it will its Doric dust away;

So most old digging which upholds the way
Of human fashioning, the doubtful rites

On which a structure firms, demands a glimpse
Of heights we rarely bend skyward to see –
Where much has tumbled, much dissolved in time,
Perhaps discreet Athena pardons all
Who by the Charles corroborate Crete's ships
Or trace through Back Bay lanes the Delphic roads
And, like deceiving columns round her head,
Taper their thoughts to seek for perfect shapes.

RETURN TO THE PLAINS

People think I'm Spanish but of course I'm Comanche.
Lone Wolf and Stone Calf allied with my father's sire.
Quannah Parker gazed one moment into my father's face.
Numinu, the People, were the phenomenon of the age
(Luminous half pinto, half Oklahoma maverick):
But poppa boxed me eastward where white-priority chemistry,
Geophysics, lore of the dominant schools,
Tutored to a different idea of Western.

Weekends visiting the ancestral acres, fewer with seasons,
I filled his cropped mind methodically
With liquid oxygen trails, rockets, muon jazz,
But he swore always,
"Comanche know that. We own that noun."
Then he would ululate outlandish Shoshone,
And these spur-of-the-moment gibberishes
Grew from his caballero thighs through a peyote-filtered throat
Into a rusty collapse, a broken derrick voice.
For each modernity, *People* had a tag already;
No matter how I smiled,
This ropedancer proclaimed a contorted phrase.
I pleaded no book, no cavalier paperback
Rounded up any locution he spread, but he replied,
Saddling his diction, "Next fine edition. Soon."

Years and lexicons advanced.
Discoveries abounded – hydrogen-expansions,
Geologies of the moon we crumble
Like our own southwest marl –
And, too swiftly, astrophysically speaking,
The twinkling of a death.
Adiós, my Comanche; *Hahn haints*,
My brave. I await in coltish sweat,

Yet confidently in my home, through journals,
Announcements of that latest enormous dictionary
Currying and carding (with orthographic daring)
All those unbridled breeds of words my paterfamilias rode.

Plug-ugly broncobuster,
Solemn-linguaged multi-vocabled progenitor
Who must have lovingly laughed at his *Hispanola* son –
I ask for him, warrior and friend to Cheyenne and Kiowa
And the shaman flickering at evening
To the red-feather rhythm of the fire:
Let the reliquary of his skull relinquish to soil
His proud brain, and earth enunciate his unearthly tongue;
Pull the lancet windows of his eyes open to the plains –
Then urge rattlers imitate him by jumping loopholed in air
And landing without ache onto his add-me-for-strength dirt.
In this way once he acrobatically,
Happily viewed me age ten
In new boots running toward him to exhibit my knotboard
(Sheetbend, square, two half-hitches),
As he under our grammar-perfect sun demonstrated
Those startling capers on, then off, the roan –
If only time could perform such backward pranks.
Pull over, father. Palaver.
Palaver.

MIRROR FLOW

I know no failed success so real,
Though time-stopping, as the Scott expedition –
More vibrant than all those magic slippers
Which, dizzily ever after, congeal
On the polar floes of childhood's end.

I find nothing so full of liberation
As their miscalculated dividend,
Though I have less tradition,
Infrequenter orders, fewer barometers
And other imposed pressures
That tell us our lives are no exploratory dream.

I am beset with less class and station
Than those seamen and officers
In their Antarctically-searing theme
Of storms and directions, of drama
And notwithstanding. No Dostoevsky
Holds such chagrin, no Flaubert
With small transfixing data can compare
To one modest panorama
So selfless, yet inveterately steady,
As Bill Wilson sledding the Beardmore glacier.

As for Birdie Bowers, only apparently diffident,
Bowers, the epitome of non-complaining,
No plea brings him radiant to our attentions,
But I believe in him, and am rent
By Crozier blizzards never feigning,
By bits of tasks his "Owner" mentions:
Sittings of cairns, weather measures,

Hitching ponies, intensifying fire,
Climbing a hill to its invisible crest
Exposed in brutal sunlight at its coldest –
All as if impossibilities were pleasures;
Scott's pages, lowering the temperature,
Drag the hearthrugged reader to his own inquest.

Perhaps it is the pity for deaths, perhaps
Their need to footslog specimens from crags,
Or grit to sustain what I would not begin –
For now, I have two better things under my skin:
Stoic ideals rubbed on by shivering colleagues,
Old-fashioned gentlemen even in collapse.
I have forgotten all riches, romance and sin.

HOMELESS MAN

nearby dusk subwaycrush
megabonded bravos
flagrant arrogant
lightstep armatured
hurtle to lit homes
bodilylaminated
grow in warmth and groin

familylife winterset
smokecurled appetites
graytinctured mustachio
crescent thighluminous
bedbound obliques
and cornerstonesoft
bookshook pillow
joshing at the joining

icicle testicles
moribund vagabond
de-fragranted vagrant
frostburned skinandbones
wrinkled in skeleton
workless-worth
shoelessness motionless
snow-endowed old-eyed
frozen touchstones

PASSAGE INTO THE YEAR

In the merry month of December
When the snowed-in universe turns over dormant,
The love-lorn loon then joins the world a full-fledged member
(Dues paid, though in a slightly wrong amount).
Accepted then? Not quite. They are all laughing:
The love-lorn loon goes linendraped with summer raiment.
So the group coughs, with but-ing and with if-ing,
Knots hands – O look, a someone's not together –
The love-lorn loon, dues card unstamped, meanders sniffing.
Who will poke this bumbler with a passion-feather,
What personage will take someone so odd?
The love-lorn loon is waiting willingly, will wither
Sitting in the near undress of a warm-climate god.
But hold – some January male comes neck to neck,
The love-lorn loon is exiting from the wrong month of mirth,
Now he has highballed, and has, her number – look, look,
The love-lorn loon is heavy with a deathless birth.

APPROACHING THE END

Yes, Joseph Campbell's gone; I hope his virile assertion
Of his spirit's ascendance
Over flawed existence
Prepared him in an unpolarized way
For some manner of legendary transcendence.

Though there is merit in Burt Lancaster's discrepant view
In a film's final bit
Where, a soldier about to die,
Disgusted, slimy on the bank in mud,
He simply murmurs, "Oh, shit."

Since I am confined to choose between these heroic stances,
For there is no myth left to diddle,
I'll take Burt,
No matter how I'm drawn to every Campbell human allegory.
You can't split death down the middle.

THE SEEKER AFTER BEAUTY

[Of Helen]...Is it not because she desires so little...
that men will die and murder in her service? – Yeats

The seeker for exquisiteness is resolute
In her collage's bounds – her overlays of color;
Helen's streaks on her astonished mirror
Are abject in continual subjection
To her stare, to her reflection:
Her insular blooming, calm and desolate.

Does drop-dead glamour harm all kings? – or rather,
Express our needs? The chorus warnings blurt:
Envious warlords deal the hugest hurt –
What if, in that quest,
She bares the quiet confession of her breast
And in that candor a thousand soldiers suffer?

Troy's princess sleeps her charms in a glass snare;
The diamonds of majesty scratch her eye
With infinity: how will she testify,
Immortal tresses her panache and hallmark,
When she, at dawn's bewitching work,
Awakens to the short-life lines of war?

Coiffed, manicured, she feels each captain's sundering.
Because strong splendors (backbiting gossip's urge
For trivia, notwithstanding) seed her surge
Fiercer than do bards whose gods are arguable,
It is for herself to see everything movable
And move it with her eyes. Her blinding.

Seeker of bliss, she rouses to create
A Helen glowing in gene-kissed night,

Carrying to enflowered halls the might
Of women pillaging their stars, plus the caress
And fate of father-son tenderness –
 A queen arranging in her character and plight

Areas of honor where combatants refine
 Birth screams into Olympian manhood:
Their private version – evil armed with good –
Invades from surmise toward all plains of acts,
Invoking how, before majestic pacts,
 Where beauty grew, notions of worth began.

BILLY BUDD

Atop the mollusk bed and crawling stars,
Pushed by low flatworms blind inside low flights,
My body shadowed by a thousand wavelets
With candle-pink fish shimmering like lights
Upborne by choirs toward one cavernous apse,
I rock in my continued dream. Blessing the Bible,
How may I wholly wish never to lapse,
Now my reflection is less pure
Than Budd, foretopman, bumpkin sure?

Still I bless Captain Vere and shipman's rules
That sprung me to my death so cruelly,
Silk-hanged by headstay I had coiled and spliced
And stroked aloft above the combing sea;
Yet were I Vere, drenched in that legal mud,
Would I have slimed my windswept ship to mock
And trip the faultlessness of Billy Budd,
Whose square-knot deeds sailed with obedience
Till by no mere tar twisted out of sense?

I might not blame, yet wronged, cannot forgive.
Before I sank into my current shape,
I hoped the Captain loved beyond his law
A justice that shows innocence escape –
Then would surrender as that sacrifice
Required; thus for his dereliction hang
In my stead. Had he in strength struck that price,
I had remained, and within his seablown shrine
Of legend walked, instead of he in mine.

SHIPPING NEWS

When Adam died, finally and dirty,
All one hundred ten years of him
Rotting atop the arid land
Until the pressed flesh of his buttocks left
To windjammer away – a navigation idea
Not yet invented where runnels mandate little,
His ribs flashed out toward Eve, hobbling by,
And she cried, "Out of that thrusting bone
My life was born," meaning love
Began for the two,
And it was thought by young local folk
She meant it literally, and a Bible writer
Noted it on the back of a dry nettle stalk,
And the words floated to the outermost reaches
While the story descended through the sequels
That Eve's birth stemmed
From the body of Adam.

All metaphors follow the physical
Back into paradise.

THE UNIVERSAL CLOCK

I don't understand chronology –
What *afterwards* derailed; who tracked *before*.
Everyone knows that Van Gogh painted
The very boots that Charlie Chaplin wore.

EACH NAME HAS A DREAM

As I wake at Jungian and Freudian risk,
To diagnose dreams becomes my morning's game,
As, a sole aspect above each different name:
These heroes pervade – I like them soured and grim –
Ahab, Achilles, Philoctetes. I'll ask,
What is the purport of a wounded limb?

So when we wake, say, to parse and co-opt
Our reverie of Laius, father of Swollen Foot,
Slain by his volatile son where some roads met,
Built into our literary minds as a station
Toward lore, we ponder at which place we've stopped.
It is called the uncrippling of the imagination.

THE INCONVENIENT FAULT

His (Cummings') loyalty to Ezra Pound, especially after
Pound's radio broadcasts for Mussolini, was unwavering.

– Joseph Epstein

Of course! Two anti-Semites hand in hand.
Depone the pretexts! Get the excuser's number.
Not really Jew-baiting? Economic traits!
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

Cold-shouldered for, not wealth, but sharp practice!
Even were all guilty as charged, how somber
Have they made Jews? How much condemned?
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

But they had little influence – no SS toughs!
Their fuming jibes at Ikey a burnt-out ember
Enflaming no one – a naked, abstract dissent.
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

Then, brilliance! Homeric talent! Concentrate
On gifts, not tiny flies in amber?
Yes, praise those writers' ears, but never shake their hands;
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

Didn't Pound repent and Cummings downplay
Trivialities – think, is it moral slumber
To compose on kulchur? Let's ask in English courses,
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

And how kind Pound was in aiding Jewish poets!
Cummings danced to his literary rumba

And called him "Nuncle," joining the coterie.
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

They will efface what poetry is to us
Who forget what we are beyond poetry. Remember
Their six million lines have never solved,
How rich is a Jew in a gas chamber?

AFTERNOON

Five o'clock hovered over Gravesend Bay;
Mewing terns careened through the sun; back
And throughout beyond, the air held tanagers
 Poised in crimson, where branches crack;

Crabfishermen in schools flitted, their casts
Caped over sandwich wraps and lichen rocks:
One hauled a cage within his rotary arms
 And cast three crabs into a box

Almost chuck-full. He turned, but one dulled brute
Awoke, thrust up two claws machined to scale
The cardboard side and, grasping hold, tumbled
 High, sidewise, down, head chasing tail,

Toward mud and an awaiting tide; he shuttled
To the sea's bed. The calling of a tern
Shook my eye then, tracing north to where
 At noon the book I read outran

My pace and conjured up White Mountain springs
Remote from waves; birds skimmed those written signs
Touching the trinity of the sassafras
 And the kingdom of the white pines

Where this New Englander farmed, and often sent
His woods of words outgoing to the world
About him – peeling, as it were, one gray
 Birchbark chromatic when unfurled.

I hailed him once – seized Yankee *leitmotifs*,
Praised *reputation* – yet, now this backslide;
A hesitation flared, and slighter awe.

 Terns clashed above the quieting tide,

Light on the water lessened. I thought, here I –
Who summoned twelve o'clock's snow-forest roost –
Find five's ingathering of abandoned light

 Synchronous with the declining best

And, in that schedule of my mind's travel,
Must topple, like the crab, to the lined shore,
Out from a poet's current or past fame,

 Below the terns' and the bay's roar.

THINK NOW OF THE WORLD

That gods can be beautiful in virility
And even in calmer moments, inspired,
Hölderlin felt in his moments out of madness
Hearing Homer sounded. His tears broke cover
To face the world, then plummet like falling hexameters:
Gladness itself at Homer's shielding thoughts
When a man's courage showed itself Greek-lyred.

But weren't tears also Holderlin's agony, knowing
His comrade bard soon would depart, being tired –
And Homer absent could send the German poet mad
Back to the tower, as Odysseus should be
Had he returned discovering no Penelope,
No son, but roaches in wide cracks of floors,
And not a mortal to hear him weep and rage?

After such startling adventures, an insect house.
Think now of the world as Hölderlin in old age
Remembering old Greeks: each memory one charge
Without caesura, then daring verbal pride
And Homer's far-flung perspective. No one can see,
As we suffer, from what dimension inside us a friend
Might debark and near us and resume our place on the page.

PHOTO: ZERO MOSTEL READING

I ferreted him out once as an Ionesco rhino
On Broadway. And in one film,
He produced (skinning the greenhorn)
Beastly-con man stage stock, his schlock in trade.

If I were this book in hand,
With each hostile Mostel brow horizontally distorted
And contesting which could bulge more with outrage
And imagined insult:
I would confess, whimpering my very print out,
Denouncing myself as a nobody,
Blabbing any supposed crime or malice
That could bribe that glare
Into heroics less harrowing.

Great clowning actors scare the hellish prominence
Out of you;
Theirs is a this-way that-way rhino horn pointing
To your groin all ways.
Zero, you're really something!
In this photo, you see through Introduction,
Title page, Table of Contents,
And certainly Library of Congress number;
You and your moniker menace, maniac, through those
intellectual circles
Under your peepers, every page
With excessive understanding of its surreality,
With manic intervention green lighting no margin
For our grasp, with keeping us in stitches
Even as we fall apart.

Zero, seed in me that out-of-sanity gawk.
I know you were budded into Bloom years ago,

With your everyday novel wandering
Toward near-breakdown.
So as we follow your settings, steering
Into each awaiting travesty,
Our entreaties –
Floundering between the Scylla and Charybdis of your eyes –
Roar in the comic isles.

TO BE CONTINUED

The night was jaw-dropping handsome.
It was alive with the profile of John Barrymore;
Each planet coursed as a Kirk Douglas dimple.
As for the flashbulb socket of the moon
Against a limitless sky, I recall
No Thespian rounded enough or potential with energy enough;
Perhaps that's why Romans reached for a Diana.
I cannot know if the Milky Way is Hollywood
Or a mean Italian street or an Ingmar Bergman death hunt
Or an Eisenstein chess board locked in black and white.
And in fireball Hitchcock each falling asteroid,
As if a chase scene, whooshes and tumbles.

From Jerusalem to Jupiter, whose is the direction?
Why these universal special effects?
And tantrums?
Tomorrows and tomorrows coming, our midnight's world
dramas
Evoke Cannes Award outbursts:
Among the glitz, that paparazzo din of Hubbell openings,
Spectacular huzzahs for meandering columns of stars
In a certain creative high-jinx,
For phasing in plots with no crew taping its story board,
Yet intriguing for the possibility of inevitability.

These magnificences then finally unfold –
Showing larger than life that nothing is larger than life –
In front of marveling last-show audiences gazing up
At the projection, each exposed image
The microphone for its you-can-make-it cosmic cry.

BAMBINO VOLANTE

Pedestaled in the Common, cape-winged, alert,
She lives the life of bronze rust by green boughs.
To her, civilization makes blithe vows.

A new sun arises with every Boston bird;
Yeats-artless tots cygnet by and dance
Ceremonies of their innocence.

This ground is where we are taken at our word.
Or silence is called for where the forms
Of life are gently poised, with back-folded arms.

When the ice age breaks our parlance and our tombs,
Metal shatters, and what before was park
Lies sullen, glacier-blank, in the scratched dark,

Who, as people scatter to their splintered rooms,
Will discern above bright ruins piled
The faint image of a flying child?

WITH JANET NEAR KYOTO

Sweetheart, the carp are paid per diem.
Yes, behind this hotel
In landscape artificial with a thousand years
Of imported Buddhism,
This architect's dream of what a brook looks like
Holds real fish fed each day. Japanese luck symbols.
Fujisan behind us upholds the lack of limit
To natural divinity
Not visited on lowlifes from the Western suburbs,
But we may join, may learn, by watching swimming candybars
Like these. What we are to contemplate
Will strike us soon, will break our biographies
Back into their elements.
Have patience, look inscrutable,
Pretend you feel how old the universe was
When fish came into being.
Pucker your mouth toward me,
Or else there is no future in forever.

BAR NOTHINGNESS

When I am bucolically dying where my favorite trees revivify,
As the shepherd dog of death herds your slowly-moving thoughts
Across the grasslands of earth, during which the twinkle in my
 eye turns ironic
And my face begins its descent gradually into a turning away

Without wind, and everyone rushes to summarize in bits
What I was, searching for the significant and the emblematic,
Take your time, you that have it still, but one person say
 immediately,
That all may hear, "He fought for civil rights,"

And then, let sound rest awhile, afloat above my increasingly
 boring hue;
I hope I am not at this hour bathed in ancient-rooted yearning
 psalms
But in your twining remembrances, all of you, and let someone
 chime
To the Ethical Society hall clock, "O yes, there was the poetry."

Also, maybe, after deep delving that has tunneled through
To my beginnings, something about his good-timing nonsense
Should trip down into the sad conversation, the sacred titillation
 of friends,
And note how he imitated Kabuki well (but a samurai carving a
 pie, outlandishly),

And so a pause perhaps, enough for the absence of Hamlet's
 pulse
And room for a star to be embarrassed in as when its light stays
 behind a cloud the way
I suspect I will be the moment of death, only, of course, this not
 passing – and someone
Say, "O yes, his two wives and son," and then for a long, long
 while, nothing else.

THE ABIDERS

Curved but not salacious,
Against inner boards of the Shaker barn,
Under the window's genteel, deflated mix
Of whole pane and jagged glass, the handle rots
Empty of the axe.

The midwest owns sunrise and the city ultimate night
With accents twanged and clipped: emphases clash,
And the vowels sleep differently,
But the plains still can't parse first grass
Empty of buffalo.

In southern France, a few pictographs cling
To seep-neurotic walls, yet will not vanish
Except as excited burrowers put the strain
Of mist through their near-breathless bodies, in caves
Empty of early men.

Eden was lost with the first hanging injustice,
Adam declaimed, by an overstrengthened Romantic
Against the physiologically limited.
So he makes the classic exit from his paradise
Empty of God.

But wait; where everything's lost, farm axe and God,
Bison, clan men, the decomposed
Or abandoned or forgotten to time,
Always something survives: a something to stand
Empty of them.

A PHILOSOPHIC ALMAGEST

Said Aristotle, to applause,
"The Prime Mover can never have flaws.
(Though my logic is creaking –
Ontologically speaking,
It's nice to create a First Cause.)"

Said Bacon, "My advice is, I wis,
Scientifically correct. I don't miss.
But should the queen think
My conclusion doth stink,
I aver 'twas merely hypothesis."

Said Descartes, with redoubtable clout,
"I doubt doubt's within me throughout.
No doubt that, *without*,
I can't wear stout doubt out –
While within, I'm a shadow of a doubt."

Said Berkeley, "I worry, though I mustn't.
When I left, I was out – the fire wasn't.
If, unseen, it persists,
Then the flame still exists,
And maybe I'm the one that doesn't."

"This matter of cause needs correction,"
Said Hume, "I don't get the connection,"
Till his head got a shock
From a flying hard knock
By a billiard ball in his direction.

Said Rousseau, as he gazed at the moon,
"We've become too civilized too soon.
Were this boudoir a cave,
I'd be no effete knave."
And he offered her another macaroon.

Said Kant, "There's nothing that's relative,"
As he made up his categorical imperative.
What he needed, it seems,
Was to wake from his dreams –
But the rest of us now need a sedative.

When Hegel was twenty and a skeptic,
His logic was rather cataleptic,
But when life became hectic
He invented dialectic –
And was then, though not healthy, antiseptic.

Said Kierkegaard, "Something is new,
I'm in fear and in dread and askew.
This trembling – O why?",
And he looked at the sky,
But it wasn't God, it was the flu.

Said Russell, the infatuate Bertie,
"These Christians see arousals as flirty;
Think no sin, they assault!
I'll admit no such fault –
It is me, not my thought, that is dirty."

When Socrates finally got wise,
And grew tired of his nagging wife's cries,
When she'd start up a bout,
He would stealthily sneak out
To the market and chat with the guys.

WHISKERS IN THE DARK

Glens of Japan abound
 in the naturally slight:
Where then shall we be reconstituted like light?

On a crimson footbridge,
 worn boards replaced through centuries,
Eternity sits fishing
 in the Kyoto rivulet below.

He scrunches
 like a crowded English G, and thinks:
Wild catfish generate –
 continual series

Will never be infused
 into those struggling adaptive ranks;
They can only not-graduate
 to what reflecting bridges show.

The idea of pure span,
 red slats forever kempt,
Sustains Eternity where worms most tempt.

DECEMBER THIRTY-FIRST

Language is the fire we burn the past in.
From Joy's inglenook, as these twelve months cinder
For my Christian friend with decorations still hung,

I try to enter her Christmas-reflected flame
And find what brought her to this holiday;
She reminisces, enjoying the *ember* in remember,

But her cedar-lit theophanies, their off-and-on assuredness,
Their sizzling into miracles, their dawdling then loud spurting
As they ease into the new year, are mainly lost to me,

Though warmly felt. The curious congruence of another
 person
May be as she narrates it as if via fusing branches –
Yet one misgives; words rupture at each log's edge

Where our fireplace thoughts are long with soot and blather.
And will her youth spear upward, sharp with foregleams
Of celebration, I wonder, or twist to sear her fragrant
 doctrines

The way evergreen needles may smolder and drop blackly
To the slate, disappointingly damp, up in smoke.
Here is a hearth. I am useless, but we sit together.

DIAVOLEZZA

It is my utmost faith there is no God;
I feel it in my guts; not all the Dewey
Descriptions of his brain, which tailors mine,
Which shows the question of questions meaningless,
Which brands empirical nonsense the idea
Superior minds go one god or another,
Can sway me from the demon in my body
Confirming massive atheism – even
To feeling cheated, thwarted, should I find
God one day, and a belief in heaven.

Now on Diavolezza crags sing out –
The nearby lakes, the highest Bernina Alp,
The very avalanches, roar the fall
Of God. Perils prevail, and rushing sounds
Urge ear-bedazzled chamoix face their chasms
And leap in ways our insights imitate –
Hinting if nature did prove one Creator
Forging in deep-dyed space, should ranges boast
Some nourishment in lores of Datelessness,
It must be at earth's snugness, earth's high breast.

I've viewed two alpenhorns, world-resting pipes,
Sounded by crinkly men in velvet suits;
The struggling themes proclaimed two synagogues
Of alpine dawns reaching from Sinai sands
Across the crests – Iztaccihuatl, Dom,
Olympus, Matterhorn, Mont Blanc – to craft
The plaintive call we try to make on God.
I know those mournful notes. I plumbed shofars
In vales below New York skyscraper tors
Before I earned the right to journey here.

They say a cultured man on Piz Languard
Claimed this our globe's supreme endearing sight,
Where one could die, and then – he fell; his breath
Sat down like melting snow upon the rocks
And flowed into the brooks. Did he die well?
Was that the query – not the metaphysics
Of Father, Baal and tameless deities?
Yet Greeks, who warned against the summary
Of life prior to death, themselves loved Zeus,
Were home to flops, Sophists, flim-flammery.

I once, near Muottas Muragl, glimpsed evergreens
Against six snowcaps backgrounded by blue,
And in a manner slid my heart inside
The wish for everlasting life. If God
Were landscapes, I would find Them at this path:
We, too, are atoms of volcanic roughness
Thrust from our inner burns – creviced through
Like failed indoctrinations, icily
And windily eroding, no unerring
Ultimate truth, and yet we are no lie.

A CHANNELING

The swimmer swims, and how far is how well.
Crumbling near Dover's fossil-lit rock,
I reversed inside my goal
of massif chalk,
where England wears the strength of skeletons;
short of shore and prone toward surrender,
I nodded.
The grappling hook swished under my ribs,
twirling me gently high onto the cold deck.

Now friends and encouragers ply creaky notions:
excessive length, hostile waves,
the ill luck element!
No one tasks my strength –
nor was it improper training or advice or fatigue,
nor a ghostly lighthouse lamp of Merlin
beckoning us
to breakers, smashing our hulls on stone.
Excuses turn near-tombs when minor muscles cramp.

LINES

My heart, immaculate, paleobotanically rouged, presses
To my lungs which are by this time clouded with soot
From the New York lost-pink whirlwinds;
Glimmers of silt like engagement rings
Set in my eyes with a vow of forever;
My tongue is dry, as sometimes my guts,
While my shag on top, Horatio'd, will not lie down at the
scalp's bridge
For the cold winds.

How can babies frown
Or show fear in tense eyes, like adults?
Why has sex a life of its own? Why do hairs rise
Upon the imperial advances of the jaguar?
Why, when you leave, do my organs seem alone and scattered
Like bleeding knights on the field when the sun goes down?

What's primitive in my mind, I cannot tell.
But the body knows the mind too well.

WAVES

I

Waves
Now graves
For aged crews
Are barnacled purlieus
For forgotten goodbyes left
Behind for retired, sea-bereft
Messmates, mere boneyard forms
In cracked, desolate crates of worms,
Landlubbered friends whose wails pealed
A shameful backdown to a burial field
By arid crops, bud dearth, leaf drift –
Betraying the old cleansing lift
Into a long earthless spray,
Tomorrow's aweigh
Where the wake
Ships make
Saves.

Where
Reflare
No-future eyes
As gunnels capsize
Of the last bluejacket to house
In shells viscous scavengers browse,
Joining admirals condescending in oceans
Tremoring like them in belly-clutching motions,
Submerging – one blowup when a flimsy sun toasts
Itself and pops as the deep mudworm boasts
His ends; how will saltworthy advice
Encompass the farewell oh so nice
Brotherhood signs of seamen
Whose flagging domain
On sky charts mark
Their stark
Fear?

How
Endow
Water's fierce flows
With water's fiery close?
Watch each gravestoneless sailor
Going overboard for death, his pallor
Pondering, "What universe will I leave?"
So, dreading *nothing*, deckhands sink, grieve
For speechless lungs plunging, and epitaphs lost,
Then – re-floating in zigzags of foam crossed
Smartly, able to steer each enlisted angle
Toward a higher latitude, to tangle
Where all unanchored tars
Touch past low stars
Till each tours
A meteor's
Prow.

II

When sound waves leap from the sun's tomb,
Flailing the drowning globes with rhyme
By mariner-poets, tongue-lashed
To their sonnets splashed
With loss, with what
Lyrics could not
Believe might
One night
Maim –
The doom
In our voiced
Planet shall burst
To query every faith.
I have mine, but in death
And, in cadences of innocence,
Never once shipped for permanence
Or blazonry. I speak not after, but until I am.

QUALITY AND EQUALITY

I've learned to tell the voices from the echoes...
– Machado

I

What, can it be true? Maybe tomorrow morning
At seven a.m., when I am so awake
My eyes ache to open and both *Reading* and *I*
Have shared a before-and-after-snoring,
As if siblings upon the same pillow –
I shall realize the beauty imminent in Ilium
Within my book translated to English,
And perfumedly present, incredibly,
In my Massachusetts home:
There Sparta's queen, torrid, lies beside me.

I trust so, for when that happens,
Without any preparation or gauge
For verbal transition, I will rocket toward her
Across the three inches separating us –
Slowly or quickly as things beyond us see us
Interlinear in motion or statically intertwined –
And speak in ancient Greek.
Then she might forgive me
For misprizing the delight of the full subtext
Gliding out from her ages.

II

When dawn clothes us next hour
Not as with clear armor
But like a loose-fitting sweater,
So the shape and weight of my loneliness

Takes a while to notice,
And an imagined rooster crows
The overtones of stirrings penetrating
What is inside us shivering
Still from darkness, finally
I will arise with Helen at my side
And, embracing, listening with our eyes,

We will begin suddenly whispering in Aramaic –
Mercifully attentive to each other's needs,
It will be the sermon of how an ancient thought
Pulls the presumptions of modern remedies
Into an up-and-down shaking out matching
The shuttling of birds – the shuffling romance
Of birds, how conglomerations of species-feathers
Glisten at the window, how glottal stops
May have muted the valuing of impurities,
How incestuous language can be what we mean
By a religious caress.

III

Now Helen, burning with plain talk, topples
Into a dream again. Those icons of Einstein
On mugs, posters, calendars, often humorous
In my lifetime, hint that as the wild hair
Of physics shines like the frazzled moon
On a cloudy night we live with throughout
Our sleep, phrases we barely imagine –
Strange and ill-fitting ideas of quanta –
Almost strangle us as they leap alarmingly
Throughout our bodies' lone towers:

But modern Hebrew, diplomatic French,
The African dialects dashing about nests

Of the bat-eared foxes, land in our voices
Easily with the morning's taps on the glass
And onto last night's epics and quiet homilies.
From rungs of sunlight ladders peeping in,
We hear trills that sound like we are on fire,
Frizzy calls to turn to foreign entanglements,
And we find in bed with us
All people we were meant to love.

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