

Robert Kelly

# MAY DAY

Poems 2003-2005

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**Skies?**

**We make those lights.**

**Nature is our half-remembered dream.**

*for Charlotte*

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## ELEGIES FOR OSIRIS

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

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

Johann Adolf Hasse

reborn every morning  
 chanting at you dull as monks  
 prioritizing rapture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

as she my sister does night after night  
 excruciating slow.

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

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

## LOVECRAFT

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

**THE FLIES OF OCTOBER**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

we thought we'd banished.





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

Plutarch

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## REMBRANDT'S RAISING OF LAZARUS, 1642

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE POOR LAND OF TYROL

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

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

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

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

\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*

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

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

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

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

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

Because everything you think  
here comes to life.

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

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

## THE POLITICS OF YOU

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

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

## TWELFTH NIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

**IDENTITY**

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

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

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

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

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

**HISTORY LESSON**

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

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

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

signs struggle against signs.

---

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

**EARLY DUTCH BREAKFAST PAINTINGS**

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

---

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

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

One touch of you  
usually lasts two or three days.

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

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

---

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



---

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

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

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

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

some meager lover sent his love.

**AN ELEGY FOR WOLVES**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

reach out and stroke the sunrise  
and follow with my fingertips

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

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

learns to speak one human language  
not even this.

---

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

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

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

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

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

**OBLATION**

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

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

## 1878 BROWN STREET

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

to spill this ordinary thing.

## A WRITING WITH JOHN CLARE

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



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

**SCIENCE**

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

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

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

## THE DAYBED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**THE VALUE**

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

**OR**

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

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

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

## OPEN THEORY

1.

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

2.

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

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

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

decipher this.

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

3.

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

4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.

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

8.

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

## A HORSE IS NOT A USUAL MENACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

Your ideas get in your way  
your taste gets in your way  
your appetites and preferences  
likes and dislikes attitudes and sentiments  
all get in your way.

And your love gets in your way  
and your hope gets in your way  
so what are you going to do?

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

**AFTERMATH AT ARLES**

*remembering Gustaf Sobin*

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

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

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

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

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

when language is gone,

**THE TEAR**

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

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

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

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

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

a field full of people in this waterdrop.

## THE SLATES OF LA BORNE

### Closets

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

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

### Sel Fin

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

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

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

### Amber

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

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

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

### **Cordon.**

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

### **Scales**

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

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

Numbers are never somewhere else, numbers have no else.

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

### **Line**

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

## The Mortal Factor

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

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

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

## Wood.

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

**PARMENIDES: *ON BUDDING BEING***

Overtaken from the Greekish  
though he was not Greek

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

the woman speaks,

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

you need them  
stallion and mare  
to make a proposition

dyadic not dualist  
he says they carried me

as far as my heart had it  
in me to desire

because the heart needs  
what is not here

to turn it into  
what is here and goes and returns

for my heart was  
not a palace but a path

for what does any heart desire  
but to be gone?

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

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

(To be is to be gone)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the secret hands that milk the winter.

---

---

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

## HOW PINDAR WORKS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*that heals in our hearts.*

---

The day I stopped sounding like myself  
and became a rough draft of somebody else.  
It was like having a mild stroke you only  
know about weeks later when your left eye  
looks weird in the mirror and you can't read  
Portuguese any more. *O but the nights*  
when the women who like this new man  
come up from the subways to know me,  
I translate Rilke for them a while then they  
enlace me tight in fleshy arguments, their  
birthparts console me for having been born.

## NINE BAGATELLES

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

\*

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

\*

*(Conversation Among Roses)*

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

\*

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

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

along the narrow path  
 between the eyelid and the eye.

\*

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

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

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

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

\*

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

\*

Folding trees up  
 neatly into treatises,

translate the whole argument  
 back into Greek

insoluble because the birds  
 that sang to Anaximenes

have changed their chromosomes  
 and walk among us now.

Philosophy is the science of forgetting.

\*

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

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

\*

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

**THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**CAMPO DEI FIORI 1600**

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

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

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

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

## MAKING GOLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**CHATEAU**

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

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

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

---

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

bones and hair arrange on white  
to spell a subtle word

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

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

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

## IN THE WESTERN REGION

Another language is so far away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## NERO WOLFE'S LAST CASE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

any prosperous machine.  
Heron baked a knife  
inside a loaf of bread  
that leapt out at you

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

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

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

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

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

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

**ANCIENT FOUNTAIN**

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

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

and still could speak  
only the language of cats.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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



**YOUR DARK RED CAPE***for C*

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

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

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

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

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

## WALKING TO AUSCHWITZ

*for Carey Harrison*

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

2.

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

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

3.

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

4.

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

5.

Intention.

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

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

*K.428*

6.  
 There she is, it is a woman,  
 one of so many  
 but this one is here,

I see her face  
 her bare shoulders  
 press against my cheek

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

7.  
 Where to lead him  
 that was her worry  
 (her business, fault,  
 fate, responsibility)  
 a man's destiny  
 is a woman's  
 responsibility,  
 that is the nature of the dream,  
 the sad old scripture we call Lilith's Dream

*ich bin die schöne Lau*  
she said, bluish,

an inland mermaid,  
lukewarm lady

wherever I am  
something streams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8.

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

9.

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

He sees the walls. The bricks  
 that look older than Lascaux.  
 This is the deepest place he'll ever know,  
 where he came out of the blue lady's  
 hole in the ground to see the stars  
 and there were no stars. The stars  
 are irrelevant, we see with our bodies  
 not with light. Our legs understand.  
 I am a calendar torn out leaf by leaf  
 I am a day lost on the road  
 a road lost in the forest. All I know  
 is how to walk. Bless you,  
 strange man. Every footstep

is an arrival. Make the body smart.  
 Make the skin never forget.

10.

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

11.

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

12.

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

13.

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

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

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