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POETRY IN TRANSLATION

The editors of PBQ wish to thank Professors Li Aimin and Michael True of Assumption College, Worcester MA, for their invaluable help and consultation in the preparation of the translations from the Chinese.
There are risks to any translation: some say it is impossible. Yet for centuries poets have apprenticed by translating. Milton is said to have prepared for Paradise Lost by translating Homer into Latin, then the Latin into English — then back into Latin and then into Greek to see how close he came.

Since the rise of Linguistics and Comparative Literature in the Romantic period — Goethe’s Weltiliteratur—translation has become even more significant as a global community has emerged. Reading Vaclav Havel or Bei Dao in translation may not be as exact as learning Czech or Chinese, but to participate in the future, we’d better do it.

The political need for translations should be obvious. A good translation can bring other cultures closer, make them less threatening, and encourage compromise amid diversity.

Less apparent, but more profound and lasting in the long run, are the benefits of an acquaintance with the poetry, drama and fiction from other traditions. Mono-linguistic cultures like the United States may discover that others are not so different, that the variety of human experience enriches us in unsuspected and gratifying ways.
TUESDAY (June 12):
Poetry reading. Ingeborg Bachmann, reading her own works in German and in English translation. Goethe House, 1014 Fifth Avenue. 8:30 p. m. (free);
Gallery talk. Beatrice Farwell. "The Art of Degas." Metropolitan Museum of Art. 11 a. m. (free);
Film. "The Dawn Patrol." see Sunday, June 10.

WEDNESDAY (June 13):
Film. "The Dawn Patrol." see Sunday, June 10.

THURSDAY (June 14):
Gallery talk. Blanche R. Brown. "At Home in Ancient Egypt." Metropolitan Museum of Art. 11 a. m. (free);
Hinter der Wand

Ich hänge als Schnee von den Zweigen
in den Frühling des Tals,
as kalte Quelle trübe ich im Wind,
feucht fall ich in die Blüten
als ein Tropfen,
um den sie faulen
wie um einen Sumpf.
Ich bin das Immerzu-ans-Sterben-Denken.

Ich fliege, denn ich kann nicht ruhig gehen,
durch aller Himmel sichere Gebäude
und stürze Pfeiler um und höhle Mauern.
Ich warne, denn ich kann des Nachts nicht schlafen,
die andern mit des Meeres fernem Rauschen.
Ich steige in den Mund der Wasserfälle,
und von den Bergen lös ich polterndes Geröll.

Ich bin der großen Weltangst Kind,
die in den Frieden und die Freude hängt
wie Glockenschläge in des Tages Schreiten
und wie die Sense in den reifen Acker.

Ich bin das Immerzu-ans-Sterben-Denken.
BEHIND THE WALL

I cling to the branches like snow
in the valley during spring,
like a cold spray I drift in the wind,
I fall wet into blooms
as a drop,
around which they decay
like around a bog.
I am the incessant-thinking-about-death.

Because I can’t go quietly, I fly
through every sky over sound buildings,
topling pillars and punching holes in walls.
Because I can’t sleep at night,
I warn others with the sea’s distant roars.
I climb into the mouth of the waterfall,
and from the mountains I release thundering boulders.

I am the grown child of world fear,
who in peace and joy hangs
like the strokes of the hour in the day’s progress,
like the scythe in the ripened field.

I am the incessant-thinking-about-death.

Undated; c. 1949-52

*translated by James Reidel*
Entfremdung

In den Bäumen kann ich keine Bäume mehr sehen
Die Äste haben nicht die Blätter, die sie in den Wind halten
Die Früchte sind süß, aber ohne Liebe
Sie sättigen nicht einmal
Was soll nur werden?

Vor meinen Augen flieht der Wald
vor meinem Ohr schließen die Vögel den Mund,
für mich wird keine Wiese zum Bett
Ich bin satt vor der Zeit
und hungre nach ihm
Was soll nur werden?

Auf den Bergen werden nachts die Feuer brennen
Soll ich mich aufmachen, mich allem wieder nähern?

Ich kann in keinem Weg mehr einen Weg sehen
ESTRANGEMENT

Among the trees I can see no trees.  
The branches don’t have leaves to hold in the wind.  
The fruits are sweet, but there is no love.  
They don’t even satisfy.  
Just what am I going to do?  
The woods flee before my eyes.  
The birds close their beaks in my ears.  
No meadow becomes my bed.  
I’m sated before it’s time  
and hungry afterward.  
Just what am I going to do?

In the mountains the fires will burn in the night.  
Shall I set out, draw closer to them all again?

There’s no longer a way I can see a way.

1948

translated by James Reidel
Herbstmanöver


In den Zeitungen lese ich viel von der Kälte und ihren Folgen, von Törichten und Toten, von Vertriebenen, Mördern und Myriaden von Eisschollen, aber wenig, was mir behagt. Warum auch? Vor dem Bettler, der mittags kommt, schlag ich die Tür zu, denn es ist Frieden und man kann sich den Anblick ersparen, aber nicht im Regen das freudlose Sterben der Blätter.

AUTUMN MANEUVER

I didn’t mean: that was yesterday. With summer’s worthless gold in our pockets, we lie down again upon the chaff of sneers in the autumn maneuver of time. And the migratory paths south are of no use to us as they are to the birds. In the evening, fishing boats and gondolas drift by, and sometimes a splinter of dream-filled marble strikes me where beauty makes me vulnerable: in the eye.

In the newspapers, I read much about the cold and its aftermath, about the foolish and the dead, about deportations, murderers, and myriad ice-floes, but I take little comfort in it. Why is this so? I slam the door on the beggar who comes at lunch, for there is peace of mind and you can spare yourself the sight, but not that joyless death of leaves in the rain.

Let’s take a trip. Let’s look under the cypresses or under the palms or in the orange groves for sunsets at reduced fares the likes of which we’ve never seen. Let’s forget the unanswered mail to the past. Time does wonders. But it comes for us inopportune, knocking in guilt: we’re not at home. In the cellar of the heart, I find myself sleepless again upon the chaff of sneers in the autumn maneuver of time.

November 1952

translated by James Reidel
Anrufung des Großen Bären

Großer Bär, komm herab, zottige Nacht,
Wolkenpelztier mit den alten Augen,
Sternenaugen,
durch das Dickicht brechen schimmernd
deine Pfoten mit den Krallen,
Sternenkrallen,
wachsam halten wir die Herden,
doch gebannt von dir, und mißtrauen
deinen müden Flanken und den scharfen
halbentblößten Zähnen,
alter Bär.

Ein Zapfen: eure Welt.
Ihr: die Schuppen dran.
Ich treib sie, roll sie
von den Tannen im Anfang
zu den Tannen am Ende,
schnaub sie an, prüf sie im Maul
und pack zu mit den Tatzen.

Fürchtet euch oder fürchtet euch nicht!
Zahlt in den Klingelbeutel und gebt
dem blinden Mann ein gutes Wort,
däß er den Bären an der Leine hält.
Und würzt die Lämmer gut.

's könnt sein, daß dieser Bär
sich losreißt, nicht mehr droht
und alle Zapfen jagt, die von den Tannen
gefallen sind, den großen, geflügelten,
die aus dem Paradiese stürzten.
INVOCATION TO THE GREAT BEAR

Great Bear, come down. Shaggy night.  
Cloud-pelted one with ancient eyes,  
eyes of stars.  
Your paws break through the thicket  
with shimmering claws.  
Claws made of stars.  
Watchful, we gather the flock  
in awe of you, and mistrust  
your sunken flanks and sharp,  
half-bared teeth,  
old bear.

A fir cone: your world.  
You: the scales on it.  
I chase them, roll them  
from the trees in the beginning  
to the trees at the end,  
snort on them, taste them in my muzzle  
and snatch them up with my paws.

Fear or fear nothing.  
Pay the collection basket and give  
the blind man a good word  
so that he holds the bear on its leash.  
And season its lamb well.

Maybe then, if this bear  
breaks loose, it will threaten no more  
and hunt all the cones that have fallen  
from the tall, winged firs  
that topple out of Paradise.

1955

translated by James Reidel
Die große Fracht

Die große Fracht des Sommers ist verladen,
das Sonnenschiff im Hafen liegt bereit,
wenn hinter dir die Möwe stürzt und schreit.
Die große Fracht des Sommers ist verladen.

Das Sonnenschiff im Hafen liegt bereit,
und auf die Lippen der Galionsfiguren
tritt unverhüllt das Lächeln der Lemuren.
Das Sonnenschiff im Hafen liegt bereit.

Wenn hinter dir die Möwe stürzt und schreit,
kommt aus dem Westen der Befehl zu sinken;
doch offnen Augs wirst du im Licht ertrinken,
wenn hinter dir die Möwe stürzt und schreit.
THE HEAVY FREIGHT

The heavy freight of summer is loaded.
The sun, a ship in the harbor, lies ready
as the gull behind you plunges and cries.
The heavy freight of summer is loaded.

The sun, a ship in the harbor, lies ready,
and on the lips of the figurehead
the unconcealed smile of the lemur spreads.
The sun, a ship in the harbor, lies ready.

As the gull behind you plunges and cries,
out of the west the order to scuttle comes.
But you keep your eyes on the drowning sun
as the gull behind you plunges and cries.

1952

translated by James Reidel
Nach vielen Jahren

Leicht ruht der Pfeil der Zeit im Sonnenbogen. Wenn die Agave aus dem Felsen tritt, wird über ihr dein Herz im Wind gewogen und hält mit jedem Ziel der Stunde Schritt.

Schon überfliegt ein Schatten die Azoren und deine Brust der zitternde Granat. Ist auch der Tod dem Augenblick verschworen, bist du die Scheibe, die ihm blendend naht.

Ist auch das Meer verwöhnt und glänzerfahren, erhöht’s den Spiegel für die Handvoll Blut, und die Agave blüht nach vielen Jahren im Schutz der Felsen vor der trunknen Flut.
AFTER MANY YEARS

Time’s arrow rests lightly on the bow of the sun. When the agave in the rocks breaks cover, your heart will sway above it in the wind and keep up with each aim of the hour.

Already a shadow flies over the Azores and your breast of quivering garnet. If that moment death has also forsworn, blindingly approaching, you’re its target.

If the sea has too, spoilt and seasoned in splendor, it raises its mirror for the handful of blood. And after many years the agave flowers, shielded in the cliffs from the drunken flood.

1956-1967

translated by James Reidel
"MAD POEMS" FROM JAPAN'S UNKNOWN SURIMONO

Not all Japanese poetry is haiku. Ancient Japanese poetry is called jōdai kayō [ancient period songs] and experimentation with the proper poetic meter continued for over a thousand years before the 16th century when haiku, the 5-7-5 syllable short verse form emerged. One significant transition point was the development of kyōka [comic verse], not generally known in the West. Teitoku (Matsunaga Teitoku, 1571-1653), though recognized as the father of haiku, began by writing kyōka. But kyōka, written in tanka form (5-7-5-7-7 syllables), were light in tone and usually satirical; literally interpreted, the name means "mad poems." For this reason they were not taken seriously by the haiku masters.

Teitoku is accredited with the following "mad poem" celebrating the beginning of the "Year of the Cow" on the Chinese calendar:

Kesa taruru This morning, how,
tsurara ya yodare no Icicles drip! —Slobbering
ushi no toshi Year of the Cow.

(Henderson)

The master haiku poet, Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) had this to say about mad poetry: "If Sōin [founder of the school of haiku which Bashō followed] had not gone before us, our haikai [haiku] would even now be licking the slobber of old Teitoku."¹

The role of kyōka as "occasional poetry" to decorate surimono [woodblock prints] is not generally known. Numerous well-wrought kyōka poems have never seen the light because they simply "fade into the woodwork" in a surimono print.

For most Japanese today, the name surimono means simply "printed matter." But to the collector, the word is used as a technical term to designate woodblock prints of
the Edo Period, specifically those created in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

One of these collectors is Sidney C. Ward, now semi-retired in Orlando, Florida. Among the rare prints found only in his collection are some by the fabled Hiroshige. Ward has produced two private volumes (in 1975 and 1976) with black-and-white photographs of his prints and the typical collector's descriptions. However, he felt that his descriptions of these surimono were incomplete without a translation of the kyōka which invariably appeared somewhere on a print, but he had not yet been successful in securing a good translator. An earlier attempt had produced misleading translations such as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isamashiki</th>
<th>That fierce red face</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kao wa o-Edo no</td>
<td>Belongs to none other than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kazari-ebi</td>
<td>The New Year's lobster on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me no shogatsu to</td>
<td>display in Edo;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danjūrō miru</td>
<td>Seeing Danjūrō is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A feast to my eyes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closer to the meaning of the original would be:

In Edo
are two fearless faces to see:
the New Year's lobster,
a feast to the eyes,
and Danjūrō.

A typical page from One Hundred Surimono in the Collection of Sidney C. Ward (1976) is the following describing one of Hiroshige's rare surimono:

81. *Kakuban* [square in shape], 17.8x19.8 cms (7x7 3/4 in). Hiroshige is undoubtedly the best known Japanese *ukiyo-e* artist to the westerner, but he did not produce many *surimono*, an understandable event because his
gigantic production and popularity began only in the last several years of the surimono era. Edward Strange, in “The Colour-Prints of Hiroshige” catalogs fourteen of his surimono and I have located about a dozen or so more in my research.

This egoyomi[calendar print] for the year 1835 is, I believe, Hiroshige’s finest surimono. The print is a magnificent work with inlaid gold and silver on garments of red, green and light blue, and a soft hint of pink at the base of the cloud and as blossoms on the tree. Exquisite in design and craftsmanship, the surimono is a superior work of art.

The extraordinary Sakuragawa Jihinari died in 1834—it seems appropriate that what may have been his last poem appears on the surimono of the artist who had just attained the position of “Number One,” the last giant of ukiyo-e, Ando Hiroshige.

Here is a translation of the kyoka by Sakuragawa, which I did at Ward’s request:

Aratama no
haru no gyoyū ni
mesarete ya
ume ga sasōte
ki-naku uguisu

Was he invited
to this New Year’s party?
The bush warbler sings
at the prompting
of the plum blossoms.

The poems of Ward’s surimono collection, though kyōka in form, are not what we would normally term “comic” or “mad” in the West:

Mizu kiyoki
furuta kobori no
nagare ni mo
haru no nagame to
kawazu naku nari

“Spring has come too
to the fresh water
of the trenches
in the old rice paddies,”
the tree frogs chirp.

But the kyōka poet takes more liberties with images than the stylized tanka masters:
Kesa to nareba
kasumi no umi o
ōgani no
ito-yuttari to
ayumu hi no ashi

This morning
how slowly,
the great crab,
with pincers of fire,
crawls in a sea of mist.

Sometimes kyōka approach haiku both in form and spirit, as this poem which appears on Print No. 59:

Sukeroku no
kasa ni megumi ya
haru no ame

Spring rain,
shower your blessing
on Sukeroku’s umbrella.

And, in the tradition of Japanese poetry as old as the Man’yōshū collection of poems which dates from 710 to 794, techniques such as kakekotoba [double entendre or pun] are used:

Nanakusa no
kayu to shoro e
te no todoku
niwa no wakana o
mago ni tsumasemu

I can almost reach out
and pluck
the seven herbs for the broth.
I’ll have my grandchild
pick them.

Read another way, the poem means:

I can almost reach
to scratch where it itches.
I’ll have to use
my back-scratcher
I guess!

Notes
2 Ward, Sidney C., One Hundred Surimono in the Collection of Sidney C. Ward, private printing, 1976, p. 9 and facing page.
CORAL

Episodi

Hola! Avui t'estimo molt
No marxaré tan aviat com ahir
Amor meu ets meravellós
El temps que m'agrada és la tardor
Ja veuràs serem molt fencers
Dónàm la mà
Mira que bonie és quan plou
Déu meu quin xàfe!
Quina olor que fa la terra! No la sents?
Avui no he tingut gens de tristes
Ets meravellós. He pensat sempre en tu
Encara que no et vegi sempre estem plegats
Però mira ja són les tres

Cor

Quan dius “hola” el meu mirall reflecteix les onades
Quan dius “marxaré la terra” és un munt d’ossos de paper mastegat.
Quan dius “amor” meu les muntanyes suporten la meva prosperitat
Quan dius “tardor” portes tardoral netedat a les idees i la paraula
Quan dius “dona’m la mà” la butxaca se’m descús pel pes del temps madurador
Quan dius “mira” el núvol cavalca el sue castell
Quan dius “deu” la creu s’apodera de l’escarabat
Quan dius “terra” ningú no es troba en un replà més alt
Quan dius “tristes” aprires a la son dels vells capvespres
Quan dius “ets meravellos” l’ombra dete la seva boca forta
Quan dius “encara que no et vegi” em sento atret pel llorar i la llum
Quan dius “ja son les tres” traspaso una porta natural i esclato en vives aclamacions.
CHORAL

Episode
Hi! Today I love you so much
I won’t leave as early as yesterday
Darling—you’re wonderful
I love the fall
You’ll see—we’ll be so happy
Give me your hand
Look how beautiful it is when it rains
My god—it’s pouring!
Don’t you smell how fresh the earth is?
Today I’m not at all sad
You’re wonderful. I have always thought about you
Yet, I can’t see us always being together
Look! It’s already three o’clock

Chorus
When you say “hi” my mirror reflects the waves
When you say “I leave” the earth is a mountain of chewed paper bones
When you say “darling” the mountains support my prosperity
When you say “fall” you bring the fall cleaning of words and ideas
When you say “give me your hand” my pocket becomes unstitched from the weight of ripened time
When you say “look” the cloud rides its castle
When you say “god” the cross is empowered by the beetle
When you say “earth” nobody can be found on a higher landing
When you say “sad” you breathe the dream of ancient sunsets
When you say “you’re wonderful” the strong mouth of the shadow is stopped
When you say “yet I can’t see” I’m drawn by laurel and light
When you say “it’s already three o’clock” I cross over a natural door and break out into living acclamations.

translated by Susan Schreibman
ES COMO EL ECO

Si golpeas la puerta de una casa vacía
el muro te responde.

Si señalas el rastro de una perdiz herida
el perro te la trae.

Pero si hablas con alguien que no existe
tu voz es como el eco
peridiéndose en los montes.

from José Agustín Goytisolo Final de un adiós

IT'S LIKE AN ECHO

If you bang on a door of an abandoned house
the wall answers you.

If you mark the trail of a wounded partridge
the dog will bring it back to you.

But if you speak with someone that doesn’t exist
your voice is like an echo
losing itself in the mountains.

translated by Susan Schreibman
THE TREES

When I am in grief, and not one letter comes, then the trees, not knowing of that, blow back and forth, bend and sway as if their roots were in the sea.

I understood much later—and my wonder and suffering still made sense to me—they sway by not-knowing, I by knowing. Mine is the dangerous way!

I am only one step away from critical mass, from the explosion, and a great emptiness—yet I love amorous protein and electricity, and I talk with them as to close friends.

Nature is bigger and taller than the man that it created. I am busy now, making a sculpture of this century, the only one among all animals that can see it.

But not even one letter comes alive, and all the time the trees that don’t understand suffering sway over, sway over, sway back, as though their roots were in the sea.

translated by Robert Bly and Valentina Sinkevich
ROMANESQUE VAULTS

Inside the immense Romanesque church, the tourists crowded in half-dark.
Vaults gaping behind vaults, and no overview.
A few candleflames flickered.
An angel without a face embraced me
and whispered through my whole body:
"Don't be ashamed of being a human. Be proud!
Inside you open vaults behind vaults endlessly.
You will never be finished, and that is how it should be!"
I was blind with tears
and was pushed out onto the sun-scorched piazza
together with Mr. and Mrs. Jones, Mr. Tanaka and
Signora Sabatini
and inside all of them vaults behind vaults
opened endlessly.

translated by Tomas Tranströmer and Fran Quinn
INTERVIEW WITH TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

by Tam Lin Neville and Linda Horvath

Tomas Tranströmer is a poet of international distinction. Born in Stockholm in 1931, he won the prestigious Bonnier Prize in Poetry in 1983 and in 1981, West Germany's Petrarch Prize. His Selected Poems 1954-1988 (in translation) was published here by Ecco Press in 1987 (this is the edition referred to below).

This interview took place on April 7, 1989 in Linda Horvath's sunny high-rise apartment overlooking Indianapolis. (Tranströmer had read at Butler University the night before.)

Except where the meaning was unclear, I have left his English as it was, to give a sense of its charm and of his slow, thoughtful speaking style. He had the air of a solitary, but of a rare sort, one who is also relaxed, open, and pleased to be with people. Like the balance he recommends here between playfulness and ambition, his manner was light (a lot of laughter), and also serious. As we talked I felt we were in the open air, somewhere with a lot of breathing space. This is like the climate in his poems.

When I met Tranströmer last Spring, I was finishing an MFA program which was both a time of exhilaration and disillusionment for me. Talking with Tranströmer I felt myself reconnected to the fluid, unterritorial roots of poetry. Now half a year later, it has been a privilege to go over this interview slowly, word by word. The process of transcribing has been a luxury rather than a task.

TLN

Linda Horvath: I wanted to ask if you feel yourself part of a literary tradition that is definable, that you feel you share with the translators? I guess I'm getting at a sense of kinship with Bly, Swenson, Fulton, and your other translators.

Tomas Tranströmer: Well, of course it's an enormous wide tradition you could call Modernism in poetry. But
there might be something more specific. The first poet who really took an interest in me here was Robert Bly. I think that was because he was working in the same direction as I was. He had been to Norway and had read Scandinavian writers and so on and he wanted to introduce to Americans an attitude to nature that's very characteristic of Scandinavian poetry. The writing in Silence in the Snowy Fields for instance is something I feel very familiar with. His poems are completely American but have something I could identify with very much when I first met him. So the experience of being translated by someone who is working in the same way as you do yourself is very encouraging, an experience not everyone has with translators.

I'm lucky because I've been translated by poets who happen to know some Swedish, but it's not so common with a small language like Swedish—it's more common that you are in the hands of a specialist in the language who might have very little interest or feeling for poetry.

Tam Lin Neville: You mentioned last night that you've been translated so much that it's changed the nature of your Swedish, that your Swedish is no longer as Swedish as it was when you began? Is that right?

TT: Well, the woman who made the introduction, quoted me as saying that.

TLN: Would you agree?

TT: It's difficult for me to know because it's taking place on a not too conscious level. I think even the most solitary writer has a sort of audience in mind. It's a sort of invisible audience that he might not be aware of but it is somewhere in his mind and I have often thought that this consists of close friends, people who understand you very well. But I think after a while if you have that wonderful experience of meeting other cultures and being read abroad, those people become part of your audience in a way that influences you. It's a sad fact that so many of our best Swedish poets are untranslatable because the structure of their writing comes too close to the structure of the Swedish language and this makes them almost impossible
to translate. And other poets can be translated easily. It's the same in all languages.

**LH:** Have you been in touch enough recently to know if the other Eastern European countries are experiencing some of the freedom of Glasnost?

**TT:** Oh yes, yes. I mean there is one country that is the worst in the world—Roumania, which is moving in another direction. But especially important for us are the Baltic parts of the Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and there there is a fantastic change. I was there in 1970, in Latvia and Estonia. It was really closed. Sometimes you felt like a person in an early Graham Greene story.

These countries mean a lot to me and many Swedes. We have a lot of exiles coming across the border from the Baltics and we are very aware of what is going on there. There has been fantastic change in the last years, especially the last year, the last month.

**TLN:** I'd like to go back to this question of audience for a minute. What do you think of the audience for poetry we have in this country? As I see it it's very self-enclosed, airless, and self-conscious. A poet is almost always writing for other poets and students of poetry. I wondered if this is true in Sweden?

**TT:** Well, the difference is that here poetry readings and so on are mainly the business of universities and in Sweden it is more in the libraries. They arrange readings and if you come to a place like Indianapolis, you would probably go to the library to read and there you would meet people of all ages and backgrounds.

**TLN:** So the audience is more mixed and broader?

**TT:** Yes. Here you have a class of young people who all support each other. They all write themselves and probably go together to a reading and so on. But in the audience in a place like Uppsala there would be people coming from very different places, perhaps very solitary people who happen to read poetry, which is not everybody of course.

**TLN:** But they're not all teachers and students?
TT: Some of them are. Of course we also have readings at universities but they are not organized as part of the education but because the students have their own literary clubs.

What else is different? I can say that the Swedish audience is rather reluctant to show feelings. They sit traditionally rather quiet and they don't show facial expressions, they don't sigh or laugh or shout. They think that's good behavior not to show emotion. This can be frustrating at times. You don't know if people are bored or enthusiastic. Here the reactions come much more openly. But in the U.S. it is different by region also. The Midwest is perhaps the least expressive.

LH: I think your first book was published when you were twenty-two. I was wondering if you feel that you have gone through different stages of development since then?

TT: I hope so...(laughs) but it's difficult to judge. Often what critics say when I've published a new book is that it's the same stuff or that I develop very slowly. They find a continuum. They look at my first book and find similar things I wrote there that now reappear. But for me, there's an enormous difference.

LH: What made me ask is that reading the Selected Poems, I felt that your poems became more complex over time.

TT: That might be true but at the language level I was more complex when I started out. This doesn't come forward in translation but the earlier poems were more compressed and I used more traditional meters, more than I do now. I think these early poems are more difficult to translate. What you get in English translation is a simplified version. But the later poems are easier to translate, on the language level at least. One difference...I hate to talk about form and content, but let's do that (laughs). For me the content in the later poems is more complex because they contain more experience. I am fifty-seven now and there is a great difference between a man
who is twenty-two and one who is fifty-seven. The whole life, society, all these things, are one way or another in the later poems. In the first book I was very young and had an intense relation to nature and childhood. But it was a limited outer world. But now there are all these things I have been through.

_LH_: One of the things that attracts me so much to your work is your global awareness. But I get a feeling of your sense of the agony of the world. In “Sketch in October” I was very struck by the image of mushrooms like “the fingers, stretching up for help, of someone who has long sobbed to himself in the darkness down there.” I had the feeling of the urgency for peace. And yet the poems are not political, they’re human. Could you comment?

_TT_: You said some nice things, I don’t want to disturb...(laughs). Yes, I grew up during World War II, which was an enormously strong experience for me. Although Sweden was neutral, it was surrounded by German occupation—Norway was occupied, Denmark was occupied. Sweden was independent but at the same time isolated. People in Sweden were divided—some were for the allies, some were for the Germans. These were strong tensions I felt very much as a child. My parents were divorced and my mother and I lived together. I had relatives that were very close. They were all very much anti-Hitler and I was the most militant supporter of the allies. I was a little boy who was like a little professor, not as children should be. I lectured people all the time. But I read the newspapers and I followed the war intensely.

I had a dream of becoming an explorer. Our heroes were Livingston and Stanley, people like that. In my imagination I was always going to Africa and other parts of the world. But in reality I was staying in Stockholm and in summers we went to the Archipelago, to the islands which was my paradise.

After the war of course I wanted to go abroad and see the world. My mother had never been abroad in her whole life but I wanted to go. In 1951 I visited Iceland, together
with a friend from school. That was a strong experience. When we came back, I was not exactly poor but I had no money. In 1954 my first book was published and I got a prize. I used the money to go to the Orient—Turkey, the Near East, which at that time were not tourist countries at all, especially Turkey was not. It was a real adventure to me. Nowadays young people go with a bag on their back as I did but it's so common now.

Meeting this world was a very strong experience for me and there are some poems from that time in my second book. There is one called "Siesta" and one called "Izmir at Three O'Clock." In '54 I was in Turkey and Greece, in '55 in Italy and Yugoslavia, in '56 in Morocco, Spain and Portugal. And I have been traveling since then. But nowadays I go when I'm invited, when I have something to do. I am very interested in the politics but more in a human way than in an ideological way.

**TLN:** I don't get the feeling from your poems that you think of yourself as a wanderer. You're quite rooted in Sweden, its weather, etc. Would you agree with that?

**TT:** I think I'm rooted in the landscape, sights, experiences...You mentioned weather. That's very important for us who write poetry and for all of us in Sweden. The very strange lights. We are so far North but because of the gulf stream, the climate is rather mild...but the lights are arctic, which is the only place in the world where that takes place. We have these summers which are completely light and the winters that are too dark.

**TLN:** Yes, long and dark. You have some wonderful summer poems. The feeling of the relief of summer is very strong.

You mentioned earlier that when you were younger the primary thing was a very strong relationship to the exterior and nature in Sweden. I was struck in your poems that though they are very much structured on the inner life, or self, there is still a very exterior quality, and actually there are very few interiors in your poems. The poem "Vermeer" is one of the few I can think of where you are
actually inside, in a studio and a tavern. But, I think it's in "Elegy," even when you walk into a room, your attention is immediately drawn out of the room, to the window, or to the alley and its traffic. Could you talk about this? It struck me as unusual that your interest is interior but your perception is always outward.

**TT:** That probably is the way inspiration works for me—the feeling of being in two places at the same time....Or of being aware that you are in a place that seems very closed but that actually everything is open. Well, this is vague but it has to do with the whole inspiration that makes a poem for me.

**TLN:** Well, I was curious—what was it in your background that enabled you to escape the pitfalls of withdrawal, solipsism, alienation?

**TT:** (long pause) I had a very good mother (laughter).

**TLN:** I was hoping you'd say that.

**TT:** Yes, we were very close. She was an elementary school teacher. And I had wonderful grandparents—a ship pilot and his wife. Very old people, very close to me. Yes, there was a basic support from the closest relatives. At the same time I was very solitary. I was an only child and they encouraged me all the time to develop my interests. I think often little boys with special interests are discouraged because parents want them to be normal and to be like other children and play and so on.

I was so often as a child hurt by the tactless grown-ups who didn’t recognize me as the adult I felt like. They treated me like a child and I was insulted by this. But the people that were close to me, the most important people, they were always tolerating my personality very much.

School was difficult, of course. Some teachers I loved and some I didn’t like at all. In general I think my childhood wasn’t easy but it was not too bad. When I was eleven and twelve I developed a very strong interest in collecting insects. Biology has always been very important to me. I collected beetles especially, I had a large collection. I was out all the time with a butterfly net.
TLN: You have a lot of butterflies in your poems but I can't think of too many beetles or other insects.

LH: “The Golden Wasp”?

TT: I think I have a beetle in here—I must have. “On the humming electricity-post a beetle is sitting in the sun. Beneath the shining wing-covers, its wings are folded up as ingeniously as a parachute packed by an expert.” (“The Clearing”) There's one beetle!

Well you know if you run around collecting insects and looking at everything in nature, it's a rather happy existence. This is also sort of a Swedish tradition from Linnaeus. Nature is not only a place for moods. it is a place where you do research. The beauty of nature—shells, insects, birds, came to me as a child. I didn't recognize it as beauty because I thought I was a scientist (laughs). But it got into me anyway.

LH: Did you have other special interests?

TT: Yes, I was very interested in history. I read a lot in history which I still do. And when I was thirteen and fourteen music became very important. I developed a fanatic interest in music which I still keep.

TLN: And you play yourself?

TT: Yes, I was looking to see if you had a piano....

LH: I wonder how you arrive at the striking images you have in your poems?

TT: The images themselves often come spontaneously. But when I work on one, I try to make it as clear as possible for the reader. Like when you dream, things like that come to you all the time.

LH: Do you try to stay in touch with your dreams?

TT: Yes, sometimes. I dream a lot but unfortunately, I forget everything very quickly.

LH: So you don't wake yourself up at night to write them down?

TT: No, I don't have the character to do that—I want to sleep (laughs). But it has happened that dreams have been so strong that I could continue them. They have become poems.
LH: When the images come to you around a certain cluster of feelings then you have to work with them to make them clear to others...

TT: Sometimes. Sometimes an image comes in one piece around a definite center with the words that really belong to it. But sometimes it comes as an image without words and then I have to work with words.

LH: So a lot of your process is the subconscious coming out rather than saying, "I'm going to sit down and write a poem about this."

TT: Yes, everything is from inside, from the subconscious. It's the source of everything. I have a lot of equipment with which to take care of what's been given to me from the deeper parts but I never order myself to write about something. I've tried to do that. When I was working in a prison for young people as a psychologist, I wanted to write about this experience. I wrote a very ambitious poem but I was not satisfied with it, with the poem which originated from this ambition. In the end, the only things which I could accept were a certain few lines that came along with the unreal and ambitious poem about the poor boys in the prison. That poem is called "On The Outskirts of Work." "In the middle of work/we start longing fiercely for wide greenery,/for the Wilderness itself, penetrated only/by the thin civilization of telephone wires." It was only lines like this that remained from a long, serious and very ambitious poem about prison. So I cannot really decide what to write, it has to come.

LH: Do you have to get yourself in a certain setting, a certain frame of mind, to enable the poems to come?

TT: It's never easy for me but when it's possible, a sort of playful mood which at the same time is serious. You must be in a sort of balance between play and ambition—it is very difficult to have this balance. And also it's very helpful to have plenty of time which I don't have. I mean on a trip like this one...Of course, if I had the character I could sit down in the hotel room and say, I will do nothing all day, just sit here. But I can't do that. People are calling
me and I’m invited to parties, and so on. And in an airplane I’m either bored or scared and I don’t feel in the right mood for writing. Trains are much better, long train rides....

**TLN:** And car rides. You have several wonderful poems in cars, “Downpour in the Interior,” and “Tracks,” among others.

**TT:** Yes, but I have a very ambivalent feeling for cars. In a way I’m against cars because they destroy a lot of things but at the same time I must say it’s wonderful to have a car, to transport yourself into nature.

**TLN:** I wanted to ask you about prose poems. I believe in them and write them myself but many people think they’re flabby and don’t want to be bothered with them. I would like to hear your comments. What do they give you that you don’t get from writing poems?

**TT:** Well, it’s an old tradition in Europe, especially in France. And when I started to write them in the late 1940’s one of the most important books was an anthology called *Nineteen Modern French Poets*. There were a lot of prose poems by René Char, Eliade, Reverdy, people like that, and so for me it was quite natural, it was nothing new. I had a good friend in school, immensely gifted. He published his first book when he was thirty. And that was a book of prose poems, very much like Max Jacoby, sort of wild surrealist prose poetry. So for me it has always been something familiar, there from the beginning. But my own first published prose poem was rather late. My mother had died and I wrote about coming to her apartment and standing in front of the book case. (”The Bookcase”)

**TLN:** What is the difference in the mode of expression between poetry and prose?

**TT:** I often know from the beginning if this is prose or this is verse. In my latest book, published two weeks ago, there are seventeen poems, two of them are prose poems. One is here I think (in the Selected Poems). It’s called “The Nightingale in Badelunda.” The other one I read yesterday, it’s called “Madrigal.” These two are very short. But prose
poems give you a sort of fluency.

This is another parallel I have with Bly. He published his book of prose poems about the same time I started to write them. We were both interested in Francis Ponge. His prose poems are characterized by a sort of intense, nearsighted view of things or of nature. They are very inspiring, though you don’t have to do it the way Ponge does it. You and I probably have the same experience of it—there’s a sort of freedom, to go into details, to digress.

**LH:** So you don’t rework prose poems?

**TT:** Sometimes I do. There’s one prose poem, I think I worked for years and years with it. But it is prose—it’s called “Below Freezing.” (Reads):

> We are at a party that doesn’t love us. Finally, the party lets the mask fall and shows what it is: a shunting station for freight cars. In the fog cold giants stand on the tracks. A scribble of chalk on the car doors. One can’t say it out loud, but there is a lot of repressed violence here....

and so on. This is a sort of pessimistic description of Sweden, among other things.

**TLN:** Is that the poem which ends with children huddled waiting for the school bus? I like that one very much.

**TT:** This was the poem Bei Dao (Chinese poet) liked the most.

**TLN:** Yes, China is very much like the landscape in that poem, very drab, minimalist and utilitarian.

“Standing Up” is one of my favorites, a much happier, lighter prose poem.

**TT:** That’s an early one for me and it’s very documentary because when our children were small we had chickens in the summer....(almost inaudibly) I sometimes think I should return to this.

**TLN:** Did that also take place at your old family home in the Baltics?

**TT:** Yes, and there is a hat from the early part of the century, so that also is true. (Reads from the poem) “I
stopped, holding the hen in my hands. Strange, she didn’t really feel living: rigid, dry, an old white plume-ridden lady’s hat that shrieked out the truths of 1912.” So that was a real hat that we had in the house. (laughs)

**TLN:** Do your children have the same feeling about “the blue house” that you do? Or is their feeling different, being in another generation?

**TT:** It is becoming more the same. As they get older, they value it more. The oldest is twenty-eight now, the youngest is twenty-four. And they are very fond of the Islands. So I feel very safe that they will not sell it.

**LH:** One thing we didn’t touch on is the religious influence in your poems. I sensed a spiritual impulse there, but one which wasn’t attached to any theology. I wondered whether you had some particular childhood religious training?

**TT:** Yes, my mother again. She was a very... If I say “pious” woman, it will give the wrong associations, of a severe old-fashioned person. But she was not, she had a very childlike and good relation to God, absolutely. She was religious in a very positive way. When I was a child of course I was very skeptical. I believed in the natural sciences, in the 19th century way, you know, where everything is mechanistic. And I was not confirmed when I was fifteen. Almost everyone of my generation was, but I rejected that. I don’t believe in doing this and my mother accepted that hesitation. But a few years after I became very much engaged in religion. At first, when it came time for confirmation, I was a non-believer. And a few years later I was a believer.

But this is something which develops in your life. I have very little to do with the church. I love the buildings, the feeling you get. I often go into them. But I am not a member of a church in a sociological way, so to say. If I belonged to a group, the religious group that I feel strongest about are the Quakers. But in Sweden that is a very exclusive group, you almost have to be a saint to enter.
I am trying to work this out. I mean, before I die I want to come to certain solutions.

**TLN:** "The Golden Wasp" is such a strong statement against institutionalized religion. What do you do then? Do you read a lot on your own? The Bible?

**TT:** Actually, I’m part of a group of people that are making new translations of the Bible. My job is to work with the sounds....But if religion were not so important to me I wouldn’t be so desperate about these fundamentalist people. Because I feel it’s a perversion of the things I love. I saw a TV film about the People’s Temple, Jim Jones. I was thinking of that when I wrote, “The divine brushes against a man and lights a flame/but then draws back./Why?” ("The Golden Wasp", *Ironwood* Vol. 16) Because that group started very well, I think, it was a positive religious group in San Francisco. And then after a while it developed into this sort of terror organization where everyone obeys the leader and all that. And I’ve heard Oral Roberts, he was on a lot when I visited American in 1986. We are starting to have some of these preachers in Sweden.

**LH:** There’s something frightening about them, the power they have over people.

**TT:** And all the money that’s involved.

**LH:** Has psychology replaced religion at all for you?

**TT:** No, I don’t think so. Well, it’s a very complicated question. Psychology is sometimes close to religion but it depends on the psychologist, on how he looks at things. Psychologists of the 20th century are rather suspicious of religion and try to explain it away. But some are not. I mean the Jungian way of handling psychology is much more open to religion.

**LH:** Are you part of that school?

**TT:** No, I’m not part of any school, I’m very eclectic, a synchronist. But there are influences, definitely. The Jungian ideas are in the air.

**LH:** I was curious about the place of the ego in your poems. I mean I had to read quite a way before I came to an "I."
TT: Well, this is true of my first book. In the first part, I really was afraid of using "I." But the "I" comes a little more in the second book and it grew and it's one of the differences between earlier poems and later poems—the late ones are full of "I"s. It doesn't necessarily mean that the earlier poems have less ego in them, just that I was shy to talk about myself. Often I used "he" in my "middle period" (laughs). "When he came down to the street after the rendezvous, and the air was swirling with snow." ("C Major") The "he" was me of course. But now I don't hesitate to say "I." But that was an ambition I had, that you shouldn't be too visible as a person. But now I think it's more honest to use "I." After all you are writing from your own experience and writing to show that.

(Fran Quinn, who directs the reading series at Butler, and Jim Powell, director of the Indianapolis Writers Center, came in just as the interview was ending.)

Fran Quinn: There's one more thing I'd like to throw in here. You mentioned last night about your creative writing group in Uppsala, the fact that you started it and now you have some questions about whether or not that was the right direction to go in?

TT: I have an ambiguous feeling for creative writing education. I don't think it's possible to have a teacher teaching you to write poems. There's something strange in this idea. But what a teacher can do is create an atmosphere where students can, as friends and at the same time as very sharp critics, have a relation that is favorable to developing writing. That's how it was for me when I was beginning to write. I had friends who were also writing and we were helping each other very much I think because you need the sort of audience that can look at your writing in a friendly way but at the same time as a reader and not as a friend only. When you begin writing you are so involved in your own inspirations, you cannot possibly understand how a reader could not have the same attitude.
So it's very helpful when you meet readers directly and they tell you their reactions. The problem of writing is to do the work from inside out. But also the problem is that everything that goes into a text must be understandable to a reader who comes to it from a completely different attitude, with cold eyes and without any inspiration at all. And this is a little shocking at first to a young poet because you take it for granted that others are as inspired as you are. And so, things like that you can learn from a group of friendly, and at the same time, objective people. But you cannot learn it from a teacher, because a teacher is an authority, someone you have to be submissive to. It's your peers that you learn from. And the teacher's job is to create the atmosphere where this is possible. And to inspire the whole circus (laughs).

**EQ:** Do you keep in touch with friends that you worked with when you were young?

**TT:** Yes, but...Well, it's one of the bad things that come with age. Some of these people have stopped writing completely. Others have become rather neglected writers. And I have become rather famous and that disturbs the relationship very much. It's not a disturbance at all when we meet as human beings and so on but as soon as we start talking about writing it's almost impossible to re-establish this wonderful situation when we were all equals and we were all very hopeful and generous. After thirty-five years a hierarchy is established already which is not a right thing to start with.

**LB:** Do you find that it's harder for them to read your work and critique it, and to accept what you say when you critique theirs, you being the authority.

**TT:** No, I stay out of the whole business. My wife is my best critic. She knows me so well, she can detect if something's false. Also, a lot of things can be discovered when a poem is translated, during the process of translation. But sometimes then I find where the faults are, it's too late (laughter).

**EQ:** Do you ever change any of the poems you've had
published?

**TT:** No, not when it has been printed in a Swedish book. There are poems in magazines that you cannot find in the same form in the book.

**FQ:** I was thinking of Yeats on his deathbed rewriting his whole collected works...

**TT:** Oh no, I would hate to do that. Old poems are just like milestones that you have passed. I even have little impulse to read poems aloud which are too distant.

**FQ:** Robert Bly recently in his selected works decided to rewrite a whole bunch of them and I was just wondering whether you ever got ideas like this.

**TT:** Oh no, I think that’s a terrible idea (laughs).

**Jim Powell:** How about burning things though? Borges went around for years burning up his early things.

**TT:** Burning is OK (laughter). But to start again with a poem you wrote twenty-five years ago...that’s a mad idea.
LIZARD

I used to overturn stones on the hill, looking for lizards, but I never found any. This was in my early youth, on what day? in which year? Today, when I went back to the hill, I found the young pine trees grown taller. In the rift of brown rocks, a lizard climbed toward me with its tail raised.

Gazing at it, I was immediately turned into the sands under its feet.

translated by Zhang Ziqing
BACK TO MY VALLEY

Summer was gone.
Back to my valley
to my hut built of stone.
I found my wife fallen asleep.
Red was my valley in daytime and
at night the sky dark blue.
In daylight, I crossed the stream, which was crowded
with one stone on another.
I need not feel my way in the dark,
as I turned the corner of the mountain
and entered my valley.
Very soon
my steps found a pass, starting from the gate of my house,
among the chirping crickets.

SEASONS

Autumn has come! Yet Summer stirs in my body
and glares in my mind.

I’ve touched the agony of the guitar.

I’m in a trance, as if in a burning valley
of granite and mica.

How can I keep my guitar quiet
while Autumn is pounding in my heart?

*translated by Zhang Ziqing*
I WOKE UP TO REALITY

What flew into my dream?
A bird painfully flapping its wings.
Where did it come from?
Why did it glance at me
as it started to fly?
I awakened, trying to recall it,

but failed to remember its name. As I sat up in bed
the distant ebb hummed in my veins.
In an instant, I opened my eyes,
hearing a bird fly over the ocean
and drop, finally, onto the steel deck.

TOUCH

Digging deeper and deeper into the earth, I finally touched
quivering wings of ants.
Reaching up, I touched a bird’s nest
and scared the birds away.
I felt the sea breathing, as I touched fallen ships.
My shadow had left me
and walked alone among city streets

further into the summer night.
If I could touch its root
I would feel the whole world pulsing, which
I would make into poems. And I heard
a breeze blow through all the cracks
as I tried hard to strike at the hard nut of language.

translated by Zhang Ziqing
狭 巷

这是一条
此路不通的古老狭巷
时间
在这里打了很多疙瘩
路人
始终解不开，只好
埋怨而匆忙

苔藓，蜘蛛，彩电，收录机
都在这里杂居
冒芽的儿歌
发酵的青春
常常听呆了
生锈的故事，和盖碗茶
泡淡的夕阳

一切都要改变
标杆
打进几支麻醉针
几把砖刀
正开始剔除这节盲肠
A NARROW ALLEY

In an old alley,
narrow and dead,
time ties itself in knots.
Passers-by,
unable to untie them,
complain
and leave in a hurry.

Moss and grasshoppers,
TV sets and cassette players,
all together.
Nursery rhymes sprouting,
Young people in ferment,
worn-out stories and big bowls of tea
being made in the pale glow of the setting sun.

Everything will change.
The surveyor's poles
inject the anesthesia;
The bricklayer's knives, high up,
cut away at the chasm.

translated by Ji Tianxiang
宣告
——给遇罗克烈士

也许最后的时刻到了
我没有留下遗嘱
只留下笔，给我的母亲
我并不是英雄
在没有英雄的年代里
我只想做一个人

宁静的地平线
分开了生者和死者的行列
我只能选择天空
绝不跪在地上
以显得刽子手们的高大
好阻挡那自由的风
从星星般的弹孔中
流出了血红的黎明
DECLARATION

to Yu Luoke, martyr*

Perhaps the last moment is here
I have left no will behind
Only my pen for my mother
I am by no means a hero
In an age without heroes
I want merely to be a man

The quiet horizon far away
Separates the living and the dead
But the sky is my only choice
For I’ll never kneel on the ground
To make the murderers look taller
They want to stop the wind of liberty
Pouring out the blood-red dawn
From bullet holes as numerous as the stars

translated by Wu Keming

*Yu Luoke was a young man who was sentenced to death in the early years of the Cultural Revolution, because he wrote several articles criticizing the lies of the Gang of Four.
你在雨中等待着我
你在雨中等待着我
路通向窗户深处
月亮的背面一定很冷
那年夏夜，白马
和北极光驰过
我们曾久久地战栗
去吧，你说
别让愤怒毁灭了我们
就象进入更年期的山那样
无法解脱

从许多路口，我们错过
却在一片沙漠中相逢
所有的年代聚集在这里
鹰，还有仙人掌
聚集在这里
比热浪中的幻影更真实
只要惧怕诞生，惧怕
那些来不及戴上面具的笑容

一切就和死亡有关
那年夏夜并不是终结
你在雨中等待着我
YOU’RE WAITING FOR ME IN THE RAIN

You’re waiting for me in the rain
The road leads to the window’s depth
The back of the moon must be extremely cold
That summer night, a white horse
And northern lights flew past
We shivered for a long while
Let’s go now, you said
Don’t let our anger destroy us
Like the mountains at the climacteric
Which cannot free themselves

At many crossroads, we missed each other
Yet we happened to meet in a desert
Where different ages gather
Eagles as well as cacti
Have gathered here
More realistic than the mirage in the heatwave
Everything that fears birth
And the smile, without time to put on the mask,
Is connected with death
That summer night wasn’t the end
You’re waiting for me in the rain

translated by Wu Keming
李小雨

冬天的船

——给老祖父

冬天的船，倒扣着
倒扣在空旷的沙滩。
风儿流窜，从远天
滑过干枯的船板，
从此，我的思念是一把沙尘了，
弥漫在空中，聚拢在你的周围，
哦，我的老祖父，我冬天的船！

那船板，许久没有浸过海水了，
裂了缝，象老祖父多皱的手，
在冰冷中，把一生的力气
摸索地送进桨片。
风哭着，风诉着，风长啸着，
我的双手，又怎能抓住那一霎
你倾倒的桅杆……

大雪纷纷落下，渐渐为你
堆一个白色的坟墓，

冬天的船啊，
仿佛七十九年，
只有这一次安详的梦，
掩埋你的故事，
掩埋你落落的太阳，
掩埋你风浪的匆忙和喧嚣，
掩埋我寻找你的
最后的空间。
A WINTER BOAT  
_to my Grandfather_

A winter boat, upside down,  
on the spacious, empty, sandy beach.  
A fleeting wind from afar  
blowing across the dry boards of the boat.  
My longing for you is a handful of fine sand  
filling the air surrounding you,  
Oh, my old grandpa, my winter boat!

Having long been out of sea water,  
their boards crack like grandpa’s lined hands  
that rowed the oar in the cold  
with all the strength of his life.  
The wind cries, howling and remembering:  
How could my two hands grasp  
the toppling mast at that moment?...

The snowflakes fall thick and fast,  
piling up a white grave for you.  
Ah, the winter boat.

After seventy-nine years,  
there’s only this serene dream  
to bury your story,  
and your setting sun,  
your hasty storms and their noise  
in the last space  
where I can find you.

Snowflakes swirl about me like butterflies.  
No line of footprints leads to you  
and the mounting snow on your tombstone.  
On the sandy beach stretching for miles,  
only cloth sails lie on the ground,  
Their silent splendor  
like glimmering white hair.  
Century upon century,  
the snow mist in the distance  
signifies  
your unattainable  
affection and dignity.

_translated by Zhao Qun_
探索

我静静地坐在地球的屋脊，
亚马孙河、黄河、尼罗河，
悄悄地从我脚下流过。

我把手伸向月亮、太阳，
伸向火星、水星、木星，
以及他们神秘的同伙。

我在那里寻找山、寻找水，
寻找开花的草，香甜的果，
以及一切有神经的动物。

我向宇宙大笑、说话、歌唱，
向他们传递人间的一切创造，
以及一切关于人的生活。

我不相信那些闪闪烁烁的眼睛后边
都是灰尘、岩石、矿物，
没有思想的头颅再多也使人寂寞！

我不知疲倦地挖掘着，
我要认识宇宙，
同时，也要宇宙认识我！
PROBE

I’m quietly sitting atop the roof of the earth, with the Amazon, the Yellow River, and the Nile silently flowing beneath my feet.

I stretch my arms to the moon, the sun, to Mars, to Mercury, to Jupiter, and to their mysterious partners.

I look there for mountains and water, for blossoming grass and sweet fruits, and for any creature with feeling.

I laugh at, talk and sing to the heavens and tell them what humans have already created and how they live and die on the earth.

I don’t believe there is only dust, rocks, and minerals behind the stars' twinkling eyes. Heads unable to think make me lonely, no matter how many of them.

I burrow ceaselessly, to understand the universe and to be understood in return.

translated by Ji Tianxiang
含笑花

人生要常笑并不容易
总有许多不如意纠缠你
也许你解释误会更被误会
也许拥抱光明反被灼伤手臂
也许一个小小的忽略
落花散了你的秘密
也许，也许

想哭你就痛快地哭吧
十八岁的脸庞
是一张诚实的纸
写上哭，写上笑
都一样值得珍惜

当你踏过流泪的自己
便走向了含笑的自己
A SMILING FLOWER

It's not easy for life to smile,
while many troubles are pestering you.
Perhaps even explanations will be
again misunderstood.
Perhaps embracing the light,
your arms will be burned.
Perhaps a minor neglect betrays
your secret, which spreads like a dandelion.
Perhaps, perhaps.

If you want to cry,
do so to your heart's content.
An eighteen-year-old's face
is like an honest sheet of paper,
recording cries or smiles
of equal value.
When you step over your crying self,
You approach your smiling self.

translated by Wu Keming
ILLNESS

A curtain of drizzle hangs over
  the window: loneliness.
A rusty sky, the heart unable
  to break through: helplessness.
I want to borrow a bit of sunshine
  from my friend’s home,
but fear it might be just as cloudy
  and gloomy

Never mind what has newly withered
  outside
I’ll turn myself into a flower
  for the sickbed.
The forecast says tonight the moon
  will come riding the clouds,
its round face thinner than before.

translated by Wu Keming

杨智

病中

窗前挂一张濛濛雨 寂寞
心打不开生锈的天 奈何
想去友人家借一方晴朗
只怕一样阴沉一样病着

唉，休管窗外有什么新的凋
落
在病榻上把自己卧成花朵
有消息说今晚月亮渡云而未
冒脸庞儿又该消瘦了许多
A BLIND BLACK SINGER IN WASHINGTON STREET

Among the street singers and players
He's outstanding, as he sings from his soul.
His voice booms out like
A distant thunder rolling over the sky, or
A strong wind howling in the valley, or
A great flood rushing against the shore, or
A lonely wild goose lamenting an Autumn night.
It is a mixture of bitterness, anger, and melancholy
Shaking the surrounding windows and the strings of our hearts
So violently that coins rain into his cap from the crowd.
But he looks not too sad, for in the suffering of the world
He might be happy, for having seen fewer agonies than his audience.
Around him all is as black as his coal-like skin,
which could burn into flame once it's touched by a sparkle.

Harvard, December, 1982
Revised at Nanjing University, September, 1989
CRONOLOGIA

...non chiamateci mai...
ma ora se li chiamo, al di qua
della finestra, ecco il numero
alterno delle morti e delle prime dita,
dove si apre un temporale
dove si apre un temporale
che ragiona in noi, che
guarda
tra un bar e l'altro, con
le scommesse del sabato pomeriggio
adesso che la guerra
è finita
ti posso uccidere
senza motivo.

from Milo De Angelis, Terra del viso (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1985)
CHRONOLOGY

...don't ever call us...
between if I call them, on this side
of the window, here is the alternate
number of dead and the first fingers,
where a thunderstorm begins
which reasons in us, which
looks
from one café to the next, with
the bets on a Saturday afternoon
now that the war
is over
I can kill you
without motive.

translated by Lawrence Venuti
TEMPO CONTINUATO

Ci ha consegnato
poche scatole, identiche,
piene di latte, di nessuna maternità,
Sono allarme e completezza,
sono rottami, Nell’ora di un quaderno, questo
quaderno essicato. “Non mi trovano
gli occhi.” Allarme e completezza. Di colui
che ci accompango sulla terraferma
tutti noi serbiamo lo stile.

from Milo De Angelis, Distante un padre (Milan: Arnoldo
Mondadori Editore, 1989)

CONTINUOUS TIME

We were consigned
little boxes, identical,
filled with milk, from no maternity.
They are warnings and completeness,
they are scraps. In the hour of a notebook, this
desiccated notebook. “The eyes
don’t find me.” Warnings and completeness. Of the one
who accompanied us on terrafirma
we all preserve the style.

translated by Lawrence Venuti
L'INCIDENTE

Guardando la cinquecento
schiacciata dal camion
dice prendimi le mani e pallida
prepara il coito

ma qui, vuoi farlo qui?
si, lentamente

il sangue non è un luogo della terra
ma una pittura

il movimento sta iniziando.

from Milo De Angelis, Somiglianze

THE INCIDENT

Looking at the Fiat
flattened by the truck
she says take my hands and pale
prepares for sex

but here, you want to do it here?
yes, slowly

blood isn't a place on the earth
but a painting

the movement is beginning.

translated by Lawrence Venuti
LA SELEZIONE

Si aggrirano e dicono "qualcosa mi è dovuto"
e chiedono, con le parole più preparate,
di fare male a un'altra vittima, più vittima
che inumidisca la loro guancia
soffrendo "dai tuoi occhi uscirà
un pianto che non serve" e poi guardano
i treni bui, le rotaie
invitanti e decidono "morirò qui"
ormai non ci sono dubbi, è troppo presente
questa stazione misera,
che dice una fine visibile, quasi in ritardo sul cervello
e tutto è cenere
coincidenza con qualcosa
di felice e impedito e spaventoso
lungo il marciapiede e il marmo
dei sottopassaggi vecchi, una materia
che vieta e chiama
genera, estingue "ma è pazzesco scegliere
anche per finire"
e fissano il binario, quello
stabilito, sempre più vicino, sicuri
che sarà un altro a morire per loro.

from Milo De Angelis, Somiglianze (Milan: Ugo Guanda Editore, 1976)
THE SELECTION

They wander around saying "something is owed to me"
and ask, in the most studied words,
about harming another victim, more victim
which dampens their cheek
suffering "from your eyes will issue
a futile tear" and then they look
at the dark trains, the inviting
wheels and decide "I shall die here"
there's no doubt now, this wretched station
which speaks a visible end, almost postponed in the brain,
is too present
and everything is ash
a coincidence with something
happy and hindered and frightening
along the platform and the marble
of the old underpasses, a material
that prohibits and summons
creates, extinguishes "but it's mad to choose,
even your death"
and they stare at the track, that
chosen one, closer and closer, certain
another will die for them.

translated by Lawrence Venuti
LA GOCCHIA PRONTA PER IL MAPPAMONDO

La goccia pronta per il mappamondo
e per i più sconosciuti
nomi di ventura
ha raggiunto finalmente una scorciatoia
a colpi di lima
ha appoggiato il bicchiere
su un solo dito, fratello
della prima volta. Tutto
il campo, con le
sue biciclette sepolte, squizza
parole di ventriloquo:
metà alla vittoria, metà
all'erba in trappola.

In noi giungerà l'universo,
quell silenzio frontale dove eravamo
già stati.

THE DROP READY FOR THE GLOBE

The drop ready for the globe
and for the most unfamiliar
names of chance
has finally reached a short cut
with a few strokes of the file
has supported the glass
on one finger, brother
of the first time. The entire
field, with its
buried bicycles, squeezes out
words like a ventriloquist:
half to the victory, half
to the grass in the trap.

In us the universe will arrive,
that head-on silence where we
have already been.

translated by Lawrence Venuti
HABITO

hasta cuando estaré inventando tu muerte
documentando adolorida
su ficción ausente
su imprudente costumbre
de llegar siempre tarde
o no llegar

el gaseoso recorrido de tu cuerpo no descansa
palidecen sus ojos por su terca determinación
tampoco a la vida buena se entrega
y encuentra tanto a la ley como a la muerte
amigas fraudulentas
y sin embargo espera enamorado
en su tránsito sin odio
y yo invento su imperceptible deterioro
un llanto que no arrastra minerales

piensa y habla en voz alta
aunque sabe sin reproches
que sólo yo lo escucho:

si
un descanso limpio de ausencias
fuera la fisura abismal
abierta con mis manos (las mías)
extrayendo las entrañas del cadáver tuyo
renaciendo como forma musical,
como vigorosa nota sin culpas
podría ser feliz
razonablemente
feliz

déjame
intentarlo

muere
tu primero
FIXATION

how long will i be imagining your death
painfully documenting
its distant fiction
its careless habit
of always coming late
or never arriving

the ethereal path of your never-resting body
its eyes turning pale from such stubborn will
not giving in to the good life
and finding the law as much a false friend
as death
but nevertheless enamored waits
without disdain, in its passage
and i imagine its imperceptible decay
a cry that leaves ore unscratched

it thinks and talks out loud
even while blamelessly knowing
that only i can hear it:

if
a lull unblemished by absences
were the gaping breach
split wide by my own hands (these very hands)
extracting the guts of your cadaver
that is reborn in a musical form,
like a booming, innocent note
i could be happy
reasonably
happy

let me
try it

go ahead and die
you first

translated by Kurt Feindeisen
SI JE POUVAIS HALER SON CŒUR...
(pour khalam)

Si je pouvais haler son cœur, tel pêcheur sur la plage plane
Si je pouvais haler son cœur par le cordon umbilical.

Long mais long ce regret à la Porte du Sud — ne donnez
pas à ma fierté.
Quand exulter aux cris métalliques des merles, aux pieds
grondants dans les nuages ?

Je suis le marigot au long de la saison. Pas une palombe
n’y boit l’amour.
C’est la sapotille tétide que ronge le ver de l’absence.

Simplement saluer mon nom sur l’aile blanche de la
mouette
Et je calme d’une main d’ambre le grand piaffant de ma
poitrine.
IF I COULD ONLY HAUL IN HIS HEART...
(for African guitar)

If I could only haul in his heart, such a fisherman on the
flat beach.
If I could only haul in his heart by its umbilical cord.

Long, how long, this yearning at the South’s gate—but you
do not relent.
When will I exult in the blackbirds' metallic cries, the feet
rumbling in the clouds?

I am the river bed, flat at the end of the season. Not one
woodpidgeon drinks love there.
Only the listless sapodilla gnaws there on the worm of
absence.

If only I could only hail my name on the white wing of a
gull.
Instead I soothe the great fuming of my breast with a hand
of amber.

translated by Ann Neelon
CE SOIR SOPÉ...
(pour khalam)

Ce soir Sopé, ton visage est un ciel de pluie que traversent furtifs les rayons de tes yeux.

Oh ! le barrit des lamantins vers Katamague hô ! quand ébranlait les villages nocturnes.
Le poulet blanc est tombé sur le flanc, le lait d’innocence s’est troubé sur les tombes
Le berger albinos a dansé par le tann, au tam-tam solennel des défunts de l’année.
Les Guélowârs ont pleuré a Dyakhâw mais quel prince est parti pour les Champs-Méridiens ?

Comment dormir ce soir sous ton ciel qui se ferme ? Mon cœur est un tam-tam détendu et sans lune.
TONIGHT DEAR...
(for African guitar)

Tonight dear, your face is a sky of rain the beams of your eyes cross over stealthily.

Oh the elephant cry of the sea mammals on their way to Katamangue oh! how it used to set the nocturnal villages in motion.
The white chicken has landed on its flank, the milk of innocence has spilled over onto the tombs.
The albino shepherd has danced on the mudflats to the solemn tam-tam for the Dead of the year.
The Guelowars have mourned at Dyakhau but what prince has departed for the Southern fields?

How can I sleep tonight under your clenched sky? My heart is a tam-tam, weakened and moonless.

translated by Ann Neelon
TEDDUNGAL
(woi pour kôra)

Sall ! je proclame ton nom Sall ! du Fouta-Damga au Cap-Vert.

Le lac Baïdé faisait nos pieds plus frais, et maigres nous
marchions par le Pays-haut du Dyéri.
Et soufflaient les passions une tornade fauve aux piquants des
gommiers. Où la tendresse du vert au Printemps ?
Yeux et narines rompus par Vent d'Est, nos gorges comme des
citernes sonnaient creux a l'appel immense de la pointrine.
C'était grande pitié.
Nous marchions par le Dyéri au pas du bœuf-porteur—l'aile du
cheval bleu est pour les Maîtres-de-Saint-Louis—mais nos
pieds dans la poussière des morts et nos têtes parées de nulle
poudre d'or.
Or les scorpions furent de sable, les caméléons de toutes
couleurs. Or les rires des singes secouaient l'arbre des
palabras, comme peau de panthère les embûches zébraient la
nuit.
Mille embûches des puissants : chaque touffe d'herbes cache un
ennemi.

Nous avons ceint nos reins, affermi les remparts de notre cœur,
nous avons repoussé lances et roses.
Roses et roses les navettes qui tissaient lêlés et yêlas, exquis les
éloges des vierges quand la terre est froide à minuit.
Et leur tête était d'or, la lune éclairait le poème à contre-jour.
Belle ô Khasonkée parmi tes égales, ô grande libellule les ailes
déployées et lentement virant au flanc de la colline de Bakel
Jusqu'a ce mouvement soudain qui te brisait le cou, comme une
syncope à battre mon cœur.
Ton sourire était doux sous paupières déclives, et grondaient les
tam-tams peints de couleurs furieuses.
TEDDUNGAL
(Ode to the Accompaniment of African Harp)

Sall! I proclaim your name Sall! of the Fouta-Damga of Cap Vert.

Lake Baïde refreshed our feet, and we walked, thin boys, through the high country of the Dyeri.
And the winds of passion blew a wild tornado through the prickles of the gum trees.
Where had the tenderness of green spring gone?
Eyes and nostrils broken by the East Wind, our throats, like cisterns,
made the overwhelming cries of our chest sound hollow. What a great shame!
We walked through the Dyéri in the footsteps of the cattle driver (the wing of the blue horse is for the masters from Saint Louis), gut our feet in the dust of corpses, our heads adorned with no gold powder.
Now the scorpions were the color of sand, the chameleons of all colors. Now the laughter of the monkeys shook the royal gifts from the trees; like the skin of the panther, the snares of the hunters cast beams in the night.
One thousand snares for every powerful man; each tuft of grass hid an enemy.

We girded our loins, buttressed the ramparts of our hearts, we refused lances and roses.
Rose so rose the shuttles which wove the singers and their songs of praise, exquisite the elegies of the virgins when the earth grew cold at midnight.
And their heads were of gold, for the moon illuminated the poem in the half-light.
Beautiful oh Khasonkée among your equals, oh great dragonfly, wings unfurled and slowly veering to the hillside of Bakel
Until the sudden movement which broke your neck, like a swoon to accelerate my heartbeat.
Your smile was sweet under sloping eyelids, and the tam-tams growled, painted with furious colors.
Ah ! ce cœur de poète, ah ! ce cœur de femme et de lion,
quelle douleur à le dompter.
Or nous avons marché tels de blancs initiés. Pour toute
nourriture le lait clair, it pour toute parole la rumination
du mot essentiel. Et lorsque le temps fut venu, je tendis un
cou dur gonflé de veines comme une pile formidable.
C’était l’heure de la rosée, le premier chant du coq avait
percé la brume, fait retourner les hommes des milices
dans leur quatrième sommeil.
Les chiens jaunes n’avaient pas aboyé.
Et contre les portes de bronze je proferai le mot explosif
teddungal !
Teddungal ngal du Fouta-Damga au Cap-Vert. Ce fut un
grand déchirement des apparences, et les hommes
restitués a leur noblesse, les choses à leur vérité.
Vert et vert Wâlo et Fouta, pagne fleuri de lacs et de
moissons.
De longs troupeaux coulaient, ruisseaux de lait dans la
vallée.
Honneur au Fouta redime ! Honneur au Royaume d’enfance !
Ah, this heart of poet, ah! this heart of woman and of lion, what sadness to tame it.
Now we walked on for so long as such green initiates. For all nourishment, clear milk, and for all speech, the rumination of the essential word.

And when the time came, I stretched my tough neck swollen with veins like a tremendous column. It was the hour of the dew, the first song of the rooster had pierced the fog, returning the militiamen to their fourth sleep. The yellow dogs had not barked. And against the bronze doors I uttered the explosive word \textit{Teddungal!}
\textit{Teddungal ngal} of the Fouta-Damga of Cap Vert. There was a great tearing up of appearances, men were restored to their nobility, objects to their truth. Green so green Walo and Fouta, waistcloth flowered with lakes and with harvests. Long flocks were flowing, streams of milk into the valley. \textit{Honor} to the redeemed Fouta! \textit{Honor to the kingdom of childhood!}

\textit{translated by Ann Neelon}

\textbf{Notes}
\textit{Teddungal:} Honor  
\textit{Dyeri:} Senegalese plain, dusty during the dry season  
\textit{Khasonkée:} the name for a tribe and also a language  
\textit{Teddungal ngal:} This honor
CHANT DE PRINTEMPS
Pour Une Jeune Fille Noire Au Talon Rose

Des chants d'oiseaux montent lavés dans le ciel primitif
L'odeur verte de l'herbe monte, Avril !
J'entends le souffle de l'aurore émouvant les nuages blancs de
mes rideaux
J'entends la chanson du soleil sur mes volets mélodieux
Je sens comme une haleine et le souvenir de Naëtt sur ma
nuque nue qui s'émeut
Et mon sang complice malgré moi chuchote dans mes veines.
C'est toi mon amie — ô ! Écoute les souffles déjà chauds dans
l'avril d'un autre continent
Oh ! écoute quand glissent glacées d'azur les ailes des
hirondelles migratrices
Écoute le bruissement blanc et noir des cigognes à l'extrême
de leurs voiles déployées
Écoute le message du printemps d'un autre âge d'un autre
continent
Écoute le message de l'Afrique lointaine et le chant de ton
sang !
J'écoute la sève d'Avril qui dans tes veines chante.

II
Tu m'as dit :
— Écoute mon ami, lointain et sourd, le grondement précoce
de la tornade comme un feu roulant de brousse
Et mon sang crie d'angoisse dans l'abandon de ma tête trop
lourde livrée aux courants électriques.
Ah ! là-bas l'orage soudain, c'est l'incendie des côtes blanches
de la blanche paix de l'Afrique mienne.
Et dans la nuit où tonnent de grandes déchirures de métal
Entends plus près de nous, sur trois cents kilomètres, tous les
hurlements des chacals sans lune et les miaulements félins
des balles
Entends les rugissements brefs des canons et les
barrissements des pachydermes de cent tonnes.
Est-ce l'Afrique encore cette côte mouvante, cet ordre de
bataille, cette longue ligne rectiligne, cette ligne d'acier et de
feu?...
SPRING SONG
For a Black Girl with a Pink Heel

Birdsong rises up, purified, into the primitive sky
The green odor of grass rises, April!
I hear the breath of dawn stirring the white clouds of my
  curtains
I hear the song of the sun on my melodic shutters
I feel like a breath, with the memory of Naett on my bare
  excited neck
And my abetting blood whispers in my veins in spite of me.
It is you my friend—oh! Listen to the already hot breaths of
  April in another continent
Oh listen when the wings of the migrating swallows glide
  glazed with azure
Listen to the rustling black and white of the storks at the
  extremity of their unfurled sails
Listen to the message of spring from another time from
  another continent
Listen to the message of distant Africa and the song of your
  blood!
I listen to April’s sap singing in your veins.

II
You told me:
Listen my friend, far-away and deaf, listen to the precocious
  growl of the tornado like a rolling bush fire
My blood how it cries with anguish because of the
  listlessness of my head, too heavy, given over to the
electric currents.
Ah! over there the sudden storm, it is the conflagration of the
  white coasts of the white peace of my Africa.
And in the night where the thunder sounds with great rents
  of metal
Hear closer to us, within three hundred kilometers, the
  howling of the moonless jackals and the caterwauling of
the bullets
Hear the brief roars of the cannons and the cries of the 100-	on elephants.
Is this Africa still, this moving coast, this order of battle, this
  long straight line, this line of steel and of fire?
Mais entends l’ouragan des aigles-forteresses, les escadres aériennes tirant à pleins sabords
Et foudroyant les capitales dans la seconde de l’éclair.
Et les lourdes locomotives bondissent au-dessus des cathédrales
Et les cités superbes flambent, mais bien plus jaunes mais bien plus sèches qu’herbes de brousse en saison sèche.
Et voici que les hautes tours, orgueil des hommes, tombent comme les géants des forêts avec un bruit de plâtras
Et voici que les édifices de ciment et d’acier fondent comme la cire molle aux pieds de Dieu.
Et le sang de mes frères blancs bouillonne par les rues, plus rouge que le Nil—sous quelle colère de Dieu ?
Et le sang de mes frères moirs les Tirailleurs sénégalais, dont chaque goutte répandue est une pointe de feu à mon flanc.
Printemps tragique ! Printemps de sang ! Est-ce la ton message, Afrique ?...
Oh ! mon ami — ô ! comment entendrai-je ta voix ?
Comment voir ton visage noir si doux à ma joue brune a ma joie brune
Quand il faut me boucher les veux et les oreilles ?

III
Je t’ai dit :
— Écoute le silence sous les colères flamboyantes
La voix de l’Afrique planant au-dessus de la rage des canons longs
La voix de ton cœur de ton sang, écoute-la sous le délire de ta tête de tes cris
Est-ce sa faute si Dieu lui a demandé les prémices de ses moissons
Les plus beaux épis et les plus beaux corps élus patiemment parmi mille peuples ?
Est-ce sa faute si Dieu fait de ses fils les verges à châtier la superbe des nations ?
Écoute sa voix bleue dans l’air lavé de haine, vois le sacrificateur verser les libations au pied du tumulus.
Elle proclame l’attente amoureuse du renouveau dans la fièvre de ce printemps
But hear the hurricane from the eagle fortresses, the aerial
squadrons firing from open portholes
And suddenly striking the capitols in a second of lightning flash.
Now the heavy locomotives leap above the cathedrals
Now the unequaled cities go up in flames, how much more
yellow how much more dry than bush grass in the dry season.
And here the high towers, pride of men, fall like the giants of
the forest with the noise of falling plaster
Here the edifices of cement and steel melt like soft wax at the feet of God.
And the blood of my white brothers boils up through the street, redder than the Nile—because of what anger of God?
And the blood of my black brothers, the Senegalese Sharpshooters—each drop cauterizes my flank.
Tragic spring! Spring of blood! Is that your message, Africa?
Oh! my friend—oh! How will I hear your voice?
How can I see your black face, so gentle to my brown cheek to my brown joy
If I must stop up my eyes and ears?

III
I told you:
Listen to the silence under the blazing anger
The voice of Africa hovering above the rage of the long cannons
The voice of your heart, of your blood, listen to it under the delirium of your head, of your cries.
Is it Africa’s fault if God has asked her for the fruits of her harvests?
The most beautiful cobs and the most beautiful bodies chosen patiently from among a thousand peoples?
Is it her fault if God chastens the pride of nations with her wooden rods?
Listen to her voice in the air washed with hate, see the high priest pour the libations at the feet of the tombs.
She proclaims the great agitation that makes bodies tremble in the hot breaths of April
She proclaims the fond expectation of revival in the fever of this spring
La vie qui fait vagir deux enfants nouveau-nés au bord d’un tombeau cave.
Elle dit ton baiser plus fort que la haine et la mort.
Je vois au fond de tes yeux troubles la lumière étale de l’Été
Je respire entre tes collines l’ivresse douce des moissons.
Ah ! cette rosée de lumière aux ailes frémissantes de tes narines !
Et ta bouche est comme un bourgeon qui se gonfle au soleil
Et comme une rose couleur de vin vieux qui va s’épanouir au chant de tes lèvres.
Écoute le message, mon amie sombre au talon rose.
J’entends ton cœur d’ambre qui germe dans le silence et le Printemps.

*Paris, avril 1944*
Life, which makes the two newborn babies wail at the edge
of the hollow tomb.
She says your kiss is stronger than hate and death.
I see at the bottom of your misty eyes the unmoving light
of summer
I breathe between your hills the gentle drunkenness of the
harvests.
Ah! this dew of light on the shuddering wings of your
nostrils!
And your mouth is like a bud swelling in the sun
And like a rose the color of old wine about to bloom at the
song of your lips.
Listen to this message my somber friend with a pink heel.
I hear your amber heart germinating in the silence and the
spring.

Paris, April 1944

translated by Ann Neelon
CONTRIBUTORS

Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-1973) was born in Klagenfort, Austria. Her Ph.D. from the University of Vienna examined Heidegger’s existentialism. After work in Vienna with Grupp 47 and in radio, she lived in Italy (1953-1957), visited the U.S. (Harvard, 1955), and taught at the University of Frankfurt, Germany. Her selected Gedichte came out in 1964. Notable among her works in other genres are an essay on Ludwig Wittgenstein, the radio play The Good God of Manhattan (1958), the libretto for Hans Werner Henze’s opera The Young Lord (1965), and a novel, Malina (1972). Often presumed to have committed suicide, she actually died in a Rome hospital from complications arising from serious burns she suffered.

Huang Bangjun was born in Sichuan Province in 1945. After graduation from the Sichuan University, he taught in Guizhou Province. In 1979 he was admitted to the Academy of Social Sciences of Guizhou Province. He has published a collection of his poems, Hundred Lyric Poems, and an essay, “Probe in the Art of Poetry.” In 1985, he compiled and published several collections of poetry by contemporary youth. He is a member of the Guizhou Branch of the China’s Writers’ Association and has won two provincial prizes for his literary writings.

Robert Bly is completing his big book on the Wild Man, due out this fall from Addison-Wesley. He lives in Moose Lake MN with his wife, Ruth.

Joan Brossa was born in Barcelona in 1919. He is a poet and playwright who writes exclusively in Catalan. He is also a visual artist, and had his first one-man show in New York at the Galera Joan Prats in 1989. In 1948 Brossa was one of the founding members with Joan Miro and Antoni Tapies of the Vanguardia, an artistic movement based in Barcelona, which favored an integrated concept of the arts.
Noah Brannen, born in Texas in 1924, has lived in Japan for over thirty years, where he has worked as a professor of linguistics, language and literature in Tokyo. He has translated a great deal of traditional Japanese poetry, including all of the extant poems of the jodai kayo, the most primitive of all Japanese poetry.

Bei Dao (Zhao Zhenkai) was born in Beijing in 1949. After finishing high school, he worked in a construction company for eleven years. He began writing in 1970 and published his first poem, "Reply," in Poetry (China) in 1979. An editor of China Report, he also writes short stories and novelettes, and his work has been widely translated.

Milo De Angelis was born in Milan in 1951, studied at Italian and French universities, and now lives in Rome. He had published four volumes of poetry: Resemblances (1976), Millimeters (1983), Land of the Face (1985), and A Distant Father (1989). He has also published a narrative, a collection of critical and theoretical essays, and several book-length translations from French and Latin (Baudelaire, Blanchot, Claudianus). English versions of his writing have appeared in such magazines as American Poetry Review, Paris Review, Poetry, and Sulfur.

Kurt Findeisen was born in Phoenixville PA. A practicing physician, his M.D. is from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he currently lives. His translations of R.D.H. Morelli and Carlos Montenegro have appeared in Desde este lado. His translation of Negron-Muntaner’s Anatomia de una sonrisa is forthcoming in a bilingual edition.

José Agustín Goytisolo was born in Barcelona in 1928, and studied law and political science there. He has won several awards for his poetry, including the Premio Adonais de Poesia and the Premio Omega. He has published over fifteen volumes of poetry, and has been
translated into many languages, including Hungarian, Italian, and Russian.

**Linda Horvath**, a librarian at Butler University in Indianapolis, is also a freelance writer.

**Wang Jia-xin** is a contemporary Chinese poet and critic; an editor of *Poetry*, a leading Chinese poetry journal; and author of several books of poetry and criticism. He lives in Beijing.

**Wu Keming** was born in Ningbo and graduated from Nanjing University, where he is now associate professor of English. He has worked on a farm, taught high school, translated for UNESCO in Paris, and studied at Bath University, England. In 1987-88, he was a Visiting Scholar at Clark University and Assumption College.

**Ann Neelon** lives in Palo Alto CA. She served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Senegal. Her poems and essays have appeared in, among other places, *Ironwood, Poetry Northwest*, and *American Poetry Review*.

**Frances Negrón-Muntaner** is a Philadelphia-based Puerto Rican poet, filmmaker, and anthropologist. She studied in Puerto Rico, Spain, and at Temple University. In the U.S. she is a founding member of *Desde este lado/From This Side*, a Latino Writer’s Collective. She has been published in *Filo de Juego, Labyrinth, Desde este lado*, and elsewhere. She has presented her work widely, including appearances at Giovanni’s Room, the Balch Institute, and the Painted Bride Art Center. She co-directed *AIDS in the Barrio*, a film about the spread of the disease in Philadelphia, and directed a video documentary about AIDS consciousness through art, *Pieces of Life*.

**Tam Lin Neville** has an MFA from Vermont College and lives in Crawfordsville IN.
Fran Quinn is visiting poet-in-residence at Butler University. He arranged Tomas Transtromer’s visit there in 1989. He is currently preparing a manuscript of his own poetry.

Zhao Qun was born in Nanjing in 1943, and studied English at Nanjing Normal University, 1960-64. She is a lecturer at Nanjing Institute of Education.

James Reidel’s most recent work has appeared in TriQuarterly, The Paris Review, and Ploughshares. He is also the editor of Reviews and Essays, 1936-55 by the poet Weldon Kees (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press) and a forthcoming novel by Kees, Fall Quarter, to be published by Story Line Press. His previous translations of poems by Ingeborg Bachmann have appeared in Ironwood. He is currently preparing a translation of her radio play, The Good God of Manhattan.

Susan Schreibman was born in New York, and has lived in Barcelona, Spain and Dublin, Ireland. Her translation of seven American women poets will published in a bilingual edition in Spain, and her Collected Poems of Thomas MacGreivy: An Annotated Edition will be brought out by Anna Livia Books in Dublin.

Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906- ) is Africa’s greatest French speaking poet in the 20th century. Born in Sénégal, he was early identified with the Negritude movement, which emphasized the connection between poetry and politics. He was the first delegate to represent Sénégal in the French National Assembly, helped to negotiate Sénégal’s independence, and retired as President of Sénégal in 1980. He served in the French army in WWII, and was a German prisoner-of-war for two years. There are five major books of his poems, with many poems set to African instruments, often celebrating the kingdoms of Ancient Africa, and the experience of childhood.
Valentina Sinkevich is a Russian-born American poet who has lived in Philadelphia since 1960. She is the editor of Vstrichi (Encounters), the only Russian language poetry journal outside the USSR.

Lei Suyan was born in Jinyang County, Shaanxi Province in Northwest China in 1942. After graduation from Northwest University in 1967, he worked in the Qingtong Gorge in Nigxia Hui Autonomous Region. He joined the army in 1970 and later became an editor of the journal, Literature and Art of the People's Liberation Army. He is now a member of the China's Writers' Association and works in the Workers' Publishing House. Little Grass Is Singing, a collection of his poems, won a national poetry prize.

Born in Nantong, on the northern bank of the Yangtze in 1957, Ji Tianxiang majored in English at Nanjing Normal University, and later did graduate work at Nanjing University. A former teacher at Nantong Normal College, he now works in a development area in his native city.

Aleksandr Tkachenko was born in the Crimea, and turned to poetry after a knee injury ended his career as a soccer player. The poem here translated is from his book, The Underground Bridge (1986). He came to Philadelphia in March, 1989, to participate in the symposium, "Soviet Poetry Today," sponsored by the American Poetry Center at the University of the Arts. He is the editor of the Selected Poems of Andrei Voznesensky (1990). He lives in Moscow.

Tomas Tranströmer (1931- ), born in Stockholm, is a psychologist working with the occupationally handicapped in Vasteras, where he lives with his wife Monica. One of Sweden's most distinguished poets, he received the Petrarch Prize (Germany) in 1981, and the Bonnier Poetry Prize in 1983. His Selected Poems (1954-1986), edited by Robert Hass, was published by Ecco in


Li Xiaoyu was born in November, 1951, in Hobei Province in North China. Brought up in the army, in 1969 he went to live and work in the country-side in Hobei. Later, he was a medical orderly in a company of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and published his first group of poems, Pluck Medical Herbs. He was awarded the Youth Prize. Another collection of poems, Songs of Wild Geese, has been published, and he is a member of the China's Writers' Association.

Yang Zhi (Old Zhi) was born in Nanjing in 1958. A member of the Nanjing Writers' Association and the Hongkong and Taiwanese Literature Research Society, he began publishing in 1977. One of his plays recently received a prize in Jiangsu Province. "Illness" and "A Smiling Flower" were first published in Poetry (China) in May, 1986.

Born in Nantong and educated at Nanjing University, where he is Associate Professor in the Foreign Languages Department and Foreign Literature Research Institute, Zhang Ziqing is the author of many articles on American Literature and a translator of 20th century American poetry. He was a Visiting Scholar at the Yenching Institute, Harvard University in 1982-83.
A CONVERSATION WITH ELLEN POWELL TIBERINO

The following conversation was edited from some three hours of taped conversation with Ellen Powell Tiberino, a Philadelphia artist, at her home in the Powelton Village section of Philadelphia. The conversation took place on a Sunday afternoon in November of 1989.

I left Ms. Tiberino's home with her image in my mind and her voice still resonating in my ears, and drove home. It was not until I was almost home that I glanced at the clock. I had spent five hours sitting on the side of her bed, amidst open boxes of pastels and crayons and packs of cigarettes. This frail, fragile artist who has been ill with cancer for thirteen or fourteen years glows with life. Her large brown eyes sparkle with an intense awareness, with humor. Her lips are full and sensuous, and her skin clear and lovely. Not the face of a person very ill for a very long time. She talks slowly, thoughtfully, her words accompanied by the gestures of large, graceful, long-fingered hands.

She seemed enthroned, rather than bedridden, propped up against the ceiling-high, ornately-carved headboard of the bed. A blooming, bush-size begonia sat on the high footboard of the bed, and its branches hung around and over me. A rubber tree filled a corner of the room, covering a window. Ms. Tiberino's dog lay on the floor beside the bed, nursing her three puppies. A large, unfinished oil painting covered one wall. Paintings and drawings filled every space.

I had not thought five hours had passed in that cluttered, bustling room that could burst at the seams with puppies and plants and art work and people. Five hours of time. "I am so aware of time," she had said, and then gave five hours to me.

I had gone with a list of questions jotted down on the back of an envelope—predictable questions about early influences and favorite artists. Ms. Tiberino didn't need any questions. She talked about her art, her illness, her family, her childhood.

One of the drawings in the room I was particularly drawn to was of three women, nuns in traditional habits, but barefoot. They shimmer with color, and one expects them to move. There is that quality to all of Ms. Tiberino's work, whether of people or vases of flowers. They breathe. Not still life, but maybe "stilled" life. Life
ready to go on to the next moment, but perpetually in the now.

When Ms. Tiberino discussed a particular drawing, the page it appears on is noted in parentheses.

Joanna DiPaolo

Ellen Tibernio: That’s Queenie (page 92). I just love her name. So if you want to add that it’s the artist’s mother or, I think a mother universal...

At the hospital...I have a tendency to get kind of low when I’m there...Joe [her husband] usually comes, and he won’t say anything...he just walks around and starts hanging up prints. You don’t realize, but it’s like you’re in somebody else’s world and the longer you’re there, the more you stop existing. You know, you forget all the things that you were about out here. You become part of someone else’s world, and you don’t realize how much you need to be reminded of who you are. So he’ll walk in and he starts hanging up the work around, and all of a sudden you start feeling better because you can look around and see who you are.

I’m still alive, and many times the doctors have come in—I remember the anaesthesiologist came down and he bought a couple pieces from me. They’re not terribly expensive. But that’s not what it is. It’s the fact that something’s going on that you’re in control of to some degree, and it makes you feel alive.

Joanne DiPaolo: Kind of like an exchange of each other’s world.

ET: Right.

JD: You’re exchanging with the doctors...

ET: When they talk to other doctors they have a tendency to forget that you don’t know or understand all of their lingo. So it just makes you feel like a person again, and [Queenie] was one of the ones that I had hanging up. Different nurses came in, and one particular [nurse] came
in, and she was looking at it and she was saying how much that reminded her, how many times she saw her mother look like this...that look in the eyes, and it says so much.

My father died about five years ago, and I love when she's working in her garden. That's her outlet. If she wants to give me a bouquet of flowers, I watch her, every movement. I watch the way she picks, and she picks like an artist would paint, or select the colors, and she's not consciously aware of it. She'll pick a little of the purple ones, a little of the red ones. She doesn't pick in the way, say, a person in a flower shop would make an arrangement, but she picks the way an artist paints. I guess that's the best way I can describe it. And I always watch her face.

I remember it used to bother her when we were younger, and she'd say "stop" in a half-kidding, half-real way. "Stop looking at me that way," she said, "No, I'm not gonna pose for you," or "Why don't you get me sometimes when I have my hair combed, and not with a rag around it," or "When I have my makeup...why don't you get me when I'm dressed up?" And the nice thing about just being alive for this long, because I've been battling illness for...I can't believe it's going on thirteen years, now...and it's so nice that I've lived that long because to see us, we're at the point now where I can look at her, we can look at one another, and we can talk to one another with our eyes, and we know what we're talking about. We understand.

Many people aren't at that point where they can look at me and not feel sorry for me, and I have to really get on them about that because I do not need or want pity. I can't do a thing with pity. I can't do anything constructive with that. But it's just that they know to some degree the different things that I've gone through like operations, seven, eight operations. Over a period of time, things are constantly breaking down, and how I try to explain it is that all of us are growing older, and at some point, whether we want to face it or not, at some point in our lives, we're going to be down. We just want it to come as late as
possible. It’s a struggle for me everyday, but thank God I can struggle, and then get up and do, and still able to do. I’m very grateful for that. It’s hard for people to see that.

Jd: I think I understand what you’re saying, because I met you once before when you were at Antioch [University]. I don’t know if you remember that. You had some work in an art show there.

Et: Yeah, it was just women.

Jd: The thing I’ve always seen in your work, that thing that you’re talking about. Someplace, I saw some pieces of yours I’ll never forget. There were disturbing drawings of operating rooms, but in the same space, there also was a beautiful painting of flowers. Just a vase of flowers, a big oil painting. It affected me very strongly because I saw there two very powerful things happening in your work. There’s another piece of yours that’s always been a favorite of mine. I never did find out if you had a print of it, but I saw it in Bacchanal. It’s a very small piece called “Esperanza,” a female figure, draped, and she’s floating above the ocean, done in colored pencil.

Et: My angel, “Esperanza” means “angel of hope.” I think I was feeling, with all that I’d gone through, even at that point, that I had a very special angel, or whatever. Call it by any name that you want, but something was out there protecting me.

Jd: She was carrying a lantern, I think.

Et: It was time, an hourglass. The figure death carries one...you’ve seen that interpretation...the sands of time.

Jd: There were two parts of your work. You were doing these two things at one time that were really the same thing.

Et: Yeah, but you know there are a lot of people...and I can understand this...that it frightens, and they don’t want to even look at it. Some people, as they grow, they’re able to do that. Until you can face the reality of death, I don’t think that you can really continue to grow and live, really. That’s my feeling because that’s as real as life itself. I mean, death is ever present. It’s just a part of life, from the
time that you’re born.

**ID:** But we hide it.

**ET:** We do everything not to think about it. That’s scary to me. I don’t mean that you should sit around and dwell on it, but you should think about it in a healthy way, the same way that we think about everything else. I’m not afforded the luxury of saying I can only see the trees and the flowers so therefore that’s all I’m going to paint. I can’t do that because I see the realities of life. I see the street people. I see the autumn, the trees. The leaves die and fall off the trees. I see it. Like with my operations and the drawings of the different things.

I had strong feelings about what was happening to me and my body, and I had to express it. I couldn’t pretend that it wasn’t happening. I mean, right away, I couldn’t pretend that it wasn’t happening. I mean, right away I couldn’t take off the bandages or the robe and stand and look at myself in the mirror. But eventually I had to, and there it was. And I had to do it because this was happening as much as the trees bloom in spring.

Indeed this was winter, my winter, because that’s the hardest time for me to get through...is winter. If I make it...winter...I have to fight a real battle. Except on the days when it snows. For some reason I feel uplifted when there’s a heavy snow. Something about snow that I like. But winter is a very hard time for me, and it gets harder each year. I get older, the scars...I have to deal not only with the pain that I have. I have to deal with things that I would have to deal with anyway, maybe arthritis, just getting older. That doesn’t mean because you have all of these other problems, that you don’t have the ordinary things that come with age...and winter...

Pussywillows is one of my favorite plants...

**ID:** You’ve done paintings of them...

**ET:** I’ve done a lot of pussywillows because if I live to see the pussywillows bloom, I’ve made it through another winter, and so far that has been the case. The other day, a friend of Joe’s sent me pussywillows, the ones in the pot
there, and I started thinking about that. Now, I have a ways to go. We have a yard full of pussywillow trees that started out with just a few branches that my mother gave us that rooted, and then we had pussywillow trees all around the yard. The nice thing about it is, her tree is gone now, and she comes down and she gets pussywillows from my tree. If it gets warm, say, if we have some warm days in March, you’ll see the little white flowers. Other plants when they come out and you have a cold season again, they die, so you lose many of the flowers. With the pussywillows, if they start to bloom, and it gets cold again, they just stop. When the weather warms up again, they’ll continue so you don’t lose them. I pick them at different times. I paint them in different ways. Have you seen them blossom almost to the point where they’re getting ready to turn to leaves, and they look like caterpillars? They’re wild. I’d never had a chance to see that until I’ve had them in my yard where I could really study them.

JD: Do you do more work in the winter, or in the spring? Or doesn’t it matter.

ET: It doesn’t really seem to matter anymore. It used to. I’m very aware of time. And it drives me crazy with my kids, but then I have to understand. It’s nice that I can keep going back. Some people forget their childhood, and I think that’s why they have a lot of problems in many cases with their children because they become holier than thou and they forget when they were young. And I can always, when they make me angry, come into this room, and I’ll smoke like three cigarettes, and I sit and I, as they say, chill. I sit and chill, and think about when I was young and it resolves itself.

JD: How old are your children?

ET: Ellen is sixteen, that’s the baby. Leo...Leonardo...is eighteen, and he’s in his first year of college. Raphael is twenty.

JD: Your son, Leonardo, he had an art show someplace. I remember a lot of crosses and Christian symbolism.

ET: He was fascinated by the crucifixion, the whole
story. His drawings were magnificent. They’re so free, so wonderful, and I still learn from the kids, even the kids that I’ve taught. It’s a sharing thing, and we give to one another. That’s how I look at it.

But when he was little and he was drawing, he worked totally in black and he had one red pen that he called his “blood pen.” And he used to say, “Where’s my blood pen? I can’t find my blood pen.” And the things he would do with the blood. Everything’s in black, but then he put like these...I mean Christ was bleeding. It was fantastic.

**JD:** Is he still drawing?

**ET:** He still draws, but he’s gone into accounting and computers and that type of thing which is not a bad idea. We need somebody from that end, definitely need somebody from that end. But he’s so good. I really believe, I know, he’s going to come back to it some day, because it’s so in him. Something a part of you so strongly, he’s going to come back to it.

**JD:** It seemed to me that there was that same power in his drawings that I also saw in yours.

**ET:** He is so good. There’s a funny story. My kids are all close, and when they were little, they were upstairs in their room playing. The first time I noticed it, I was vacuuming their room. I acted like I didn’t notice what he was doing. I was trying to figure what is this kid doing, but I didn’t want to spoil it. We had one of those old-fashioned easels, the big ones, and he was standing there with his arms up on the cross, and he was little. He must have been just in school, and he was standing on the cross and he was making these faces. He’d move his head from one side, and he’d move it to another. It looked like he was trying to look as unhappy, as sad as he could possibly get it. And I’m vacuuming and I’m looking, checking him out, and he had this towel, like sometimes he would have. I saw it more than once.

Sometimes he would have his little jockey shorts on, that’s all. And then other times he had this rag tied up in between and around hanging down the front. I don’t
know how he did that. He had been looking through books with Christ and what not. He was just fascinated with this man, and he was trying to tie this cloth, like Jesus Christ. He was trying to look like Jesus Christ on the cross. He was studying so when he was drawing, he could make these faces.

**ID:** How old was he?

**ET:** That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I want to say he wasn’t in school. I have this fixation, and I could have been vacuuming everyday. I have to figure it out. I just have a feeling he wasn’t in school.

**ID:** But you’re talking about five, six, seven years old, and he already started drawing.

**ET:** Yes.

**ID:** That’s really interesting. Where do you think that came from?

**ET:** I have to finish telling you this story...Leo wanted Ellen to play with him, this game again with Christ on the cross. Ellen was about her game. She had her little dishes, whatever. Ellen was never into dolls and stuff that much, but I guess she liked pots and pans for a little while. She was probably inventing something that would blow up the house, knowing Ellen...Anyway, she was about her game, and that’s what she wanted to do. “Ellen,” [Leo] said, “I want you to be the Blessed Mother.” Ellen did not want to be the Blessed Mother. She was not interested in playing that game.

Somehow or other, he convinced her, and very half-heartedly she accepted. Apparently, he had given her instructions about what he wanted. So, I’m in and out of the two rooms, and Ellen had agreed to do this. He kept screaming at her, “No, Ellen, I want you to do like this,” and “I want you to put your hands like this.” And she was supposed to be kneeling down, and she was supposed to be looking sad. He wanted her to look sad. What do you call it, the method of acting, not Stanislavsky, is it? But, anyway, he’s the director, right? And she wasn’t carrying out his wishes. She was not doing what he wanted. She
wasn’t putting the feeling into it. I heard this...you know when somebody smacks you, that sound. And all of a sudden, Ellen was waaaaaaah, she was crying, and I went into the room.

Leo had gotten back up onto the cross, and he had this look on his face. It was like, “That’s the effect I want.” You know, it was one of those times, when you’re a mother you’re supposed to be the disciplinarian. I was so tickled, but I’m trying to be like a mother. I’m supposed to be angry, but it was so funny, too. He had such a look on his face, like “That’s the look I want.” Can you imagine some crazy producer really popping you and surprising you because they want this effect, and he had this look of real contentment...“Ah, that’s what I want.” And he’s on the cross. I mean, it’s something that you have to see. He was really into this thing, and Ellen had real tears coming down. So that’s what a mother who’s losing her son, this is what she’s supposed to be showing. It was one of those moments when my childishness came out, but I still had to be grown up, and I had to let him know that you’re not allowed to smack your sister like that to get the effect that you want.

**JD:** It’s a wonderful story. It’s so interesting to me that a kid that young would have this fascination for something like that. Was he brought up a Christian?

**ET:** We went to church every Sunday. There were times when I couldn’t make it but Daddy—Joe—would take them. They were altarboys and all that, but that came later. He did it all when he was young. When he had that show, he was maybe thirteen or so. But when he did the drawings, he was seven and eight, and maybe nine because he did a period of drawing. And they were all on this white paper with this black ink or pencil. I think it was pencil, and then he had the red blood pen. And they were his tools. He didn’t use color.

**JD:** Then the drawings came out of his own head.

**ET:** Up until fairly recently, when I used to get too stiff or too tight, I used to go down and look at his work to
loosen up. Children’s work will make you do that. Actually the funny thing is, you were so good when you were a child, because you haven’t been inhibited by anybody, you haven’t had to listen and be mixed up by anybody. You’re very free, and you’re not scared. That’s the secret. You’re not afraid. You’re bold. You really don’t need an eraser. So I have gone many times and studied his work to loosen up.

**ID:** I’ve always loved children’s art.

**ET:** They are so good, they really are. When I started art school, now you’re getting a lot of different teachers who have different concepts of what art is, and then naturally they’re going to teach you from their concept. If one teacher you don’t understand, and it doesn’t come across, usually you’ll get one teacher will drive home everything that they’ve been trying to tell you. You’ll say, “Ah.”

I always think of Helen Keller. I think of the film, "The Miracle Worker", and Annie Sullivan. I’ll never forget how patient, and how she kept going over...I’ll never forget the feeling and what happened when everything dawned on Helen Keller, and she was crying and the tears were flowing down my cheeks. It was just so beautiful. They were running around and she understood water and she understood this, but until that magic happened, where everything came together, and indeed, Annie Sullivan was great. She was capable of doing that, and of course this lady went on to be a fantastic person.

**ID:** Who was that teacher for you?

**ET:** His name was Harry Rosen.

**ID:** At the Academy [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts]?

**ET:** Yes...at the Academy. Harry Rosen, because he was so down to earth. He was a sculptor. I used to pose for extra money, and he used to tell me how cute I was, but he said “You’re not as cute as my wife, though.” I never met her, but he had this beautiful piece of sculpture and it was cut off in a way it shouldn’t have worked. So when people
tell you you can’t do this, you can do anything you want as long as you make it work, and that’s something I learned through Harry Rosen, too, because this thing he did of his wife, her head is back. You know the one I’m talking about. Her arms are just so. It’s such a beautiful piece. I think she’s from the islands, Tahiti or one of those islands. But he was the one, and I had teachers like Hobson Pitman, Frances Speight. One teacher’s still there that my son has, Roswell Widener. I had an adorable person by the name of Julius Bloch who was really a dear friend because there were things going on that I didn’t see...

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I never knew about people being prejudiced because I don’t go looking for things like that and perhaps things that you can’t deal with when you’re young, you don’t deal with until you’re ready, until you can handle them. So the neighborhood that I came from and grew up in was a working-class neighborhood—Irish, Italian, and Jewish. We were not wealthy, we were working-class people, and everybody worked for everybody else, so we were all friends. And this area had just become integrated and they were not people who ran, because there were Black people coming into the neighborhood who were hard-working people. And maybe it’s because those people didn’t have the money to run, but luckily that they didn’t because everybody had the opportunity to see that we lived together very well.

There was a fish market next door, but they sold everything. The woman became ill with cancer and my mother worked for her. We lived right next door to her. When my Mom used to come home to fix lunch for her children, she would send me over to watch and sit with the woman until she got back. I’ll never forget, I didn’t know how to tell time, and I was embarrassed about it. But she was always constantly asking me about it. She had good days and bad days, really in pain, a lot of pain, and she
would ask me, "Ellen, tell me what time it is." I had to say to her, "The big hand is on such and such, and the little hand is on such and such." And she was so sweet. She had the patience to sit there and tell me. She taught me how to tell time. And on a good day, she would get up, and I'd help her into the kitchen, and she would make, especially around the time of the Jewish holidays, chopped herring, gefilte fish, and I love matzas...pickled peppers and things like that. I like trying different foods to this day, and this came because of this woman who was really a nice person. I've done drawings of her too.

All of these things, as a matter of fact. From the things that I remember as a child, I'm still working from those subjects. Even the trips that I used to take down South every year to relatives. My relatives had farms and animals and things, and that was always a lot of fun. I didn't have to deal with what was going on because this was before Martin Luther King. I didn't go to the city because I was kind of outspoken. My Mom was always worried about me back then. I remember when my father would come down to meet us, and I would sit...I would always be studying people. I would watch the people in the waiting room coming up North, and they'd have their little paper cardboard suitcases with the belt tied around them to hold them together. Some of them had these wicker type suitcases. All of these things I remember, and my mother, she'd say "How could you remember all this?" Because they didn't. I did a drawing called "The Migrants."

**JD:** I know that one. When you mentioned the wicker suitcases...

**ET:** I did several, but they were sold before I got into prints. So the reason that you see that around at a few places, there was a limited edition of prints. It was not always the proper time to pull out a sketch book, like at a funeral or something. I developed this somewhat photographic memory. It's amazing. If I really feel strongly about something, I could come home, or even
years later, capture this.

But the people, the migrants coming up North, you could look in their faces, and see their fear. Everybody else looks very secure around them. The little girl’s asleep, the wife’s head is resting on his shoulder. There’s an aunt who really is my great aunt. I drew her face when I went down to see her years later before this particular piece was done. And everybody looks very content, but when you look at the man’s face, you see this real fear because he only knew that it was supposed to be better up North. Sort of like the immigrants. The streets are paved with gold, everything’s great in America. Your migrants coming up here, they weren’t sure. They only knew what they had heard, and I captured all of that fear that he had in him.

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**ET:** The people that were here before you came in, we were talking about Frida [Kahlo], and here’s what I was thinking about...

**JD:** Did you see the film, “Frida”?

**ET:** No, but I’m going to see it.

**JD:** Janet Kaplan [Frida Kahlo’s biographer] was at the screening of “Frida” at International House. She introduced the film.

**ET:** There’s a piece in there [the book, Frida], when a poem or something went through her. Well that piece, that famous piece that she did of herself...it couldn’t have come at a better time. A doctor friend of mine, that was a Christmas present from him. And sometimes I, like anybody else, I feel down. But he picked this book out, and I really love it. She spent a lot of time in bed, working. She had to paint lying down, and in that book, they have photographs of her lying down painting and smoking. And I’m smoking too, and apologizing for my smoking. But I think she’s such a strong painter. It’s so good to see, because they don’t have that many women painters...

The Bronte sisters, they had an understanding father, so
they were allowed to write, but they had to write under assumed names, male names, things like that. And then they probably got talked about as oddballs, even though they were very accomplished writers. Well, I understand that back in those days that, if you took painting other than like a finishing school person would do it as a hobby, or something like that...if you really were serious about painting to the point that you wanted to exhibit, you had to put the name of your husband on the painting. It made me so angry just thinking about it.

**JD:** I just finished reading a book called "Writing a Women’s Life," and it’s about women and autobiography. One of the things...when you mentioned women painters...women writers who really put themselves out there like George Sand and George Elliot...there’s no language to talk about those women. The way that people tried to talk about George Sand, was "She’s a woman with the heart of a man," or "She’s a man with the heart of a woman." There’s no language to talk about women who say "The heck with this stuff. I’m gonna do my art. I’m gonna do what I’m gonna do." Which was really the point of this book. It’s a very beautiful, very lovely book about women writers in particular.

**ET:** I’ll be ready to read it after I finish getting ready for this show. I’ll get it from you then, but I’d like to read it so much, because they’re not there, and you know that there have to be women painters out there. Creativity does not just come to male persons, you know.

I remember at the Academy, I used to sign my work, “E. Powell.” Really. People, when they met me, they would say—my work would be in the shows, the student shows at the Academy—and they would say, “Oh...your work...” It was almost like they were saying “How could your work be that strong and you be a woman?” They thought it was “Edward,” or whatever.

**JD:** When was that, Ellen?

**ET:** That’s when I was in my third year at the Academy.

**JD:** What would be the year? Sixties?
ET: That was my Cresson [a traveling scholarship awarded to a student each year at the Academy] year...that must have been ’59.

JD: Were there many women students then, at the Academy?

ET: Julius Bloch told me that he was the oldest teacher there at the time. He was the guy that would tell me all these little things. He was like a grandfather, or more like a father. He used to take me under his wing, and he would tell me things. Julius Bloch told me that I was the first Black woman who had ever won a Cresson, and he also told me that I was the first Black woman who had graduated. But I always say that I was the first Black woman who won the Cresson, because that I am absolutely sure of.

So you can somewhat imagine what it was like. It was like you had to be very good. Like some of the things that other kids were doing, I was a child, I was young...I would have liked to have done some of those things. I museumed myself to death, and I think now it’s a good thing that I bought a Brownie so I could take these photographs so I had a chance after I’d gotten home and rested up, that I had some reference. I saw so many museums, so many galleries, that things were beginning to run together. You could only see so much, and I went to as many countries as I could get to with one thought in mind—that I would never get a chance to come back to Europe again. So I wanted to see as much as I could possibly see, not thinking that you can only handle so much. Your mechanism kind of goes haywire, overloads, like a computer or something.

That’s what I was trying to be, and I was a human being. I did everything according to the rules, and even more so, because I was being looked at. I didn’t even talk about these things for years, because so many good things happened, and I tried to think only about that. But the thing of it is, if you don’t get rid of the stuff that’s inside that’s negative, it’ll be there always, and it will bother you, so you have to let that out too. It’s just as much need to get
rid of that as it is to say something that was great that happened to you.

**JD:** How did you get rid of that? Where did you put that stuff?

**ET:** I see Ellen, the way she does it. But she doesn’t have to because of the way I raised her to handle all the shit. She’s allowed to just let it hang out, and so she comes off as being real ungentle to some people. That was hard because I didn’t know consciously how much it bothered me, and there was always other things to do.

With my friends, and most of my friends were white, well...there were like three [Black students]—you know Lou Sloan? He was there [at the Academy], but he was in a higher grade than I. I always respected him. He talked to me a lot.

**JD:** He was a student then? When I was at the Academy—I didn’t go to school there, I modeled there—Louis Sloan was faculty then.

**ET:** Well, he was real quiet, but we got to be friends and he used to talk to me, and I valued that. But Louis was also very much like me. I think he could handle and deal with a lot of things and look at the positive side of everything. And that’s what helped to get you through. I mean, because that’s the way things were. I have to get over the fact that I felt bad about telling anybody these stories, because I feel I am at this point in life, I want to give. I know I’m respected, so therefore what I want to give to people, especially young adults of any color...I want to give them positive energies and things to feed on. But then, as I grow, I realize that that would be a lie, and that would be wrong not to give all of it, because that’s just as important, maybe more so. It you’re going to give any of it to them, give it all to them.

I didn’t have anybody. I had to learn everything as I went along, like from us sitting out in the hall, singing songs like “You Are My Sunshine,” and “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” and harmonizing and drinking a bottle of Chianti. The Academy would never say anything about
that. It was how it was done. The Academy was cool, because it was loose like that—that was pretty loose then. The guy that worked there who was like a retired cop—I was going to say he looked like a retired cop—and what he was doing was working as a janitor. He would say things to me that he wouldn’t dare say to white students who were there. Like he resented me. I was very nice to him. I have had the opportunity to talk to intelligent people and change their minds about things because they’ve never had the opportunity to meet a Black person. They assume, because they’ve met a bad news person who happened to be Black, that’s the way everybody is. So when they talk to me, I feel that’s good because they had a chance to talk to me, they might go through some changes...But this guy, like I would speak to him, and I doubt if this man could ever change. That’s where he was at, and he was the one that reported when we were singing and drinking. You know who was the ring-leader. And I had to tolerate things like that. That really hurt me.

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**JD:** We were talking about mothers and daughters. I was remembering what you were saying about your mother, and drawing your mother and reaching that point in your relationship where there’s an understanding. I think that takes a long time.

**ET:** It does take a long time. I’ve seen people do it and I hate it—guilt trips on the child. I’ve seen them get angry with my kids, but I have tried real hard for them to have a normal life because it’s been so long. I’ve been sick for so long. You know? I’m glad that they can forget about it at times. It’s really hard for them to face the reality, especially since I keep bouncing back. There are times I’ve actually died, and been brought back. All this is really hard on them.

I guess people think you should just think of yourself, but I can’t do that. I think about what an affect that must
have on them. That’s why you have to keep yourself from getting so low, and keep working at staying up, because I found myself, a few years back...I said, “I wonder if it had been better if I had died, and they could just sort of get on with their lives.” And then I realize that that’s not the case at all. It’s just that they think that I am so strong, because even if I’m lying in here in bed, you wouldn’t believe the things that I have to handle from here. They still come to me and ask me if I’ve seen their underwear, have I seen this, that, and the other. And I haven’t been any place but right here in this corner. And the things that they come in to talk to you about, in their own way. They never make it look like they’re asking your advice, and I’ve learned to answer them, give them what they want and, at the same time, without them knowing or acting like I’m answering their question.

**JD:** It sounds to me like they’re relating to you as their mother, and not relating to you like someone who is seriously ill.

**ET:** Yes, it’s the normal thing, thank God. That’s what they’re doing, but it bothers other people, then I have to let them know how it is.

**JD:** It’s the same way, I think, that all of those drawings that you do that have to do with doctors and the operating rooms. You’re confronting...people have to deal with both of those things. You’re not denying, not hiding that from your children, or trying to hide it. Of course you can’t really hide it, but one of the things I think that happens is people don’t want to deal with that. Families especially act like everything’s okay, and everybody knows that it’s not okay, but everybody’s playing this game, and it makes people crazy.

**ET:** And it’s tiresome, and it bothers you. It bothers you because you know where you stand and where you’re at. But even I, at one point, lent to that. But, as I said, the important thing is that you are still growing, and you can look back on what you did.

I remember when I first found out that I had cancer, all I
could think of was protecting my Mom, and why tell her about something that wasn't necessary for her to know yet, because they had said that they were going to try radiation. My rationalization was that if the radiation worked, then there would be this worry that she didn't have to have. I was way off base, but that's the way I felt. Therefore, I had nobody to go to, really.

My husband was there, but I wasn't going to die anyway. And that was his way of dealing with it. So there were only certain things I could talk to him about. I couldn't talk about my fears. There were letters and things I wanted to write, so when Ellen got to be a big girl.... Let's face it, she hadn't even started school when this happened.

I think I had to go six weeks for radiation, then they did a direct radiation implant, because they didn't even want to dream of what they'd have to do if that failed. My mother's not dumb. My mother knew something was wrong. Why all of a sudden then, I'm going to think she's an idiot. My mother knew I didn't have an infection that would last all of that time, six weeks. But I figured that as long as I could keep it away from her, better for her. I wouldn't make her sad. I never told her then, but she knew, because we talked about it since then.

And then, of course, when that failed, I went away. I took Ellen, and went down to visit relatives because I thought they were relatives that were getting old, and for some reason or another, I wouldn't see them again because they were going to die, or, maybe, I would die. That was in my mind. I wanted to visit down there, and I took Ellen and we stayed for a little over three weeks. And before I came back, I knew the cancer was back, hoping not, but knowing that it was. There was a certain something that I just knew.

When I came to the doctor, he just had to confirm that it was so, and then we went ahead and scheduled for the operation. It was really a fifty-fifty chance and all of that. It was so radical. If everything had of gone according to the way they wanted it...would have meant a changing of
your anatomy...

I could express then many of the things that I was feeling, but I wasn’t really being completely truthful then, because I couldn’t be. I didn’t even realize it. I thought I was being completely truthful, but during this time I had someone coming over and we were working on tapes, on a book, of all the different things that I had gone through, or was going through. I mean, so much was happening to me, that it was just unbelievable. I used to put my head back, and I used to laugh, genuinely laugh. And I could generally laugh and cry at the same time. That’s how unbelievable it was, the things that were happening. I said I knew, I had a feeling, I was always going to be put through tests, but this is the pits, you know? I didn’t know it was going to be anything like this, I never dreamt...

I held off as long as I could getting scarred up more. I wasn’t even thinking in terms of scars. I was thinking in terms of another...how am I going to deal with all these appliances. Eventually the holding off paid off because one doctor did everything he could do...then I had to be turned over to urology.

The doctor may have been highly respected in his field, but he was very, very sadistic. And it was almost like he was trying to break my spirit, or something. And I kept looking at him, because I think he was Jewish. He wasn’t young, and he was really considered a very learned man. I mean he was given the highest respect. But there were things that he did that I consider very unprofessional. I kept thinking about Auschwitz, and how could he treat another human being like this if he knows anything about Auschwitz, and how those people were treated. I don’t know if he was Jewish or not, but I was thinking even if he had knowledge of some of the things that were done. You know, they operated on people, did all these awful things on people that were healthy, that didn’t need it. So, there were times when I began to feel like an experiment...

That’s the doctor (page 98)...I had so much to get out for him. This man was so cruel, and the only way I could
do that was to let my feelings come up.

**JD:** When you first started doing the drawings related to your illness, how did people respond to those initially?

**ET:** A lot of people, it was like, "Ooo...ooo..."

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**ET:** I did that drawing from memory. It's called "Chartres '59." They [the nuns] were playing in the water. When I went on my first trip to Europe...

**JD:** How long afterward did you do this piece?

**ET:** Just recently. I just finished it up a few months ago. I'm so glad you like it.

**JD:** One of the things that has always struck me whenever I've seen your work was the drapery, the clothing. It's not even like the people are wearing clothing. It's more that they're draped or something. I can't explain it.

**ET:** This is from Harry Rosen. The first day I walked in and I saw a nude standing up there in class...I walked into the Academy, and this was a life drawing class. And what did that mean to me? I walked in, and I was with this guy, Joe. He and I came from the same school. We walked in, and here was this lady, standing up, nude. I couldn't believe it. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I sat in the hall in front of the coffee machine for five days, and finally I said, "This can't work. We have to go in and work."

And so I went in and do you know, I could only draw from the feet up to her neck, because I was thinking, how could she stand up there and pose in the nude like that? How could she do that? And this lady looked like she was around my mother's age. My mother was teasing me about that, because my mother couldn't believe when she was looking through my sketchbook, "You have models there who pose like this?" And she said, "What if you came in one day and I was standing there like this?" And I said, "Mom, don't even talk like that, please." That
terrified me. Eventually, what happened was, and I don’t know when it happened, I was drawing the whole body, and the face. And she [the model] and I used to sit and talk.

Rosen was the one who hit home about drawing. And he used to use the example of a tree. How a tree grows. You think you’re hot shit because you win a scholarship. I won a City Council scholarship there, full paid. And you walk in and all of a sudden, you see all these other people, everybody can draw. First you got to get over that shock. Everybody else can draw where you used to be top banana. And so then you find yourself looking over shoulders and studying other people’s work, and that’s all very much a part of it. But him using that example of a tree, and how it grows out of that main form, that trunk, and then the arms. They’re not just stuck on, but grow out. I became so aware of the human body and how beautiful and how very necessary it is, because when you do the human form and its concept, everything about it, then there’s nothing else you can’t draw. A leaf, you don’t look at it like it’s just a leaf. It’s the same way. The veins, and the form, it grows out of and into...

**ID:** I guess that’s what I see. It’s the body that’s there, and the clothes are on top of the body.

**ET:** I have to do that in order to get those clothing to work right. You have to feel that body under there. I usually do that body, wash it in, sketch it in, and then work the clothes on.

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**ET:** I was a strange little bird. My Mom thought I was very different, and she could not understand why I was the way I was. As a matter of fact, they thought that something was wrong with me. I used to hear my father and my mother talking sometimes. They’d say, “Oh our poor Sis.” They were worried because I could lay out in
the yard and look at clouds for two hours. And different little things like that. I guess they said to themselves, is that normal? And so it was a series of things like that. Of course, now, or rather long before now, we could laugh about it, and it came together.

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**ET:** When I was in high school, in the 50s. This is some other stuff that I blotted out. Black people were just starting at Overbrook (High school), and it was like a quarter Black, a quarter Italian, and half Jewish. There were so many different things that had to do with people's opinions, but there were wonderful teachers that were white. Like my English teacher was responsible for me getting the City Council scholarship. She asked me, "Ellen, what do you plan to do with your life when you leave Overbrook?" And I said I would like to go to the Philadelphia College of Art, because that was the only art school I had heard of then. She said, "Well, Ellen, did you ever think about trying for the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts?" Just the name of it was intimidating. I'm like, "No, I haven't, I never even heard of it." So she was trying to tell me something. She had seen my work hang in the halls when she walked past, because I wasn't that great in English, trust me. And she literally took me by the hand, and helped me fill out the papers and everything. I had to get a girlfriend to go with me to Center City, because I was scared to death of going to Center City. I hadn't been down there that often.

**JD:** So you went to the Academy right out of high school?

**ET:** Right out of school. That's why the naked woman shook me up so much. Yes, yes, and no preparation. I didn't know anything.

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**ET:** It came the record book time [her last year of highschool], and they were judging who should be the
editor of the yearbook. That’s one thing about children—you know that song about you have to be taught to hate? It’s really true, even up to when you’re in your teens. It’s because most of the class was Jewish and Italian in my art class. I was the only Black in my class. So when they gave the vote, the whole class, unanimously, voted that I should be the art editor of the yearbook, for no other reason than the truth. They thought I was the best artist in the class.

I remember the teacher. See, you have to blot out a lot of things when you’re growing up. If you don’t, it could destroy you, depending on your sensitivity. It really could. They voted, and I remember her saying to the whole class, “Are you sure?” You don’t ask the class if they’re sure of a unanimous decision. But she did. And they sort of like...“What the fuck is she talking about?” was the look. But she said, “Well we’re going to have another vote.” She was deliberately trying to sway them, but children, they don’t catch that stuff. So they voted again, and I could tell by the color of her cheeks—she wore heavy rouge—but her cheeks were turning so red, and I was not scared to look up, but didn’t want to see her face. I didn’t feel good. I did not want to be there. I wanted to disappear.

She was so upset, but nonetheless, she couldn’t push. She couldn’t give a third vote. The second vote was unanimous, so there I was. I guess the thought of, to her, of a Black person...and you have to remember, I didn’t know anything about these things. My friends were my friends. I didn’t think about colors. I guess those who did weren’t my friends so I didn’t know anything about it.

I did my job, and I realized I had to be really good at it, because she would really jump on me. She did things like...I remember we had to work on a book cover. The cover was to be on the Middle Ages. I did some studying in the library, and I got the idea of the costumes and how they dressed in that particular period. I did a cover, and I had to sketch in the lettering and I wasn’t that good at that anyway. I did it really neat, and you know how a teacher
walks around and she checks your work. She checked everybody’s work and she checked my work. She saw I had done something wrong, and the kick that she got out of it was not telling me until I finished. I didn’t know I was redundant, and I used a term that was equivalent to using something twice...Medieval Middle Ages, or something like that. She let me get all that printed and I had to do the whole thing over. Things like that, like for instance the counselor.

I had a counselor, and you know how you really believe what you read? We had a paper that they gave you when you first started school, and it said that your counselor was there for you. She was your friend, and she’s there for you. And you know, kids take that literally, especially if you’re the kind of kid that I was. I did not have many friends. My friends came later. I went to Overbrook because Overbrook gave art as a minor. My friends went to West Philadelphia High. That was the first big decision I had to make. I felt like I was starting all over again friendship-wise. So the counselor, being my friend, I really relished the thought of that.

Every day I would be about there, at least three days a week. I would have my sandwich with me, and sometimes I’d sit and eat my lunch while I was talking to her, telling her about my hopes and dreams and thinking that she really loved knowing what I was going to do with my life. That’s what the paper said. She was looking at me. I couldn’t read looks then. To me it was like she really cared. What happened was I got through everything, and I went to the Academy.

I was in the Academy about six months. One day, I was coming back from lunch, and I walked past the office. Kitty, the secretary, said “Ellen, come here.” I said, “Hi, Kitty.” She said, “You know, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.” And I said, “Yeah, sure.” I sat down in the chair and crossed my legs. She said, “Ellen, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. You know your counselor?” And I said, “Yeah.” She said
"Well, I have to tell you something. You know your counselor called here?" And I'm thinking when, when?

She called before I started the school. Like it's hard enough that you have to adjust to new situations, a totally different situation. It was scary. And I walked around...everyone thought I was so cool and together. Everybody was probably thinking that about everybody else. And I was scared to death. But you work at making yourself look that way, you don't want people to hear your teeth chattering.

She said, "You know your counselor called me, and she said that we should keep an eye on you." And I said...I'm trying to hold back what I'm feeling...I said, "Oh really?" That was one of the words I had picked up, "Oh really?" And she said, and Kitty was chuckling, because it was like "This is absurd, that somebody should say this about someone like you."

And I carried off the act, because she must have thought I was really secure. She said the counselor called her and told her to keep an eye on me because something was wrong with me, that I seemed a little crazy. See, the problem was, what she had kept trying to lead me towards was home economics. I was crazy because in her life, she had never heard someone of color talk about the things I was talking about. To her, I had to be insane because I had forgotten my station. I had to be crazy to be talking like that.

When she said, "Ellen, can you imagine that," and she's laughing, and I should have won an academy award. I'm laughing too, and acting...like when I'm ready to burst. I can't tell you the mixed feelings I had, to carry off the sham, and not let her know how much it really hurt me. She said, "Imagine that, Ellen." And I said, "Oh my God," and we're laughing, but I wasn't really laughing. She said, "Ellen, I realize..." You see, she couldn't get around the word, "observed." See, the lady told her to keep her eyes on me, but she said, "And you know what? After observing you, I was inclined to call her up, and tell her
that she was crazy." And we laughed about that, but the thing that's so sad about it was that it meant that I was being observed. I wasn't going to do anything out of line anyway.

I went back into the bathroom, but I don't remember walking through the hall. It was as though I floated back. That's how full I was of emotion. I went to the lady's room and into the stall and very quietly cried.

**ID:** Reminds my of the poem, "We Wear the Mask." Who was it? Langston Hughes or Paul Lawrence Dunbar? "We wear the mask," that whole idea of what you did, that terrible way you were feeling, and you had to laugh.

**ET:** I had to really fake it, too, and it was hard. It was very hard, but I got through it. Three years later, when I won the Cresson, they had write-ups in all the papers, from the Black papers to the Bulletin, the Inquirer, the Daily News. She called my house, the counselor, and it's a good thing Richard, my brother, answered the phone. She wanted to know if that was the same Ellen Powell. I looked at it, and if it bothered her that much, then it's really her problem more than mine. God bless her, you know?

I haven't talked about that in a long time, up until recently, because I don't feel like I used to feel, that I shouldn't say anything about it. I can't pretend, but I don't want anybody to use it. Young adults don't think about it until they get older. And I thought about it, and it was a little too late, but I never called Miss Chester up. You know in your own glory of things, we forget sometimes to thank...you know how you feel and you know how much you loved her and what an important role she played in my life. She was white. She was what they termed back then "old maids."

**ID:** She was the English teacher who helped you?

**ET:** She saw the beauty in my work, the beauty in me. It didn't make any difference to her what color I was, and it certainly didn't make any difference to me. So it's not a statement of white hate. It's people, and I try to tell
everyone too. It's people. It's individuals.

**JD:** But the reality is that hatred exists.

**ET:** And you can't pretend it's not there. People get mad when you tell the truth sometimes. But the hatred is there, even for people that are not even from your own neighborhood. I think it comes down to the fact that in the world...if everybody would become the same color, there would still be [hatred] because your eyes are blue and his are brown. They'd find something to hate. I don't want to say that, but I think the best you're going to get in life is that you're gonna have good friends who come in all colors, that's all. And you're going to live your life according to certain rules and that's it.

**JD:** Sometimes it's hard to cross certain kinds of lines in this society. There's consequences that a person has to be ready to deal with. Even if you may not be aware of it at the time. You crossed a line by daring to be an artist, dared to be the weird, bizarre, crazy kid that you were who had these dreams. You crossed that line in that school, and you weren't even aware of the consequences.

**ET:** All I was doing was trying to live out my dreams...this is my dream. This is what I want to do.
STONE

My home is a harbor. It floats on limestone high above the Ohio. Underneath our feet, acids eat away the stone and there are underground rivers and caves and, I swear it, if you were small enough and didn’t mind tight black places, darker than any dark you could imagine, and you could crawl through slime and rushing water through tunnels that could end with any step in a cavern so deep you would never stop falling, if you didn’t mind knowing that could happen at any moment, if the thought of cave-ins and earthquakes do not concern you because you somehow carry yourself with you gently as a baby, you could be the first person to crawl from here to the brightly-lit caverns in Kentucky.

And imagine it, after years of groping, how like heaven it would seem to you, emerging in even the tackiest tent-colored cavern lit with red and blue and green floodlights, seeing a man with a flashlight aiming it at the ceiling—saying doesn’t this look like draperies, doesn’t that rock look like bacon frying, doesn’t that one look like an elf, here in the body of the earth isn’t nature a miracle, millions of years ago, making a rock that looks like a toaster?

We float so gently on top of this gloom, in the graying yellow October daylight, in the night lit with candles, in the strong wood houses and barns, in the orchards where the apples fall into our hands and the leaves twist down. We sail on the land as though it’s real, our compasses pointing north, as though we know where we are. We eat sugar pears and watch the sugar maples blaze and we suck on sweet candy and smell the damp decaying leaves and we hold on tight as the boat heaves or the land pitches.
FRAGMENTATION

Joy says she believes in reincarnation. Joy’s mother says she doesn’t. Her mother says she can’t stand the thought of someone having her babies before she did. Joy says but your babies aren’t yours anyway, they’re their own. Her mother says in that case, if you don’t want your children, I’ll take them.

I cheerfully bring up compost. Think about it, I say, it’s comforting.

Joy’s mother looks at me like I’m crazy. My babies nothing but old apple cores, she says, there’s more to life than that.

Their bodies are apple cores but not their souls, Joy says.

What souls, I say.

What bodies, Joy’s mother says.

It was heady, this conversation.

It was my second year of college. I was home on break, and sitting on my mother’s porch. Joy and her mother lived next door. Joy brought a spider out of her house and looked for a place to put it. Her mother was spraying Weed B Gone on the dandelions. You can put it over here, I said to Joy, and motioned to my mother’s geraniums. Joy came and sat beside me on the porch. I was reading Helter Skelter. I was going to write a paper.

What are you going to say? Joy asked me. Something about how it’s because of...I said. I talked about his mother and social influences and chemical imbalance. I had some sort of theory at the time.

You can explain anything, Joy’s mother said.

She went into her house and came out with a chair and a sack of tools. The webbing on the bottom of the chair was broken and the spring scraped on the alley between our houses. It was an old chair. From ten feet away it made me sneeze.

Joy blessed me and her mother said that Manson was bad because he’d wanted to be bad and if this is what I was learning at college then she was glad Joy hadn’t gone. I tried to explain to her that she thought what she thought about Charlie Manson because she believed in free will and that she believed in free will because she was born in the 1930s.
It’s impossible, I said, to have a thought not of your own time.

She had tacks in her mouth and didn’t respond.

Everything is metaphor, I said to her, quite seriously. The greatest scientific theories, religions, historical movements, I hate to be the one to break this to you, are only metaphors for human fears. None of it is the least bit real. We just see what we’re compelled to.

Joy leaned forward and put the spider on an impatien.

Of course, I said, standing up and starting to pace across the porch. I took my notebook out and started to take notes. I was picturing an elaborate A plus, my name in the Who’s Who of College Students. Of course none of what I’m saying can possibly mean anything because we’re all like termites working on a structure and not seeing it, and once you try to look at something you’ve changed it, it’s all post-structuralist deconstructive Marxism, and the style of your times permeates everything but you can’t see it while you’re living it, and the Eskimos have one hundred words for snow.

Joy left the porch and started cleaning up my mother’s petunia bed. She removed the wilted blossoms with a sound like snap beans.

The old chair sat in the driveway with its legs in the air. Joy’s mother was pulling on a piece of brown webbing. 200 years from now, I said, jumping from the porch and writing furiously, it will all be clear to the densest baboon.

Their only response was snapping and hammering.

But I think I have a glimpse, I said, I think I see a glimmer.

I had a job that summer working a fast food drive up window. Every day for hours I’d handed paper bags to heads and arms mounted on interchangeable cars. They flickered by my window like a slide show. The style of our times, I said, is a drive through window. The style of our times, I said, is fragmentation.

I heard hammering and snapping. Snapping and hammering. I stood in the middle of my mother’s lawn babbling. I was relieved when they started talking about garage sales. I never did go back to college. From that moment on I was heavy into things.
FOR XEN, BECAUSE YOU ASKED ME AND BECAUSE I WANTED TO TELL YOU

words  words like water
perhaps
death without
yet I run from rain to keep dry
words like flies
or better, bees
like a shiny penny
like twenty dollars when you were ten
then
why me
like a tenebrous crone
sometimes,
flowers mean more than
than sun in winter
(even if they're only jimson weed)
"You talk to me in riddles"
but I think the same way
the Joker never got caught for very long...
words  suffused
and I squeeze through the phone
and run to your arms
"I'm fine."
(please hold me)
and by the way...
which way towards felicity
SILK SCARF

This moonlit cloud is
the belly of a fish swimming away.
Later I will feel something—
put my hand in last spring’s coat pocket
and find a scarf forgotten since a rainy day.
The moon is dressing in
the silk stockings
the ladies wore after the war.
It is caught in the sticky nets
moth worms spin in trees.
Wrinkled strands wrap its face.
I have not finished feeling
the old woman’s silken cheek.
I will see silver cheeks
close the moon again in a dark purse
when my cheeks are old and loose
and warm under night’s pallid skin.
SEX AND DEATH POEMS

If has been said by more than one learned scholar that all poetry, give or take a few stanzas per century, is about sex and death. Given that so many of our readers are avid poetry fans, I have undertaken the massive task of proving or disproving the above stated hypothesis. Although my research is as yet inconclusive, I have discovered several rather pure examples of the genre, which I am now prepared to explicate for your enlightenment. (The names of the authors are withheld to protect them from their readers.)

Our first example illustrates the inherently complex sex and death concept with a remarkably economical use of language.

Sex and Death Poem #1
Baby, if I can’t have you
I’m gonna die

Note that the first line displays the author’s desire for a sexual encounter, if not a full-fledged sexual relationship, possibly leading to matrimony. The tension culminates in the second line with the threat of violent death through suicide (a ploy found universally throughout contemporary poetry). In any case, it cannot be denied that the author is very much in touch with his feelings.

Our second example is slightly longer, three lines instead of two, and, therefore, it is, as one might expect, exactly 33 1/3% more complex.

Sex and Death Poem #2
Baby if I can’t have sex with you
I’m gonna kill myself
But I’ll take you with me

The author’s sexual reference in the first line is a bit more explicit than the comparatively polite voice of the
first example, but the major difference is the threat of an unpleasantness to be administered on the person of his desires. One can only image his (or her) lover's reaction.

Our next example climaxes with a particularly illuminating insight into the nature of life itself, not to mention what it teaches us about sex and death.

**Sex and Death Poem #3**

Baby, you make me think about sex  
Sex makes me think about poetry  
Poetry makes me think about death  
Alas, woe is me  
Life...is a vicious circle

Sex and Death Poem #3 is so powerful that further discussion would serve only to weaken it. With that said, let us forge ever onward.

I think you'll all agree that our next example exhibits a rather uplifting, life-affirming, down-home flavor, if you will, that I, for one, find refreshing, especially in light of today's decidedly nihilistic cultural milieu.

**Sex and Death Poem #4**

We were supposed to get married  
And have lots of little babies  
But you changed your mind  
And now my life isn't worth a brass farthing  
So I suppose I'll just crawl out behind the barn and die

Very sad, to say the very least. Very, very sad, indeed. By combining a child-like rhythm with the drive-in horror movie motif, the author of Sex and Death Poem #5 charmingly juxtaposes true love with violence, suffering and mutilation. No easy task, that!

**Sex and Death Poem #5**

Boy meets girl  
Boy gets girl
Girl leaves boy for other boy
In a fit of jealous rage
Boy hacks girl's head off with meat cleaver
Rotting, pulsating, and oozing slime from every pore
Girl's body rises from grave to seek revenge

Example #6 is a tragic story told in the classic headline style. This example illustrates how values such as commitment, understanding, and forgiveness bring only pain in these morally corrupt, flag-burning times.

Sex and Death Poem #6
Boy meets girl
Boy gets girl
Boy loses girl
Boy goes on murder spree
Takes hostages
holds the police at bay
Girl speaks to boy with bullhorn,
"Oh, darling, I love you so much.
Please give yourself up"
Boy falls for it
He comes out with his arms up
Police shoot boy in head with bullet

Our final sex and death poem is an example of the very stylish "list" poem. According to the author, the following piece can only be appreciated by screaming it as loudly as possible to the accompaniment of a raging hardcore/speed-metal/thrash band.

Sex and Death Poem #7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercourse</td>
<td>Swan Song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copulation</td>
<td>Rigor Mortis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screw</td>
<td>Perish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commingle</td>
<td>Kill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propagate the Species</td>
<td>Meet one’s maker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A CHARM TO BE SPOKEN TO ONE WITH CANCER

Fishers together on this bank, we practice
The flowers’ way of beauty. Stars,
Stones, friends, seasons, lambs, lions, cells...
What part of us would we deny our love?

A CHARM AFTER DYING

Pine smoke rising from a mirror
Snowflakes from an icy lake
Mice from old rags
Peace from lost wars

A CHARM TO FALL ASLEEP

My heart hums and a drowsy moonlight stains
the honeysuckle, and a downy moonlight
dreams the honeysuckle, down a moony
dreamlight drowns the honeysuckle,
down a honey heartlight down
a dreamy humlight down a
down a downlight down
a down.
READING ROOM

Walk slowly into my silky room, rug pink as a milkshake
and my shoes lounging about, creamy patent leather,
lizard tongues of fast gold straps—

walk slowly, vines fall over the eyes of my house,
squirrels twitch on the fire escape, my nylons strewn
across the headboard, smoky scent of smothered
cunt, flowers pressed between moist pages, linger here,
untie your soft scarf, drop your black cashmere coat,
your static-cracking sweater,

I loosen the band around my waist and voices hiss
up around me, moans waft from the ground’s moss-softened
crevices, sky rippling with pleasure,

that priestly gesture, you closing the curtains,
unzipping your unstoppable boots, smooth calf, your
smooth calf and salty throat distract me,

I press the heels of my hands into your warm back,
lift your knees and lick the red mouth
between your legs, my chin and fingers wet with you,

the beaded bedspread wet with you, my rosy camisole and slip
slumped against the baseboard, dresser cluttered, amber
bottles of perfume, silver puddle of coins, coins knocked

onto the floor, angry roll across the linoleum, blue,
blue bathroom and my skin blue when I go in there
naked, flick the light switch, bulb popping,

mirror cool against my cheek, streetlight liquid and full,
outlining you on your side—you snap your fingers,
pat the mattress, stare at the ceilings, swipe dust

from my nighttable, lift the magazines wilted open
and overlapping where I left them,
too exhausted to continue reading.
GENE TRAIN SUICIDE

Sometimes my heart sounds like a construction site
In an abandoned neighborhood.
Everybody that could moved out long ago
Leaving nothing but shells of stone—
Their vacant eyes.
And now machines have come,
Looking for a future in it,
My abandoned heart—
Sometimes sounds like the burrowing animal called Guilt
Making chambers in the mud
Where no chambers were.
But sometimes way back in my head
I see what I call my heart & I hear
Just a thin hiss of smoke, or
Firecracker in an unclear mirror:
It's the engine that's kicking over
Of what was actually just some train of thought
Not really mine, but that's how it starts
The coil of the fate slowly opening, a spring:
I took a walk, I don't know why
I saw the guy come out of his hotel
He had a suitcase & he thought he was getting away
I was behind the guy when I saw the gunshot
I didn't know I was travelling so fast
That I would be the target
Then I said I resent being the object of other people’s
Romantic fantasies.
....It doesn't matter
I hear the bullet coming anyway
I hear the launch & the slow grind—hey
First I thought it was my very own suicide
Plug coming for me,
I thought shit, but then I thought
It’s not aimed at me,
I changed that train to comfort me
Why I ....think I am that bullet
I'm a walking bomb, that bad ad
Campaign for someone's death.
Because my head hurts like it's going to blow
& if you look at my face, if you read my mind
Any minute now
You'll find it's all really aimed at you
I said what I Am is aimed at you
As if there's any difference who dies
In a Causeless War.
DIVER

It’s four a.m., wild-eyed with fathers of the same burning name. Their mouth is yellow,
oh, their heart and blood are yellow...I howl
at the doberman till his plum brain bursts
and as they lay you on the soundless bed
only once do they lunge for me, banging the big dumb gong of Love. This is for you:
whole histories or one short thing to forget...
faceless Annie down in the soup,
somebody famous
swimming through a hole in the floor.

What hero is this whose footsteps slam the sidewalks
at gloomy intervals?
The King rides the button of an Eveready up his dueling heel...the Queen arches with inspired detail
toward the blue ceiling.
The gleam on their jackets is sap from trees
in the Rhineland. They come in the dead of night
to give me this blond watch, a purse full of runes because,
they say, beneath the microscope of God
these things are more useful
than the face of Man.

Meet me somewhere. Even in space
we’ll talk through milky halls of light.
On the river, surprise me squatting under the bridge
beside your brother’s name. There’s a garden
under it of fuschia, pepper and gold.
Cockscomb line the canal with vivid, furred intelligence.
The soil’s black. Everything grows.
Even the stones are rich, and bleeding.

But this, now, is winter.
The clock is sore with ringing and Blind Sam coughs
a dream
and loses himself on the rug.
The smell is yellow. The night and the moon
are yellow. Meet me
where our power sets us free. The S.S. Rotterdam
floats like a tulip
in my eye.
LADIES' NIGHT AT THE DISCO

Hundreds of hungry women
can taste the opiumed musk
of their bodies
before the show starts.

Hundreds of hungry women
lick their lips, give lingering looks
order drinks from nearly-naked
spandexed waiters.

The tuxed-up m.c. rollerskates out to center stage.
The music gets louder and synthesizer-funky
like a first boyfriend pressing to go all the way.
It's now or never.
The m.c. whips us into an evangelistic fun frenzy
and someone's grandmother jumps up,
plants a sizzling kiss on his surprised
mouth. She's trying to flip him
into a tango dancer's hold.

The dancers flex their sleek
oiled muscles
like metallic animals or robotic
blow-up dolls.
These are men who practice
meaningful looks/thank-you-ma'am eyes
as regular reps in their daily work-outs.
We cross our legs,
island villagers getting ready for a seaquake
and all over the audience
warm/electric wet spots appear
on cotton/silk/polyester/
standard/hipster and bikini panties.

Each dancer has his "act":
The Flasher, The Perfect Man,
The Construction Worker, The Virgin, 
The Caveman. 
Each has a signature gyration and a skimpy 
g-string showing well-muscled firm buttocks. 
All the while the m.c. exhorts the lovely 
ladies to tip nicely for brief kisses 
and oh my god, 
the Caveman jumps on someone’s table, 
humps close to her delighted face 
while the grandmother keeps going for it 
with the m.c.

A hurricane-force desire sweeps the room. 
My brain moves down to the mass sexual chakra, 
slowly succumbing 
teasingly caressed 
into this circus of sensual fantasies.

This is group sex in the eighties, 
visually heavy necking, 
safe and sanitary.

Hundreds of hungry women 
lick their lips. 
Hundreds of hungry women, 
we are an army, 
ready to screw 
anything 
that moves.
ONION

A heavy hand-held burden. Smells
of a million satisfied diners, tufted, sporting
a navel inside out. It’s a purse. Mother of
Pearl. A bloated wheel. Rung and ringing, it’s
a bell. Full with stinging soup, it’s the song’s
momma. It’s matter. Stung, it’s an under-
ground blimp, tissued, filigreed, its packed
oblivion wrapped in belches and huge sighs.

Forgive it. It’s pregnant and secret, a tuber baby
banished at birth, a bloated head, tired, tremendous.
Lean into its lemony bag and smell: leftovers from other
suppers, greasy drippings, trimmed covers of old legumes,
a stew to blow on, an uncool pudding, a surprise of skin.
Stripped. Omened. Onioned, once and for all.
BOOIES AND BATHTUBS

The thing I remember best about my mother was her fascination for peering through keyholes. Anytime there was the slightest hint of a commotion in the hallway, outside our five-room railroad flat an Adams Street in downtown Hoboken, her face would light up like the night sky on the Fourth of July, and she would spring into action, tossing aside her broom or dishrag or whatever else she happened to be holding, and dash to the door. There she would drop to her knees, wedge her head beneath the heavy glass doorknob and with one large and expectant eye, spy to her heart’s content on whatever was taking place at that moment on the landing.

"Who’s there, Ma?" I would whisper, sometimes crouching down beside her. "What do you see?"

Usually it was Mr. Reilly who lived in the apartment two flights above us with his wife, Rita, whom the neighborhood women referred to as "that long-suffering saint."

We all liked Rita, but not many of us, not even the men, liked Reilly. He was a silent, morose man who worked as a nightwatchman down in the Maxwell House Coffee plant on Hudson Street. He was forever coming home drunk in the dead of the night, waking everybody up and sending tremors through the house as he staggered and stumbled his long gangly limbs and bone-thin body up the winding, narrow staircase.

For at least two years, I lived in mortal terror of the man. A six-foot-four, one-hundred-fifty pound Irishman with flaming red hair, beet-red skin, and wild, blood-shot eyes, he was the leading character in all my childhood nightmares. Perpetually tottering, he seemed always on the verge of bloody destruction. In my worst moments I’d see him tumbling down the stairs backwards and crashing through the milky glass pane of our front door like some terrible ogre, his flaming red skull split from end to end.

My mother, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy Reilly.
Every time she heard him stumbling along, even in the dead of night when she was already tucked safely in her bed, she'd jump up and rush headlong through the dark, cold rooms until she arrived at the front door, her right eye twitching with anticipation.

Blow by blow as the action unfolded she'd fill me in on all the bloody details: Reilly was down on his hands and knees and crawling; Reilly was being pulled to his feet by two burly cops; poor saintly Rita was bending over Reilly, weeping and wailing as she wiped the blood from his long pointy nose.

From time to time my mother would get so excited watching the continuing adventures of the Reilly family that she'd even clean out the dusty keyhole with a Q-tip dipped in rubbing alcohol just to make sure she didn't miss anything.

But despite the endless fascination my mother held for Reilly, he was not the only person in the building who captured her attention and devotion.

There was also Mary the Mop Lady who lived in the apartment below us and who wandered the halls on occasions mumbling to herself as she searched high and low among the rickety rails of the banisters for her dead husband, Harold, who had died one night scrubbing down the linoleum on the third floor landing. After his death, which Mary never quite believed in—she claimed he had simply gotten lost in the building somewhere—Mary took over his duties as janitor. In return for her labors of hauling out the garbage from the back cellar and mopping up the hallway floors once a week, she was given a three-room flat on the first floor at half rent.

We'd see her every day as we went up and down the stairs since she kept her door always open a crack. My mother claimed this was Mary's way of letting Harold know he was still welcome, but other people in the building thought differently.

"She does it to let out the stink," they'd say, joking that they had to hold their noses every time they went by her...
door.

And it was true. There was a terrible stink to Mary’s flat. it came from all the mops and dirty rags and old pails she used for cleaning the halls. She kept them lined up against the wall in her bedroom where she’d sit for hours mumbling to herself in the gloomy dark.

Since we all felt sorry for Mary, however, and knew that she was a bit off her rocker, no one ever complained. Nevertheless, it wasn’t easy. Moldy mops are a terrible thing to keep on smelling every day.

But despite all this, my mother always got excited when Mary came up to our landing to scrub down the floor.

“She’s here,” my mother would exclaim, rubbing her hands together and kneeling down to watch the show begin. “And this time she looks bad, real bad.”

I would sit at the dining room table glancing at the back of my mother’s head, as I did my long division and dreamed of Sister Ellen, my English composition teacher, whom I was madly in love with at the time.

As far as I was concerned, she was the most beautiful, exciting woman in the world. Not only did she have exactly the kind of eyes I wanted—sapphire blue flecked with hints of purple—she also had the kind of voice I wanted: soft and low and lilting like notes from a toy xylophone.

It was like no other voice I had ever heard. Certainly nothing like my mother’s, which some people described as being similar to a gasoline explosion, and certainly nothing like any of the voices of the people I knew who lived within our red-brick tenement. But since my mother got angry every time I mentioned Sister Ellen, fearing that I would one day grow up and turn into what she called a “lizzie,” I rarely talked about her.

“What’s Mary doing now, Ma?” I’d say from time to time, just to let her know I wasn’t thinking about Sister Ellen. “Is she rambling on about Harold and Lithuania again?”

“Oh, you want to see her,” my mother would exclaim.
"The poor thing looks like she’d about to drop. She doesn’t know what the hell she’s doing. She doesn’t even know enough to rinse out the rags. No wonder this place is crawling with cockroaches."

Sometimes my mother would insist I take a peek to see for myself what she was talking about, but the sight of Mary down on her hands and knees among the filthy soap bubbles did not work the same magic on me as it did on my mother. In fact, if you want to know the truth, it made me kind of sad. Especially when I saw how the hem of Mary’s dirty yellow slip used to hang down from her house dress and trail in all that filthy water and how her stockings, which she tried to hold up with big round garters, would slip and sag beneath her fat, knobby knees.

But on top of all that, I knew how important that keyhole was to my mother, and how she really savored the moments she spent at it. The last thing I wanted to do was to steal those moments or hog them in any way.

In fact, most of the time I was very generous with my mother’s keyhole. That is, until the Two Women arrived. Only then did I acquire my mother’s fine taste for peeking.

They moved into the five-room flat directly above us—Edna, a pleasant-faced buxom woman in her early forties who, we soon learned, wore see-through blouses and long flowing kimonos that opened to the waist, and Dorothy, a tall, blonde lady in her early twenties who, it was rumored, sang and danced in exotic nightclubs all over New York City and was once engaged to a man on death row.

On the day of their arrival, however, my mother and I knew nothing about our new neighbors, but after listening to all the excitement taking place outside our door, as the women came trudging up and down the stairs with box after box of belongings, my mother’s curiosity was driven beyond its limits. By 9 A.M. she was already at the keyhole, providing me with one of her finest play-by-plays ever.

By noon I learned that our new neighbors were two
women who spoke a foreign language, wore long funny dresses, went in for lots of weird jewelry, had pointy fingernails, drank lots of white wine, and owned lots of unusual things like feathers and fur pillows and bright orange and purple paintings and big statues of fat, naked women with gigantic boobies, and large round bellies.

"Talk about shit!" my mother said, her mouth pressed against the doorjamb. "You wanna see this crap! Come on, take a look."

I didn’t need much persuasion, especially since it wasn’t everyday I got a chance to see naked boobies. My own hadn’t begun to appear yet, and so naturally I was more than curious to see what I was in for.

I knelt down, pressed my right eye up to the keyhole and stared. At first all I saw was part of my eyelash, but after blinking a few times I focused in on the two women. They were standing a few feet from my door, facing one another, their hands resting atop each other’s shoulders. Then all at once they both leaned forward and kissed. A long, lingering kiss, smack on the lips. Just like that.

I was so flabbergasted, I almost fell over.

“What’s the matter?” my mother screamed in my ear. “What’s happening? Why are you so pale all of a sudden?”

I couldn’t say a word. I simply hung onto the keyhole as if it were a life preserver.

“Answer me,” my mother roared. “What’s going on out there? What do you see?”

Never before in my life had I seen two women kiss like that. I felt like I was going Down in an Up elevator at breakneck speed.

“Move over!” my mother shouted, pushing me aside. “If you’re not going to tell me, I’ll see for myself.”

It was an eternity before she removed her eye from the keyhole, but when she did her face was ashen.

“Did they stop?” I asked, after a long moment, wondering if it were safe to steal another peek.

“Never you mind,” my mother said, grabbing my arm and dragging me to my feet. “Get out of here. Go to the
bathroom. Go pee. Do something."

From that moment on the keyhole, Edna and Dorothy became my obsession. Every time I heard their door slam shut and their feet tapping down the stairs, I longed to throw myself on my two knees and press my face to the door. But since my mother's startling and terribly unjust pronouncement that keyhole-peeking was now suddenly off limits, there was no way for me to satisfy my curiosity.

Thus, I was forced to live only for those rare and exquisite moments when I encountered both women in the flesh.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," they would say, smiling at me as we'd pass on the narrow stairway. "Comment allez-vous?"

Most times I was too shy and tongue-tied to say a word. Compared to all the fat housewives in the building who spent their lives hanging out their windows screaming after their children, Edna and Dorothy were like creatures from another planet. Especially Dorothy who within only a few short weeks had captured my heart by becoming the talk of the building, the scandal of the whole neighborhood.

To my mind she was even more exciting than Sister Ellen who wore a black veil all the time and whose hair I had never once even seen. Dorothy's hair, on the contrary, was like satin. Long and flowing and brightly gleaming, it shone like the sun on a lovely lake or a soft wet flower.

Night after night I would lie in my bed, picturing her in the room above me smoking cigarette after cigarette as she tiptoed around in her open kimono kissing Edna and crying a little over her old dead fiance who to my mind was the spitting image of Jimmy Cagney.

Why someone as fascinating as Dorothy could inspire so much gossip among the neighborhood women was something I just couldn't figure out, but there was no question that she was on everyone's lips. Even Mr. Reilly and Mary's stinky old mops took second place to what people had to say about poor old Dorothy.
"If only she wasn't that obvious," Mrs. McCarthy, who lived on the top floor, said to my mother in the laundry room one day. "If only she didn't flaunt her aberration so much. I mean, you think those kind of people would at least know how to use a little discretion."

"What kind of people," I asked, staring up at my mother defiantly. "What's she talking about?"

"None of your business," my mother said, giving me a vicious shove. "Now go over there and play."

I went no farther than earshot would allow, figuring that if I couldn't peek at my friends at least I could eavesdrop on my enemies.

"Oh, I tell you, it's terrible what this world is coming to," Mrs. McCarthy continued. "And to think they actually go around naked and wash one another's backs in the bathtub!"

"No!" my mother said, grabbing hold of her throat. "You can't be serious?"

"That's what I heard," Mrs. McCarthy insisted, nodding her head. "One of the neighbors across the street said she saw them from the window. Their shades weren't even down. Can you imagine?"

"That's unbelievable!" my mother exclaimed.

"Yes, and what's more, they do it all the time too. Right here in this very house under our very noses!"

The thought of Dorothy and Edna being so maliciously maligne while they sat naked and unsuspecting in their bathtub was simply too much for me. I burst into tears.

"What's the matter?" my mother screamed, running toward me in a frenzy. "What's happened now?"

All I could do was wail, my face swimming in misery and snot.

"Stop it!" my mother said, yanking me by the hair. "Stop it, you hear?"

"But it's not fair," I screamed. "It's just not fair."

"What's not fair?" my mother asked, eyeing me suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

"Dorothy and Edna," I sobbed. "Everybody's always
picking on them.”

Mrs. McCarthy glared down at me.

“It’s not polite to listen in on grown-up people’s conversations,” she said. “And what’s more, children should be seen and not heard.”

I began to wail even louder until my mother shut me up by clouting me on the ear with a right hook that left me reeling.

By the time my head cleared, I knew it was all-out war, and what’s more, I knew I was firmly on the side of Dorothy and Edna. Even if it were true that they were taking baths together and looking at one another’s boobies, I didn’t think it was right for other people to go around snooping on them and then talking about them behind their backs.

I began plotting my strategy. My imagination knew no bounds. Like superman, it soared through the air faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive.

I saw myself crawling through their bathroom window as they sat together naked in the tub scrubbing one another’s backs.

“Beware of windows and keyholes,” I warned. “Your lives are in danger.”

Other times I imagined my self flying straight through the ceiling like a mighty bird and burrowing myself in the warm sleeve of one of Dorothy’s silky kimonos where I would lie in wait for her enemies like a deadly vulture ready to spring.

In bed at night as I lay listening to their soft laughter rise and fall in gentle ripples above my head, I pictured myself in the bathtub with them, splashing among the warm bubbles and then rushing to their rescue with one of Mary’s mops as Mr. Reilly came crashing through their front door, his red lips frothing at the sight of their wet naked bodies.

For weeks I racked my brain, wondering how best to declare my love and allegiance. Then one morning out of the blue I came upon the answer. It was the simplest, most
natural thing in the world. I would write them a long, passionate letter explaining everything that had ever been said about them, and how much I loved them. Then I would quietly slip it beneath their door and wait for their message.

All that afternoon through my geography, spelling and science classes, I wrote and rewrote, telling them in the kindest way I knew that, although lots of people thought them bad, I would always remain their true and faithful friend no matter what. And although I tried not to mention anything about bathtubs and boobies, I did manage to say something about how important it was for them to keep their shades down "whenever they did funny things together." Finally, after six drafts and lots of crossing-outs, my letter was complete.

I was about to put it into the nice blue envelope I had brought along when suddenly I heard Sister Katherine Eucharia, my Earth Science teacher, call my name.

"Laura O’Neill, bring whatever you are writing immediately to my desk."

At first I couldn’t believe my ears.

"I must be dreaming," I thought, remaining glued to my chair. "This can’t be happening."

But I wasn’t dreaming, and before I knew it Sister Katherine was charging down the aisle at me like a raging bull, her long black veils flying behind her like the wings of a rabid bat.

She snatched the letter from my hands, pulled me up from the seat, and slapped me soundly across the face.

"Next time you obey when I talk to you, young lady, understand?"

I was so stunned I couldn’t even cry.

The rest is history.

By the time Sister Katherine, Sister George, Sister Veronica, Sister Mary Louise, Sister Grace Edwards, Sister Clair, Sister Thomas, the principal, and my mother got through reading my letter, my fate was sealed.
Justice came quickly and unmercifully.

For almost a week, I couldn't sit down without crying out in holy terror, and although I was permitted food, I might as well have been dining in the State penitentiary, bread and water being all that was allowed me until I confessed my terrible sins and begged for God's sweet mercy.

As luck would have it, I remained the topic of hot conversation throughout the school until the day Felix Fitzpatrick snuck up onto the roof and threw a brick at Sister Louise's head while she monitored her class of fifth grade girls skipping rope in the courtyard at recess.

After that, my reputation as the school's leading misfit faded considerable.

Slowly the weeks rolled on and by the time spring arrived, turning the only two trees on Adams Street from dirt brown to dull green, things were back to normal again.

The nuns stopped telling me what an awful child I was; Mr. Reilly broke two ribs by falling into one of Mary's metal pails; and Rita, Mr. Reilly's saintly wife, suffered a miscarriage after trying to drag her husband by the necktie up three flights of stairs.

As for Dorothy and Edna, well, I really don't know if they went on kissing and taking baths together since my mother wouldn't let me anywhere near them. All I know for sure is that one day I came home from school and saw them driving away in a big moving van.

Where they went is anybody's guess, but for years I prayed like hell that they would remember to keep their shades down and to stay clear of keyholes.
DWELLING ON/IN

I twirl the globe
and land my finger
squashing the city
he's in this time

and in that
other-side-of-the-world
night
no one sees
the big shadow
of my consideration.

Moon, I call,
if you're not too busy
making werewolves
and dodging satellites
put on the
old broken mask of Love
just once more
and with a hard
foreign language
whisper my name
in his ear.
LOPOLP TWINES

Are these the drinking sellers? Little ones run along where it’s flat. Points perfect for the pond or lagoon.

I have length, you have preferences. Legato. Trained to bake and then lengthen.

A perimeter that is not your lesson. Brought back stronger and pure barometer. A pillow or pouch sized the balloon.

And in grass of wrench. Silence. Mexico.

There was a grace down flat that could not be reflected. On high. The stones, torment.

Inch by marge. The boat’s lingo. Tied to torment, latched avenue.

Letting the height from the deep perspective. He was able to, then waddled, detriment. It all came up then, mirrored reason.

The three streams. The vulgate. Water is lighter than objects.

As is in. The three thoughts of flatness. Brain and bareness, the following dull.

The bird settles for no sensation. He’s marveled before. Ho ho.

Nights on the park and nights with no ignition. I could stop it. I could go long.

The metal initiating failure. The top and then the cry. Long things that roll and consist.
These poor dots are the ingredients. Stoppers. Calmers.

Penetrant fly. Oh. The goose of the open mouth made sense sink.

It had had its emitters. Something was allowed on the lake. Gone unseen on the pond.

They're all calling now, crying. Too set for a fit. Acknowledging the date on a rock in this space.

Crime had a way of following, a master. Dip and then fly. Sounds in wire chairs.

It could haul the sky, slip its fronds. Strangers arrived in plenty. Merely things.

Tall ones. Apes with lights, with apples in crinoline on fire. Wait for that flag to go down.

The birds that meet. The scaler. Well written grasses.

Half of your answers. Settled at the spit for no reason. Shown on a screen.

In a tick, in the part blank. So told to me, mated. Boat pieces.

City not the city. Primp failure. Velocity bottles.

Things over stretched hands that loose things. We could have paper that the pendants, beads that the flies. Glass in the hallways.
A favor to me, burn it. White pounds that float.
Investment in a violet arena.

And the smoke leaks into the pocket pond.
Tours. Armpit of flavor.

Goose needs. Let out that fly. Avenging
long silence.

Accoutrement. Clinger to Amalfi. Clanging short
to the strand.

Weapon. Summertime leaving, dish of so small.
Cork pole and I'd smile.
BECAUSE MACAROONS WITHOUT THE SEA AIR
WOULDN'T BE NOTHING: A LOVE POEM

I will capture the exact moment this August moon
rises out of the Atlantic
just a little to the ocean side of the Music Pier
   in Ocean City, New Jersey,
glowing a deep orange.
The color I imagine the souls to be
of those who die with a smile.
Later as it rises higher it will turn
a pale white, the color of the faces
of the women of Atlantis,
but it will be that orange glow I will capture,
the color of a rich wine nature reserves
only for the sea.

I will keep that moment
in a blue porcelain ginger jar,
and I will wrap the jar in the travel section
Then I will place it in a stainless steel cylinder
and store the cylinder in a time-locked vault
in the office of a lawyer
in Paris, France.

Seven minutes after I die as stated
in a prior directive, the jar
will be given to the third granddaughter
of the eldest son of my second wife.
She will not open the jar until
the August moon, barely waning from full
enters Aries, and then with the aid
of a sterling silver straw she will
drink the contents so slowly
that she can hear the stars move
and then and only then
will the glow of the moon
remain in the wombs of all women forever.
AFRICAN JACK BENNY

in space above Africa
Jack Benny lays sleeping
the whitest man in the whitest heaven

two black ravens perch on his palms

he is the symbol of African justice

he tried to bring Christmas there
warping the dancers encircling a mountain
into small squares of red green color
viewed only by satellites

one's just now transmitting

there a slave ship rocks
there a breast droops
a spring dries up
then fills again

I want what's African yesterday or tomorrow
as far from shacks and pennies as possible
I want an African thought that goes:
she is the grandmother's grandmother of the
one with the yellowing voice.
I want African singing protecting the dark night
with a million human heartbeats

this then attracts photographers who
come in pairs to protect the moment

Jack Benny believed in this
though I don't believe in Jack Benny
but in Africa
where the future is waiting
in Africa, giant plants grow a common cure
for a common cancer
and an old satellite beams
a new image
onto a teenaged world.
CELADON

Eyes glaze over at thought of elusive matters,
like the ages of stars,
truth at the far edges of light, or the surface of celadon cracking deceptively above its mysterious depth.
The glaze over the jar explodes to shattering light layered terraces of cultivated forms, tendrils and peonies, say, to carry the eye through the gray nephrite haze beyond each imaged tier into tiers of surprise.
EXCERPTS FROM LINGERMAN’S HANDORACLE,
AS TRANSMITTED TO ROBERT GALLAGHER (CALLED
“BACON” IN THE TEXT)

Preface

But I won’t try to “explain” it. I draw your attention
instead to the somewhat blurry xerox displaying the
facade of Lingerman’s house of voice illusions. Note
especially the theriomorphic imagery and captions, “I hoot
for Lingerman, etc.” This was our inspiration, or perhaps
Lingerman’s ectoplasmic foot in our door. In any case,
Lingerman boasts, at the very opening (“Lesson One”) of
the handoracle, that he has secured, in lieu of “whittled
dummies..., a pair of vacant rubes from among the living
[“our two glad fellows, Bacon and Bungay,” as he dubs
them], to sit upon my immaterial knee and emit
responses.” Bacon, he concedes, will not at first believe any
of this: “Bacon now writes the present page and thinks it
Bacon’s.” But he assures us that with time “a certain logic
will increase its hold over both him and his collaborator,
Bungay... And then I’m back in business! The Owl will
again Hoot for Lingerman! The Hen will again Cluck for
Lingerman! The Ass will again Bray for Lingerman! The
Crow will again Caw for Lingerman!”

Thus Lingerman initiates a strategy of beguilements
designed to reinstate the proper name of “Lingerman” in
the place of an authorial subject, the one who “throws” his
voice across the medium of a text. But Lingerman is quick
to assure us that his revenancy is not simply onomastic. By
lesson two he is already declaring his independence of the
“empirical Lingerman” and presents himself as “an
esemplastic agency that can resume itself thematically
without adherence of [memory-]traces.” “But suppose,” he
asks, that such an agency “wanted to research those traces,
this time without the protractions of any actual birth. Such
is the position of Lingerman (true of voice). He has put off
the slippery caul of memories and must how undertake,
against the direst odds, to reconstruct himself esemplastically."

But already I stray ahead of myself. By no means is Lingerman's the only voice we have so far heard. In lesson one it is already evident that Lingerman experiences certain difficulties, that he must struggle to reassert himself on the surface, and against the many-layered undertow, of a vertriloquial palimpsest. Toward the end of this lesson "oracular" sediments have begun to reveal themselves and the lesson concludes with the long passage of heiroglyphs which I have enclosed. Lesson Two, entitled "Utchat as Inaugural Caption Point," deploys another mysterious paragraph, origin of which uncertain, before Lingerman is able to resume. It begins: "The ocean heard in our conch, the echo-weave of vatic murmuring on which our hand(c)oracle is found drifting, heaves also on its swells Egyptian reedcraft..." Here we learn of "an Ocean of Ventriloquy, where no voice thrown is not already echo of some other, which is also echo..." The Utchat (the ornamented eye of the Egyptian text) surveys this ocean in a kind of synaesthesia for which seeing and hearing are undifferentiated. Lingerman is perhaps not altogether successful in his attempt to assume explanatory control over this development. He says that the Utchat is "our handoracle's first caption point." But what exactly is a "caption point"? All he can tell us for now, he says, is that "one eminent sage has likened them to the points at which quilted upholstery is buttoned down, and that our handoracle, as you will see, is to be organized by similar fastenings, especially in the sense of meaning accepting intercourse with its contrary. This is the way the ghost weaves it simulacrum, enfleshing its little hollow of a vortex, giving Lingerman something worth lingering for, enabling him to tumble once again in the haystacks of brute Being..."

One more important element is to be noted. It is Lingerman's belief, we come to realize, that if he can succeed in assuming, from the beyond of death, at least the
partial authorship of a text, it is not impossible that his beloved Lucy, a palm-reader, might similarly succeed in perusing it. "...and as for you, my darling Lucy, who in certain readers of this handoracle will have later discovered yourself, I throw to your recursive glance this impalpable kiss..."

But I am carrying on too long. I will enclose a few of the shorter ("oracular") fascicles of the handoracle to demonstrate their diversity—you will see that not all of them admit the presence of Lingerman. None admits mine.

Bob G.

LESSON ONE: Voice Throwing

Consider the following predicament. Suppose the ventriloquist, like me, Lingerman, being dead, had no voice—forget any whittled dummies on which to squander it! I have, for this reason, secured a pair of vacant rubes from among the living, to sit upon my immaterial knee and emit responses. Now, it is unlikely our two glad fellows, Bacon and Bungay, would comply, if they believed this. So it is necessary to becloud their minds with certain cautiously insinuated equivocations. Bacon now writes the present page and thinks it Bacon's. As we progress, however, a subtle logic will increase its hold over both him and his collaborator, bungay. And then I'm back in business! The Owl will Hoot for Lingerman! The Hen will again Cluck for Lingerman! The Ass will again Bray for
Lingerman! The Crow will again Caw for Lingerman!

And what of Bungay? Is it pure coincidence that, house-hunting, Bungay should have come upon the house which was once Lingerman's, and then have discovered a picture of this house, when it was the emblem-cluttered emporium of voice-illusions, in which dwelt and purveyed their subtle arts, Lingerman and his soror mystica, Lucy? Or that he and Bacon should have found occasion in all of this for devising their handoracle? —Bacon's mind turns inward, unsure of whose grip commands its helm. But what does he find there? Haunted by a sudden plausibility, Bacon sinks into trance, and now words come to him, sinuous, exuberant, rearing up heliotropically, and swaths of fetid mist, writhing, dissipate before a voice of sunlight, one that echoes into deep gorges, parsing with its white syntax the roiling basins of their waterfalls, and speaking to the eye a forgotten fire:

...............
LESSON TWO: Utchat as Inaugural Caption Point

The ocean heard in our conch, the echo-weave of vatic murmuring on which our hand(c)oracle is found drifting, heaves also on its swells Egyptian reedcraft...bowl over basket seated man courtyard mouth walking feet quailchick firedrill hawk scroll...seafog text in which we find first caption point, our hawser woven of the very wave it seeks hold from...from elsewhere, anterior to differentiate meaning, Utchat of Ra, re-integrated Eye, and one who dwells within the Utchat of Ra, whose name is unknown, seer of millions of years...oceans of ventriloquy flood his gaze, where no voice thrown is not already echo of some other, which is also echo...and of its contemplation of this confabulating vast, though one of vision, we hear only echos, for underdrifts of synaesthesia draw us, interlacings across levels of or script, deepening toward the most archaic erasures of our palimpsest...waves part to reveal bottomless gorges underprow, and it is upon such unsteady sea that he who was Lingerman, and who was re-appropriated by the gaze of the Utchat, must revoice himself...

Not always an easy task.

Know, then, —and it is now more clearly I, Professor Lingerman, speaking—that our translation of the text concerning the Utchat, though it will arise piecemeal, interwoven without noticeable citation throughout this handoracle, is nowhere explicitly given, and will therefore function like so many unseen grooves, still ushering down hidden defiles of signification. The reader is at his own discretion in his pursuit of it: it is to me only the surf through which I am struggling ashore (but also the raft on which I do so). And so I seek re-entry into the pullulating cosmos, where once I felt blood in my veins, where I exchanged caresses with my beloved Lucy: the realm on one’s exit from which is nailed fast a horizontal door.
(Soon, Lucy, you will receive inklings of my message to you.)

And of caption points, which we shall examine in more detail later, suffice it to say here that one eminent sage has likened them to the points at which quilted upholstery is buttoned down, and that our handoracle, as you will see, is to be organized by similar fastenings, especially in the sense of meaning accepting intercourse with its contrary. And this is how the ghost weaves its simulacrum, enfleshing its little hollow of a vortex, giving Lingerman something worth lingering for, enabling him to tumble once again in the haystacks of brute Being...

To achieve this, it will be unnecessary to gain rude mastery over Bacon and Bungay. We allow their assent to come in its own way. Bacon wishes to understand our project in terms of a strategy for his poetic experiments. A handoracle, he tells himself, is certainly no widely exploited genre and he believes it holds much untapped potential. He further sees in it a tool for exploring what he calls the Unconscious. By making himself (in imagination) prey to this peregrinating Dybbuk (which is me, Lingerman), he is able to examine the uncertain moorings of his subjectivity, as these are manifested in the paradoxes and equivocities of language. And his reader, too, is invited to "use" the handoracle accordingly, to find in it what certain Christian hermeneuts found in the writings of Virgil: not in this case one's dogma confirmed there, but the opened possibility of drawing vatic lots....

LESSON SEVEN: Episteme

The knowledge to which our handoracle gives impress is the effect of a shift, a sudden re-organization, a sudden channeling of affinities between desert and flood, the process of a quenching and the return of a fecund silt. But it is never an automatism and is not subject to mastery. It resists frame. Its sayings are a zigzag heliotropism, advancing in narrowing crisscross along a thousand edges
of penumbra. It is the reception of light with every confession of unknowing. It is a vast region of ocean birds and leaping fish, within whose unsteady elements is nothing posited with fixity, only the rafts joined from its flotsam...

LESSON TEN: Owl of Predication (Second Caption Point)

mysterious owl-glyph
    and instrument of all substitutions,
lips of our inmost infant
    hum you at the remembered breast,
tranquil power all-sorting,
    owl of all predications,
free of the jesses of determined thingness,
    keen in the quick blink
cutting free of all trails of accreted meaning,
    swift in your swoop
on the Nile mouse in clear moonlight,
    who witness all distributions
of the limbs of Osiris,
    vigilant over the abounding granaries
of Sechet Aaru, counter of all pulses
    still sleeping in nights of dark rivers
pulsing in the clear disks
    of your watchful unthinking,
to the sudden blink
    of your spacious thought-fields of cool wonder:

Indifferent keen Owl of distinctions,
    we hail you!

Our handoracle invokes the Owl of Predication, the copular bird. This owl (pronounced "m") means "in the position of," "as." Not "Lingerman is Lingerman" but "Lingerman as Lingerman." Neutralizing the question of entity, the owl's swoop delineates a region free for
substitutions: not "Bacon is Lingerman" but "Bacon as Lingerman." The gaze under which this substitution is effected is only that region of emptiness, and no one appropriates an "is." Therefore, for (a) m read owl.

(It should be noted that securing a caption point is never easy. The handoracle will seem to knot in on itself, and is at these moments most exposed to the charge of purveying nonsense. Each time (twice, so far) that we have negotiated a caption point, Bacon becomes nervous. He so far fails to realize that no matter what the joint to be welded, it is always with the same blue flame.)

By bringing up the Owl this way, our handoracle does not mean that the Utchat is superceded. We must try to think of the Utchat's gaze as not bound by alternatives. It gazes. On everything it gazes evenly and without construction. It does not oppose to its luminous clarity even the thought of if there's anything there. Eons of tormenting trifles fill its empty orb like an intricacy of fool's-fire soon vanished. But it also includes the two-eyed Owl, blind or sighted spontaneously, in this way making intimate subtle displays of its own freedom, the more precious for their vaporous exiguity. Thus it is possible for everything to be real and not real at the same time, or for two different times to be at the same time. The Owl is the expression of that function, and at its blink, I, Lingerman, am able to revoice myself from the barest nullity—not trammeled by any contradictions, not opposed in the slightest by any exclusively real body-tenant named Bacon, by virtue of our handoracular Owl, I confidently declare myself the true-voiced Lingerman. —Think about it, my dear Bacon. Think about it.

LESSON ELEVEN: The Ka

On its plinth the hieratic statue assumes the full magnificence of its profile. To its head are affixed what
look like antlers, but they are discovered to be upraised forearms and open hands. It is the statue of someone's *ka*. It is the exact double of someone. We think of this *ka* as mirror-self, and also that which distributes its image in the mirrors of others: for it is of one's *ka* the thought is formed in one's absence. And we say it is one's *own ka* and not someone else's, though it is completely estranged and exists chiefly for others. This paradox frequently reduces one to its servitude, so that many have squandered their fortunes on the *ka*, which often becomes an insane rebellious puppet, completely overmastering the identity of its original. —But who is the original? This is the great question when it comes to *kas*. Am I only an empty light that shines in order to manifest that being which is my *ka*? Some follow such thinking and become entirely identified with their *kas*. But it is the teaching of our handoracle that *kas* are not even dung unless this light shine on them. This light, we say, is no other than the witnessing of our Utchat, which opens to our multiplicites like sheer unaffrontable space. Ponder this carefully.

LESSON FOURTEEN: Gnostic

If one using the handoracle should become snagged (for it is at times obscure), he need only expose its leaves to a light breeze. For like the oaktree of Dodona, it will then whisper secrets to him. And understand further that no single leaf of our handoracle suffices to initiate this soughing, but must involve itself in a co-emergence that offers throughout its entire tree. This is the recursivity of our handoracle, the always differing recuperation of its fractalated themes. For it does not consist of signs to be grasped but scions to be grafted. And its meanings, far from proceeding always left to right, can be discovered in various ways, and in one instance, even by boustrophedon in the same furrow. Thus we define the rubric of our present fascicle in the following words: Gnostic: A TAG OF DIM NOON MID FOG, A TACIT SONG. Contemplate
this definition with care and you will see that beneath its surface connotations of paradox and obscurity, it distinctly mimes a retracing of steps in silence. The thief returns, but we see only the footprints of his departure.

LESSON NINETEEN: The Unretained

Our handoracle secures the ghostly structures by which to read itself always against certain unremembering fluidity, a mercurial runnel of reflections unreflected. But what appears there appears in a determined solidity and timeliness because of the incessant promptings of a throng of memorious ghosts. Forever striving to return, to restore some unspeakable loss, to retain what has already escaped them, revenant fragments redelineate their woes in the figure of worlds for us. For no world, not even a part of one, is encountered pristinely. It is always first noticed in the vanishing differentiality of a fruitless retention, in a mimicry of possession named "naming." Even the most intimate self is framed in this illusory way.

LESSON TWENTY ONE: The Future Perfect

Despite his liking for that inflection, Lingerman cannot return to us in the third person. Only by virtue of a kind of shifting wand can his tongue flickeringly be heard by us. And so the "Lingerman" whose biography might tempt investigation—him you may sift as you please, he is dust, and I am happily disburdened of him. But I on the other hand—let's make no mistake about me. And when I say I, Lingerman, do not think I am making toy with you! —And you, my sweetest Lucy, surely you can peek through the thicket of those eyes which now, alas, are finding my obscure subtleties so rebarbative. Part therefore their thorny twigs with your dainty fingers, my marmoset, and read my longing for you. For the difficulties are all just here, my chirp, in the eyes or those who trail at ankle the clinging weeds of a determined fatality, entangling their
proper names in its daedal paraph. But you and I, my Lucy, can we not drink together from this lucid cup of unmemory? And can we not sign the contract of this second, immeasurably deeper marriage, with ink drawn from the living mind which now elaborates this handoracle? Black as this ink may be, and indelible, its characters will nevertheless have become legible only in disappearing. And then, and once more, my inestimable precious one, will we have extinguished each other with caresses...

LESSON TWENTY TWO: Gnomic Shards

...a stain of sadness: it is crowded with ghosts.

Raven head of the spagyricists, its dark tincture permeates a resistless diaphane.

But soon the painful veer of desirous meaning is lifted from it and it begins to albify and become lunar, quieting all restless phantoms.

The fool reflects a moment on his own changefulness.

And in the pines a sigh toward shadow of their soughing voices is gently interrogated by owls.

...nothing beside remains...

The ash scarcely remembers its truculent flare, and doused coals unleash a feeble hissing.

Something here receives welcome of its own distances, offering surcease of desire and cool vacuities to ease its furrowed brow...
I WAS SOMETHING

I was reaching for my lip balm
but found the cigarette lighter
burned my lips something awful

I was watching the cats crawl
like hours
after sparrows
after dinner

I was considering Kandinsky
got dizzy
and vomited
the sparrows

I was wanting a bird to nest in my ear
and a leopard in my pocket
and an electric socket

I was buying a pack a day
of smokes, of gum
of wolves

I was riding
jalopies
of jealousy
through jalousie
windows

I was almost human
I was thin as a second

I was something
WATER LILIES

There's been a heat wave around here lately and no one's been doing much of anything. The air is a sticky gloom and the roads are baked and the boys don't come around on their bikes for my brother anymore. Mom is in the basement ironing and I can't think of anything else to do to help her so she has me painting the little rocks around the flower garden white.

I'm about halfway done when I get a telephone call from Priscilla at the post office. She says she's got a strange package for Mom there marked LIVE CONTENTS WATER LILIES HANDLE WITH CARE and she's afraid to leave it sitting in the heat too long. "It's from your mother's friend," she says and I can tell from the way she says it that she knows all about the crush that this man has got on Mom. I wonder what Priscilla thinks about this, happening so soon after Dad's death, wonder what it matters. I shut the door, head for the post office.

I see some men in front of the firehouse putting up a red sign for the carnival next month. The carnival always falls on my birthday, which has sort of become a running joke because it turns out to be the only way there is to celebrate. I get closer to the sign and to the men and see that one of them is Tom Sweeney's dad and my heart beats a little off for a moment and I remember how I used to love Tom Sweeney.

I go into Peppy's for a soda; they've got the air conditioning on full blast, which feels good, and I think, well, today is not such a bad day after all. Because the next thing, Kenny Sheets comes in while I am standing in front of the Tasty Cakes deciding which one I want to buy. He exclaims to me and to the girl behind the counter about the heat and how he is doing the work of ten men on the farm. He asks the girl to make him a ham and cheese sandwich.

Out of the corner of my eye, I look him over and see that he's not so bad. Tall and shiny-faced and almost handsome. My brother says he sees him in Fran's Pub
drinking beer and hustling pool just like any other guy and that he wouldn't be such a hick if he didn't wear those plaid shirts with snaps instead of buttons. But I know those kinds of shirts, the kind that farmers wear out on the town, and they're not so bad. I think how it might be to be Kenny's wife. To live on a farm and wake up at five looking fresh and smiling, like they must do. Kenny smiles at me just then, and I smile at that but who am I kidding, he's just an old farm boy who loves the land and who probably doesn't have much to say for himself anyway.

Kenny goes to leave with his hands full of a sandwich and chips and coffee so I help him with the door. Outside, up close, I see that he is sweating quite a bit but he doesn't smell with the stink of a farm, which impresses me a little.

"So, what are you doing with yourself this summer?" he says.


"I think I saw you in town the other day," he says.

"Me? When?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Hey, how about coming to work for me and my Dad?"

I wonder whether he is serious at first because he's got only guys working for him. But then he looks at me like he means it, like I am all of a sudden the spice in his life and, because this will probably be the most exciting thing that happens to me all summer, I say yes.

"Hey, wow. We'll talk to my Dad about it right now if you want. He'll probably put you on today. Come on, hop in."

He's got a red pick-up truck that looks so clean and shiny, blinking in the bright sun. It is only a short distance from here, so we don't have to do much talking. We turn off the main road to the farm. I see the boys up ahead, spread out by rows in the strawberry fields. Their shirtless backs are arched towards the sun. Kenny slows it down to a crawl here and the boys look up like cats to see who he's got in the car with him. Kenny keeps going and I think
how these guys don’t know the first thing about life, except what they see on their bicycles.

I meet Kenny’s father in the high barn and Kenny starts bragging right away about how smart I am, as if he’s known me all along. His father, I can tell, likes me right off, says I’ve got expressive eyes. He is over six feet tall and has thick blonde hair like Kenny. He’s wearing dark, dark aviator sunglasses and a blue baseball cap. He shakes my hand to mean I’ve got a job now. He says he’ll start me off packing corn and warns me not to hold the cob against my hip when I’m snapping the stem off or I’ll have bruises, just use your wrist, he says. He shows me how in the air and I smile at him but I am tired and my head is swelling up from the heat. There is a heavy smell of manure and hay in here, and it feels like the air has stopped moving altogether. I wish I were home. I remember the water lilies at the post office and hope to God they haven’t died from the heat. I should have gone straight there to get them; they have been sitting there all morning and I am ashamed of the thought.

Kenny walks out with me. By the way he is swaggering beside me, his head jolling off to one side, I get the feeling he is going to stumble over some words before I go, maybe offer me a ride home. But instead he gets really close and looks real bold.

He says, “Tell me the truth.”
“What?”
“Did Tom Sweeney really piss on you at the Starlight Drive-In?”

I feel the swelling in my head again, but it’s more like in my heart.
“Well?” he says. “I heard something like that.” I feel my jaws hardening with anger and it occurs to me that it must have been Tom who had told him.

“You’re a pig,” I say without shouting, but I say it so that my throat hurts and then I turn to go. He calls my name but he doesn’t come after me. I catch his father’s look from
the barn, which is the look of someone who has never heard much of the truth before, but I keep going and I run right past the boys in the field who are all gawking at me and I say under my breath, I don’t care if I have been made a fool today because I’m never coming back.

When I get to the main road, I slow down to a walk to catch my breath. I press on my chest to make my heart stop. Damn. This whole thing’s got me thinking now about Tom Sweeney and that horrible night. I remember I got home and I was afraid to get undressed, I was afraid to sit down. I think I stood in the same spot for an hour. I think about it and my legs get all numb again and I wonder if the pain will ever go away, if it’ll be there forever. As for the pissing, well, he actually drank a whole six of beer in the car beforehand, and I can understand anybody for that. But why I am even thinking about this. Whenever I do it ruins a perfectly good day.

I make it to the post office just as Priscilla is closing up. She has the bars in the window and it is all dark behind there. She tilts her head back and puts her hand on her neck and then on her chest, I guess to feel the sweat. She slides me the package under the bars like she’s never seen me before, but I let it go, because the heat’s been eating everybody up.

All the way home, I count the number of water lily drawings on the mailing label. I keep having to stop and count again because some of them are overlapping and some are cut off at the edge. It is really impossible to tell. I pass a smashed turtle on the clean road. Cars are whizzing by over and over it. Then through the trees I see my mother standing by the pond looking happy and peaceful and something tingles inside me. Something about the perfect timing of this gift. Something about this man wooing her and knowing exactly how to do it.
RETURN

Something is calling for darkness,
Something for light;
The late birds die enroute.
All news reports are such
That where we stride
Small animals tend to follow.

Steel cleats of men grind out sparks
Along the farthest ridge of night;
A boundary of tears you say:
God, perhaps, or stars weeping silver.

*

Gathering toward the cross-hatched city,
There, the blue gleam of houses,
There, the archives—ponderous mandates,
Bold signatures like time itself
Inscribed upon the soul...

And rooms of still museums
Swathed in the velvet chains of evening,
The glow on airless streets,—
Veins of warm Neon; turbulence,
Whisperings...

*

Your arms,
Moon colored,
Hold me now in a tight
Parameter of musk
And heat.
I cannot recall
Such silence, it leaps
From limb to sill
Landing on all fours
Prepared to hear us speak.

I hold off madness,
My tongue on your forehead,
Your hands on my life.
POEM FOR JOE BEAM

the time may come, joe
as we evolve and grow
when who we love is who we love
and how we are is how we are
cunt to cunt or cock to cock
or chinese to tasmanian
it wont matter whom our hormones say we fuck
a touch will be a touch
not legislated
by the frightened herd
every woman, every man
will see themselves
in each and every other
and we will be as full of light
as the sun is full of fire
we will be as open
and receptive
as the sea

but all of us
these words fall on
will be long dead by then, too

Joe Beam (1954 - 1988) died of AIDS. His anthology of Black Gay Men's literature, In the Life, was published by Alyson in 1987. He was a past editor of PBQ.
THE SHADOW KNOWS

On nights when sun can't find the moon
and sleep is farther away than morning,
give him a torturer he can feel.
One from whose bulky body rises
the yeasty smell of sexual fear,
one around whose sweating edges
adheres the scent of rancid desire.
Let him be tied then with nylon rope
and given up to this man
the nerves can scream aloud to,
one who will bring him
pain the body understands:
a thread of shining steel eased
between fingertip and fingernail,
electric light burning in eyes sewn open,
blue electric fire searing the scrotal sac,
the hiss of a white hot brand
pressed smoking into dark flesh,
letting the smell of his own cooked meat
into his shivering consciousness.
But on this night, a colored and smiling porter
is the only image in his head.
Every twist and turn he makes, the porter owns.
The porter owns his every sigh and curse.
This short, yellow, fleshy man with small hands,
this marcelled man in industrial grey
who wears a pencil thin moustache
and drags a heavy mop
back and forth outside
a door that will not close,
slosh swoosh slap at the turn
swoosh slap swoosh slap
back and forth
all night long...
UNTITLED

She was the first to say it. She said the sound of the sounds for names, verbs, all-matter-of-things-green sticking up through the snow, patches of uncovered blue-black earth sort of sexual wet where the sun had been, dog barking, books, yesterday and tomorrow, Plato and Fanon and the differences between them, the names of the letters spelling coffee on the bottle of coffee brandy. We were walking through the woods, the path around the lake with the smell of leaves preserved from fall and with the smell of joggers’ sweat. She named these two, “grace” and “masturbation.” Because death was in both these smells I felt that they were the same thing. If it’s death, she insisted, the death which rises with absence, yes, but then accepts itself like knowing we are not in heaven but walking around a lake with an abandoned bathhouse over there beautifully washed in sun. This was the death she meant. Because she was an artist she arranged everything into a new order, and she was the guide. Thus she pointed out loon, pine needle, lichen and portentilla: 1, 2, 3, and 4. Because I was momentarily infatuated the order seemed natural. And when she shrugged off spelling Hiram Walker the brandy I drank with her was a general kind but coffee even more. With this wild stroke she believed she was working on the problem I was having with seeing the simple beauty in things. She wanted me to have the specific sensation of what we were doing so that I might recognize her. I could tell by the far off look on her face that she was beginning to feel I would never yield far enough. The uneasy sense that we would stay two versions of ourselves, never addressing fully ourselves. She felt that I felt she wasn’t there—at least not in the complete way when she melted snow in her mouth and in the melting loved the taste of spring, felt herself in the center there. It was a need she had to show me something—sweet, powerful, sincere—that would overcome the way I was looking past what we were doing to try and locate some
ideal truth. We made love against the warm side of the bathhouse. I saw pictures, a flood of memories from summer days as a boy pulling up dandelions, finding robins’ eggs in spring. Afterwards when we talked it was as if it were the same. It was as though she were showing me a notice sign, this is life, like—"oh, someone left his watch, do you see the mallard out there, what do you think of Reagan’s talk about making the Sandinistas say uncle, Reagan’s such an asshole." After this things went more slowly. As though we’d temporarily reached a deep place we both were inside of, could call across to touch each other. I was infatuated. Because she was a biologist she arranged everything into a new order. Walking again we found a set of tracks in the snow; she said she could picture the animal who’d left them. We lost these tracks in a bare spot but up ahead found another set—this time bigger and deeper into the white which was a little page-like. She began describing the animal—it had a gold furry coat, a Chuck Berry face, and big blue fins for swimming, it was like the animal I was when riding my bike when I was five and sure I was beginning to get off into flight. She said these new tracks were more dreamy and impressive than the first set, that they belonged to a special animal. I disagreed. "They’re both the same," I said, shaking my head in the air. "Or at least, the same animal made both sets of marks." Now she was getting annoyed with me, "why wouldn’t I let things be what they might be, and, well, this was my loss." We went on arguing. She brought up the raccoon that I had told her had wandered onto my porch last night. "Let’s say the raccoon made tracks of different kinds," she said, "then why not three types, or five, nine, and so on. Your raccoon wouldn’t make sense—or, anyway, our idea of the shape of its paw wouldn’t. You’ve just ended the faithfulness between the life of the raccoon—its late night tramp across the road to sniff flowers, gnaw on old bones, knock over the garbage cans—and the place in our own lives for it, our knowledge of it. And I don’t know why I go on talking to you anyway."
You don’t really hear me. It’s as though you’re cutting the bond between my words and what I mean.” And suddenly she was going to cry. I imagined what it would be like to cut the tie between the word and its world. Just the sound of calling the white pine red pine, the rock—ice, or just the sounds themselves. I tried to imagine her argument. Raccoon crouched down, blacked eyes falling back, drawing its fat drum of a body across the snow, furry inkling a manual of style—distinctive midnight cat. I shut up, drank the rest of the brandy. What she said was music.
THE DISCOVERY OF MOUTHS

At first eating was through skin like plants: the way they devour sunlight without teeth or tongue. Foods were rubbed in, all over. Ripe avocados, for instance: on bellies, on arms, buttocks, breasts, scalp. Wherever the body wanted nourishment. Feeding time was absolutely thrilling—a banana on the spine, plums rolled behind the knees, a sliced cantaloupe cradling the elbow. All this was thousands of years before the first one minute screen kiss, back in the very earliest days of Eden, back when thoughts jumped without speech across the gaps between them. Adam and Eve, that is, who never missed a meal, sampling the Garden all over their bodies: putting leaf lettuce between their toes, pushing ripe baby tomatoes into their ears, pomegranates turning their genitals red. How sweet the delicacies of those early days! Before Freud, before gossip, before hunger.
SHADOWS FROM THE WOMB

When you stormed out of town,
headed for Africa atop a swaying camel,
scarves draped over your mouth, hurling
daggers at those who stood at the kitchen door,
their hands rolling like question marks,
you thought you’d made the big move
toward Enlightenment. You thought

you could shake those little selves
like a dog shakes fleas
til along about Spain you realized
your camel and you can’t wriggle like that
and folks in the kitchen
had long since sighed, cleaned out the stall,
gone back to their bowls of steaming

Brunswick Stew and have nothing to do
with phantoms darkening waters of oases,
clutching fur on the belly of your beast—
shadows you dragged out of the womb
and then dismissed until here,
halfway across the Sahara, where you, vulture-bait,
lie panting in their shade.
LONGING

I should wear a sign
for all prospective lovers: caution—
this twin suffers severe
post-coital blues. Bring tissues
and bear in mind it has nothing
to do with you. It’s just
the way your faces resume
their shapes,
how those limbs become your own
again, and these mine, the sudden chill
of sweat on the belly. And then

the ancient memory of intimacy
before birth,
when bodies of half-formed brains
and sightless eyes
rolled over one another
for months and months
in a silent watery world,
stubby fingers intertwined,
knowing nothing but another
presence growing in the dark.
JEWEL THIEVES

1
When we saw the huge red Rothko in the Kline Gallery, Jack and I quit our jobs as asbestos removers and got on as night janitors at the gallery so as to have our days free to ponder the painting. We go to work at six-thirty after the gallery closes, get off at three, grab six hours sleep, and return to the gallery when it opens. The curator just shakes her head. We sit before the painting until it is time again to mop the floors and clean the walls. We only leave the Rothko room when groups tour the gallery or someone from the university comes to lecture on the painting.

2
Our significant others split shortly after, not understanding the significance of the painting nor our response to it.

-1
When we first saw the painting, we wept. Our significant others asked us why we were weeping. We said, you have to ask?

CRUSHED RUBIES
The painting is called, quite pragmatically, “Red on Maroon.” It might be said (metaphorically) that Rothko’s reds were derived from crushed rubies. It is, I think, not a bad image.

FURTHER INSIGHT INTO THE PAINTING
A ruby-red rectangle looms in the foreground. Behind it is an amorphous pink cloud surrounded by a wine-dark border. The rectangle forms a kind of entrance to the rest of the painting.
To rule out any sexual connotations would indeed be an oversight, yet to dwell on it would be an equal if not greater instance of myopia.
I suggest that one way to look at the painting is to think of it as a three-piece musical ensemble, whatever your taste:
  ruby-red rectangle = violin or guitar
  amorphous pink = cello or brush drum
  wine-dark border = stand-up or electric bass
I proffered this insight to Jack who says it has added a new, aural dimension to viewing the painting. We sometimes plug our ears with cotton to hear the painting better.

3
In order to better understand the personality behind the painting, Jack bought a book in the gallery gift shop, Conversations with Artists, in which Rothko upbraids the author for trying to carry on a conversation with him. In another part of the book, Rothko expresses his hatred for museums and galleries: "How often [one of my paintings] must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally!"

4
On the weigh of this remark, Jack and I have decided to steal the painting and rescue it from further affliction.

5
We have measured carefully its frame and built a duplicate in the loft we are renting on Barnett Street.

6
Tonight, while the night guard slept on the coat check counter, we removed "Red on Maroon" from its frame, folded it over seven times (the paint is spread thin enough to do so) and hid it in my empty mop bucket. I covered it with my dry mop and waltzed past the guard on my way out the door under the pretense of mopping
the front marble steps—my last nightly task before punching out. I placed the canvas behind the front shrubs. Jack, in a symbolic gesture, rehung the empty frame in its appropriate spot. We woke up the guard who checked Jack’s and my bags. Then we all left together.

7
Jack and I returned ten minutes later for the painting. We put the folded canvas in a backpack and took the subway home. We took turns carrying it, not because it was heavy, but because we wanted to entrench ourselves in the responsibility of our actions.

8
Back at the loft, we immediately tacked the painting to our frame. It now hangs in the living room, from which we have removed all the furniture (with the exception of one plain sofa) so as not to distract us from our meditations on the painting.

9
The art community is naturally (I almost said understandably) in an uproar. There have been front-page (lower left) stories in all of the papers. Critics speculate that a private collector contracted the heist since the painting is too famous to return unrecognized to the buyer’s market. Jack and I have been acquitted of any possible blame. We both passed lie detector tests by putting a small pebble in our shoes and exerting pressure on it every time we answered a question (a trick Jack learned in the Marines to screw up the test results).
10
Nevertheless, we resigned from our jobs at the gallery to devote more time to the painting which we are now calling "Crushed Rubies."
SONGS OF THE DEAD

Death sings and sings
a song
with her ancient white guitar,
and sings and sings and sings

García Lorca

1
For the man
who cannot love
it is always afternoon

the black cloud
of sorrow
fills his huge heart
as he lays in the dust
weeping

his salt tears
nourish no one
the roots
of the tree of life
can find no ground
inside him

the birds of love
will not flutter
in his veins
and the cool night
never fills his branches

in this emptiness
only the sound of weeping
the sound of the sea
2
They stand with their hands
held high above their heads
as if they were supporting an army

it does not matter how they are dressed
they turn their eyes away
their incandescent watches have stopped
like violets bursting into flame

they cannot smell the blood
so they say it has no smell

they cannot hear
the heart beat
as it carries life
into the future like ants
so they say it is not beating

their bodies litter the fields
like furniture

3
The dead are among us
you can feel
their warm breath
on the back of your head

termites have eaten
through their
wooden hearts

ships that sink
like the sun sinks
into their bellies
4
The apostles of grief
gather
like birds
in the field

all afternoon
they circle the sun
waiting for you
their last supper
A JOURNEY

One day peering down at the earth standing at attention in the palace square, we feel a longing that the sun's relentless energy cannot heal. So, we take off our robes and crown and set off down and around the stairs to the secret door behind the Adam’s apple, laboring against its constrictions, until, with a gulp, the body accepts us and we float solemn as dirigibles by the lungs and the heart singing its sad song to itself.

Pulled downward by the dense gravity of the genitals, we wonder if they are where we were meant to go, but hear a deeper call beyond the great forking,—and which leg will be the one we travel by?—the right, for all our lifetimes when we rose from our chairs, have we not set off with the left, while the right, diffident, hung back bearing the weight and thrust of our leaving? So, we clamber down the right thighbone, beyond the knee and risk the sharp descent of shin until at the great hinged gate we enter the outpost of the foot where welcoming toes shout their greetings—the relief's come at last—after so many years.

Meanwhile, the earth, breaking ranks, has fallen into holiday—spreading itself out like a meadow for revelers, and we set about to learn to dance before the forest, before the dark, dark forest.
TREMOR

Tonight I rehearse some words for my mother's life
to free us both, as in the old days when men carved
in wood or chipped away
at stone to give forms to their fears,
to catch them and stop their roaming in the world.
Without these words my sister has been caught by
something she can't name; and my daughter
has been left unborn and when she does arrive she
won't have a clue why she's
so lonely. My son
while making love to his
wife will pass through his sperm
something like a shadow or a tremor, only
bigger, only heavier. Their names will be chiseled on it
and they will confuse themselves with their fears.
WHAT IF THE GNOSTICS GOT IT BACKWARD?

Robert Hass’s latest collection of poems, Human Wishes, continues the theme of poem as benediction and beatitude developed in his previous book, Praise. Blessed is the human, he insists in poem after poem, the pleasure of watching one’s own children, of eating fine food with good friends, of sex. And no less blessed is the shared grief after miscarriage, or the difficulty of fitting the strange, the other, into the pattern of one’s everyday life. A teen-age girl in the prose poem, “Novella,” recalls an odd and persistent memory of trudging through the woods to pose for an old, semi-blind painter. It is all “sexual and not sexual, as she herself is.” In her pre-pubescent innocence, she is as much a part of the “path to his house,” where “deer had eaten the tops of fiddleheads,” but not the “peppermint saprophytes sprouting along the creek...,” as she is the object or art or desire. In “Museum,” also a prose piece, Hass finds perfection possible only in the unsolicited, fortuitous configurations, in the splendor of multiplicity: A couple breaksfasts in a museum cafe; their infant naps; the Sunday Times separates beside the melon; Kathe Kollwitz prints hang on the wall—it couldn’t have been otherwise!

Many of the poems present similar sudden and easy enlightenments. And so they should, Hass seems to imply, if only it weren’t for desire.

The first temptation of Sakyamuni was desire, but he saw that it led to fulfillment and then to desire, so that one was easy (“Spring Drawing 2”)

And if the Buddha’s peremptory words (via Hass) fail to convince:
As if language were a kind of moral cloudbarmer through which the world passed and from which it emerged charged with desire ("Human Wishes")

Hass places himself in the untenable position of finding his enlightenment, the unity in the multiplicity, through the very medium that destroys that unity—language which creates desire, which, according to Buddhists, is responsible for all existence, which means all suffering. Hass, however, is well aware of the perils:

supposing before they said silver or moonlight
or wet grass, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth? ("Spring Drawing 2")

Desire is so immanent in Hass's poetic cosmos that even his angels (in "Privilege of Being") bristle at the sight of sexual desire. Unlike Rilke's angels, terrifying to humans, Hass's angels "braid one another's hair," and "shudder pathetically when they glance down at a couple making love."

All creation is offended by this distress. It is like the keening sound the moon makes sometimes, rising. The lovers especially cannot bear it, it fills them with unspeakable sadness...

So that for Hass, Buddhist desire approximates original sin.
Unfortunately, Hass's poems too often succumb to less radical forms of desire. Too often a poem stumbles into a hip eating establishment and forgets its true direction.

hunks of cooked chicken in a creamy basil mayonnaise a shade lighter than the Coast range in August ("Vintage")
Squid is so cheap in the fishstores you begin to consult
Japanese and Italian cookbooks for various and
ingenious
ways of preparing ika and calamari.
(“Late Spring”)

This is clearly a degradation of the complex matrix of
wonder that produced the more successful prose poems.

Similarly, Hass abandons his stated aim to be
“responsible for the innocence of all suffering on earth” for
the easy fulfillment of fatherhood. There are far too many
vignettes inhabited by his immediate family, his sons and
his daughter. And there are far too many passages that
grope about fatuously after significance.

and she, after the drive and a chat with her mother
and a shower, which is ritual cleansing and a passage
through water to mark transition
(“Spring Drawing”)

In spite of these lapses of attention, Hass’s collection
goes quite a way in presenting the reader with a human
universe that is complex, synchronous, and ineffable.

....It was the abundance
the world gives, the more-than-you-bargained-for
surprise of it, waves breaking,
the sudden fragrance of the mimulus at creekside
sharpened by the summer dust.
(“On Squaw Peak”)

In the end, it is this response proffered by Hass to the
Gnostic condemnation of the world (and all creation!) that
prevails. “What if the Gnostics had it backward?/What if
eternity is pure destruction?” The plausible answer, the
one posited and affirmed in poem after poem is yes,
perhaps they did get it wrong; creation is not fallen, not merely the perverse whim of a mean-spirited demiurge, but something sorely in need of blessing and transformation only language can provide. Among his contemporaries, Hass is one of the very few who can find that language.
CONTRIBUTORS

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Robert Gallagher is here published for the first time. A Philadelphia, his theater pieces have been performed at the Wilma Theater, the Walnut Studio Theater, and elsewhere.

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Ellen Powell Tiberino is a Philadelphia artist who has exhibited her work in group shows and one-woman shows throughout the U.S. and Europe, including the Whitney in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This year she had had a one-woman show at the Hahn Gallery in Philadelphia.

This is Ken Victor's first publication. He lives in Syracuse NY.

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Carl Watson, from Chicago, is living in Brooklyn NY. He has published four books of poetry and a collection of essays.

Barbara Wilson teaches at Frostburg State and directs the Western Maryland Writer's Workshop.
ANNOUNCEMENT!

The third Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival will host a gathering of many of this country’s finest contemporary poets at Waterloo Village in Stanhope, New Jersey, on September 13, 14 and 15, 1990. Two leading poets of China’s modernist literary movement, Bei Dao and Duo Duo, now both in exile, also will be featured. The festival will celebrate the oral tradition with readings, workshops, discussions, storytelling and music.

Participating in the festival will be internationally and nationally known poets: A.R. Ammons • Jimmy Santiago Baca • Coleman Barks • Cyrus Cassells • Lucille Clifton • Joy Harjo • Carolyn Kizer • Maxine Kumin • Li-Young Lee • Philip Levine • Howard Nemerov • Naomi Shihab Nye • Joyce Carol Oates • Alicia Ostriker • Quincy Troupe • Cecilia Vicuña • Richard Wilbur — and more than two dozen regional and New Jersey poets.

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