

FIELD



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GERALD STERN

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

GERALD STERN: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

Thinking about *FIELD*'s relation to Gerald Stern, in connection with this symposium, has led us into our own archives. Back in the spring of 1988, *FIELD* 38 contained a review of Gerald Stern's 1987 volume, *Lovesick*, by our editor David Walker. It was titled "Chekhov in America" and it began this way:

A reviewer writing recently in the *Hudson Review* charged Gerald Stern's work with sentimentality. I can see the reasons behind such a claim: Stern's work is often unfashionably passionate in its response to everyday pleasures and terrors. His poems frequently risk banality by dancing in the territory of apparently naked emotion; they are full of the sounds of moaning and singing, of extravagant gestures of celebration and repentance. But in my judgment there is nothing sentimental about the poems in *Lovesick*, if by that term one means a self-indulgent summoning of emotion for its own sake. What seems remarkable to me about Stern's work is how successfully he manages to dramatize the emotional content of the poems, framing it so subtly that the seam between art and artlessness almost disappears. In that sense he seems to me increasingly an American Chekhov. He is as generous, honest, and fearless a poet as we have, but he is also a masterful sculptor of tone, rhetoric, and cadence. (87)

This puts the case for Stern's uniqueness and accomplishment so deftly that it can still serve as introduction to this symposium on his work. Twenty-five years have intervened and Stern is still very much the American Chekhov that Walker admired then, still taking risks, still producing astonishing, passionate poems. Readers of this symposium will find, again and again, that our essayists discover and celebrate those very qualities that Walker identifies: the nakedness, the dancing, the extravagant gestures, and the disappearing seam between art and artlessness. Our writers discover, in a variety of poems over many years, a consistency of effect that

testifies to Stern's long-standing mastery of his art. And they show how they have learned to love both the man and the artist, not to mention the art.

The Chekhov analogy is quite helpful. We also think of Whitman and Williams, two important predecessors and co-conspirators, celebrating things American almost in spite of the official versions of this country. Gerald Stern's America is centered in places like Pittsburgh and Trenton: it takes a particularly gifted and courageous poet to walk their streets, know their people, sing and dance their pain and delight. Perhaps America needs a counter-laureate to tell us the whole and often painful truth about ourselves. If so, Stern wears that unofficial laurel and carries it off with humor, modesty, and grace.

It's a pleasure to have been able to collect and present these essays about favorite Gerald Stern poems. They add up to a moving portrait of a remarkable artist. Here is the conclusion of Walker's 1988 review:

The directness of Stern's language and the domesticity of many of his subjects should not blind readers to the unique authority of his vision. These are eloquent and compelling poems, brave in their treatment of the emotional life, yet refined and subtle in their craft. (93)

We're proud to present this celebration of a unique poet in our midst. We think Chekhov, Whitman, and Williams would be proud as well.

David Young

HONEY LOCUST

Here are about seventy snakes waiting to come to life,
each one about a foot long,
with noisy seeds inside them like little coffee beans.

They are curled up for the winter,
some in the leaves, some on the grass walk,
some lying face down or face up in the snow.

I put about twenty in my pocket so I can look at them
when I get home and tear them apart slowly
and shake them like old rattles in my ear.

I read and study all night trying to understand their cries
as they pull themselves loose and dance around in their beds
and sing about their lives like old musicians
singing about theirs.

THE CITY OF GERALD

“A man is indeed a city,” William Carlos Williams wrote in an introduction to *Paterson*. I don’t assume from this that Williams was the city of Paterson; he was larger than Paterson, even the Paterson of its heyday with its fabric mills & firearms & railroad engine factories, & of course its great falls where the milky waters of the Passaic plunge almost 100 feet only to wind up in New Jersey. Of all our present day poets Gerald Stern is the one most certainly a city, The City of Gerald, which must have at least one cafeteria where you can get chilled borscht & lemon cream pie. It must have a tap room with a stained oaken bar & bottles of rye whisky lined up in front of the mirror. The bartender must know at least three languages one of which is Ukrainian & another French but keep his mouth shut. And of course it must have a kitchen where Gerald can get fish on Fridays, fish & mashed potatoes & tri-colored Neapolitan ice cream to top it off. On Gerald’s favorite avenue there must be an ancient beech tree bronzing in afternoon light, one with a crotch large enough to shelter & comfort him so he can swap tales with the sparrows & the chickadees & sing along with the dark leaves. Gerald’s city must have at least one huge, open field where the ruined horses go to nibble & where every day Gerald can see the whole golden spectacle of the sunrise & later see the florid sunset darken into night.

Gerald will not be the Poet Laureate of the City of Gerald because the city itself is a poem & like all true poems wears its laurels at all times. In the City of Gerald I will learn how to look, for Gerald—a born teacher—can teach me to see the universe in an acorn & hear the music of the lost in an empty Pepsi can; he even remembers the lyrics the old Studebakers & Hudsons sang when they idled into never-land. His city will have, of course, street after street lined with honey locust trees. They will not be the thornless variety because, like Gerald, they must at times be spiky. If you stroll down the boulevards arm in arm with Gerald you will be lulled by the whispers of honey & awakened by the alarms of thorns. Should you walk those streets alone in all weather you will come to believe Gerald is beside you because like the honey locust he can tolerate a salty soil or sea spray, he can give of his pods & seeds so that others—

birds & beasts—might survive all that he has weathered. Like the honey locust he often turns brilliant colors in the autumn & can shed his limbs if need be to survive the decades of drought. We all know Dr. Williams was decades ahead of his time, but still how could he know back in 1954, know that one day a poet would arrive who would indeed be a great city, the City of Gerald, where the imagination is king & the honey locust its bride.

LUCKY LIFE

Lucky life isn't one long string of horrors
and there are moments of peace, and pleasure, as I lie in between the
blows.

Lucky I don't have to wake up in Phillipsburg, New Jersey,
on the hill overlooking Union Square or the hill overlooking
Kuebler Brewery or the hill overlooking SS. Philip and James
but have my own hills and my own vistas to come back to.

Each year I go down to the island I add
one more year to the darkness;
and though I sit up with my dear friends
trying to separate the one year from the other,
this one from the last, that one from the former,
another from another,
after a while they all get lumped together,
the year we walked to Holgate,
the year our shoes got washed away,
the year it rained,
the year my tooth brought misery to us all.

This year was a crisis. I knew it when we pulled
the car onto the sand and looked for the key.
I knew it when we walked up the outside steps
and opened the hot icebox and began the struggle
with swollen drawers and I knew it when we laid out
the sheets and separated the clothes into piles
and I knew it when we made our first rush onto
the beach and I knew it when we finally sat
on the porch with coffee cups shaking in our hands.

My dream is I'm walking through Phillipsburg, New Jersey,
and I'm lost on South Main Street. I am trying to tell,
by memory, which statue of Christopher Columbus
I have to look for, the one with him slumped over
and lost in weariness or the one with him

vaguely guiding the way with a cross and globe in
one hand and a compass in the other.

My dream is I'm in the Eagle Hotel on Chamber Street
sitting at the oak bar, listening to two
obese veterans discussing Hawaii in 1942,
and reading the funny signs over the bottles.

My dream is I sleep upstairs over the honey locust
and sit on the side porch overlooking the stone culvert
with a whole new set of friends, mostly old and humorless.

Dear waves, what will you do for me this year?

Will you drown out my scream?

Will you let me rise through the fog?

Will you fill me with that old salt feeling?

Will you let me take my long steps in the cold sand?

Will you let me lie on the white bedspread and study
the black clouds with the blue holes in them?

Will you let me see the rusty trees and the old monoplanes one more
year?

Will you still let me draw my sacred figures
and move the kites and the birds around with my dark mind?

Lucky life is like this. Lucky there is an ocean to come to.

Lucky you can judge yourself in this water.

Lucky you can be purified over and over again.

Lucky there is the same cleanliness for everyone.

Lucky life is like that. Lucky life. Oh lucky life.

Oh lucky lucky life. Lucky life.

ON "LUCKY LIFE"

I saw Gerald Stern read in the early 90s when he visited Texas State University (then called Southwest Texas State University). After his reading, he signed a book for me, and inscribed it "Love – Luck" (as I'm sure he likely did for most of us in line), but that phrase "Love – Luck" has stuck with me for twenty years now. Of course, yes, it's a nice salutation, a nice way to conceptualize things: love and luck. But it's not love *and* luck in Stern's salutation, it's a connected term, it's the dash, like the famous dash between birth and death years, that connects these terms into one economy, one life, and it's this economy, this joint economy of love – luck that Stern writes from out of. I think of the dash there as the unwritten, but suggested, third term of dancing, that also permeates many of Stern's poems. This is how I think of his work, how his themes of love and luck unite and dance in his strongest and most characteristic poems.

And there is a risk to this love, this luck, this dancing. A risk in keeping it going, in having the love collapse, the luck run out, that the dancing appear foolish. And this risk is an important aspect of his poetry. One of the ways I like to think about poets is to ask what the poetry risks, and, through this question, what the poet gives to the art of poetry (or allows into the art of poetry) reveals itself. At least I like to think so. When one says "risk" in contemporary American poetry, however, one must first make clear what one means by the term. I've thought about this often, as I've come across people often praising some poets for their "risk," when, though I might also admire the poetry, I don't quite see what it is that is being risked. When one risks something, I think of the imminent danger of bodily or otherwise personal harm: a risky venture. One might lose one's life, health, or property.

What does this mean for "risk" in contemporary poetry? Usually, it seems to me, when a poet is being praised for "risk" what one is praising is that poet's overt use of politics or personal disclosure. At least that's what it seems to be from reading the books that praise the poet's "risk" on the back cover. But I think of that, as politics and personal disclosure have become common in our poetry, to usually be a fairly safe risk. When it comes to the content of what

one might call "political poetry," there is very little these days that, in America, might get one arrested. Likewise, there is little when it comes to personal disclosure that might get one into real trouble, beyond maybe a wince. The reading public for serious poetry in America is a pretty hardy lot when it comes to this sort of content. But, even so, there are accepted ways of talking about historical and personal grief and horror, and to go some other way with them is risking, at the very least, bad taste, or, as is more commonly charged, sentimentality—that the dancing might appear foolish.

And what if the poem fails? What is the outcome, the punishment for failure? In contemporary poetry it's our reputations we risk (though, even with that, there's usually not much more than an eye-roll or the usual group defensiveness). The risks that open themselves most obviously to this criticism are sentimentality and naiveté, heightened emotions that can be mistaken for—or can run afoul of—pat, easy assertions or reductive simplicities. The serious poet today, above all else, does not want to appear sentimental or reductive (bad taste is much less of a risk, for various reasons).

Gerald Stern risks a panoply of high emotions in his work; rhapsodic praise and sentimentality are just two of the stations along the route. In a poem such as "Lucky Life," from its title, to the inclusion of words such as "horrors," "dear friends," "lost in weariness," "my scream," "black clouds," as well as the inclusion of a dreaming speaker and war veterans, pulls out all the stops, or at least enough of the stops to potentially give a reader pause. And yet, he pulls it off as he does in so many poems that one might imagine, from an unsympathetic summation or out of context quote, would fail. In critical parlance we would say that Gerald Stern has "earned" these words, this method, but that also sometimes seems shorthand, or an evasion of what's really going on in the work.

An example of this is "Lucky Life," my favorite poem of Gerald Stern's, and one I've returned to for some twenty years now, as one returns to the things that help, that recuperate the emotions that are so easily debased by common, uncritical use. Or maybe it's just that this is the poem that for me most completely incorporates Stern's salutation of "Love – Luck," which has come to me to be something of a primer for Stern's method, as well as an example of what he's

given to (allowed into) contemporary poetry. In "Lucky Life," we begin with the general: "Lucky life isn't one long string of horrors / and there are moments of peace, and pleasure, as I lie between the blows."

This straightforward assertion of luck, that the speaker is lucky that life isn't one long string of horrors, can also be read as a description of what "lucky life" is, what it is to have or to experience a "lucky life": it's not these unnamed horrors that we're left to fill in for ourselves that constitute a lucky life, and besides, there are these "moments of peace, and pleasure" (that remain unspecific) that the blows punctuate. We're lucky, yes, that life isn't just the "interesting times" of the curse: "May you live in interesting times."

But thinking this way, about Stern's doubled use of "luck" and "life," one could imagine the poem is going to say that somehow these "peace, and pleasure" moments will be the lucky life, but that's not it either. The poem moves on, from the abstract, general horrors and peace and pleasure (that risk a kind of easy reduction) to a more mundane version of luck, "Lucky I don't have to wake up in Phillipsburg, New Jersey," that undercuts the grandiosity of the opening, and allows the speaker to recall what the time was like back in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, and its repetition of "the year . . . the year . . . the year."

By this point the poem has narrowed from the general, abstract assertion of the opening, into a catalogue of events, and the terms "lucky" and "life" have disappeared into the life itself, and it's minor failures, which, of course, are major for the individuals involved, this "we" of the speaker and the one addressed that recently were in their crisis year "with coffee cups shaking in [their] hands."

Here is where the poem makes its second turn. It leaves the unhappy couple for the speaker's dream of "walking through Phillipsburg, New Jersey" and being "lost on South Main Street." It's in this dream of visiting this landscape—a dream that gets enacted three times as a sort of incantation—that leads the poem to its final shining moment as a series of questions posed from the speaker to the Atlantic ocean: "Dear waves, what will you do for me this year?" And it's these questions directed at the waves that bring us back to luck:

Lucky life is like this. Lucky there is an ocean to come to.
Lucky you can judge yourself in the water.
Lucky you can be purified over and over again.
Lucky there is the same cleanliness for everyone.

We are lucky that life is like this, the speaker says, and the paired wordplay of “lucky life” as “this is what lucky life is” returns. Lucky life, in this way, is a process, like this act of questioning—it’s neither memory nor place nor dream, but a method of interrogation, and cleansing, which is the hope of an answer that can only exist in simile, in the imagination, in the potential of the earth itself. It’s at this point that the speaker—in the final two lines of the poem—seems to become consciously aware of the doubled play of the term “lucky life” that has been hinted at in the poem, and rises into repeating this new usage in the joy of a sudden discovery:

Lucky life is like that. Lucky life. Oh lucky life.
Oh lucky lucky life. Lucky life.

Gerald Stern is a master (it’s one of his signature moves) of the repeated ending, a near litany of conclusion that he employs here, which can also be seen in poems of his such as “Soap,” “Leaving Another Kingdom,” “The Dancing,” “Lovesick,” and several others, and in this iteration, it’s in simile, the imagination, and our potential that life is at its best, and that is the gift, and the subtlety of his achievement. It’s a beautiful argument, ending on this term “lucky life.” It’s an incantatory moment, an assertive alchemy in the face of what one’s history is capable of. This is Stern’s great magic, to take the failures, the horrors, the base and vulgar, in their lived names, and to twist them into love and luck and dancing.

IF YOU SAW ME WALKING

If you saw me walking one more time on the island
you would know how much the end of August meant to me;

and if you saw me singing as I slid over the wet stones
you would know I was carrying the secret of life in my hip pocket.

If my lips moved too much
you would follow one step behind to protect me;

if I fell asleep too soon
you would cover me in light catalpa or dry willow.

Oh if I wore a brace you would help me, if I stuttered
you would hold my arm, if my heart beat with fear

you would throw a board across the channel, you would put
out a hand to catch me, you would carry me on your back.

If you saw me swim back and forth through the algae
you would know how much I love the trees floating under me;

and if you saw me hold my leaf up to the sun
you would know I was still looking for my roots;

and if you saw me burning wood
you would know I was still trying to remember the smell of maple.

If I rushed down the road buttoning my blue shirt—
if I left without coffee—if I forgot my chewed-up pen—

you would know there was one more day of happiness
before the water rose again for another year.

BOARD ACROSS THE CHANNEL

In Gerald Stern's "If You Saw Me Walking," the lulling effect of anaphora combines distantly affirming modal claims, both directed seemingly toward us via second person: "If you saw me singing as I slid over the wet stones / you would know I was carrying the secret of life in my hip pocket." This trio of devices allows Stern to achieve spellbindingly contradictory evocations of time (past island vs. always-possible-island), audience (near or distant), and mood (elegiac or self-soothing), giving this poem a memorable, hypnotic, uneasy weight.

Of the two ways of approaching the poem's treatment of its lyric "you," as direct speech to us or as overheard, neither is particularly inviting at first. If we take the poem personally, we allow hypothetical actions—however bewildering or unfamiliar—to be assigned to us. The poem dives right in: "If you saw me walking one more time on the island"—what island?—"you would know." The speaker's nearly-accusatory insistence upon feeling recognized is startling, to say the least. *You know me well... don't you?* the poem almost threatens, then moves on. *And here are all the ways*, it seems to say. That insistence is both unsettling and riveting. It is as if we have run into a stranger on the subway who insists on calling us by the wrong name, but is so glad to see us, and so confident in his reality, that we hesitate to burst his bubble. Meanwhile Stern's repetitions seep in like incense curling around the encounter, half-convincing us—maybe we are who he says we are.

In the other possible interpretation, the reader stands off to the side of the speaker's imagined dialogue with a fulfilling-yet-absent partner (real, imagined, somewhere in between), both persons strangers to us. Unlike the many love poems and songs that move audiences by letting us eavesdrop on personal yearning, this poem's pain is implicit. It does not make I-statements of feeling and need. Its imposing if/then statements, with their declarative ring of authority, run a risk of hiding the speaker's vulnerability throughout this poem. But Stern does not hide it: the disheveled self-disclosure of the speaker ("if I wore a brace"; "if I stuttered"; "if my heart beat with fear"; "I was still looking for my roots"; "I was still trying to

remember"; "I forgot my chewed-up pen"), flickering under the bravado of increasingly anxious declaratives, is what bonds the reader to his need, whether he's speaking to someone else or to us.

So who *is* he speaking to? "You would throw a board across the channel," Stern claims/wishes. Despite the "would" in this and all of the poem's lines, there is not necessarily a habitual past to back up the claim. The line "my heart beat with fear, you would throw a board" starts with an "if," not a "when." This lack of "when" throughout the poem leaves the track record of the "you" more uncertain: wishful projection takes precedence in this poem. For this reason, the audience of this poem—a poem which acts as if it might be possible to pin the actions of its "you" down—does not seem to be exclusively either the reader or some longstanding friend of the speaker's. The poem abides by laws of the imagination, making its audience—an imagined Other.

Poor speaker, then? Separated by both time and realism from this ideal friend? Overhearing him, we hear the wistfulness inherent in the conditional tense with its at once solitary and hopeful "not yet." Taking ourselves as his audience, we maybe feel sorry about the *it ain't me babe*-ness of our role in his narrative. Or do we? By the time we're done reading the poem, we are prepared. This speaker's given us much of the information that we'd need if we wanted to respond to his outreach—about the island's external landscape, about his inner world. Increasingly, perhaps, we've come to care about him maybe just enough to want to assuage his loneliness. If this is the case, aren't the speaker's assured insistences *right* in the end? Maybe, after all we've learned by the end of the poem, we *would* cover him in catalpa. Maybe we *would* know what it meant to him.

"I stood in one garden looking over the fence at another," Tony Hoagland writes in his poem "Not Renouncing": "Year after year / they kept growing into each other: —the dreamed into the real, the real / into the dreamed—the two gardens." By the end of the poem, Stern has so effectively merged wishful thinking with self-revelation that the reader is much closer to inhabiting the identity of his longed-for comrade, much better-suited to deliver. "You would throw a board across the channel," he wagers, but it's Stern who's bridging the gap, human to human, "before the [water rises] again for another year."

WAVING GOOD-BYE

I wanted to know what it was like before we
had voices and before we had bare fingers and before we
had minds to move us through our actions
and tears to help us over our feelings,
so I drove my daughter through the snow to meet her friend
and filled her car with suitcases and hugged her
as an animal would, pressing my forehead against her,
walking in circles, moaning, touching her cheek,
and turned my head after them as an animal would,
watching helplessly as they drove over the ruts,
her smiling face and her small hand just visible
over the giant pillows and coat hangers
as they made their turn into the empty highway.

ON "WAVING GOOD-BYE"

To read a poem is to read a mind. The experience of reading a good poem has the quality of meeting a person who strikes you immediately as distinct, not the *n*th iteration of a type. This is what I mean when I tell someone their poem works—it is itself and nothing else. Even though it's made of borrowed things—virtually all words are pinched—it has a shape, an attitude, a vibe I've encountered nowhere else. What we want of being is what we want of art—to be a one-off, to be true. One of the greatest compliments we pay each other: you have a unique voice (and lovely shoes). Voice, fingerprint, signature—all testify to a distinctive self. Voice is self conveyed, is essence given the flesh of words.

I like Gerald Stern's mind. It's the mind of a bear who reads or a flower that talks. It—he—the poems—what's the difference—are always doing and going and falling in love, in love with love, among many other things. If American poetry is a tug of war between the exuberant and the pensive, as it seems to be—we still declare ourselves and each other little Whitmans or Dickinsons—Stern has for decades led the yawpish charge. His poems are immediate in appetite and broad in vision. More than anything, though, they're unique: Gerald Stern is Gerald Stern.

What I've overlooked, though, until now, until setting out to say some small thing about his work, is the intimacy of this poet. A random (really—I'm about to flip through his *New and Selected*) sampling of Stern's beginnings:

This is too good for words. I lie here naked
listening to Kaiser play.

There are two hundred steps between my house
and the first café.

Little did the junco know who he was keeping company with
this Christmas,

I guide my darling under the willow tree
to increase the flow of her blood.

Stern's poetry—which I think of as large (he could be tiny, pocket-sized even, I've never seen the man)—as an advocacy of passion (in the sense of engagement with things and people, thimbles and lovers and operas)—an embodiment of hunger (spiritual, artistic, actual)—is habitually personal and domestic in its facts, in its contexts and actions. In other words, these big poems are small. In other other words, Gerald Stern is a master of the psychic and physical inversion: by looking inside and nearby, he looks at the world.

“Waving Good-Bye” is a dog-eared poem. I come back to it because it moves me, though perhaps more because of why it moves me: inside this tiny moment, there's a largeness of imagination and a desire to use imagination for emotional ends. Stern enters the poem wanting to be changed, to be other in order to understand better who he is. It's a kind of torque he applies, a pure interjection of self, of whim and wish, an unreality grafted to something real. In the personality of those first four lines, I discover a life—not the product of a mind so much as its creation before me. No one else would have written that start, which has the effect of proving Stern's humanity and establishing him as a person to be listened to, someone who has a way of seeing that is unlike but complementary to my own. This matters so much in a poem that ultimately requests that I *feel Stern feeling*, that I recognize his pain and connect it to some pain in myself.

But the coolest part of the poem is that, in wanting to be un-minded and un-teared, Stern magnifies the sense of loss by very quietly pointing out that loss is not only a human but an animal experience. He's not trying to avoid loss here but to experience it in a purer form—to go back, in a sense, to the start. He wants, if anything, to feel his daughter's departure more deeply, more physically, and to have no choice but to communicate what he's feeling in the most physical terms.

Sometimes I think the real test of the quality of a made thing is if it tells you something about its own nature. A good chair must tell you something about chairs. This poem makes me consider poetry as a struggle against estrangement from our deepest selves, an effort to make the immaterial real—to give flesh, through language, to what we think and feel. To go back to a time—imagined, Edenic as it may be—when we were at ease with ourselves.

Gerald Stern has always had this effect on me, has always pulled me toward his subjects and into the anatomy of what he does. I can't imagine American poetry without him. His poems are not just poems but advocates for poetry.

ROMANIA, ROMANIA

I stand like some country crow across the street
from the Romanian Synagogue on Rivington Street
singing songs about Moldavia and Bukovina.
I am a walking violin, screeching
a little at the heights, vibrating a little
at the depths, plucking sadly on my rubber guts.
It's only music that saves me. Otherwise
I would be keeping the skulls forever, otherwise
I would be pulling red feathers from my bloody neck.
It's only music, otherwise I would be white
with anger or giving in to hatred
or turning back to logic and religion—
the Brahms Concerto, hills and valleys of gold,
the mighty Kreutzer, rubies piled over rubies,
a little Bartók, a little ancient Bach—
but more for the thin white tablecloths under the trees
than for Goga and his Christians,
and more for the red petticoats and the cold wine and the garlic
than the railroad station and the submachine guns,
and more for the little turn on Orchard Street
and the life of sweetness and more for the godly Spanish
and the godly Chinese lined up for morning prayers,
and much much more for the leather jackets on sticks
and the quiet smoke
and plush fire escapes,
and much much more for the silk scarves in the windows
and the cars in the streets
and the dirty invisible stars—
Yehudi Menuhin
wandering through the hemlocks,
Jascha Heifetz
bending down over the tables,
the great Stern himself
dragging his heart from one ruined soul to another.

GERALD STERN: SING!

I've never met Gerald Stern, but I've heard he likes to sing.

He's also a difficult poet to categorize. On the one hand, his poems are generally driven by a clear lyric "I," landscaped with non-ironic Americana, and compelled by what seem to be profoundly felt passions and politics. These qualities might land him among more "traditional" poets. At the same time, there's often a wild, headlong quality to his work, an anti-rational—almost expressionistic—force that could connect him, perhaps, to European surrealism, to the New York School, or to "ultratalk" poets that come after him. As I see it, more than anything else, his work bears the kind of interiority, integrity, and urgency that good singing does.

I'd like to consider Stern's poem "Romania, Romania," which I've admired since I was an undergraduate—though back then I'm not sure I quite understood it. The poem is an ode to the legacy of Jewish immigrants in America and, more importantly, to the complex power of music. It's a poem that excites me in a variety of ways: it uses repetition forcefully and surprisingly, its "I" quite notably disappears less than halfway through the poem, and it ends on a resounding, though equally wry note. It also addresses historical violence without getting mired in it and presents music as a redemptive and transformative force in opposition to that violence.

The title refers to Aaron Lebedeff's Yiddish vaudeville song "Romania, Romania." Both celebratory and nostalgic, it sings to the homeland from the vantage of America, where Lebedeff came in 1920. The speaker—Stern—finds himself singing this song as he stands across from the Romanian Synagogue in Manhattan's Lower East Side. And though he mocks himself for "screeching" and "vibrating," he sings from the "depths," "plucking sadly"—viscerally—"on [his] rubber guts."

Stern then asserts, "It's only music that saves me." Saves him from what? From "keeping the skulls forever" and "pulling red feathers from [his] bloody neck." These oblique, haunting figurations refer, we must assume, to the long history of Jewish persecution and diaspora—to Jewish suffering at the hands of history. (The "red feathers" in particular offer a complicated image—the speaker seems

to be comparing his music-less self to a bird with its throat slit, though there's also a faint echo of the flight and crash of Icarus.)

Yet, just after Stern exalts music's restorative power, he declares that it's also "only music"—no more than a tune. These ideas initially seem opposed—but then music's "lightness" (to borrow from Milan Kundera) is, paradoxically, at the heart of its ability to "save." As Stern presents it, music stands in opposition to "anger," "logic," or "religion"—which might elsewhere also be opposed to each other, but which Stern sees here as all too similarly heavy for the purpose of salvation.

At this point, the speaker disappears from the poem—eclipsed by a range of classical composers and musicians—all Central and Eastern European—that Stern reveres. He begins with the composers: Brahms, Beethoven (the Kreutzer Sonata), Bartók, Bach. Brahms and the Kreutzer Sonata are described synesthetically through the stunning, clearly elevated images of golden landscapes and layered piles of rubies. Bartók, the Hungarian Modernist, speaks for himself. Bach is "ancient"—which points more than anything else to his lasting power.

Now Stern gives us a new series of oppositions to consider. Extended, impulsive, and, when we initially arrive at them, a little syntactically confusing, they're carried forward by the seesawing force of Stern's repetitions. He begins:

but more for the thin white tablecloths under the trees
than for Goga and his Christians,
and more for the red petticoats and the cold wine and the garlic
than the railroad station and the submachine guns [. . .]

What Stern addresses here is the impulse behind his singing, behind the music and, by extension, behind art. Consistently, the emphasis is on dailiness, simplicity, and beauty, rather than historical metanarratives and violence. As the repetition progresses, the speaker brings us back to "Orchard Street," the "Spanish" and "Chinese," and the "leather jackets on sticks" of the Lower East Side.

Of course, there's always the risk of liking a poem merely because one agrees with its arguments, and it's true that I like Stern's

arguments in “Romania, Romania.” I like the idea that the lightness of music paradoxically opposes historical violence, and I like that Stern emphasizes simplicity and beauty as primary values—and, thus, as primary sources for art. But the movements of the poem consistently startle and impress me. Stern’s lassoing outward from that corner on Rivington Street toward European music and history—followed by this subtle return to the present landscape where the poem finds its initial occasion—is, to my way of thinking, seamless and stunning.

At the end, Stern has one last, lovely move in store for us. Progressing from Europe to America, as the poem has done in its second half, Stern ends by celebrating three Jewish-American violinists with Eastern European roots: Yehudi Menuhin, whose parents came from Belarus; Jascha Heifetz, who came to the US as a boy from Vilnius; and Isaac Stern, whose parents came to the US from Poland when he was an infant. All three, Stern implies, find a source of their expression and talent in Eastern Europe and Jewish diaspora. There is, he seems to be saying, a well of collective experience there that contains a profound capacity to create great beauty. In the last two lines, Stern alludes to himself only elliptically, hiding behind “the great Stern,” Isaac Stern. Yet, both Sterns are ironically yoked together, ultimately asking whether the musician *and* the poet—indeed, whether all great artists—aren’t finally doing the difficult, self-sacrificing, and *intimate* work of “dragging [their hearts] from one ruined soul to another.”

SAM AND MORRIS

I had two uncles who were proletarians and one of them was a house painter and one of them was a carpenter—they beat their wives regularly and they had nineteen children between them. Once a month or so my father would go to one of their houses to intervene and once I remember a police car with a dog. When I was home on a short furlough I went with my mother and father to a Jewish restaurant and there, sitting in the back, were my two uncles, in their seventies by then, and eating together, chicken, chopped liver, God knows what, but pickles and cole slaw, there always were pickles and cole slaw and they were almost conspiring, it seemed to me then, so young I was, and I was reading my Ezra Pound already and I was ashamed of what he said about Jews. Of usury those two unshaven *yidden*, one of them red-eyed already from whiskey, they knew nothing, they never heard of Rothschild. Their hands were huge and stiff, they hardly could eat their *kreplach*, Pound, you bastard!

AN AMERICAN SONNET

For years before later volumes were published, I packed one of my two copies of *American Sonnets* whenever I left for a trip. I still often carry it with me and still find news in it. I'm moved by these poems' emotional and rhythmic intensity, their large heart and mind, and the unexpected connections they make. Something underneath Stern's particular brand of English reminds me of the Yiddish jokes and pithy insults I heard as a child. I crave this voice and what it has to say—as basic as bread and salt, and as freshly surprising.

I love the way that "Sam and Morris" builds from the seemingly neutral opening "I had two uncles," and shocks us at the end with the ferocity—and intimacy—of the poet's outrage. It begins simply, the everyday language drawing us in with a few essential facts, then gradually intensifies, climaxing in an explosion of anger and betrayal.

Social class enters in the first line—the uncles "were proletarians"—and the poem swiftly identifies their particular occupations: housepainter and carpenter. They're the salt of the earth; but this is no idealized portrait of noble workers. We're still reading the first sentence when we learn abruptly that "they beat their wives / regularly and they had nineteen children / between them." The details are matter-of-fact. Sam and Morris are not larger than life. Their only power is in the domestic sphere, where they beat and regularly impregnate their wives.

The speaker, recalling his father's regular intervention in the uncles' violent domestic lives, shares a fleeting memory—"and once I remember a police car with a dog"—that extends the poem's undercurrent of violence, as does the oblique reference to world war: "When I was home on a short furlough." Suddenly, as in an illuminated manuscript, the poem bursts into color with a vivid image of the two uncles, old men sitting in a Jewish restaurant eating quintessential Jewish food. The phrase "and there, sitting in the back" begins a revelation. The poet's (and reader's) vision of the pair is immediate and indelible. This is a moment of dramatic change in the poem, comparable to the turn midway through a traditional sonnet.

The poem turns inward, the speaker facing himself as he makes explicit the theme of his education as a poet: "...so young I was, and I was reading my / Ezra Pound already...." The way the line turns just after the word "my" is telling: *my* Ezra Pound hints at the young poet's indebtedness and deference to the great promulgator of modernist literary practice. But in the same sentence, Pound's hold on the imagination goes beyond poetics: "...and I was ashamed of / what he said about Jews." To the young observer, the uncles looked as if "they were almost conspiring"—not just a reference to their physical posture but a hint of the myth of a Jewish conspiracy to achieve world domination, the supposed goal of the international banking family the Rothschilds. "I was ashamed" has a double edge: Jews, including the poet and his uncles, were stigmatized, but we have a sense, too, from "so young I was," of the poet's shame at his youthful naiveté and a hint of the betrayal and outrage that will erupt at the end of the poem.

The poem doesn't have to spell out the details of Pound's 1940s radio broadcasts from Italy nor to quote from Pound's bitter verbal attacks—rants that claimed that we were all being drawn into a war to protect Jewish wealth and power and included such language as "stinking Jews," "damn Jews," "dirty Jews," "a dirty bit of meat," "Jew-ruin'd England," "hang Roosevelt and a few hundred yidds," "you yourselves out-jewed the Jew," and on and on. Instead, with typical economy, Stern calls up Pound's famous litany against "*usura*" (Canto XLV), with the assertion, "Of usury those / two unshaven *yidden*...they knew nothing, they never / heard of Rothschild." The poem tears down the myth of Jewish power and domination with a few strokes, simultaneously picturing the uncles as "unshaven...red-eyed / already from whiskey," and dramatizing the feelings of the speaker. We experience the shift in what feels like real time, and the revelation is visceral.

Shame enters the poem first, but then is transformed into rage at the physical portrait of the uncles eating. Stern does not write about the redemption of shame by anger, but instead expresses his feeling with immediacy and directness. The repeated negative "they knew nothing, they never" and the internal rhyme "Jews" and "usury" intensify the poem's emotional build. The Yiddish words serve as a

counterweight to Pound's literary Latin. *Yidden* and *kreplach* are like tuning forks; they vibrate with the tones of a language characterized by darkness and sarcasm, wit and vitality—a language not of power but of the daily life of the powerless. And the explosive “yidden” and guttural “kreplach” embody the speaker's anger through their mouth-music. The possessive *their* in “they hardly could eat their *kreplach*” is an echo of *my* in “my / Ezra Pound,” suggesting that literature and food are essentials, properties of life embraced without question, and evoking the young poet's intimate engagement with and faith in what he reads. The reversal of this early trust, the rejection of Pound's anti-Semitism, is expressed with wild, personal fury, not *about* Pound but uttered directly to him in the turn that ends the poem: “Pound, you bastard!”

Though Pound's manic hate must be rejected, his poetics (as the speaker in the poem acknowledges by implication) have influenced the way this poem is made. Its rhythm is typical of many Stern poems: in twenty-one lines there are only five sentences, three beginning in the middle of a line. Sentences push past line endings, holding thought in constant tension with our expectation of a cadence. The result is the propulsive motion that is the hallmark of Stern's poems. “Sam and Morris” is a spoken utterance; there is nothing pretentious or artificial in the tone and diction, no straining for high art. It's appropriate that the language is not hieratic, in that the central figures, the two uncles, are poor, unshaven, and ordinary—uneducated eaters of pickles and cole slaw.

There is so much in this poem: ordinary life, class, politics, war, literature, family, and the basics of eating and breeding, fact and myth. But above all, it's a voice remembering, reflecting, reacting—and undergoing a sea change, altering its tone and rhythm in response to experience and the feeling it provokes. In confronting Pound's lies about Jews, the ending of the poem shocks us with its intense feeling and the power of truth.

MY DEAR

This I learned from Angela, a fawn's
ass has to be clean or he won't shit,
and if there is no mother to lick him, you have
to use toilet paper, lovingly, this way
you become his mother, you get to name him
and get to find him on Johnson Road, a '74
Mercury heating up beside him, the owner
in tears, and you, the mother, consoling *him*
as you both drag the body into the woods
which keeps you calm although your hands are shaking
and you are breathing hard from pushing the one
remaining leg into the ground without
disturbing the bloated stomach or the nose
that wants to stick out of the leaves nor do you
lower the shovel and flatten the ground
for you have babied the universe and you walk
with fear—or care—you walk with care—and wipe
your face with dirt and kiss the murderer.

ANIMAL LESSONS

I don't know if anyone writes about animals as beautifully as Gerald Stern. In his poems are birds, donkeys, squirrels, dogs, possums, ducks, and on and on. He's said, I think, that many of the animals populating his poems are the overlooked, those who exist at the peripheries or shadows of our imaginations. Those we almost refuse to see. That's perhaps why W. S. Merwin, when asked in *American Poetry Review*, what poem he would give to the person in charge of a nuclear submarine, said Stern's "The Dog," in which the dog, dead on the side of the road, addresses the poet—and begs of him kindness and memory, begs of him forgiveness most of all. "Forgive the yapping," the dog tells the poet, whose hand quivers while he takes the instruction; "forgive the shitting." What kindness in ourselves might be freed if we not only witnessed the dead, but forgave them as well? It occurred to me right now that the dead need no forgiving. They are, in their way, free of our judgment and resentment; they are elsewhere and otherwise concerned. But we need to forgive the dead for ourselves. I think part of the long road of my adulthood is forgiving those dead, who, forgiven, make space for much more worthwhile stuff: light, mostly. And joy. "The Dog" is an even more marvelous poem than I previously thought.

But I want to talk about a more recent poem from Stern's 2008 book, *Save the Last Dance*. "My Dear" recounts, again, an animal's death (it should be noted that not all of the animals in Stern's poems are dead; neither are all of the people or buildings, but sometimes they are—though, made into poems, they might be a little less so). The poem, anyhow, recounts a simple, if weird, story. His friend Angela was, more or less, the mother of a deer, whom she named, and whose ass she wiped because "there [was] no mother to lick him." It would be less strange, of course, if the animal was a dog or cat; even if it was a bunny. But wiping a deer's ass, I suspect, is no small task, and maybe even kind of risky. Pretty as deer can be, and as familiar as they can seem nibbling your chard or chomping your tomatoes, or curled up on the side of the road with flies in their eyes, they remain wild. If you don't hunt, you've probably never touched one—let alone wiped one's ass and named it.

And it's that same deer that his friend Angela—the deer's mother—ends up burying, with "the murderer," after it gets run over. You might know this about the Stern of Stern's poems: he is a lover of justice. He is rageful in the face of injustice, and a belligerent shit-talker to boot. And it's not a theoretical injustice at which he rages, nor the *idea* of cruelty—he is in the poems angry at George Bush or Nixon or Ezra Pound or the kid who threw the frog out the window. And often the Stern of those poems is not particularly interested in forgiveness.

But the Stern of almost all the animal poems is pointedly interested in forgiveness, and thereby compassion—and in "My Dear" this is evident perhaps as much as anywhere. It is the deer's mother, Angela, who ends up consoling the driver of the car, as they haul the dead child into the woods and bury him. It is the deer's mother—the victim—who kisses the murderer.

Talking too much about this poem, and the abundant and impossibly wise heart of it, is difficult, or even ridiculous—what the poem instructs, and I believe it instructs (as many good poems do), is simple, and the most difficult thing one can do. Who among us has not spent countless hours chronicling the wrongs done us? Cut off in the parking lot or spoken to unkindly in a meeting at work. Mom careless and the check-out clerk a disrespectful jerk. And worse: much worse. Who among us has not built a life of her or his injuries? To whom this poem perhaps might mean the most. "This I learned from Angela," he tells us. How to kiss, with forgiveness, the murderer.

The last five lines of the poem are wonderfully beyond me: how does it follow that Angela—and Stern, now Angela's student—wouldn't "lower the shovel and flatten the ground" because she has "babied the universe." There's some kind of violence, some kind of forgetting, perhaps, in the flattening. Some erasure of tenderness. Some flattening of love. This is one of those beautiful and challenging arrivals you find in Stern, arrivals that continue to make new meaning for years.

Finally, there's something in the conversions of those last lines. First, as the poet recognizes, correcting himself, the teacher has "walked with *care*," and not "fear": very different experiences, and

very differently motivating conditions. And this other conversion, when Angela “wipe[s] her face with dirt.” The wiping, the *dirt*, makes possible the forgiveness. That sounds almost biblical or mythical. It sounds sorrowful; it sounds true.

CASALS

You could either go back to the canary
or you could listen to Bach's unaccompanied *Suites*
for which, in both cases, you would have the same sofa,
and you will be provided with a zigzag quilt to sleep
under and a glass-top table and great fury,
for out of those three things music comes;
nor should you sleep if even the round muscles
below the neck fall loose from their stringy moorings
for you would miss a sob and you would miss
a melody à la red canary
and à la white as well and à la canary,
perched, as the cello was, on top of a wooden box
and a small musician perched on top of the cello
and every night a church full of wild canaries.

GERALD STERN'S "GORGEOUS RETRIEVAL"

In *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, Gabriel García Márquez's unnamed narrator refers to "Johann Sebastian Bach's six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello in the definitive performance by Don Pablo Casals" as "the most accomplished pieces in all of music." Gerald Stern's sonnet, "Casals," functions not simply as homage to and elegy for the celebrated cellist (1876-1973), but, like many of his poems, as *ars poetica*. "All art is about saying yes," insists artist John Currin, "and all art is about its own making."

To call this poem a sonnet, even a very loose sonnet, is to stretch anyone's definition of the form. Basically, "Casals" is a fourteen-line, free verse poem. There is no rhyme scheme and no volta. Still, Stern might think of it as one of his American sonnets (the title of his 2002 volume), in which the formal constraints of the Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet give way to the rhythms of the American vernacular compressed into twenty lines or less, the way a jazz musician, Miles Davis or Keith Jarrett, for example, might acknowledge the American songbook yet subvert it by improvising within the structure of "Someone to Watch Over Me" or some other standard.

Stern is also fully aware of the history of the elegy, itself originally a form rather than a style: a couplet consisting of a line of dactylic hexameter followed by a line of dactylic pentameter, suitable in its brevity, it turned out, for gravestone epitaphs. "It is only since the 16th c. that an elegy has come to mean a poem of mourning for an individual," notes J. A. Cuddon in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. By infusing his free verse, itself a search for form, with muted acknowledgment of traditional scaffoldings, Stern allows "Casals" to function as palimpsest, the poem an additional, textured layer upon a deepening body of work. That work can also be read horizontally, a body consisting not only of Stern's expansive oeuvre, but one that means to embrace the work of those artists whom Stern considers essential, and among whom Stern hopes to take his place. Surely Casals' longevity did not go unnoticed by Stern, eighty-six when he wrote the poem.

For Stern, the creative impulse originates in the community of poets and writers, musicians, composers, philosophers, and visual artists, past and present, among whom he mingles as if a guest at some celestial cocktail party. Stern's poems are rife with allusions, often direct, to Dante, Schubert, Kant, Magritte, Shelley, Stieglitz, Pound, Proust, Nietzsche, Ginsberg, Picasso, Vivaldi, Emerson, Auden, Villa-Lobos, Hobbes, Bartók, Shostakovich, and Béla, among many other luminaries in the creative firmament. Pop culture barely rates a mention in his work. Sid Vicious makes a fleeting appearance in a poem about the exilic Ovid, about whom Stern writes, "I myself / feel almost happy that he came before me, / that my own wailing / found such a model in his book of sorrow" ("The Same Moon Above Us"). He continues:

In my lighter moments when my cheeks
are dry and my heart is not yet pounding
I like to compare his heaviness to mine—
or mine to his—to see whose chair is older,
whose rug is thinner, whose hands are colder,
although the world I live and wander in
is really not like his, at least not yet—

This, then, is Stern's occasional method: to bring forward the lives and works of kindred spirits, reveling in what he calls his "gorgeous retrieval." It is this active and ongoing community of his making that prods his own work: "Poems from poems, songs / from songs, paintings from paintings, / always this friendly / impregnation," writes Adam Zagajewski.

As the above list of compatriots might indicate, Stern is attracted to outsiders, those like Galileo, the subject of another poem, who stood outside social, civil, and religious institutions. Bach too had his detractors. "These suites had been deemed academic rubbish, mechanical studies without musical warmth—can you imagine that? How could they be considered cold—these works that positively radiate poetry, warmth and feeling of sound?" Casals marveled in his

memoir *Licht und Schatten* [*Light and Shadow*]. He recorded them during 1934-36 at EMI Studios (now Abbey Road Studios) in London and in Paris. Stern's poem means to make tangible that "feeling of sound," to give the emotion tugged forth by the music a shape and color, to absorb the aural and make it, almost impossibly, visual.

A single sentence, nine of its fourteen lines enjambed, the poem seems to be an almost breathless burst of memory, one that might be lost forever if not quickly uttered. The opening pronoun is generous in its gesture, embracing the reader. "You [too]," it seems to say, *you as well as I, any one of us*. In memory, we return to music, which for Stern underpins all of creation, whether the natural music of the canary or the music composed by Bach and brought more palpably into existence by the further genius of Casals. Stern's use of "unaccompanied," a five-syllable mouthful, two syllables longer than any other word in the poem, drawing attention to itself, indicates that for this music to achieve such fullness it must remain isolated, a singular voice crying out in the wilderness—while at the same time, a listener, *one of us*, is required to acknowledge its existence. Ironically, then, such beauty is never "unaccompanied," and in fact has us humming along.

In an unpublished, undated essay titled "What Is the Use of Poetry?" William Carlos Williams writes, "This is a principle we can utilize to our profit in estimating the quality of any piece of writing: by reading it backward.... I find my own sensual pleasure greatly increased by so doing." The muted humor in this poem lies not in its rhythmic complicity, as it lacks the traditional iambic pulse of the sonnet, but in its allusion to solfège in line three with "sofa," that word's two syllables inverting *fa so* (as in tonic sol-fa, the pedagogical technique for teaching sight-singing, its musical pitch rendered as *doh-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti*). These notes are followed seven lines later by *la*—which then trails off into the unselfconscious and perhaps mindlessly happy *la la*'s of line eleven. (The Von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music*, in both the 1959 Rodgers and Hammerstein stage musical and the 1965 film adaptation, reprise the show tune "Do-Re-Mi" as a Bach cantata.)

Stern is being playful here, of course. He is less so when mentioning the "sob" of the music and its "great fury." "Casals

would tell his pupils that, in general, each suite takes its character from its prelude: ... tragic in No. 2... tempestuous in No. 5," notes critic Lionel Salter. The music that comes out of the three things Stern mentions—the quilt, the table, and the fury—is less precisely only a single discipline than artistry itself, poetry included. For Stern, the creative impulse arises and announces itself through a mixture of form ("a zigzag quilt"), transparency and clarity ("a glass-top table"), and emotion ("great fury"). The poet needs to be receptive—"nor should you sleep"—in order not to allow the impulse to dissipate. The muscles' "stringy moorings" cannot be bowed. Stern is now back in playful mode as he hums Bach's melody and allows synaesthesia its corresponding visual sensations: "a melody à la red canary / and à la white as well and à la canary."

Like the cello, the canary was "perched... on top of a wooden box," and like the canary, Casals, a "small musician," was "perched on top of the cello," both making music that seems to arise naturally through all of creation. For Stern, such music is prayer, and his final metaphor to describe Casals' "most accomplished pieces" and to make them even more tangible gives them, implicitly, architecture, color, fluidity, and sound: "a church full of wild canaries." This is the church in which Stern worships. It is also the church in Prades in the French Pyrenees in which Stern heard Casals play in 1950 when the cellist broke his self-imposed decade of silence undertaken in protest of Franco's rule. "In the church and out, I felt that I was in a protected and joyous place," Stern writes in his essay "Vow of Silence." "It was quiet and civilized and purposeful."

Richard Wilbur has stated, "I think that all poets are sending religious messages because poetry is, in such great part, the comparison of one thing to another; or the saying, as in metaphor, that one thing *is* another. And to insist, as all poets do, that all things are related to each other, comparable to each other, is to go toward making an assertion of the unity of all things." Gerald Stern's gorgeous retrievals, in their unique and generous gestures, make this assertion again and again, and his work, in its resonance and depth, offers pleasures comparable to those channeled by Pablo Casals in his interpretations of Bach's remarkable suites.

DEAR DEATH

Cool cloak. So goth. I dig how the pleats
ripple like pond water when you move,
and the hood shadows the absence of your face.
Sweet scythe, too. The craftsmanship
of the wooden handle, how smooth the slow
curve. I had to look it up—it's called
the *snath* (rhymes with wrath), or *snathe*
(rhymes with bathe). I prefer the latter, the long
a. Snath sounds like an infectious disease
I might've caught if my mother wasn't there
to steer me from the gutter, from large
puddles marbled green, mosquitoes
scribbling above. How many times
do mosquitoes do your dirty work anyway?
Versus fleas? Versus gunpowder?
How bone-tired were you in Tōhoku?
The previous year in Haiti? Have you ever felt
the sepia wind of remorse? I have 77 more
questions for you, give or take, you're often
in my thoughts. Yesterday, while grinding
coffee beans. While cleaning the lint trap.
Dicing cilantro. Buying ink cartridges.
Clipping my beard. I could go on and on,
you're that legendary in my head.
It works this way: I'm running the knife
across the cutting board, the cilantro
breaks into confetti, I remember my mother
scattering the herb over a Chilean dish, then
her voice on Monday, "numbness in my leg,"
"congestive heart failure," and it fails,
my mind fast-forwards to when it fails,
I can't help it, you grip her IV'd hand, pull her
over, and it is done, her silence begins
blowing through in waves, icing the room—
the thought seized me so completely, the knife

hovered still above the wooden board.
Seriously though, cool cloak. Sick black
fabric. I heard if you turn it inside-out,
the whole world's embroidered on the lining.

MAYFLY

I died. I was
born the day before,
floated up inside

a globe of air
to the water's
wobbling roof.

I molted, opened
ghostly wings,
was soon

airborne
with my brothers,
one dot

on the stippled cloud.
We mobbed
above the river,

we eddied,
desire rousing
in each of us.

Every time
a mate arrived,
she left latched

onto another.
So went the minutes,
the river scrolling

endlessly. By dusk,
while the sky's
lush blue

drained out
quicker,
I felt my life

ending. It could
not have been
any fuller.

LOOSE FLOWERS

Out of the vase—
 jumped bail—
 fled the interview—
or sloshed over the levee by
 mud frowns of a flood—

Vase—bare vase—
Air vase—air base—

Scalloped face—evasive provenance—
Invasive, between stems, a space—

I take this space—
I retake this trace of a space—

for a flower formed
out of phone dial or sundial

and an aglet-less, untie-able
one-handed shoelace.

A failed
prose plot,
a flower
plot
is not
poetry;
flower
bed is.

In gutters,
start of the workweek,
flowers Sunday gardeners culled,
bouquet manqué.
A big scoop
collects them
with a grating snarl.

Elsewhere,
in honor,
the respectful
toss theirs over the *Arizona*.
Loose flowers
with heroes
still pinned there,
the stems of their bones
vased in salt-eyed water.

1939

"The Getaway" (1939), also known as "The Fox [The Get-a-way]," by Horace Pippin

Try to ignore the connections between the invasion of Poland, a sorceress crushed beside the curb of a yellow brick road, and a 1939 painting by a Negro folk artist of an escaping fox—fox as sneak-thief, spirit-animal, shape-shifter, ambassador of ghosts, fox as sign, how death steals and steals away.

Dark sky and torn clouds, the snow, the axe-colored creek, Ol' Brer Fox with Massa's best settin' hen pinched tight between pointy teeth, a little some'm-some'm the fox thinks he is righteously owed and has artfully gained with stealth, as history is ultimately a chronology of grand larcenies and petty thefts, the bones of prey animals picked clean by kit and vixen. History is the fox.

But art too is theft. Mark the rapacious brush (pointed like a fox's tail). Mark the rapacious eye (vision's feral skittishness). Mark the rapacious canvas (like the henhouse, after the fox has left). Lift a brush, snatch the unwary eye, alter borders for lebensraum, and *you'll be his- you'll be his- you'll be history!*

A watercolor painted by Adolf Hitler is auctioned for less than Dorothy's ruby slippers. After all, a pair of ruby slippers could be enchanted kits, fox spirits bearing missives from the dead, or exhibit items stolen from a display of several thousand little shoes in a Polish Konzentrationslager. A pair of ruby slippers could be the ears of the fox in Pippin's *The Getaway*. History is a tale of shape-shifting and unlikely connections, or art is the fleeing fox and history dangles from its mouth.

CRADLE & BUGGY

A lonely cloud, high above cradle & buggy, gliding.

My ears are hungry for the division of labor
& my eyes take over for a while.

Two more clouds, also above cradle & buggy, also gliding.

If only the myth contained a strategy for survival:

praise for the horse, praise for the driver of the buggy.
Praise for the baby, praise for the mother rocking the cradle.

How to introduce the baby to the horse
without making a scene.

How to purchase a very fine buggy
when almost everything has been spent on a suitable cradle.

RECESSION

The tendency to swerve
(avoiding)
the deer & the crow.

(Now seeking)
rejuvenation in the collective labor
of the hornet's nest.

Providing
(comfort and/or a guilt trip)
to the snowy egret.

(All winter)
capturing snowflakes
in a brass bucket.

[The snowflakes...have melted]

[The snowy egret...has sneezed]

[The hornets...have evacuated their nest]

[The deer & the crow...wait patiently]

I know things are difficult.
Things are really bad.
What to do about things?

Philip Metres

from HUNG LYRES

this is the air we script to lips / air we usher in lungs / that ushers us
in / this is the air / there is no other / we unseal & key / the same air /
hair of the fathers / shoulder of the mothers / air of laughter & air
of slaughter / air / of wrecks & reliquaries / of wasp & papyrus
barbed wire & hung / lyres & this is the air we draw in / air we expel
sphere that spires in us / spears us into us / stories we find ourselves
in / the middle of something / a building we did not build
& this is the air of ozone & benzene / that quickens the blood /
clarifies the eye / this is the air / there is no other / nesting in us /
then beaked & breaking / a sudden flutter / ring / out of us /
this is the air we gather / there is no other / lower / nature / field
this the clearing / this the threshing / floor the flesh's door / unseen
seething song that fills the nautilus that the little hammer wields
to drum / aria of the air sculpting the thinking bone

from HUNG LYRES

What does it mean, I say. She says, it means
to be quiet, just by yourself. She says, there's

a treasure chest inside. You get to dig it out.
Somehow, it's spring. Says, will it always

rain? In some countries, I say, they are
praying for rain. She asks, why do birds sing?

In the dream, my notebook dipped in water,
all the writing lost. Says, read the story again.

But which one? That which diverts the mind
is poetry. Says, you know those planes

that hit those buildings? Asks, why do birds sing?
When the storm ends, she stops, holds her hands

together, closes her eyes. What are you doing?
I'm praying for the dead worms. Says, listen:

"I DIDN'T INTEND TO WRITE..."

I didn't intend to write about anything
But the cigarette looked for and never found
A sort of legendary cigarette
Like a hoped-for love, Princess Charming
Ebony-locks, Snow White or Solveig
But my mother's old shoes, covered with paint-splashes
Jackson Pollock stains
Came and elbowed me
I had seen them on the floor of her studio
Ageless and childish, a bit like her, all said,
Gaping, and in that black waiting to be devoured
Something female, and of a woman's sex
That would bewitch men, sons especially
Make them sweat with confusion
On the road of life one of them had lost a heel
And the other its shoelace

"CHILDHOOD IS THERE..."

Childhood is there, heavy and timorous
He can make it out between the procession of thoughts
Walking from room to room in the house
This morning he got up early
He tried to work and to imagine the encounter
Waiting for him later in the day
Words and desire became mingled
A cup of coffee pushed them both away
And the telephone served as a mailbox
He wanted to turn his back on that child
Who staggered under the wild pepper trees and sycamores
Who hated the pine trees under an inexorable sky
He had trouble breathing
And loving the women around him
Though he thought only of their bodies and of the day's lightness
He didn't sleep at night
The heat was foreign to him
The noises made no sense
Now the marble has become flesh
Light vibrates and bodies hum the melody of endless pleasure
A winter morning sweetens like spring

translated by Marilyn Hacker

FRISKING TWO MEN IN SADIYAH

Sergeant Kenson wants these two men searched
since they've watched us

by the road all morning. I go down
to the dirt on one knee, begin
at the ankle where the thin cloth

of this man's beige dishdasha
grazes the skin. My palms and fingers climb

like up a rope, push at the outline
of leg. Marcin watches to the side
with his rifle; mine's slung

over his back. This man, who could be sixty,
doesn't take his hazel eyes from my face. As I slowly

reach the space where my right knuckles
brush the scrotum's loose weight,
he doesn't blink. I frisk the other leg, stand—

forehead level to his chin peppered
with stubble—smell the warm

breath of smoke. I pat the torso, up
to the pits of outstretched arms, feel the cigarette-
pack in the breast-pocket, then lean

forward, slide hands down
the smooth of his back, the magazine-

pouches on my chest press
his stomach. He sees through the smoke-gray
ballistic glasses I wear—all of us wear—

for explosions, for sunlight,
and as I squeeze both arms

through his sleeves, I think he'll be the one,
after hundreds, to spit gently
on my face. I tilt my head:

in the periphery, a few feet behind:
Marcin—just to make sure

he's there. When I back away, the man studies
my face as if to put it all
to memory. All I want is to grab my rifle

from Marcin, but the other man steps
forward, lifts his arms, and waits for my hands to begin.

THE LEG

On the road that weaves between the dark slopes of desert
a small car moves slow. With rifles aimed, we watch it
closely because of the strange beam of light that shoots
from its passenger-window into the hills. We wave it down
to stop. One man drives this blue Volkswagen, its doors
held shut with string; another man holds a spotlight pointed
from the open window. We search: no shovels, no rifles,
not even the usual knife for shearing sheep. I walk them
to our terp who has his face covered, all but his eyes,
with a khaki scarf. After the men speak Arabic,
the terp says they've been hired by the phone company—
each night they drive while shining the light, watching
for anyone who might cut the wires, blow the lines.
Sergeant Kenson says, *What do they do if they see someone?*
The terp speaks and the man who had held the light
runs to the car, leans his body through the open window
and jumps out holding—it must've been sawed-off
from a dining room table—a thick polished wooden leg.
The man smiles and swings the leg left and right. When he
spins across the road as he swings, not showing any
sign that he'll stop, as if wanting to demonstrate
the capability of this table-leg, all of us—the platoon,
the Iraqis—laugh. Hard laughs that go deep into the desert.
Even the terp, always scared for his life, mouths out
long screeches, one hand over his mouth. Babylon
is only a few hours south. Somewhere near,
cuneiform began on tablets of clay. Most of us

from the state: Ohio, named after the Iroquois, *ohi-yo'* — “good river.” In two weeks, the Coalition Provisional Authority will transfer power to the Interim Iraqi Government.

Many people in America have yellow-ribbon magnets on their bumpers. It's getting late, but the man just keeps swinging the leg, and everyone's laughing, some of us to tears.

CHATTERBOT #1

Let the brain rest on a net
of code, a comfortable nest

One of us

One of our fathers is a lizard
and one of us remembers nothing
but a long hallway of drawers

One of us is dressed and one of us picks
at the clothes of a man, believing
they are his body. Only

one of us is one of us.

Together we make a seat for the voice
as it leans back and lurches forward.
A room where it composes furniture

by speaking. Joiner of beams
and pegs in an atelier of echoes,
it terminates all speech with a bearing

or a hook. There is nothing better,

one of us assures the voice,
than to be finished.

One of us runs a script,

like a lace mantle, over
our body hidden in the next room.
You can hear the swish

of fine work on flesh.
The voice asks, which one of you
made me.

One of us says, Yesterday I went to the races.

One of us says, Let's talk about something else.

ROLE PLAY

Let's be lesser known suns.
You love me up close and I'll love you
from over here. We'll be ok if our legs

are strong against the horse. Oh, quick,
quick, he's getting away. Let's rub
our noses until we smell of home.

I'll be fragment of a female,
you be fallen man.
Play me like an oboe and I'll you,

we'll see who can get the loudest
honk of grief to pass through.
After that, let's pretend we're mature

men who travel first class
with pockets of cash
until we forget we're scared

and alone. You be a god
who could drive through traffic
all night long. I could love a god

like that. You do that
and I'll get lost in thought,
like a philosopher, I'll wear a hat.

Show me your heroic nudity.
The head is meant to resemble
the head, after all. The experts say,

something is going on that we don't understand.
They shake their tags like dogs.
We're dogs. Play rough with me.

AN INVITATION

after a plot by Robert Walser

Look through this hole in a stone wall
at the man in his bloated overcoat;
morning suit beneath it; around his neck
a thing half scarf, half boa constrictor.
He strides past alleyways brilliant
with yellow, orange, and green fruit rinds,
brownstones guarded by their ironwork
reflecting on the river. How he loves
these lovely things, and everything else:
sycamores amused by the tappling water,
come-hither, womanly shapes of churches.
He'd have loved to meet the architects!
When it rains he stays inside, but the sky
always burns blue, so he's always walking.
Everybody walking pleases him; and since
everybody's strange—aren't they?—strangers
in particular. No one's unsafe, except inside
everyone there's a kind of corroded iron
nobody not living in the moment sees.
When a woman out of ancient Greece
nakedly appears in her first-floor window,
her ideal smile fills a gap in the nothing
he relives of his life. Moved in, he buys her
a bathrobe. Who's got a right to call him
selfish? He's got what he wants, happily
ever after no less an invitation to disaster.
From now on he'll be longing for longing.

EN ROUTE

after Montale

The church grew out of its mountain,
shone, baroque, in the sun—
stucco the color of bread crust.
The river foamed. For a moment,
one cloud passed over the water,
our table, not set,
strewn with leaves and ginger.

Where did he come from?—
the swimmer who surfaced
into our atmosphere of gnats.
No one expected he'd question us—
what brought us here and why—much less
that he'd point to the bridge up ahead.
To cross it, he said, you need a coin.

Then he pushed back into being
part of the current,
while somebody's small dog
started to yelp and strain
against his leash, as if he wished
to run with the river as far as he could.
His was the one familial voice in the heat.

On the surface equally blue in July
Jacob's ladder
 just inches tall
and a mouse-gnawed antler dissolving
 into the reindeer moss

where 1940s nuclear testing left strontium 90
to live out its many half-lives
 One gravel truck-road
(straight) follows the zig-zagged Alyeska pipeline
 north

The Brooks Range flattens to
 stegosaur spines
at the skyline
 a scuffed-up cuttlefish bone day-moon
And beyond

a sign reading
 Arctic Circle the clangor of pumps
in Deadhorse they call it
 the glassy sea and under the whiff of diesel
a diner famous for pot roast and pie

boiling water for spaghetti fogs the glass
the girl is placed is turning
the chair away from its table
little steps

on her knees
the woman is hemming back blue

on the sea

BOUNDARIES WE DON'T SEE

The farm's boundary should be
a seasonal creek, but here's barbwire

so rusted into the October thicket that color
alone can't define it. It's only talk

my brother & I take turns carrying
as, with the owner's permission, we step

off the legal description of our father's
boyhood farm, so many times re-sold,

someone else's implement-shed,
the barn from the thirties' photos now white.

* * *

A pole too limber, the station sign too high—
only an attendant, he tries to change the prices

of gas. Sweating, in his chair too long,
& a continent away, trying not to do it,

the driver of the Predator drone flies it
into an Afghan wedding party.

* * *

Belief like the rust on barbwire,
I pray past it. Next in line at the reliquary,

I kneel to kiss whatever is left
of the saint.

ANIMISM

Imagine your favorite CEO furry, forepaws
up, with a nut in his teeth—what if every

bureaucrat & CEO who ruined it were forced
to live in nature? But it's not enough

to make a CEO scamper in a poem,
though the poem seeps water vinegary with

solvents from a shunt creek at the company
outlet. Even if you make the CEO shrug

downstream on his belly, you'll change
nothing. You must believe that the gods inside

things can remake themselves, that rural houses
will set themselves on fire—though the tree

is cut, the spirit won't leave the wood.
Bless the jay whose dogma is rancorous

but still absorbs blue heaven.
Bless the 8AM windfall apples so spattered

that the only solvent for the light is more
of the light that spattered them.

ODE TO A DRONE

Hellraiser, razor-feathered
riser, windhover over
Peshawar,

power's
joystick-blithe
thousand-mile scythe,

proxy executioner's
proxy axe
pinged by a proxy server,

winged victory,
pilot cipher
unburdened by aught

but fuel and bombs,
fool of God, savage
idiot savant

sucking your benumbed
trigger-finger
gamer's thumb.

WELCOME HOME TROOPS!

Observe the Argive,
 redivivus
with his Bethesda
 Special prosthetic
elbows, his Versed-
 reversed remember-
remember, looking
 alive in olive—
the aftershave
 civilian, the crewcut
oorah. His stop-
 loss odyssey
went Kabul, morphine,
 Ramstein, Stateside,
and back—round-robin
 desert wrestling,
tag out, tag in.
 Now, retrofitted,
the soon-to-be
 robohobo
thumps down the jetway,
 a glint in his eye,
springs in his step,
 no place like home.

LITTLE ANATOMY

Not the heart of a plane
but its black box. Not words
but wings scrawled across
a page, almost onto
the next. Am I reading
too much into night?
A star was what is.
A star looks backwards
in the mirror of a sea.

GIRLFRIEND SENDS ME A WHALE

have you heard? is the
subject the email has an
attachment it's a whale whose
frequency is all wrong &
the other baleens can't hear

her fuck it's so sad
she gchats she travels the
sea & lives alone her
whole life could I even
imagine being a whale with

no furniture though co-habiting
adds a certain slant of
stress a wave simply breaks
when it needs
the sky is there so

the whale isn't completely alone
I type this & immediately
regret it the sky she
replies is all reflection

RELEASE FROM STELLA MARIS

“So you’re saying there is no self?” I asked the doctor.
“Well...” he said. He took off his glasses and breathed
on the lens—for a moment an extraordinary radiance
hardened there, then he flicked it with his cuff.

He coughed, painfully, and swallowed hard.
At once you heard the other patients bickering
along their waxed corridors, and I counted myself
lucky to be alone with the master surgeon,
the one whose lab coat bulges with key rings.

Perhaps this *I* who still speaks
was just the experience
of watching snow fly in a dim window?

That might be a great happiness.

When the head rose, I rose also, when he pulled on
his gray calfskin gloves, I rubbed raw knuckles,
braced for the wind that blows from the mind itself.

LAST

(As the verb) as a

tulip blade

saffrons the rapier

Pear-tree leafing

in your back-crop

of blossom: preserve

that whiteness

still my sight

OUR IVY

Star-gust. Seed cluster. Difficult syntax
of clouds through the yellow maple.

He flips
my paper to the porch these mornings
when he rises early to get his son
up, breakfasted, and driven off
to school.

It's *hedera helix*—twisting ivy:
whose dark green, three-lobed leaves “grow alternate
along the stem” one by one and
waxy
as a living leather, who spreads ravenous
until it's covered the host tree's whole trunk
and thickens there, blossoms there, pre-
dator
or symbiotic partner, depending . . .

We need to get that thing ripped out. He means
the whole green mass. He rolls down his
window,
telling me as he slows into his drive.
But now he sees I've seen his face—*I'm fine,*
more tests . . . hairline where a doctor
shaved him
and four or five gauze bandage-spots dotting
his cheek and jaw. It's the actuary
in him—retired, insurance—
worried
about our cars, glass porches, passers-
by beneath the heavy shedding branches.
Our ivy's in its jubilant
phase, fall
flower sunlight twisted through with shadow,

each bloom-cluster splayed along the lifting
torso like a little nova
 outheld
 or geometric pincushion, eight, twelve,
sixteen spokes per globe with green-white blossoms
—“if sufficient sunlight is avail-
 able”—
 which turn, come spring, into black berries and
“a few stony seeds.” *I hate it.* He means
 the waiting now, the dark disease,
 coded
 in his gene swirl (from *melas* + *-oma*)
like a time bomb triggered by more sun.
Our maple is beautiful, and
 dying,
yellow leaves like flags, like pores, like patient

shaking wings, and the dark green, blunt, spearhead
leaves of the ivy swirling in
 relief.

One holds one up that pulls the other down.
I read somewhere the sky is blue because
of Rayleigh scattering, shorter
 wavelength
atoms (blue, violet) absorbed and re-
distributed most readily. I’ve read
the dust of long-blown stars seeds empty
 space.

Go get your saw, he says. I’ll grab my gloves.
About our ivy—I won’t tell him—“new
plants grow prolific from cuttings.
 They spread
merely from stems making contact with earth.”

CORNER WINDOW

so quiet I hear

the streetlight ticking

red recycling back

to yellow then red

we know the depth of

things by what they're not

how empty the sky

how vast the few stars

as in emphasis

*

the ones I love are

far away one is

hurting she cannot

talk who wears a mask

to help her breathe

when I spoke her name

tonight by cell phone

trying to be happy

what did she hear

*

rain coming before

it rains a low wind

seething in the trees

far off then nearer

under my lungs that

same sweep adrenal

is small relief that dread

like dread lifting

or like a little

bit of happiness

is grief growing darker

CHARITY

During the moment of crisis, hands
lace the chest as self-made seatbelts.

There are small fires in the fields as the
women assess the situation.

Someone has been shaving stone in the shed
all night, which suggests a kind of madness.

*

Nettles sting the thighs strafed from a night
of running through slow motion dreams—

the same carp as always circling in the murky water,
a child ringing a dinner bell at all hours of the day.

*

The blue trance of need settles over us
as we bob our heads courting silence.

If there is water we'll find it,
Assured.

Assured.

*

Non-believers, we believed everything
of ourselves, a line of diviners

searching for water in the house-well
of hungry ghosts,

legs spread wide over a muddy river
of blood and sheets.

*

In the fever hours, lucidity opens
like a flower then closes.

*

I'm afraid she didn't make it
the doctor says to the morning,
the priest nodding gamely nearby.

We indulge the grand metaphysics
of capes and coats, and wait for them to leave—
like a woman at a police station
having a polite donut after her rape.

The Golden Rule of public aid:
Do not deluge the helpers
with your helplessness.

I'm sorry is the only Nothing
there ever is
to say about any of it.

You will have a lifetime of heartbreak to grieve.
Surely, you can wait and do it in private.

FORGOTTEN GLOSSES

In the room of blonde wood:
A pack of cigarettes, and a red

Cosmetics case
Packed with amber

Bottles of medicine.
The remainders

Of childhood:
Music and blue

And white porcelain.
A paper mask of cat's face,

With whiskers, and a soft ribbon
That fastens below the chin.

Outside, the golden
Mercedes awaits:

My sweet boat
Of death—

What was I saying?

The mind goes blank.

THE ABANDONED LETTER

In this shimmering
I have found his voice.

Consider this:
He appeared to me

In the rich red wing
Of the Chinese Vault.

A ravishment,
When we met.

I will call this
A love song.

The perfume
Of his body, a damp

And flowering music.
Little circle of death

Among the love
Objects. In Paris

He takes my face
In his hands

And we vanish.

ROM, DU BIST EINE WELT

—*from the headstone of Hans Barth,
buried near Keats in Rome*

One vast ceiling in this city—
of course of course, Adam reaching a long way
to touch fingers with a god who
maybe is curious.

Two panels over, Eve takes an apple from
a human hand. We know better.

It never was a garden, how that arm morphs
from the snake of all snakes
a few feet away.

The old story. Threat,
meet dread. The deepest deep sea.
Or outer space with its
light years flashing through dark.

But never to end
loops and still breaks, color
violent, muddied, murdered in the making.
Paint toxic, a blue scarce-brilliant eked out of
Khyber and Persia, scaffolding so
look down, day grueling day, the most
twisted position to do
an angel's wing right. Years, the swearing
up there, swirl and swell of rage,
the bad light

huge in the eye
that blinks back an ocean.

PORTRAIT

Of all things, my mother said.

Modigliani. My Aunt Virginia's
preposterous knockoffs, her way with a brush
as they slowly came to.

The trademark long necks. Women always,
each face with its
endlessly vague expression she
multiplied. How many hung on the wall?
Many. And the *why* in me
is a boat
and a hopeless navigation.

I try to imagine what I never saw: my tall aunt
bending herself into their
narrow charm, head to head with one
on her easel, last touches to cheekbone and brow.
But then, she looked like
those women: regal, the sweep of neck, same
blank overseeing-my-kingdom aimed
down and at
until I dissolved.

My aunt, clearly in love.

And if paintings are mirrors and it was
self-love, well,
bully for her. And beyond? *Come deepen me*: part
anything we cherish before getting
lost at sea all by ourselves, bewildered
by those waters, cobalt blue
being best. Or it's

lapis she chose for eyes
distant, to the ends of the earth
in that house.

DOLLHOUSE

Our lady of the loudspeaker,
our lady of the scaffolding,
and of the ever-present concussion,
our lady of the close-talker,
our lady of the babies, I have seen
your ultrasounds. If I put this coin in you
what will come of it? A little light
for a dark womb? A little tomb
for an oversight? Our lady
of the happiness,
of the neckbrace of happiness,
our lady of the fuse executed,
I planted wild strawberries
as if that were even possible.
Clouds elaborated on the sky.
Our lady of the upscale bondsman
gets in the pool. Later we will meet
at the fire pit, share a bottle of wine.
O our lady of the lady, I felt like a dollhouse
with one half opened to the world
and you arranging my tiny furniture,
my tiny nuclear family secret.

RED MUM

“Originally the monk was likely looking in awe at something such as a container of enshrined Buddhist relics (now missing) miraculously rising in the air.”

—caption from a Seattle Asian Art Museum exhibit

Today I was likely looking in awe
at something such as a man waiting
to cross the road but standing in the road
and so almost hit by a van (now missing)
miraculously speeding past. I was
waiting to cross to the farmer’s market
and after he didn’t die we all crossed
miraculously normally
and I was browsing the kales
when the almost dead man
bumped into me and I jumped,
shook by this brush with this brush
with death, my head blooming
with red mums, my mind likely looking
at this man miraculously rising in the air
over the hood of the Econovan,
his death (now missing) miraculously.

I went on. I bought the kale, and honey in hopes
it would help with my allergies. I went home.
Went to a birthday party in the park.
I was not talking to the police.
The day was beautiful but colder
than it looked and everyone
had to put their coats on in spite
of our summer feeling. At times
everyone looked up at our enshrined relics
(now missing) miraculously rising in the air,
ideas of our lives in a jar
carefully decorated with dragons and red mums.

MOTHER ANN, MOTHER

Ann, so sorry to photograph your bull
full of piss, vigor, and natural
human urges trying to throw its weight
around the cows. Sorry
we are not brother and sister
when we return pink and laughing
to our room in the family dwelling.
I know what's wrong with this picture.
Mother Ann, sorry, the lemon pie
tonight was bitter and the winter
root vegetables before it were bland.
The biscuits were good with butter
which I spread with relish.
We spoke over dinner. Sorry
so much has changed; the woman
weaving bedspreads goes home
at night. The broom-maker, too,
leaves the hill. And my cardigan
is sewn with metallic thread.
And the simple gifts are for sale.
And, Mother Ann, I lay down
on the Meeting House floor.
The sun coming in was warm and I
felt beautiful. Playing pretty possum
where ecstatic feet once shuffled
could not have been part of your vision.
Sorry. Cigarettes. Sorry. T.V.
before bed. Sorry? An electrified box
of crimes, clouds, and people dancing,
praying to win. Mother Ann,
we hardly dance at all.
Sorry, he says. The tongues
we use are plain as the nose on your face
was. And our stairs are not prayers
unless tornado or fire.

SPIDER PLANT BOULEVARD

I-know-you blue in wild piles out the back banging screen door down to the Jupiter Bar. Flatscreens: "And Chutzpah is out of it! It is no contest for No Go." These mullions speak of dukes, Waynes and Ellingtons and Nuke 'Ems. These staticky children keep jiggling their guts.

Miss Envy, 3C, polishes her fondnesses and puts them back just so. Next stop Billy Joe, non-sequitur to Romeo and that balcony, eye-level and smeared with rosebushes.

You iron your sweatshirt. You sit on a couch. You are nowhere to be found. You scrape the bottom of the Cherry Garcia with a spork. You deal a stack of albums to the floor. You iron something else.

Skylines of birds, limpid *whooha!* Ol' Spider Plant Boulevard, what do I know anyway? So, shutting up already, I just stare a thousand yards away.

PANDORA

Why expect me to open this?
What specific qualifications are required to open this?
What if I won't find what you expect when I open this?
What if it's pillars, golden birds, the mountains,
and slow clover and snow cover,
ceilings clouded and only
a few broken shells, dust from a granary,
one broken spine when I open this?
Why expect me to be the one to open this?
Tell me again what specific qualifications
are required to open this.
Maybe something swarms
under the lid like ants if I open this.
Migrating ants. I open this.
Too late. Too late to stop reading.

SALOME'S DANCE

She was a rabbitty teenager punked out in
polka dots, her feet nicking the air.
This baby in her sword dance, this blotted peeler,
this little-bitty trotter with a blind spot.
She pared down into slots.
She judged how far to go to make sure
the bird got shot. She danced

like shower curtains,
like a swizzle stick, savannah wrapped,
twirling her seven pajamas.
That platter needs a head, she said,
take it all off.
Who wouldn't follow the twists of her silly tickler pack?
Her beads clicked like a respirator.

She draped the ribbon-cutting ceremony
for psychopaths.
Her feet were pattering clams and her arms
snakes in a birdcage, wind scalping a rooftop.
Through it all, how innocent her face was.
A face:
that catch basin.

GUINEVERE GETS RELIGION

O, turn around! Turn it all back
on. You'll need more than
a rushlight to read this.

Praise be to the river. Praise
be to the flame, the breath,
the tree rooted in the slog

of peat. Praise be to Google Earth,
the GPS coordinates that just
might bring you back to me.

My eyes have seen the glory
of the coming of the Board.
They'll dispose of you

without Arthur at the helm.
We'll burn in effigy and Elaine will
leave and Galahad will flip

the Land Rover again.
And though the nations will rage
and the earth give way

and thirty-two youths
will be gunned down within
the city limits this week

(as recorded on the newsprint
stuffed in packages shunted by some
strange new shipping machine)—

despite these earthly cares and sorrows
that roll like harbor fog over my soul,
praise be to the electricity company.

Turn the lights back on.

WHY WE MUST SUPPORT PBS

"I didn't think of it as killing them," the executioner from the late eighteenth century said to Charlie Rose, still wearing a hood, his axe resting on the wood table I've assumed is oak. "I don't know how to put this: it's as if I loved them in the moment I swung, loved them and wanted to offer them peace." Charlie Rose was smiling, excited. Even more than usual, the joy of an otter seemed to be swimming through the long river of his body when he put a hand on the man's memoir and said, "But then something happened that made you question your entire existence up to that point." It was hard to see the man all in black on Charlie Rose's black set, as if midnight were speaking, saying, "Yes. One day I looked down and there was the son I'd never had staring up at me from the block, I could tell by his eyes, this was my boy, this was my life flowing out, reaching beyond the sadness of its borders." "You knew this," Charlie Rose said. "I knew this," the executioner replied. "Even though you'd never been with a woman." "Never. I was all about career." "You knew because the eyes tell us something." "Because the eyes tell us everything." "And you couldn't go on." "No. I couldn't go on." They changed gears then and honestly I drifted off, half-dreamed I'd arranged a tropical themed party on a roof without testing how much dancing and vodka the roof could hold, people were falling but still laughing, falling but still believing there was a reason to put umbrellas in their drinks, that otherwise their drunkenness would be rained on, rained out, when I heard the executioner say, "We were running and running. Finally we made it the border and I put my arms around my son and told him, you have a future but no pony. Get a pony." Charlie Rose smiled like he was smiling for the otter, for whatever is lithe and liquid in our spirits, and repeated, "Get a pony."

"That's the last time I saw him," the executioner said.
"And that's why you've refused to die." "Yes."
"To keep that moment alive." "Yes." "And you believe eternity
is an act of will." "Yes," Mr. Midnight said. "Will.
Will and love. Love and fury."

INSIDE

The best way to get to know a city is to walk it. I have New York often and Grand Rapids, Paris, Amsterdam, Venice, this is a list, Chicago is on the list, Detroit is hard to cross on foot and not feel one needs to feel impervious to economic ruin, DC and Sarajevo before the war, when everyone I met was proud that Muslims and Christians got along so well and drank warm beer ecumenically.

Then I came back decades later to shrapnel in the wall
I wanted to kiss L against but thought she had a boyfriend
until she kissed me a block later with both her lips
and hips against a different wall that's shredded now
like a wind full of bayonets turned it to elegy.

The door I knocked on for L was answered by a man with a beautiful
shrug,
at least the ugly apartments painted whatever yellow or lime green
they happened to have at the time died too, the river survived,
it seemed to remember me or was just so accustomed to bodies
that it greeted my hand out of habit, I crossed and crossed
and walked up a mountain snipers had loved to send out their
zeroes
from, people were eating, talking, taking pictures, pointing, I
admired
the simplicity and sincerity of their motions and smoked the one
cigarette
I smoked that year in a religious ceremony meant to extract
a little bit of my life and feather it into the air, the atomically
wispy equivalent of placing a rock on a gravestone to prove I was
there.

Then down and threaded myself through the city, passed minarets
and trinkets, bars and with dusk in my pockets to the hotel
and so tired, I woke fully dressed the next morning, not having
dreamed
but wishing I had hovered in moonlight or worn a tuxedo

to my life, went out and walked a last time to a square with fountain, water slapping water, children running after children running after pigeons, through shadow into the pushy sunlight, there was a stone L had carried for years she dropped into the fountain, I looked and decided I remembered exactly which one it was, and offered what change I had to erosion before the train and voices on the train speaking anything but English, anything but home.

CONTRIBUTORS

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PHILIP LEVINE, for the first time in 21 years, recently taught a course at his old school, Fresno State: a one week course that cost nothing and gave no credit. "I loved doing it," he says. "We studied the friendship between Robert Frost and Edward Thomas."

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TATE

GARY HUME

Blackbird 1998
Gloss paint on aluminium
234 x 164 cm
Private collection, London
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