

MEMORY EFFECTS

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FREE

On the day the guards ran, and
the shelling grew louder, the man
from Cernauti emptied the barrack
slop pail and went looking for blood.

He found men clumsy at butchering
a cow. They pushed him off, but
when he said it was only blood
he wanted, they let him catch it

spurting from the neck. The man
lifted a board, took out his clay
figures. He set them in a circle
in the dirt, a woman and child

in the middle, then walked around,
his hand dipping to the elbow
in the bucket, throwing blood
at the feet of the clay people.

And when they didn't move, the man
from Cernauti called their names,
one by one, and sang the Shma
backwards, and desperate, smeared

more blood on their poorly formed
faces, knocking them over, and
in the end, cursed God hoarsely
in both Yiddish and Romanian.

JUNE 1943

Others had come back long after
the war was over, so I was sure
you had not died, father.
As they marched you through town,
probably you just broke free,
ran. They'd shot another
in your place. One day
you would come,
gaunt, threadbare, to tell stories
from the marshes where you hid.
One day you'd come back,
walking the long road from Russia.

And when you failed me
and didn't come, I asked my mother
to tell me one more time
what had happened,
and I willed myself into the mind
of the Jew who informed on you,
oh my father,
who gave away your hidden guns,
your break-out plans.
I told him of your courage.

When this didn't work, father,
I dreamed I had powers,
that I could pump vodka
into the blood, slow
the Ukrainian policeman
who pulled his gun
when you lunged at the SS trooper.

And when this too failed,
oh father,
I closed the shutters
and turned away the faces
of the people forced
to watch in the square,
so they would not see you fall,
so they need not hear you say,
twice, my mother's name.

SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES

If he sleeps too close
to a green plant, he
dreams what he heard
a wet-nurse whisper
to his mother in Rovno:
you shouldn't let the boy
sleep in a room full
of plants - merciless,
they'll lean over a child,
suck air from its throat.

The story bothers him.
And though he's learned
much about picosecond
lifetime intermediates
in photosynthesis, and
that there's manganese
at the end of the chain
making oxygen, the only
way he remembers
what plants breathe, is
that they are the other.

A friend, Mechele, tried
to grow a sunflower
in the camp. One hungry
day (they were all hungry
in 1944) he tore off all
the leaves, put them in
the thin potato skin soup.

And they are the other,
the lush, alive, the green.
He wonders: is there
something to the dream —
in steady state there's
never much CO₂ in air.

In Israel they taught him
survival techniques
in the desert. Even
grimmiest wilderness
had bushes, there is dew.
So you sleep near a plant,

spread a plastic sheet

around it. Wake early
(it's difficult, the cool
time is when you finally
sleep), shake the dew off.
If you have no plastic,
he was told you must
put your lips on the stalk.

Or find a succulent, don't
be afraid, bite into it.
As if he could forget
his first memory, at two,
the rhubarb stalk's green
shading to red, the red
of the Buchenwald sun
over Weimar, his
mouth burning, sister's
warm arms, before the war.

LOOKING INTO THE CAVE

1

For a town boy the earth cellar
was a store of smells; dominant onions,
turnips under sand, sometimes
the sweet decay of an apple drifting by.
In the newly dug deep part
the earthworm-dank earth's
place to hide.

2

In a bunker under the Horwitz tanning company
twenty seven people lived fifteen months.
They had good ventilation, kerosene lamps,
and a way to the sewers through which someone
went out each week to buy food. Hela
gave birth to a boy there, her friends
covering her mouth. People worried
about the child crying, so it died.
The mother couldn't stop crying, but she learned
to keep herself quiet. The bunker
was cleaned out by an SS detail with dogs
in May 1944, three weeks before the Russians came.

3

After the war we used to play
in concrete bunkers in Germany.
These stank of animals and shit,
but there was a chance of finding a foil
chocolate wrapper for my collection,
or an unfired cartridge
that you could work on
to get the powder out.

4

On this free and grassy hill
I saw the debris of excavation, then
a hole into the ground, widening
like a sunken tepee.
There was a ladder.
The old smell of the earth
came into me, so I had to go down.
Two steps down the ladder,
in the penetrant patch of sunlight

I saw my shadow cross
the frozen snakes on the floor.

SPEAKER FOR THE DEAD

in memory of Primo Levi

Shall this heap of gold teeth
pulled root and all by kapos
speak for them? They once bit
a sugar cube for every cup of tea
with raspberries. They remember
too many Sabbath sweets.

If not this, shall the unmuted
witness of man's base twist speak
of Mengeles and Ivans, freezing
experiments, the butt of a gun?
In the same camp a man
gave me two crusts of bread,
and some rare earth metal chips
sold well as flints.

Who shall speak for the dead?
I, said the dazzling southern day.
I waft you the smell of a favela.
I bring you news from a doctor.
And I, said my night. I give you
eels of comparison
with those who didn't come back.
I speak for the dead
when I take away your breath
when I wake you every day at 5
the time you woke in the camp.

INTO THE STADIUM

Something new has come over
the young men of this town.
They pick up a stone, raise it
high, in one hand. It lights.
How can stone burn, we asked
ourselves in the better cafes,
in the town. Then we remembered
the comet, Elijah's chariot.

And the young men, some
still in their leather shorts,
like torchbearers then run
through the streets. Every night
you see a few. We used to think
it strange, we suspected a cult.
But now it's accepted; in the
cafes, in the parks, people say
they're running for us.

We're out for a walk,
you, I and our son. We stop
at a jeweler's shop, where pearls
are draped across barite roses.
Our son is missing. Then
I see him, through the window,
in the shop. He's pale, gesturing —
the jeweler knows, nods, gives
him the amethyst geode. Our son
holds it, high, and I see how
small he was, and how now
his time to run has come.

GAMES IN THE ATTIC, 1943

To get from Uniow to San Francisco,
this is what you do, mammi; first
you walk out to the road that ends

near the church, you wait a while
for a peasant to give you a ride,
for a few kopeks, to the main road,

the one where you said father
built the bridges. There you wait
for the bus. In Zloczow you catch

a train (maybe we could visit
Grandma Sabina, when the Nazis go)
to Lemberg, wait a few hours, on

to Warszawa, still by train to Gdansk.
Then you get on a boat, go out into
the Bay of Danzig, the Baltic,

through Öresund, Kattegat, and...
I forgot the third one, around
Denmark, but maybe you can cut

across by the Kiel Canal. Out
to the North Sea, the English Channel,
out to the Atlantic. Then, because

we have time, like here in the attic,
we can sail the longer way (do you
want me to tell you all the names

of the islands we pass, mammi?) around
South America, through the straits
of Magellan, near Tierra del Fuego, up

the long coast of Chile and this island
of Robinson Crusoe — please, I want you
to read that story again — up further

past Panama, where there's a canal
that could have saved us time, up
this long chicken leg that sticks out

of Mexico, to California. Here's a bay,
here's San Francisco. How did I do,
mammi, did I get it right, mammi?

near San Francisco, 1989

THE BOND

Come, Mr. Gottlieb, you can do it,
I know. And I did — skin the others
for this pink-cheeked German gentleman.
For he had good reasons, barbed wire,
and he did give me true instruction,
the word, a manual. And he put
in my hand the knife cut from an old
ram's horn. Practice on deer,
if you like, he said, and — there
were deer in the fence, and the knife
with the old letters carved in the bone
slipped through the fat, sticking
in just a few places. They taught me well.
And he, well-dressed, his shoes polished,
stood on the side, watching, and I knew
he'd go on to ask me to skin myself.
For him I could learn even that.

MY HAUNT

The photos saved from the attic. A man
and a waking child, framed in a patch
of stark sun, the door opening.

His case of drafting instruments,
the field-worn lid. His fingers
snapping the case shut.
His hand on the compasses.

In my brain, the neurons
that once remembered how
he patted my head in early 1943.

The identity card that says "The Jew,
Hilel Safran, employed by Radebeule Gmbh.
should be allowed to pass."
Signed: Gauleiter K. Muller.

In the labor camp he wrote long notes
in Polish on a semipopular book
on relativity theory.

Someone must know where
in Zloczow they heaved his body.

His eyes in a photograph.
My eyes, my childrens'.

THE SEA IN RADZIN

The Lord spoke to Moses and said, Speak to the Children of Israel in these words: They must make tassels on the corners of their garments, they and their children's children. Into this tassel thou shall work a blue (tekhelet) thread, and whenever you see this in the tassel, you shall remember all the Lord's commands and obey them, and not go into your wanton ways led astray by your own hearts and eyes...

Numbers 15, 38

A disciple asked the Rabbi of Radzin why tekhelet, of all colors, why blue? And Gershon Chanoch Leiner, who knew the commentaries, spoke: In the time when the people of Israel could still fulfill what the Lord said to Moses, Rabbi Meir, he of blessed memory, said tekhelet is like unto the sea, and the sea to the sky, and the sky to sapphire, and sapphire, the Throne of Glory of the Lord of Israel.

The rabbi thought - if only tekhelet were found, it would speed the coming of the Messiah. He dreamt of a shell, its color like unto the sea, as it is said, in the shape of a fish. Rabbi Gershon Chanoch Leiner, who knew French, German and Russian, and how the blood changed color in a man, who built a mill with machinery of his own invention, searched in the books of the gentiles for snails that come every seven years, as the Talmud says. The Radzin Rabbi taught himself Italian, and set off to the distant sea, for Naples.

Hot in their black caftans, the nine men of Radzin and their Rebbe walked the shore of a small island at the end of the Western sea. The rabbi offered a bounty for sea-snails' dark blood, was brought cuttlefish by the sailors.

Gershon Chanoch Leiner, holy in his

task, looked at the cephalopod, said:
Wise one, you are a woman, as it is
said, you are Moses' shell. He dipped
one white strand of his tassels into
the ink, and it was dyed, blue-black,
like the evening sky over the sea.
But the color faded, not yet tekhelet.

The Chasidim of Radzin had lost their
rabbi to the books he ordered brought
from Warsaw. Had not Maimonides and
Rashi too told of chemicals to bring
the blue out, in accord with dyer's
craft? He put the cuttlefish' black
sacs of ink, caked dry after their
long journey, into a very thick vat,
added iron filings and snow-white
potash. To his disciples, the blaze
outside and within was as the fires
of hell; fused, encrustation filtered,
the whitish essence, boiled into wool
turns to tekhelet in wintry Radzin.

The flour mill soon went bankrupt, but
the dye-works of the Radzin Chasidim
spread sealed blue threads over the Pale
of the Settlement. The rabbi, now old,
was plagued by profane dreams — eyes
of cuttlefish, bullock's blood treated
with iron and potash, a green bottle
with a label, Prussian Blue. Unable
to wake, Gershon Chanoch Leiner, dreamed
on, of a sailor on a ship, a sailor
dipping his hand into the wine dark sea,
a snail in his hand, the tanned sailor
drawing in sure strokes a pattern,
the Maltese cross, on his shirt, turning
to the sun, the tekhelet of the sky;
the cross turning yellow, green, purple,
the eyes of a cuttlefish, the Throne.

THE ALCHEMISTS TRIED

Now it's my turn. Flasks, mercury
won't do. So I climb over barbed
wire as it cuts; push on, listening
for the space of silence pass

after each step in dry rattler
land. I make meringues. Something
is at stake in sinking a shaft
to this fear of mine. Someone's hand

makes me leaf through every page
of the turn-of-the-century album,
color photographs of people drawn
and quartered in a dusty town

square, sullen crowds watching,
a different landscape out-of-focus
on each page. But the bodies, they
were meant to be clearly seen. Can

one eat crystals, the way shamans
did? Then would I forget? The shaft
sunk with risk, at its bottom a stone,
the work, cracking memory's slow arc.

THE SIXTEEN SULFURS OF ERÄMETSÄ

In the years between '58 and '63
O. Erämetsä reported them in German
in Suomen Kemistilehti; yellowish

gray, red, lilac, orange, black
pine-needle shaped crystals pre-
cipitating out of organic solvents.

Chance took a hand: ø-sulfur grew
out of a-pinene solution one cold
winter day when the lab temperature

fell to 80C. I see Erämetsä at work
for long hours, trying for t-sulfur
which was obtained only three times

in 5000 crystallizations. I imagine
him in gloomy November, extracting
sulfur with carbon disulfide, heating

residues, washing, drying, putting
them on silica gel, taking X-ray
powder diagrams. I wonder if

somewhere on his lab bench
there lay a diminished sampo,
the machine that Vainamoinen,

the Finnish Orpheus, searched for.
It lay hidden in the strange land
of the Woman of the North. Heroes

died for it. Grinding out prosperity
for men, making all things near
take on miraculous shape. Even sulfur.

*This owes much to J. Donohue "The Structure of
the Elements", R. E. Krieger, Malabar, 1982.*

SPECULA

1

Out of one, two, it
really being a matter
of the chemistry
of thin silver films
and the physics
of angles of
reflection
equalling angles
of incidence; but maybe
(who knows)
there's really
three — the one
back there
beckoning, left
and right exchanged; you,
seeming free, and,
since it's about surfaces,
pretension,
maybe the one
caught
right on the mirror,
half-size.

2

If I tell you that molecules are left-
or right-handed, that a carbon bound
to four others can be crafted by your
hands in nonsuperimposable mirror
image forms, that we are built from
just one hand, and that sinister, that
we smell and taste and are numbed
by one, and not its image, you'll say,
in your sweet way: what's left or right
got to do with it, do molecules
hide turns, switch-hitters, the lovingly
taught match of small arms and sleeves?

3

There are people for dinner at home, but
I'm tired, go to the bedroom for a rest.

I sit down in front of the mirror, play
with the ground glass stopper of a perfume

bottle, reach for a comb. The light flickers,
the room seems darker. In the mirror I see

the bed cover is not a dhurrie but frilly
with lace. The paintings are in ornate

frames, there are real candles in a crystal
chandelier. I hear its glass drops jingle

in the draft of a door opening, and I don't
want to see in the mirror who is coming in.

4

I think this is what drove
Bishop Berkeley to notions
of the real; he, like me,
in the bathroom, the only
full-length mirror there,
asking, in a time-honored way:
Mirror, mirror on the wall,
who is the fairest...and the
mirror, privy to technologies
of future, at home in fairy
tales, flickers in a moment
of steamy hesitation, floods
with flesh tones, and there you
stand, love, drying your back
talking vigorously to yourself.

5

I am one. I
am two. Split.
Untied.
By the point
that is you.
By a stop. That
draws — one
in, one on. In
you I am two.
I am one. You.

6

In a pair
of mirrors joined
at a right angle

three likenesses
of you
stare. Two
straight, face on;
but they're not you,
as they are switched
left to right.
And in the corner
where the mirrors abut
stands a lone man
who has it all
right
as far as
sides go, except
for that unbecoming
crack
down the middle
where he seems to be missing
something.
If you were to move,
no matter how you move,
the two seamless men
respond, quicker
than you can follow. But
the image
in the corner
stays put
there,
like you.

7

Essential amino acids, dextrously
synthesized, are a mix of mirror-
image forms. The left nourishes,
the right is excreted unmetabolized.
How could one pry them apart?

Imagine...a musty storeroom crammed
full of mannequin parts, left and right
arms in rigidified plastic disarray.
And you, in the dark, have to sort
them out. It's a left-over Fellini set.

No problem. You enter, feel your way
to this scene of cool carnage, and
like the President, you begin shaking

hands. Maybe they're a little dusty,
and one surely felt warm. If the grip

feels good, well, it's off with them
to one side; the others, found out
in the dismal misfit of left on right,
over there. It's soon done, but why
is there one more right hand than left?

8

He seemed so gentle, knew everything.
We thought you were lucky; I remember
so clearly having coffee with the two
of you on the veranda, your bandaged
hand. You said it had gotten caught
in the garage door. Now you tell me
of scars that are worse, that make
you feel like a moth with one wing
torn off. You tell of how his body
froze away from your hug as he heard
his friend coming. And I was like
his twin; none knew him as well as I.

9

Tetrahedra, screws, bolts on car
wheels always tightened the wrong

way; in silver mirrors, in molecules
growing on handed clay surfaces, or

seeded, panspermia, into cauldron
atmospheres, chains growing, left

clasping left, sculpting double
helices, to be nicked in mutations,

building, building, to Alice's
passage, in cyclones and anti-,

born from nonconservation of parity,
the four-pronged, chiral universe

marches to an asymmetric tune: left,
right, left, left...Remember, o

explorers, to bring along a hand

when you rocket to the far stars.

10

In Manchu dialects
the word for mirror is
"the place where the soul-shade is held".
Deep behind copper mirrors
the Mongol shaman sees the world,
fixes spirits,
imprisons
the white horse
of his own, ecstatic, flight.

HEAT:HOT AS __:COLD

Deep, in,
they're there, they're
at it all the time, it's jai
alai on the hot molecular fronton —
a bounce off wall onto the packed aleatory
dance floor where side swipes are medium of exchange,
momentum trades in swift carom sequences,
or just a quick kick in the rear, the hap-
hazard locomotion of the warm, warm world.
But spring nights grow cold in Ithaca.
The containing walls, glass or metal,
are a jagged rough rut of tethered
masses, still vibrant, but now
retarding, in each collision,
the cooling molecules.
There, they're there,
still there,
in deep,
slow

.

GIVING IN

At 1.4 million atmospheres
xenon, a gas, goes metallic.
Between squeezed single-bevel
diamond anvils jagged bits
of graphite shot with a YAG
laser form spherules. No one
has seen liquid carbon. Try
to imagine that dense world
between unquenching diamonds
as the pressure mounts, and
the latticework of a salt
gives, nucleating at defects
a shift to a tighter order.
Try to see graphite boil. Try
to imagine a hand, in a press,
in a cellar in Buenos Aires,
a low-tech press, easily
turned with one hand, easily
cracking a finger in another
man's hand, the jagged bone
coming through, to be crushed
again. No. Go back, up, up
like the deep diver with
a severed line, up, quickly,
to the orderly world of ruby
and hydrogen at 2.5 megabar,
the hydrogen coloring near
metallization, but you hear
the scream in the cellar, don't
you, and the diver rises too fast.

CATALYSIS

Hitchcock sure knew how to frame a shot. In North by Northwest there's a seduction scene on the train. Cary Grant leans forward to light Eve-Marie Saint's cigarette. The shot lines up with the dining car window, we see only their hands in front. He moves the lighter. She lights up. He moves slowly back. She moves his hand toward her again, in the erotic pavane of flame, hands, frame on frame. Why don't I remember the scenery (it was between New York and Chicago) that goes by outside? If I know Hitchcock, it too was probably picked as part of the dance.

We were watching North by Northwest in the choreographer's studio, because that has the only VCR here. A couple of mattresses got dragged out, two pillows, and then six people draped themselves on these in assorted angles of discomfort. I thought everyone was very careful not to touch anyone else, but when one person moved, so did all the others, thus relieving the discomfort in a sinuous concerted shift. Hitchcock would have shot this from the ceiling, straight down.

Later that night I got to thinking of this chemistry series we're making for PBS. In a half-hour on surfaces we're going to animate the approach of a diatomic molecule to the surface of a metal catalyst. It could come in end on, or maybe lying down. The first act in catalysis is that molecules bind to surfaces,

which weakens the internal bonds that hold them together. This in turn makes it much easier to react with other molecules. There's a lot going on down there. We sure could've used Hitchcock in our series.

CHEIRON IN WOODSIDE, CALIFORNIA

The redwoods' tall-stance reach up
out of a canyon peaks just about even
with the live oaks' low crown
on high ground. They share, these trees,
simple gifts of fog, the high wind
off the sea. One's branches lie layered,
a bit apart like the lines of its cone.
The other's, in every turn and gnarl
a scar of infestation, drought, repair.
Climbing along the slope between them,
I see moss softening the oaks.
There was no moss below. Each tree
reigns its cluttered empire of beetles,
borers and symbiotes, the motley
niche-filler breed of a million years
of speciation. I'm bothered by all this
apartness, so much made of a hill,
a little drainage, a different soil.

I rub the oak bark, take my glasses off
to see the lichens, and that makes
me think of microscopes, to see, inside
and deep in there all the world' detail
alike. From the large cells in root tip
or leaf, in deeper, to grana, the stained
engines of photosynthesis, chloroplasts,
alike in redwood and oak, hidden convolutions
of cell membranes holding enzymes ganged
to push on electrons, chlorophyll's magnesium,
intricate cycles of sulfur, citrate, ATP.

This made me glad, all that emerging
cleverness in the building blocks.
But then I remembered the coded capsule
of the nucleus, those tightly paired
purines and pyrimidines, waiting to say:
you, you are oak, eucalyptus, madrone.
Then you've got us, I thought, able
to scramble up hills, so that no species
is safe, no tree secure. Masters of grafting,
breeding and genetic engineering, with
an immune system, the better way to mark
the intrusive stranger, one of our own.

So I left the oak grove and set on
up the slope, skirting the poison oak
where the cattle paths led. And
I was sore with myself for seeing
only splits and sunders. The way up
grew steep, I needed to go around
where no trail went, just long grass
and thistles. The wind took up, as
I looked back the clouds had massed,
back to the sea indistinct. The clouds
touched the hills, my green swaths of hills.
I heard my airplanes in the sky. So I
looked for the live oaks and redwoods
so different, but I had climbed far,
high, and they were one joined patch
of this abundant earth. With the moss,
the beetles and me. The rain never came;
still it was time to go home — far below
I heard the voices of my friends.

REWRIT

When God made the sun
he lay back on his white
sand beach, and reaching
out, with both pale hands,
into his space, he shaped
there a sphere of hydrogen,
God did, set it alight
with his nuclear fire. He
felt, God felt, its warmth
on his soft hand. And
it was good, it was his sun.

When God set about next
to make the moon, he put
his feet on the ice cap
of Mars, and reached out
again, seizing a piece
of an old sun, and God
threw it, like a snowball,
at his earth. The earth
rocked, and so the moon,
God's moon, came to be. He
felt its reflecting light,
and it was good, his moon.

When the time came for God
to people this blue earth,
he stood knee-deep in paddy
and sea, and, dear God, he
didn't make people in his
image, but just reached out
his now sunburnt hands
to plant a mitochondrion,
here a squid's eye, a seed
of rice. Hazard he gave them,
rules, God's time, and soon
enough, the creatures came,
spoke. It was good, the word
between God and his people.

PONDER FIRE

I wonder if phlogiston theorists
 were lovers, if it began when they
 were set off, like the brown grass

on the hills a little north of here.
 It takes so little, a touch, to burn.
 They had it right, sly Becher

and Stahl, the principle is fire.
 Wood, coal, and lovers, and metal
 too are rich in it, it's what's

expelled in a flame. And the stuff
 left behind, spent ashes (and they
 were right too in the slow burn

of rust) is emptied, lax, the head
 of a long untuned drum. An inconstant
 agent at the heart of this plausible

theory, sometimes free, sometimes
 much combined with the base, antsy
 to move out, but often held, dearly.

Its loosing can banish weight, as you
 coming on me, do. It can add stones,
 the thought this consuming day will end.

THE 1986 NOBEL PRIZE IN PHYSICS

Because it stops
short
of touching, I feel all

the more your tongue
track the small
of my back, the hidden

line crease of leg
and buttock. You have fine
control, a feedback

loop, so that if you
touch a hair, if I rise, wanting that,
you move back, mapping

out (this is not
the first shy scan) the tense local topography.
The scanning tunneling

microscope, invented
by Binnig and Rohrer in 1982 works like this: a fine tip
of tungsten is brought

gently, mechanically
to a teasing five Ångströms of a surface.
Electrons tunnel across

the gap. Much care had
to be taken in the construction;
isolation from perturbing

vibrations being para-
mount. And control:
too close — the tip breaks,

too far — no electrons make
it across.
A sideways sweep easily

maps underlying order, local
defects,
imperfections. Sometimes atoms

jump from surface to tip, the
image shifts. On
microscopic examination the tip

is seen to be very rough. Still
the signal flows; only the asperity
closest to the surface matters.

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

Good theories
are those capable
of being disproved, Karl
Popper says. Like
that if I come
next week,
at the same time, sit
over my coffee
just exactly
there
where I looked up
and observed
you,
looking at me,
that I will find you,
again,
there,
and this time
have the courage
to smile.

HERE'S WHAT THE WIND CAN DO

sweep up the gully
as aery serpents
of tall grass
elsewhere
steady but shifting
bend thistles
into treble clefs
and ampersands or
rampant
fell a redwood
pulling its roots
an oak span
into the air
even
remind me
of you
blowing across
my sweaty belly

HERE'S WHAT THISTLES CAN DO

spread
with a natural vengeance
like a shantytown,
like a fire
whose blue flames
burn through the summer light.
In the slow bang
of the green world
they create
inviolable space
yet serve
as a floret feeding
niche
for hoppers, bumblebees,
a spiked perch
for hunterflies.
I've seen thistles
bent by herbicide
into treble clefs
and ampersands and
surmount that.
Elsewhere,
I've seen an old thistle
sway under a finch.
And the other day
one forced me
from my path,
closer to you.

FREE BOUNDARIES

We had to turn left off the highway
on this dirt road, which looked
just like a road we had come on
many years ago, to find the head
of a trail. But the way was blocked —
even before we turned we saw
the dug up earth, the barriers.
In the gravel, on that side road,
a man was walking back and forth;
and on a leash, that as we came
nearer turned out to be a metal
chain, he had another man, bearded,
fat, wild-eyed. A man with appetites.
There was reason to chain him, to lock
a steel collar around his neck. I
hoped the chain held, for we had to turn
to regain the highway, so straight.
I asked you to roll up your window.
I turned the wheels, but they came
toward us. I wouldn't manage to turn
around fast enough, and he was saying
something, something important, we had
to get away, and you didn't speak at all.

ONE ASKS

How does the Öresund freeze?
Out from the land, a fringing

memoir of what impinged and
mattered — now resting, severely

scattered ice. Or, in placid
sheets, domains of the night breeze

setting its last evaporating kiss
on that water. It had to be cold

already to go that fast. It couldn't
last much longer! Here and there,

cut open water, steaming wisp
memories of a sometime warmth.

BREAKING

A month ago that ice
was thick enough to drive

a car across — now it's mush-
room porous, bottom and top,

a sooty matte to the sun.
Stressed, fractured, still

it holds, so that it takes
the big Finland boats' passing

wake to penetrate Hustega-
fjärden and lift the edge

which then cracks in coming
down, clumsy block floes

pulled out on the rebound wave.
We knew it had to break,

but it should have been
the sun, the new hot sun!

No, each day the cold
sea water chips its way

a little further into the bay,
each day the ice is cracked

up, to be, piecewise, the sea.

REPAIR

The free day together
began jagged, like glass
on the floor, green glass
making love afraid. And
the air didn't clear
in the museum that had
to be visited. I moved
apace, you lingered,
a labyrinth of Italian
saints and patrons set
to separate us. Then
I saw you, in a south-
facing alcove, the sun
on your sweet graying hair.
The day annealed itself;
in the next gallery
we leaned on each other
and fell asleep, in front
of the Rape of the Sabines.

WALKING ON LIDINGÖ

for Eva

He can't carry a tune or draw a tree,
but there the man goes, whistling
up a medley of the shy red of blue-

berry flowers that you first showed
him; also a swan, fixed forever, or so
it seemed, in the white arc hold

of his neck, surprising by the pointing
straight stretch to takeoff. He imagines:
that scoured round granite bulging free

of its cap of dirt, heath, and pine,
an ice age troll of a puffball. The man
whose soul is music that is you,

that is this island, wipes the wet
side of a wooden boat, but sees only
your thigh, up close, beaded with water.

HOW IT GROWS

Where the creek bed turns
the paired redwoods' roots
lift rock, surface inter-
twined to wrestle each
other back underground.
Sloughing off big brown
slates of bark, seedlings
given to the wind, they've
long shared this wet earth.
Look up, love, look to
all that up-thrust, which
couldn't rise, and wouldn't
withstand the wind, but
for these twisted roots
hard-won common ground.

THE REDBUD RAIN

Your bloom clings to me
 in surprising old places
One day you covered me
 with such white rain
Your green heart leaves grow
 into the access to my door
Then fallen brown but entire
 they whirl to shelter me
I am shifting, you rooted
 you do what comes naturally

AIR AND WATER ISLAND

As first I sail
in, in tense desire
in you I find
a glistening shore
a dock, a place
as sure to please as
rest in and there
to be entire. And
as our moist palms
press and you rise up
on waves that soar
and crest, I know
you are my air
and water island
my tropic home

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY

The vanilla grass
 bends
 to the will
 of the wind.
 Actually
 the wind has no will.
 The wind is air, a disposition
 of molecules on their way
 to low pressure.
 The glumes
 of Hierochloe orientalis
 stand in the way,
 act
 as sails, transmitting
 the force of the wind
 through the round stem
 to roots, rooted as they are
 in a tangle of topsoil.
 The stalk inclines,
 how far
 determined
 by the uneasy
 balance of forces, upset
 by the spikelets bounce-
 slip back
 off-equilibrium.
 The wind has no will. I,
 who do,
 must bend
 to follow
 the way of the vanilla grass.

WHO USES WHOM

The grasses
figured it out
many winds ago: you can trust
the moving ocean of air.
So their sex
is all superficial,
just a lot of stamens
wavin' in the breeze
letting go.
Lower on the same stem
nets of stigmas
sift the genebearing
air. There's a tryst in the wind. Later
these organs
will wither, brown, the seed
oh, all for the seed,
grow. You can see the oats'
seedpods pendant,
like a school of feeding fish, then
the unobserved snap, out, the awn's
long hard awl of a point emerging
surprisingly part of the seed.
A lure is cast
on the fluid air,
fishing for ground below.
And the wind, what does it get
for all this matchmaking and delivery?
Some oxygen for its body; a spirit,
the bearable lightness of pollen;
the grass' sough, its sole sound;
a shape for itself, lolloping madly
up slope.

THE BERING BRIDGE

The old men say
the sky was once so close
that if you shot an arrow up
it would bounce back at you. The sky
swallowed birds. Sometimes it lay
like the luxuriating fog
just above our tents
and a man could climb
to the opening at the top, where the smoke went out
and talk to the gods.
Then the redwoods came, sacrificing
all to the main trunk, and
they jacked up the sky,
and then men with balloons and telescopes
pushed it back further,
so it became difficult to talk straight to the gods,
one had to yell, or use the intercession of shamans.
Now I have flown myself across the Pacific,
seen the deep sky blue at 30,000 ft.
They say a man has walked on the moon. They
say the earth is getting warmer.
I see smog, the sky coming back down over California.

THE BOVINE OFFERING

Busy with life's
business, you

fly-covered
cowpie, swirls

of browns, chock-
full of vital

hard gold or-
dure, the voided

congealed in
galactic

shape; what fauna
teems in you,

now pocked, dung-
beetle-green

flickering turd.
It's what comes

after much ru-
mination.

Like lava,
but quicker,

it will bear
such life. What's

left behind,
only to stoke

the greatest
cycle of them all.

LAVA

I think the chaparral
grows at night, starkly

violating the laws
of photosynthesis; for

in the moon's stringent
light there are only

vital signs — this splurge
of wild animal fur,

glistening green-black
off the pale hills' grass

ground. What life, owls'
haunt, the refulgent, oily

blackness of a bee swarm
on the way to a new hive.

The chaparral is moving,
the chaparral may be

moving, unseen, hollow
to hollow every night.

BRAHMA OF THE FOG

To go uphill in the morning,
is to see the gray cobweb

catchments terracing the slope,
to punch a hole in one, wanting

to stir the spider, and watch
the dew bead up around a heart-

shaped void. To climb steeply
in the fog is to shed the past,

that jerry-built contraption,
stand willingly in the world,

a weathered lens, to see
in a circle that fades out,

the center ground rich, you,
now, yourself, clear as

coalescing dew, and to know
that a space will open, and

will move with you, faithfully
step-in-step with you. To go on

in the chill of the morning,
is to come, wet, up on all

that exists, the Brahman bull,
the sun trying to break through.

FOR NAOMI

To be a day less than one year old
means that you can take two steps
into sheer space, one more, forgetting
just how far it is to the furry
geese calling in the play-pen;
then a bounce up-and-down when you
realize that maybe you've let go
the only hand-hold in the universe.
Still there's time, for a half turn
to mother, a smile, on the way down.

To be a year old means to speak
in tongues, but softly, to yourself,
in the morning, when the deep summer's
light begins to come through the slats,
and you hear the garbage trucks, doors
slamming. To be exactly a year old
means to jump up and down in the crib
the moment you hear a bedroom sound.

To be a year and a day old means
that at night your mother can take
your father's photo and teach you
to say "Aba", and you can make such
a wonderful mess sucking on a peach,
and pull off your diaper, smiling
with the dark eyes that open souls,
the heart you once opened to Ruth
in the desert, your grandmother's,
teaching her children to tie a bow.

METHOD ACTING

The apprentice marbler
told me the old men,
masters at this pastel

disassembling trade, advised
he think of the stone
as he paint (pine surface

primed, stick stripe borders
ruled in with the thin brush)
not as Michelangelo, who,

it's written, saw the way to cut
free. No, his world, youngling,
was to be in history's cross

section, the folded-in memory
that marble held. Here water
mattered, heat most pertinent,

the banding set in that first
mineralizing segregation, to be
deeply buried, (now his brush

flicked slower), in a giving in
to pressure, recrystallization,
the rock annealed to rose

translucence. Painting in
random cracks, a necessary
touch, comes last. He said

he was good, but lately short
of breath, thinking of the dust,
the stone sawers in the quarry.

A SUNSET CLAUSE

From the ash gray of her skin
you can tell that this body
is bent on banking its fires.
She cannot walk, or talk, but
her cuttlefish eyes follow you.
She types with her one free
hand word-processed letters
to Prometheus. She writes: Friend,
I have held dinosaur eggs, and
made myself osmium-osmium bonds
stronger than in pure metal. I
have watched the seal, and when
he dives I do believe there is
an edge to the universe. She floats
in a wheelchair, playing loudly
the two records Stan Getz and
Joao Gilberto made, playing
Theodorakis. Her eyes dance
to Mikis, her imprisoned mind
soars over aeons, anxious to ask
Prometheus in her next letter
what he did, where he went, after
Hercules freed him from the eagle.

TREMORS

He was alone in the house
when the first shock came
and would have passed it off
as just a truck rumbling by.
But the house recognized it
with a quick new creak,
the glasses in the sink sang
as if someone were testing
leaded crystal.

The next time it came stronger.
the house spoke to both of them
with all its joints. He swore
he saw the window undulate.
They argued if they should stay
in the house or run out.
Some of the glasses broke, and
in the closet the toy animals
tumbled from a basket. But
the house had no cracks.

She said: It was actually good
to have the house shake. You see,
we think we build them square
and strong, of seasoned lumber,
a tested plan. But they might be
card houses for all we know,
an unfired pot, a wine glass
on too tall a stem. A quiver,
the least strain, and they give.
Especially a home. So solid
looking, you don't think it
breathes. Ours stood the test.

He said: I wonder when the next
quake will come.

MAINTAINING PRESSURE AT THE EQUILIBRIUM LEVEL

I tracked down the Irish
expert on anti-sound
to a pub, rock blaring

round. He said — it's all
a wave, love, you know
it's air; compressed just so

by your prate, a caw; a tweaked
millionth of an atmosphere
and there, you've let sixty

db babble go. Bit of solid
state circuitry — a cinch,
to synthesize the opposite

phase, respond (here he leered
at a blonde). A crest atop
a trough, that's how it works,

he said, it sums to a flat
nil, the din rendered quiet.
Two pints on, maudlin,

he cried he got the idea
from his second wife — the
damped dialogue of her yes, his

no. There still be problems,
dearie, he yelled in my ear
as we danced, there's wild, wild

sound. And we can't figure out
why people get this damn short
fuse in our custom-made silence.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF MOTION

for Katelijne Vanduffel

The wolf-child creeps around the clearing where children build a campfire. She hears a new sound, laughter, cross talk. Upright shapes jump blurred across the fire. But they have dogs that smell her, so she can't get near. After they run off she sniffs the fruit skins, some colored paper they left. She raises a paw, then tries to stand, as she saw the children stand, but her rear legs remain bent, she falls over and over and over. She hitches away, in her crab-like motion, fast as the rabbits she catches and eats. From the edge of the forest the wolf-child watches men hoe the fields. They've begun to set traps for her. She tries again, to stand, her front legs on a tree trunk, leg over leg up the bark, rearing up so the sun coming through the leaves hits her muddaubed belly. Her back legs hurt, like the day she tried to lope after the wolves, before she came on hitching. She falls away from the pain, with a grunt, not the tinkling water sound of children in her ears. In time she learns to hobble leaning on a stick, and the wolf-child comes on stage with a different kind of motion.

THE SEASON FOR APPLES

One snowy afternoon I was in this
taxi going downtown when the driver
turned, asked if I'd mind picking up on

the way a lady at the Resurrection Home.
I said no, I didn't. It turned out she
was a regular call, the drivers knew her;

twice a day they'd pick her up a block
from the Home, then drive her to the Stag's Leap
and pick her up again for the uphill

run an hour or two later. So we stopped
and this wrinkled lady gets in. She's shaking
a little, because all she's wearing is

a summer dress, not even a sweater.
She's friendly with the driver, asks him in
for a drink. He says no, so she asks me.

I've got some time to waste, we go on in.
The bartender, he knows her too, gives her
a shot. She buys me one. I ask her where's

her coat, and she says she has one, but they
sometimes take it away in the winter
to keep her from going to the bar. She

has a good laugh, like a horse, except I
hear it breaking up a little. I buy her
one, then I've got to go. She says: Sonny,

getting old is like shaking a plastic
bag of apples. One comes out, the others
get stuck. And you don't want them to come out.

THE ANGLICAN CARPET

Once upon a time
I saw a stout Greek Orthodox priest
emerge from behind the iconostasis,
followed by acolytes swinging censers
like walking grandfather clocks.
The priest stumbled on the edge
of one rug, slipped on another,
going down
in slow motion, freezing
the acolytes who barely got a hand up
before he hit.
It struck me
that something like this
might have happened to William Paley
on his way to a natural theology (1802)
in which he reasoned that the design
so evident in this world
argued for the work of a creator.
Not much new about that, except that
Paley had a Cambridge degree, good maths
and showed that in a universe with four or more
spatial dimensions the mutual attraction
of masses for each other would no longer go as $1/r^2$.
Circular orbits wouldn't be stable, nor
clocks work. It was better to stay
in this slippery 3D world and
take on the Creator standing up.

FRITZ HABER

invented a catalyst to mine cubic miles
of nitrogen from air. He fixed the gas
with iron chips; German factories coming
on stream, pouring out tons of ammonia,

fertilizers, months before the sea-lines
to Chilean saltpeter and guano were cut,
just in time to stock powder, explosives
for the Great War. Haber knew how catalysts

work, that a catalyst is not innocent, but
joins in, to carve off the top or undermine
some critical hill, or, reaching molecular
arms for the partners in the most difficult

stage of reaction, brings them near, eases
the desired making and breaking of bonds.
The catalyst, reborn, rises to its match-
making again; a cheap pound of Haber's

primed iron could make a million pounds
of ammonia. Geheimrat Haber of the Kaiser
Wilhelm Institute thought himself a catalyst
for ending the War; his chemical weapons

would bring victory in the trenches; burns
and lung cankers were better than a dum-dum
bullet, shrapnel. When his men unscrewed
the chlorine tank caps and green gas spilled

over the dawn field at Ypres he carefully
took notes, forgot his wife's sad letters.
After the War Fritz Haber dreamed in Berlin
of mercury and sulfur, the alchemists' work

hastening the world, changing themselves.
He wondered how he could extract the millions
of atoms of gold in every liter of water,
transmuting the sea to the stacked bullion

of the German war debt. And the world, well,
it was changing; in Munich one could hear
the boots of brown-shirted troopers, one paid
a billiard marks for lunch. A catalyst again,

that's what he would find, and found - himself,
in Basel, the foreign town on the banks of his
Rhine, there he found himself, the Protestant
Geheimrat Haber, now the Jew Haber, in the city
of wily Paracelsus, a changed and dying man.

PURLIEU

The sign says "Gap in Verge"
and instead of worrying
I might cross the central
divider, as I once did
in soupy fog near Buffalo,
I leave the road and wander
the grass on the other side.
It's the edge of a forest,
my reserve, where nothing
is fully formed, and all
loves extant. Here and there
are pine needle paths, easy
to commit oneself to, knowing
none will loop. I hear
an older man with an accent
patiently teaching his grandson
to pronounce his name. They're
in a gazebo overgrown with
rose hip bushes, and when
I find the entrance only
the child is there, crying
softly. We stroll together,
coming to a miniature town
powered by falling water.
Parts of it are modern —
in one house one can see
the carved wooden figure
of an old chemist reaching
repeatedly to turn a stop-
cock on a vacuum line.
The child has slipped away.
Someone plays the guitar
in the flat yellow light
of the end of a day. Figures
enter the path, wave
and walk with me a while.
They don't hesitate to slip
an arm under mine, singing
gently after long silence.
I find that I can carry
their tune, remember them all;
I rise in the air and regard
the land at the border, limitless.