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# Heaven Overland

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**HEAVEN**

**OVERLAND**

**Poems**

by

**Jim Murphy**

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## Foreword

By Jake Adam York

... this much  
I've heard—tucked under quilted covers  
with no light but the numbers and no dream—

the day-bright choir of Asbury Chapel  
A.M.E. Church in Louisville, Kentucky,  
so far off in the atmosphere...

So Jim Murphy's "Bellwether Radio" moves to conclude, revealing the commitment at the heart of these poems: Even in the most solitary, insulated position, the poet opens himself to receive the world.

While some singularity or egotism may be unavoidable in poetry, not every poet chooses, as Jim Murphy does, to temper subjectivity with sensitivity to the world around him. Murphy's choice—or his compulsion—to attend to his community, its geographies and histories, is a gift to all readers: This poetry concerns us as much as anything else.

This is to say that this is an American poetry. And in this poetry, Murphy continues the work of Whitman, which we so often misunderstand. When we remember him, we usually remember Whitman as the supreme egotist, the author of "Song of Myself," as if the title said it all. We forget, if we ever learned, that Whitman founded that self in relation to others, in a human community, a nation. We seem to have missed Whitman's declarations, like the one in the exact center of his great poem of ego, of connection:

Now I will do nothing but listen,  
To accrue what I hear into this song....

Whitman places the world at the center of his self, even as he places his self at the center of his world; even as he reaches in, he reaches—as he must—out, working toward an uncommon marriage of self and world, subject and object, a union.

Over the last fifty years, American's most visible poetry has been a poetry of ego and personality, in which the writer's self serves as a primary subject—so much so the most readers seem to expect

every poem to be a confession or autobiography. But the poetry of community—of environment, of city, of nation—the poetry of concern has also abided, albeit less visibly, as a counterpoise. *Heaven Overland* draws from both traditions. As it turns outward, this collection extends the ethical tradition, and as it turns inward, marries the subjective to the receptive, recalling Whitman’s work more perfectly.

This is to say that this book is important, that its commitments and accomplishments are rare and always to be kept in mind.

Still, reader, you may wonder what it offers you directly. Let me assure you, these gifts are not only for history, but are for you also, whoever you are.

These poems record, from our own language—spoken on the street in Atlanta or Dayton or Chicago, in the graveyard in Charleston, on the rivers of Ohio or Missouri or Illinois, on the road in Mississippi, or on the radio anywhere in America—momentary beauties, to show us that song, however rare, proceeds from the common tongue. So these poems promise that any speech, that any mouth, might be an occasion for beauty or blessing.

Everywhere in this collection, ears, eyes, minds open to discover new abundance in landscapes thought familiar. These poems discover in America and its history boundless vistas, to remind us that the word cosmos means both “beauty” and “world.”

In this world, innumerable processions make their way “through the neighborhoods of breath and music” to find those “embouchures” through which we might reach some greater expanse. Jim Murphy’s America is one in which a heaven—in which Heaven—might be reached by making the right turns on common roads. Wherever we live, wherever we have lived, may already be holy.

In Jim Murphy’s America, a blessed music is anywhere. It is everywhere. It bears us home.

Denver, Colorado  
Winter 2008

However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling we  
cannot remain here...

However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us we are permitted to receive  
it but a little while.

—Walt Whitman



# The Family Cadillac For Sale

And here it is—after fifteen years of grinding  
desire and denial, five hundred dollars

down and sixty months of drafts on that  
unaccountable dark reservoir—an all-American

thrill in excess—our blazing El Dorado, one long  
dream of comfort in the urban wilderness—

driven only thirty-nine short years from Detroit  
to a corner lot off Rampart Street in New Orleans.

The superheated sheen of brick and asphalt,  
seven hundred days of it, combined with two

tropical depressions, sixteen major storms,  
and three incidents of theft have purified

the black heart of this fine car from 375 to zero.  
The four bare axles and the grim half-fender

together almost name my price. Just haul this  
beauty off for status, scrap or target practice—

it's more or less been done already. Better take it  
for a spin and feel the rust drop straight away.

No takers? I'll make you an even better deal—  
this body, dead as metal, dull as the ore itself

locked still in its matrix, is a powerful antenna  
to draw so much distant matter down to earth—

Miss World and her well-built bouffant, coldest  
longneck beer uncapped, Murphy's call of the '69

Mets' ecstatic dance out at the pitcher's mound,  
the jingle, gallop, stomp, and rolling thunder live

via satellite from picturesque Hawaii, and not least  
the mock ferocity of teeth and bloody tongue

stenciled on the jaw of an F-4 Phantom, wheeling  
into dawn's high prism out of Cam Ranh Bay to strike

a bargain with the vanished world—its leading edges  
tearing through thin air with 35,000 pounds of thrust

to back the brag of finest on the lot and none better  
in the land—fantasy for real, slogan for the sunrise,

the blue sky cruise they've made of heaven—you can  
pick it up behind this wheel. My father did. And I

hate to see it go. You might say times have changed.  
Let me be square with you—I'll sell it for a song.









## River Minstrels, No Date Given

Invisible from the angle of this image,  
a low rumble of vast Indiana tree line  
must swell before their open eyes.  
Along the heavy envelope of the Ohio,

the boat's prow cuts a seam, dividing  
neutral air and water, while the great  
wheel churns depth to surface and back  
down. Four stiff figures, posed

in a brittle pantomime of friendship—  
hands clenched at hips and chins,  
with banjo, fiddle, drum, and cane fife  
played at their feet like captured flags,

flat on splintered boards. Strange bearing on  
each face—no showmen's grins, almost  
bitter, lined and freighted with stark  
knowledge of the world, its drifting

tastes, peculiar wishes. Barrels of salt pork,  
rye and brandy, rstras of chiles,  
bamboo crates of chickens, strings of long,  
skinned hares—provisions furnished

above decks or below, beyond the lens, yet  
lending texture to the whole. Who will  
consume these staples and indulgences? Who will  
pocket the change or pay? Who will

step forward from the camera's deadly-still  
embrace to claim a partner, then set to  
dance, and break down in the paneled cabins?  
These four players—black men without

burnt cork, each a solitary traveler in communal  
exile, trained in subtle warcraft, plying  
trades along the rivers—stand disguised quite as  
themselves, bent to survive the times.

In the photograph, a mere suggestion  
of the unrecorded music, custom,  
thoughtful variation, a semblance  
dignified, demeaned, drastic and denied—

no solid land or portage tracks in sight.



## Spectacles of 1906

W.E.B. DuBois, 1868-1963

Now the easy principles of light,  
clear order—eloquent ideas  
on character, all taken  
from the flesh—typography  
in solid ranks and rows,  
bound in soft calfskin.  
Speech is the dream  
here, a traffic in declaratives—  
the scrape of fountain pens  
across good paper. His numbers  
all work out, the strong cases  
and connections—yet  
it is a history in doubt.  
Removing pince-nez from his face,  
trace of sparrow-tracks, pink  
pressure from the nose's bridge,  
he squints and pinches  
at the center of his sense.  
With eyes closed, the past  
opens to schoolrooms,  
broadcloth and gingham, dust  
and drills in learning English.



Now some lessons of real life—  
a belch that brings up bile,  
misplaced medications,  
fumbled statements from a trust,  
a note past due, a soiled suit,  
thumbs that depress scales,  
an old greengrocer's jokes  
and heaps of spoiled fruit,  
the scrape of shit from soles,  
a precocious daughter's pregnancy  
of modern, dangerous ideas,  
how someone grumbles, is offered

a retort, then screams in anger,  
a front porch leaning  
like a winded athlete,  
and during a lazy morning's exercise,  
the explosive affront  
of this unfathomable sight—  
five human knuckles  
charred and clearly tagged  
in a prosperous shop's window.  
There is no nomenclature.



Now the tired scholar  
who peers into this darkness  
detects some subtle movement  
in the night, and lays down dreaming  
for the well-worn stock  
of his Boss shotgun.  
Fingering both triggers,  
maneuvering the parlor  
furniture like it's alien  
terrain, he soon squares  
himself in the portal, stiffens,  
and steps into the breach  
outside—dry leaves  
tumbling over cobblestones.  
*Who's there? Who's there?*  
Only then the terror-  
flash—a life sucked down  
in a single spellbound breath  
as this time the rider passes him  
a false alarm—summer lightning—  
then a heavy peal of thunder  
that rattles every pane.

## Peaceable Kingdoms

One hundred fully lacquered variations—  
always the glass-eyed lambs, bulls' horns'  
smooth satanic curl, same Schuylkill River

free of trash and floating reeds, the omni-  
present high-peaked hats of William Penn  
and brethren as they ink the treaty, feast

on summer's plenty with the heathen Indian.  
Then to counterweigh him, finely balanced  
somehow between black soil and the Arden-

green circumference of the Knowledge Tree—  
the rosy infant, shouldered by jackals and twin  
Augustan lions—the whole scene burning

light of Law and Reason. Natural condition.  
The painter's pigments thick and raw,  
the idea lugged up and through his poor

technique—again, again, again—one hundred  
fully lacquered variations. And in what  
front room, barn, or kitchen studio the Quaker

layman Edward Hicks worked his view  
of amity for thirty years, home from gilting  
sides of coaches and pub doors, I'd like

to think his eyesight remained clear,  
his belly full, his mind unclouded by the demon  
rum, or lust, or doubt—but nothing in these

words and pictures lets me know. On canvas,  
the living hazards look the same as  
one bright morning I went looking for a lesson.

# Sin City Keys

Gram Parsons, 1946-1973

Not standing for the silver methadone drum, betrayal here of a singer to be driven in the A.M. dead and blue down barren I-10 to the music of slow clouds cooking over Twentynine Palms, and the Uniroyals rolling black on black. For now, gimlets and disunion, funereal curve of the pedal steel, and kisses on the throat from a debutante who keeps on snapping Polaroids. Conflation of red hair, turquoise, and tobacco smoke. Commemorative tequila and Tropicana rising to the rims of paper cups. A slow watch on top of a Gideon Bible with its diamond waiting. A gracious hand job failing, falling equally to stupor and the sweetness of her smile. He trails off a few bars of “Half as Much” before cool satisfaction drags him in its killing undertow. Oil seal, cannonball and blue eye. Some thoughts about America, true love, the gilded palace, someone’s child and silence.

## Charleston Language Lesson

Close ranks in the Anglican church yard,  
    half-inch thick slates  
        that run the gamut of gray shades—

sun-bleached shell to dark intaglios of lichen.  
    Words barely exist  
        to bring the soft dead back—

the faint or vanished narratives of praise  
    for beloved mother,  
        loyal husband, six days' infant—

*The least of these* planted in this civil quarter.  
    A few short steps  
        from the last Bastion, then open water—

green sea lanes that drew on English fortunes  
    and showered the low  
        country with rich prospects—

*Charles Town's blessed with such spires,*  
    *dear father, this place*  
        *is called by rights the Holy City—*

missives brought about by water music.  
    Warm nights in August  
        once thought to be miasmal—

how every flagrant human sickness played  
    out in quiet chambers,  
        or on the buckling street. In desperation—

*Come, Timothy! This is a city with no shortages*  
    *of rum, or cards, or comely*  
        *little things who'll turn a thigh—*

*forgive my indelicacy—who will provide*  
    *any upstanding member*  
        *of the King's Grenadiers with—*

*How to put it? Comfort. Molasses quotes,  
an empty powder horn,  
a half-full jug of Rhenish—*

personal effects now crushed below  
the riprap foundation of the roads.  
The disappearance of this afternoon—

circling ocean birds, percussion from a passing  
low-slung Chevrolet,  
our own impatient talk of drinks and dinner—

all of it wrung out and almost forgotten  
before our sweat beads fall,  
caught up in what's dimly legible—

*Josiah Everett, born in Liverpool and sixteen  
years a trader  
at Havana and Barbadoes—*

*Who did arrive at Charles Town for his good  
health this April past  
succumbed to foreigner's fever on—*

Enough to halt the forward  
motion of our play, enough to stop  
our chatter in the cunning history of terms—

among bent tendrils and cracking pathways,  
one juju bundle, freshly placed  
beneath the whitewashed pediment.

## Dunbar's Apparition

The byzantine cage snaps shut.  
Poet keys the box, calls the floors—  
a flesh-and-metal case ascending.

Some passenger's hand strokes  
his shoulder—two soft fingers  
ply the collar, spidering his neck,

cradling closer. Can feel her  
breasts heavy against his back,  
pressed into the gold brocade.

Buttons eased open on his uniform,  
a cough from one of the gray wool  
Dayton drummers behind the pair,

black men half-asleep themselves.  
No exchange of words. His protest  
is a sudden stop. The car jolts dead.

Needling attack and decay of a faint  
Brahms played on another level.  
He looks. No crowd, no car, no woman,

just receding rows of caneback chairs  
set in shallow water, all empty—  
out and down until they disappear.

## Twain

an incandescent evening sky—  
lapped waves of night that curl  
down to the corner of a garden

unhinged instinctual flights  
from gnat pits—riverbottoms  
into depths of royal blue

nightmare of a deadly flaw  
in pressure—blast-frozen red  
splinters of the texas deck

last mortuary flowers—a child's  
only photograph the stale air  
sickness drops to nightly prayers

stuffed cash-boxes coming open  
cognac and cigars some heavy taxes  
on the brain—dull conversations

genteel madness of the age—  
decanting apish wit and wisdom  
clean linens and burst veins

stars that burn down in the fist—  
bullets in the holly bush—poison  
waxy presence of red berries

reeled back from utter darkness—  
figures as much written as erased  
and penned into a children's story

unerring American local sense  
the world a sucking hog mire—still  
lived as if it could be different



## Night Visitation

Brother Kosmos, help me understand  
this scene, this unreal snowfall—  
a landscape opening before us, now  
barely lit in shades of stolen blue.

I'm walking three unminding dogs  
into the hollows of my early childhood—  
loud firehouse, the brick storefronts—  
all this brash enormity—full-grown,

in that far-off country without laws—  
a bolt of cloth unfolding, snapping  
all ways in the wind. We're running.  
Every streetlight turns us home.

Around back to the planted keys,  
the chipped storm cellar and the dust  
where shavings of my daylight  
life are curling on the concrete floor.

Someone's smashed a window pane,  
the latch is dangling by a string.  
We're moving in and shaking down  
burnt powder of another century—

the ash and chatter of some thirteen  
decades all along these papered walls.  
Up and down the stairs—the paid-off  
embarkations of our onetime lives.

Familiar music from the bedroom  
suite—up to the cedar cabinet where  
a student I have wronged is standing,  
thumbing through my favorite suits.

What a cacophony of snarls and barks  
just then—such strain on every link.  
A nosebleed and a shoulder separation—  
I stumble over myself, then down

on through the dissolution of these  
streaming courses, half-moon phases,  
tight dream fits—this proving ground  
we walk and lose from time to time.

Raised up—

my heart's a leather strap  
your hand pulls through my chest—  
your freezing breath gone through me,  
your blue stare through the world.



## Bellwether Radio

First signals crash across the landscape  
in broad, wild arcs of adolescent sound—  
electric shouts to all our Nowheresvilles

across the country—Yazoo City, New York,  
too, and all the unincorporated territory  
where boys are tipping bottles and the girls

won't play along. Adulthood stops and frisks  
each one at the designated checkpoint, doles out  
its punishments in clipped, officious English,

then winks and offers everyone a safe ride home.  
The kids are left to sulk, sunk deep in backseats  
humming mindless tunes, arrangements

dreamed up by Marketing Departments.  
It's how in the world the most loved soul  
grows clean and legible, like pages in a notebook.



The next program begins in pencil, then,  
once given voice, goes crackling through  
the threshold of a slash pine colonnade

as companion to the all-night diesel drivers  
plunging down unnumbered county highways.  
They awaken to this early morning news—

a sudden dip in temperature, a sermonette,  
and *Yes! no money down, no closing costs*—  
weightless notes trilled on the living wage.

Dawn's transported where the grass fields give  
to bricks and mortar. The unholy traffic  
snakes into the future's hours and stalls there

as the constant sky report reveals late overhauls  
of all transmissions—miscues of the winter  
morning—blood-deep changes on the air.

\*

Late at night some free hand curls itself  
around the amber Bakelite dial, touching  
base per hundred megahertz with jazz,

Rachmaninoff, and old-time country—  
right on through this sad cacophony of fried up  
notes and voices washing in and out of range

to the far left end and back. But this much  
I've heard—tucked under quilted covers  
with no light but the numbers and no dream—

the day-bright choir of Asbury Chapel  
A.M.E. Church in Louisville, Kentucky,  
so far off in the atmosphere, has reached me,

dropped down in velvet cassock majesty  
to signify the space between us—to cap these  
blues and offer a remembrance of first things.

## Quarter Mile

Burst gold, smoke of the starter's gun  
in the sleep-thick overcast this morning.

How a body breaks from crouch to stride—  
a leap against pine blocks, gravel clouds

into the mist, eyes fixed on a pale seam  
that's buoyed in the middle distance.

He levels out, but his breath goes short.  
The heavy air won't give enough

to let him through. One look left, one right—  
jaybirds passing at established intervals

now paying out their hacking laughter.  
He's watched himself from deep in the turn,

where memory cuts back through the curl  
of wood smoke burning somewhere, to cooking

fires set in the city's blistered core.  
Stolen, crumbling ribs and brisket fetching

top dollar in the pockmarked streets.  
Ran butcher paper to and from the stalls,

wheeling corners, paid in stacks of bills,  
and just outpaced the bare-bone-hungry dogs.

Now in midstride, midfield, middle  
of the pack, the cash prize vanishes

before he's even finished. Another man's  
half-lifted up before he crosses over.

He comes in wide past the victors  
and collapses in the grass. Covered in shade,

covered by the shape of his torn-down frame,  
racing at more than fifty years of age

for a hoard of uncollected notes and liens,  
shoes full of sand, jackets of loose change.

## In Desert Quiet

Agape in the hot closet of midday—no encroaching gulls to sound across the dome of red rock and high cumulus, a vista flush only with the braided bodies of gaunt Joshua Trees. It's simple wreckage to the untrained eye. As a film location, this could be ground for desperate talk, then quick gunshots to pound the silence back in place. Lone riders, Remington rifles slung low among saddlebags of cracked English leather, that scent of manliness, pure Sam Peckinpah. But that would not be nature. Beyond the footsteps back of me, beyond the low-end rental car, the thread of desert road, the hiccup of a barracks town, this scene repeats in three directions. It's understood I'm not to put any human imprint in the dirt. This is a well-traveled road, but for once we are alone. None of it is wilderness, but an annex to Palm Springs, Orange County, then Los Angeles—always a passage through urban undergrowth to the manicured frontier's formations of automatic sprinklers cascading over painted lawns. Such quiet will be filled, no question. Voices coming clear—first putting ink to paper—any medium, any process to record.



## Fordyce One July

Now this Mississippi Impresario of the blues offers up a side trip curling over blacktop down to Dallas—and, *snap*, a bodyguard arrives in a rented Lincoln with three stashed fifths of Rebel Yell, tops the tank and scores all the necessary petty cash, then collects his charges from the Memphis Hilton, cooling on a quarter-million dollar high. Mick Jagger's in Virginia. Charlie Watts is living on a string of Zoot Sims records, brown rice and Darjeeling tea. It's not the Art School South of Edith Grove—stumbling over simple chords, dreaming a long dark river to the heart of London. A train song on the reel-to-reel. Keith plays and sings along, just letting notions settle. *No sun like this in England. Hard to see.* Can't feel the frets or fingerboard of his vanished Telecaster—a guess the same pure air flows through jet engines, over every human hand. *Bloody hell, why not? No way to lose.* So the drive always begins half-cocked, half-lost in chrome and manic light, mapping back into the cheating past even for these true believers, scuffed and sore, now cheaply entertained in Arkansas. It's early morning, noon, midday—good country from the Delta for an hour, easy laughter from the radio. But then someone's got to stop and see the world. No use joking through the amped-up afternoon. They need something to cut down the landscape. The wide sedan fishtails in gravel, then a sideways jolt—commotion from a gang of kids idly smoking in the street, out there in another universe. Just a mild drag—*Someone should get out*—but then it happens—once more removed from home, the police drop down by rote arrangement: City, county, state patrol cars ring the scene. And this is how the blues hit home—a whiff of reefer, some uncorked bourbon, plus a Bowie knife discovered on one longhaired passenger—all the standard violations, except the last confusing piece of evidence, lifted straight from Hollywood, now offered back with other accents. First time in years here's something almost badass, an equal estimate at least before the judge. *Now watch them close.* In the end there's nothing difficult to straighten out—the local sheriff's accurate—*We don't need no Rolling Stones in Fordyce, riding in and making waves around the world.*

## Opposite of Berryland

Forever biting at the heels of fat Saint Louis—  
Collinsville, Caseyville, Edwardsville, Alton—  
grinding bitter medicines in silence, knife-drawn  
Belleville nestled up to East St. Louis, in cul-de-sacs  
where before the weekend's over, there will be rituals  
of fish at English's vs. Shrine of Our Lady of Snows.  
It's always Thanksgiving Day, with a greasy sleet  
that vanishes as it hits the twisted rails and signs.  
My aunt is peeling back her linen curtains, waiting.  
Uncle's no longer gone, not full of old-time hate,  
knocked out by two p.m. Once more the Detroit Lions  
have perfected their aerial attack, and have dutifully lost  
on the ground. I'm looting through my cousin's music,  
at best pissed off, about to steal. There's no defense  
once the buzz-saw cuts come over the headphones—  
so mean and lethal, all the burned-out huffer basement  
bands—The Stooges, Stones, Ramones, The MC5—  
minstrel singers bent to history, players on private planes.  
Their slit-open chords have all fallen from the wrists  
of the city's least favorite son—that intractable bastard  
who refuses to play his own songs straight, and instead  
draws curses around himself in the way that Elvis  
Presley sleepily collected sycophants. What would  
take me years to learn about corruption is right  
there inside the sleeves, and spread out on the dirty carpet  
like some clandestine centerfolds. At sixteen, for me  
it's all the same vague notion—something casual  
and grave I have to parrot for my life, or what  
spreads into a life. I'm fingering a tennis racket far up  
in the back bedroom—drone-on-drone above, below—  
each track's a 2x4 swung into the future, a grab-ass play  
for the T.V.-eyed suburban kids' attention. Not hard  
to plumb us in those days. What little tunnel light  
there was was dim, what sound needed to be loud.

## The Hecklers

What he yelled at Buddy Guy—

*How bout more BLUES! HEY! BUD-DAY!*

What she yelled at a T.V. screen—

*Goddamn YANKS! I can't believe you LOSERS!*

The hecklers always on the winning side,  
always bursting full throated from the back,

way behind their beards and bottle glasses, off  
the hook from work and university, lips loosed

by the queasy fellowship of darkened rooms  
and drunks, heads all messed up for a sudden

message from the lectern, stage or stadium  
about how *Everything's gonna be alright*—

always wasting for the quiet moment  
when the pitcher, singer, mayor, clown,

guitar-slinger, pianist, or other hustling player  
lets her caution fall, backs off the current game,

off the mound to take a drink, a toke,  
a snort, a scratch, or even fully drop the ball

enough to smile, remind herself just why she came  
to this piss-dank cavern space in Newport,

New York City, Hamburg, Baltimore, Big D—  
five seconds of some *Mercy Mercy Me* before

the hecklers start to wreck it—remind the room  
they paid their fare—they didn't come for this.

## A Superior Hairdressing

Before an open mirror's makeup lights and a pale feathery sway of dancers, nearly visible history exists behind him—Tupelo branch to Memphis brick,

jalopy rumbleseat to the smooth, blue Lincoln, nickels dropped in the dim shot house to dollars bound in dark red bundles, oil-saturated uniform

to sequined cummerbund and silk lapels—the forms combine and jell. No one can claim the face—hill Scotch or lowland Cherokee, Italian, African—

conjecture bent to antique laws and guessing games on local radio. So goes the voice—at once chiffon-light-and-teddy-sweet-touch-your-tongue-to-his-and-wink,

but then again, kicked-over-pail-of-blood-stilled-heart-death-letter-railroad-blaze-at-midnight—so sullen, fatalistic, lost deep in the country. It's the jet black

pompadour that plants him. And so the nervous clicks as he dips two fingers in a jar of Black & White Pomade, then rolls his thumb over the substance, as if working

sheets apart. He swoops for the swamp green comb, then frames his head for two seconds in a shaky gesture—an extra-wide headache—while he chomps his Juicy Fruit.

The close-up human details in the dark-ringed eyes and wrinkles printed on his doughy skin are all clear at this split moment, just before he waxes for the world.

As the teeth bring on a heavy-lidded order, and the shape conforms to each twisting tuck and patted tap, vain vistas of the kingdom rise to meet him. A poor boy

from the wrong hometown, he laughs, and frowns, and slowly mutters—*It ain't nothin'. You ain't nothin'*—chin-up words that fog the glass, once his hair is perfect.

## “A Monday Date”

His choice of loafers and aftershave, crisp shirt  
and an automatic chase around the town  
for rudiments—a legendary linen suit and tie.

And her, curling black nylons over the calf,  
straightening the seams in back and adding  
enough blush to count, but not too much.

So this re-enactment of the scene distorts  
no truth, let them take the Lake Street El  
to *El Dia Nuevo* Salvadoran restaurant,

have whole baked fish, and agree the wine  
is something else. Let them settle for some  
good life after, afloat on conversation,

always coming to each other. Such simple  
things to ask for, tracked from someone else’s  
composition, put into the books so long ago.

## Twentieth-Century Limited

Last stop—the luck train  
rolls slowly into Union  
station. A Sunday crowd  
files down from their lives  
while the children run  
through every open gate.  
The tracks shine and stretch  
from Moscow to Chicago.  
Someone's lover peels away  
a hundred dollar bill and signs  
her postcard's dry farewell—  
*Wish you were, so long, goodbye.*

Tell the folks back home this is the Promised Land callin'  
And the poor boy's on the line.

—Chuck Berry

## Heaven Overland

The greatest ramblers nearly always die  
in bed—Geronimo to Oscar Wilde,  
Aphra Behn to Mary Magdalene—  
knife-bearing, before-sunrise-up-and-gone  
balladeers in homespun flax, and folklore  
coming down the years—this is a lie  
I'm telling you—the selfsame burden calls  
our hearts to preach—the singer can't decide—

and now the soul's corona goes unlit—  
not even a cheater's prayer for good times  
comes—the stomach churns, and all eyes roll—  
Jordan, roll—soft song where are you now?  
A fellow Christian needed burying—  
it was me, of all the world, who carried him.





# Stag Hollywoodland

John Gilbert, 1899-1935

A string of near-freezing mornings—on foot to Echo Park,  
and once more way down Western, past Wilshire to Sunset,

threads of cigarette smoke and ash dropped on the jacket—  
white on black—the gloss of leather shoes, the heel-to-toe

express requires refreshment—Bloody Mary, steak and eggs,  
white toast, and breakfast jabber with the crowd of regulars,

where downdrafts of swift change pass for pure amusement.

*That's right, the straight studio man, none other than myself, I was paid*

*for making love to Greta Garbo. Brother, she felt like she was coming  
from the future, every take—your whole life laid out burning in your arms.*

Cupping another few seconds of brief matchlight, drawing in  
the silent era—*Golden Rule Kate* (1917, five-reel Western, four lost)

to *Flesh and the Devil* (1926, first long, prone, American screen  
kiss)—then blowing out the train-wreck talkies, *His Glorious Night*

(1929, sound recorded directly to disk) to *Downstairs* (1932)  
and *Queen Christina* (1933)—all shrill and quavering testaments

to the primacy of looks and style—gorgeous personal disasters  
voiced in Vitaphone, and scrolled in brown paper thunder.

*I tell you, buddy, if I had to do it all again—what?—don't look at me  
like that—I wouldn't change a thing. Well, what's a lover got to do*

*with talking, anyway? I got across damn well just as it is, my friend.*  
Ring and roll of dimes and nickels, and a single greasy bill

to punctuate another one-way conversation. Then daylight  
on the bursting avenue—behind a charcoal sunglass screen—

the Fords and Dusenbergs, tamale carts and high tea rooms,  
flagged flophouses, pearl-white cabanas of the Roosevelt Hotel,

one hundred close-shave drivers and their pomaded, blushing  
customers, bathtub gin and blended Canadian whiskey,

paper sacks and stainless flasks, yellowed fingers, sallow faces,  
and hard, unrelenting ravers with raw timebomb coughs

confront the noiseless grace of early happiness in hose and heels,  
ringlets perfect, full lips circled, pursed. Such candid moments

clear the mind. Soon the level of the day is reached stag-walking  
to the foot of Mt. Cahuenga, where the world's greatest gimmick

for pitching real estate buzzes and blinks its three-part projection—  
*A home for you among the lights and stars—you'll never walk alone.*

## Brokers' Holiday

In the financial district, slips of the calendar carpet the streets. All the dead dull meetings, notes on the intern who just wouldn't work, the new direction, an unexpected hiring freeze, Suzuki string caterwaulings and some secret anniversaries—all this and more penciled in gray, then blackened by loose grit in the gutters.

In some other age, ticker tape and newsprint cut to ribbons signified the New Year's oncoming edge—public fortunes spooling through the old boy's office windows, down to Giacometti's civic nightmare of nothing doing in the intemperate glare, rough metal bodies walking homeless through each other.

Now the unhinged Franklin planners cough up their contents and bring a touch of home right to the sloppy curb. The flowers remain bunched in their electric foil. Mylar balloons smile at us, and on a candy Volkswagen's windshield, half of someone's disintegrating summer smears in the light Pacific rain.

## Surf Mechanics

Take one look at this woman more than chin-deep  
in the blue Pacific—blue past the braids of foam  
that skirr against our bite-peppered ankles—  
no thought beyond the stretching skip of palms  
that rise and plunge on the ocean. Deliberate churning  
stroke of a lifelong swimmer straight against the breaking waves.

Photographic flash of the sun and thunder heard through  
a fog horn—whole body taut and pliant as the tide ordains.

If we were in St. Louis, each of us leaning against a leg  
of that train-colored gateway to the West, I would whisper  
something right that only you could hear, conveyed by lucky  
accident of engineering. I don't know if this is true myself—  
but the notion makes good copy from eighteen hundred  
miles away. Now look at how she's changed her stroke,  
pinwheeling in the water, about to edge out of our view.

## Natalie and Dennis

They wake, surrounded by Anasazi petroglyphs at the bottom of Lake Powell, just coming clear through another dream of life. The Indian head nickels under their tongues have granted them safe passage to this side of ten thousand-year-old graffiti or keys to the spirit highway. They fought their deaths and brought blue fingers to the rock face—now they're keening for a toehold into life again.

When they surface, the sudden cough of oxygen's enough to burst a drum or shoot them to the moon now wedged between the dam and Rainbow Bridge. It's night powered by complex elemental force—hydroelectric wheels and the coyote red-eye slink from can to can across the fractured surface. On the swim to shore, they move with renewed purpose, then build a fire of flotsam on the banks. They drink metallic lake water from some Dixie cups left at a camp. As the flame goes green, they warm their feet in it. What can touch them now?

Up stumbles morning. They start for Page, Arizona, across the original Glen Canyon, vague inspiration for street plans and at least one radio Western. All the way the tones of gospel music in their ears—"Woke Up This Morning with My Mind on Jesus," a call-and-response by Blind Roosevelt Graves and Brother, reverberates off the mesas by electric conduction, cylinder-cut in the country, so they can hear it now, even as they walk and don't grow weary.

Can you fit in the vision of these old-time pilgrims, these Californians in cutoffs and thong sandals? Her pink bikini top, his loose hung surfer's limbs—both of them now taken to the road with perfect ease. Are they a part of our sunscreened afternoon moving ineffectually into night, case of iced-down Heinekens, two fingers of good grass in the bag, rasp of tools against the grill on this rocking pleasure craft?

## Some Fantastic Improprieties

Out of her disdain for the music, his wife laughed during the *adagio*. She thought hard about the consequences. Out of his penchant for crisis, his son said something at once calm and self-assured—*Pop, I need a thousand dollars.*

What the civil savant needed was *Transport to Summer*,

the place where a man can say what he pleases, decked out in some breezy pinstripes with his hand set substantially on the grip of a buffed-up rattan cane, the place where you can drink sun-strengthened mimosas for breakfast, and sustain the blush all day, accompanied by mambas always drifting out of earshot.

You can sink into arm-length slabs of melon in the shade, and shortly after you turn to rum at sundown, be soundly beaten for reading misguided things on the face of a fellow tourist.

You can drop the blinds on paradise, splash seltzer water on your face, contemplate the bloody nose, finger the swollen lip, and startle yourself with this moment meant for lifelong memory,

then turn from the bathroom mirror, and drift through the already half-forgotten suite, climb nude into the linens of a bed that fits you like a ship. Last thoughts for a feast day with a name that's lost—more good space to suss out later.

## Trappings of the “Spanish Tinge”

Just Jellyroll Morton’s oblique nod to this  
strong coffee, eggs and pepper sauce  
of the treble clef—strange gift scattered  
and masked, tripped up and duly given  
battle marks of roughest handling—  
horns’ light trapped in amber, hot butter  
on the gut strings, caught in double-time.

And how Lorca’s lethal vision forms  
nights on an arid paper plain of dreams,  
Max Roach and Clifford Brown stepping  
on the burning desert floor to puncture it.  
Scholars of the flatted fifth, the high-hat’s  
theme and untold variation—getting over  
process, zoot, and snares for every hand.

And now in *Calle Ocho*, Mobile, Thirteenth  
Ward in New Orleans—there all along  
the unknown broken cobbles, upturned carts,  
down inside the drum machines—some are  
casting looks up and back, and getting nowhere  
close to the gold seam of that frontier—  
doctors raising stethoscopes to hear a ghost.



## Seeks Clinical Opinion

We have a young man called to preach,  
to move the people  
morning, noon, and night to a closer walk  
in Spirit, sounder steps.

You should see him with the children—  
just gives them someone  
to latch on to, something to think about.  
In that way, he's different.

But something in his body's failed—  
cold chills in summer,  
burning fever winterlong. No one knows  
what devil's on him

week after week. But everyone agrees  
the Spirit's strong,  
and though life's fire gutters, dwindles,  
and nearly passes out,

there's much more work to do. Always  
has been, always will.  
So we prop him in the bed, put a cool cloth  
on his brow, a poultice

on his chest. There must be more words  
to bring him around,  
more for us to see in this suffering  
about what exists,

about His Plan. He gets far down and has  
times of crisis—"episodes"  
let's say. Sometimes talks Bible right  
out of his head.

Sees double. Jaundice. Belly aches.  
Had to ice his privates  
for a solid week because he's standing out  
that long—can you believe it?

I wouldn't ask if you didn't know about  
these things. It's serious  
business since bad times with us always  
come to stay, it seems.

If there's anything that we can do,  
please notify.  
Looking forward. We do have money.  
In Christ, Sincerely Yours.

## An Opera of the Future

Dozens of sapling maples ringed in gravel  
lined each side of the bright boulevard.  
Next century's shade, someone's dream today.

We turned a corner and the pressure dropped  
before a row of weather-beaten brownstones,  
just ten feet of drunken bricks between them.

I don't remember the upstairs sill flung  
open with a bang, or the rip of fabric—  
but this must be how it happened. I was there.

The wadded dollars landed at our feet  
all at once, it seemed. A woman's hands  
barely held a mattress she'd slit open.

It slipped a few inches—another heap  
of bills fell to the ground. She lost her grip  
and we had to jump into a doorframe before

the fetid dead weight hit us. The sash slammed shut.  
We pressed ourselves tight into the wood,  
transfixed until the line of streetlights

buzzed on above us, until a soprano voice  
drifted from one of the pitch-dark rooms  
to fill the alley, her voice a crank and scratch

away from heaven, close to complete bliss.

## Five Points of 1906

Overhead glint of electric feeds,  
the car jerks across a siding, straight  
into the drumfire center of the riot.  
Sunburned and shirtless figures,  
distribution of bricks and bottles,  
feel of a stone in every fist  
heaved up, glanced against the body,  
a strip of green paint gone,  
another, another, another  
skips the car, dents the roof,  
clatter of hooves coming fast  
from the narrow approaches,  
sealing off the intersection,  
and the sidearms now appear  
just beneath the riders' armpits  
hands still on the reins, a moment's  
silence where

*the music teacher  
tightens his coat  
pulls his hat brim  
coughs just once*

*Oh Lord*

And someone starts the shouting,  
a woman's voice, indistinct except  
the name that hammers every  
accusation home. The name itself  
a cracking egg, a perforated drum,  
*The World Turned Upside Down*  
again, the reptile's tail that curves  
*o-ho this a-way, o-ho that a-way*  
back on itself, that lashes  
forward without warning, shaped  
in human press of human faces,  
teeth and tongues, eye whites and gums,  
a half-naked advance that could be  
anyone, now close enough to touch.

## Ideas of Deep Storage

A warehouse where the films of yesteryear  
go sightless, crumble to dust in their cans—

Universal vault, a late last stop before  
complete nothingness.

Ripped-off masking tape,  
some hardly-visible, bad-handed scrawl

that's supposed to document the effort.  
Somebody's vision suffers from neglect—

the horses snap, the starlets bleed to zero.  
No shootings on the steps, no huge gestures,

no despots bloodied in their open cars,  
no choreography of revolution.

What's left? At best, some child of calamity's  
screen test, *circa* 1922.

See her  
on the spangled black and white frontier—

mouthng lines, feigning sleep, distress, sweet talk.  
It's natural. Growing easy with the camera,

she makes attentive love to future days.  
The Old West fills with someone's images,

empties out and fills again, next time without  
this model who took one cash payment,

gave up on Hollywood and settled in  
Colfax, near that country's heart of gold.



## Fragments of The Irish Empire

The backroom caucus meets to place its secret capital, and the congress smokes *Gran Reservas* in celebration on Candlemas—the night they choose our American bosses.

*The black steamer's deck is scalloped with fresh ice  
and the tetherlines creak over the water's open jaw.  
Life's hinge is a forged ticket in his vest pocket.*

The first boss collects his plats and proofs, and arrives in New Orleans with a gallon of gold reflective paint meant for the icons and storefront panes on Felicity Street.

*John Sullivan and unidentified Russian sailor trade  
cracking blows in front of the Carrollton Gardens,  
then hit the Sunnyside for ham, clay pipes and hominy.*

The second boss stirs his bowl of plaster with a putty knife. Room for rent. An empty window on the Ashland Avenue side lights up as he fills the gaps and smoothes the broken wall.

*Thompsons at the inkwell, working. Two brothers who  
lost it gradually, then suddenly—except for the wet bands  
of their visors and a bottle ornamented with blue prints.*

The third boss reflects in his office on Commerical Street. He eyes two pencilled columns and a stack of shorn pay stubs, until Juan S. breaks his peace with a call in sick. Blue ribbons flicker on the fan.

*With Mary Rourke again. Voices all along the wharf nail  
options into place. His free hand wraps her fingers. Her  
head nods in a white fog—her wrist still raw with bleach.*

The fourth boss secures his lot with chain-links and razor wire. Impounded cars are chalked higher every day. All night, the dogs' blood barks are hymns of safety, his folksongs ringing change.

*Ancestry of the beaten railway line. Lunch bucket rye  
for the week and a hidden whiskey flask for Sunday.  
A slap and a few black photographs inscribe the ruling clan.*

## Ouro Preto, Bishop-Neruda

*I wrote her a little poem in English.  
It had a few errors, which is only as it should be.*

The article itself scrawled in small poor script  
on a postcard—on a teeming jungle summer noon

when Pablo Neruda comes to call  
on *that fine North American poet* and finds her

gone to Rio de Janeiro, Massachusetts, Nova Scotia.  
So instead of captivating crab cakes, rum, and poetry,

he attempts to learn his way about the grounds,  
decides to pick half her tomatoes, and gets thrown out

by her Master Gardener. He has to duck the rocks  
and livid curses tossed his way in Portuguese.

Even so, he admires the heat of that half-known  
tongue's elaborate invective as it spirals out behind.

Down on the main road, his driver's asleep  
in the cab, bill of a ballcap sagging over his nose.

There's obviously no hurry, since all day  
the pocked road has protested any sudden moves.

*She doesn't like you! Wasn't that just  
what Juan said when they blew a tire that morning?*

The insolvent envoy-poet thinks that's something  
to remember. Just how the tire iron tore against

the lug nuts, Juan's sopping bandana, cursing grunts,  
and then the frilled quetzal that shot from the brush

when at last the car got moving. Portents and profanity—  
all the ardent poets' business he intended to discuss



with herself the *gran turista*. No sense stopping  
now. He pops the trunk, reaches for the worn black

leather bag, unzips it, pulls out *North & South*.  
When the trunk door crashes shut, the driver

kicks himself awake—*To hell with you!* Ah yes,  
we're back, my friend. *Miss Bishop, it is thus—*

*a stillness shuffles forthward from the trees,  
wild eyes stare behind a breastwork green—*

*yet none but safe travels. I have "The Map" you left me  
this day, the fourteen of June, nineteen sixty-nine.*

# One Step to Fox Trot

Madison Square Garden, 1914

Tonight's contest is not what W.C. Handy had in mind,  
dancers shuffled and dealt like cards in a straight hand.

*Did you see that? The kid must be drinking double  
sidecars to strut up and ask her just like that.*

Since they've wrung out both one-step and camel-back,  
what's left now but the low down dip of the fox trot?

*I wouldn't give him the time of day. What kind of man  
would walk up and just announce himself that way?*

Big Jim Europe's two-hundred man orchestra swings into  
high gear and opalescent looks flare from the corners.

*Now look at the fool. That jacket must be ten years old.  
Who wears corduroy in April? Can you see his shoes?*

Even the galvanized fans can't blast fresh air any closer  
to the center of the ring, spinning brass and timpani.

*What on earth is the girl doing? When her sister finds  
out this, it's curtains for Irene Castle's Dancing School.*

The marathon keeps on for seven hours, couples meeting  
at the middle, palms brushing all the innocence and hints.

## Sarah Vaughan's Voice at Thirty Stories

Nearly cooled and cajoled from the red  
edge of near disaster—the ceiling blades

manage to circulate relief, and fresh air  
somehow evaporates night squalls of anger.

Both feet march the badly twisted stories,  
hometown news bought for the foreign chill—

untied, unread—tightly tucked under an arm.  
A wasp blunders up the barren stairwell

with his zipped-shut case—cage lamps, *in case*  
*of fire break glass*—and then emerges

to the homing beacon of her song, brilliant  
from behind the heavy half-closed door.

*Every road has a turning. That's one thing*  
*you're learning*—trip music for the skin—

May's morning brass delight. More surprises  
through the daylight's gap—the soaring

voice and strings, a bare calf, freshly painted  
toes, wet towels, a walking sandal sole-side up.

Opening the door to this, the deep lushness  
in these hotel joys—long nights, thick sleep,

slow rising and the gleaming one-time novelty  
of pressing hands to another uncovered city

through tinted safety panes. Almost  
anything can happen so high above the street.

## Left to Arden

Lost in rude Metairie, on 61, the Airline Highway, probably since no more pitiful road could be found—we roll the fractured curb and our car jumps. We're searching for the Garden of Memories

because Gram Parsons is rumored to be buried there. We might lay a packet of steel strings on the grave and sit out a gliding Monday afternoon far from the torpid streets of the Quarter. It's that hour's

crawl after the downpour, when all the fuzz lifts and vents begin to kick steam into the cabin, when people move inside again. A silver American whines across the windshield—sun slips

through a needle on its back as it takes the eastern turn. Along with each piece of blind chrome along the line, we're jammed in the toxic ruts of a conrail, in the backwash that stamps

pebbles flat on rooftops, and gives each palm a copper crown. It's hopeless, so we pull into a Sinclair station. Someone's drawn his idea of a penis on the dinosaur. It's just a little grin.

An unlikely spot, but action swirls inside. A hold-up or reloading of the cherry ice? A nice time. One place to cool your worried mind.

## Twilight Call, Louis Armstrong Park

Municipal Auditorium is a shark-gray nightmare,  
mere upturned stones  
inside this ring of urban holies. The brass likeness  
offsets Congo Square,

banana and catalpa leaves furrowing the space.  
Light and horns come flaring over  
from the tourist section. Only knots of sunshine  
reach this yellow-green enclave

almost completely starved of sound—just  
the mounted police passing  
at a trot, the sleeper in torn shirt and paint-sloshed  
khakis, and the single chickadee

that has taken on a spirit of the place—  
just aimless energy  
that hops from branch to fence to posted sign  
without significance.

✧

*Happy New Year, New Orleans! Remember,*  
FALLING BULLETS KILL

✧

For firing a pistol in the air, thirteen-year-old  
Louis Armstrong was remanded  
to the waifs' home where he learned to play the horn,  
swept in a random course,

likely as any path across the Square. What did  
he see in back of the burning  
spotlights? Kinds of life that could crack up  
in a single afternoon—

Hotel *Louis Quatorze* versus the wrought iron  
orphanage—same notes  
threading both. At sixty-eight, he's a *bona fide*  
world icon, cutting vocals

for glitzy Hollywood productions and soulless  
TV theater—some would say  
washed-up, a prime time act far from the heart  
of what the music's meant to be.

Yet even in the last performances, the tone  
is gold, the phrasing  
generous, unclouded, and utterly free—extant  
in all times at once.

✱

Traversing Congo Square—deepest ring  
of jazz—core also of Harlem,  
Nashville, Hollywood—each cobblestone  
a radial shell—no seen center

at the center. How easy it would be  
to become utterly lost  
in Louis Armstrong Park at nightfall.  
Already, impossibly vast

shadows boil underneath sycamore spikes  
as the two-hundred-year  
live oaks churn their ground. We were warned  
to keep our distance—

*an isolated section, dangerous on foot  
both night and day.*

No telling here at the hinge of twilight, where  
old and new songs cross.

# Open Letters to James Wright

Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky, 2004

You would have liked it here. For all  
I know, you've been here many summers,  
to add your words to vespers, to muscle  
a hand tiller over smoking ground,  
to cut cores from the wheels of cheese  
in cool, quiet rooms, or to hold out alfalfa  
for the most boisterous of the Holsteins,  
open-handed, slowly talking down  
the broad globes of panic in her eyes.

If not these slopes, you've walked  
a thousand hills that shared the tones—  
distant menace of the crows and jays,  
rearward bubble of the songbirds,  
fat bees curious about your sugars,  
and the rotary flicks of grasshoppers,  
all mingled with the crunch of steps,  
your breath, the whispered recitation  
of your life's iambs—a-go, a-go, a-go.



A statue of St. Joseph marks the site  
where the college burned in 1912.  
All those classrooms charred.  
I'm told the monks chose  
not to rebuild.



It's almost impossible to feel anger  
in this place, but you would find a way.  
Like all of us, something small  
would set you off—cold coffee,  
a turned ankle on the path, misplaced  
glasses—*How in hell did that happen?*  
You'd find yourself in an agitated state  
right here in the left ventricle of peace,  
a rubber clown who gestures and huffs  
for someone to help you with the door,

wrong key jammed in the lock. A poet  
has to carry all that ignorance around  
like luggage, only to recall how it feels  
to set it down, take it up, set it down.

✱

Tell me this, how do you maintain  
surprise? I don't mean in all the natural  
wonders over which one is destined  
to explode. I mean in artifice, in books,  
all the flawed human productions.  
Is this why you gave up Dickens?  
If I read your critics, I would find  
a studied range of answers. I want  
to find a razor.

✱

Connections to the other world  
are judicious—electricity, one telephone.  
The water treatment plant is right behind us,  
squat on a rivulet. I'm taken aback  
by how quietly its cycles turn.

✱

How far from your greasy railroad trestles,  
the creosoted graveyards of your river cities,  
black veins dropped through the gray  
substrata of a nightmare—your country  
at midcentury—topped on bourbon,  
tranquilizers, trade shows and burlesques,  
pinched ass in the White House, vivid  
pageantry of killing on T.V.—so much  
has changed, you wouldn't recognize  
the sneakers, breasts or stereos.

Our empty boxcars look the same.

✱

What is a perfect lizard but a darter  
behind graves?



✱

Each morning, just as the sun's earliest redness  
grows golden through the atmosphere,  
a big chocolate lab comes  
bouncing through the abbey cemetery.

So much to admire in the candor of a dog—  
someone offers him a treat,  
he tastes and sees that it is good.  
Someone pats his head,  
he accepts this as a true anointing.  
But if someone rejects him, walks up with  
a rotten look and shoos him off the place,  
he shakes the dust from under his feet,  
marks the spot, and then just waggles away.

✱

From two hours before dawn until after dark,  
a monk's almost every move is synchronized.  
We're subject to a lighter discipline, but even so,  
our hours are meticulously trimmed.

You know how a writer thrives in patterns—  
even Hemingway had his breakneck routine—  
to write, fish and tipple in exact proportions,  
as he ground his sunburned body to its bones.  
It's best for us to steep, to concentrate, and here,  
where every flagstone and foxglove is planted  
at an angle to enhance reflection, deep reservoirs  
may be attained, even for city poets trying  
on the country air.

So what does it mean  
that this morning a magnificent woman  
walked in front of me, and I failed to dwell  
on poems?

My words might now meander  
downhill in clichés of the libido, until whatever  
good was in the moment gets reduced to a farce  
complete with frock coat, wig, and hedges.

This is the oldest poem, perhaps the only one,  
and it may not be plainly spoken without risks.  
Even I can understand the laws. But this—  
if it disrupts so much to regard her now,  
how much worse to miss her in the future?  
Because after much consideration, after all,  
what in this world doesn't have its rhythms?



Some have clearly come to be healed.

From my narrow window, I see  
the abbot sometimes walk with a guest,  
very slowly, each measured step a lifetime.  
Both heads are bowed, and the retreatant's  
hands move to illustrate some condition.

They pass beneath a row of ancient sweet gums,  
vanish up the lane, and then return  
past the newly planted maples.



I've searched here for your fellow traveler,  
Father Merton. Though you two were  
separated by earth's orders, the same Zen koan  
became your index at full stillness of the Zero.

Silence of prayer and speech of poems,  
the give and take of hearts, simple and complex  
as the collision of weather systems—above  
all, natural. These things you understood.

The forms at last grow baroque, and difficult,  
and awful pride fattens those who seek to be  
their masters. But you went the other way,  
into purposeful erasure, into pure green time.



Someone's left a note for you from Merton:

*Your work is not quite done.*

And here you thought you'd caught a break at last. No use grouching about it. Once we return our cracked tools to the cabinet, let's thank the monks for their equipment and continue on by this and other roads.







*Silence is Kept*

# Dual Jazz Funeral

*In memoriam* August 29, 2005

## 1

Real rain on the cobbles—white-out  
world of ancient St. Louis Number One  
  
gains shape as a long day uncurls  
along Basin Street—bright memories  
  
in the pipes and frames—so many  
giddy street mistakes. Real rain on  
  
the architecture's iron vines—so now  
that grave two-step begins—honorific,  
  
washed from uniform blue, so slow  
the passage is in French. The process  
  
takes more time than thought  
possible, this progress through real rain  
  
on the morning. Frames and cobbles—  
pushing into those bright memories.

## 2

After a word and silent smoking  
thought, time to cut the body loose—  
  
giddy ghost mistakes. The afternoon  
unfurls in a sky blue drape arrayed  
  
with brass and gold—in step  
behind the players—Dejan's Olympia,  
  
The Gentilly, Young Olympia,  
The Tremé and Jack Laine's Reliance



Brass Bands—striding back and forth  
along the fraying ropes of history.

Leather, wood, brick, and steel—  
trumpet valve and bass drum strap,

talents for the world—embouchures in  
the neighborhoods of breath and music.

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The epigraph for the second half of *Heaven Overland* is taken from the song “Promised Land,” by Chuck Berry (Isalee Music Publishing Co., 1964).