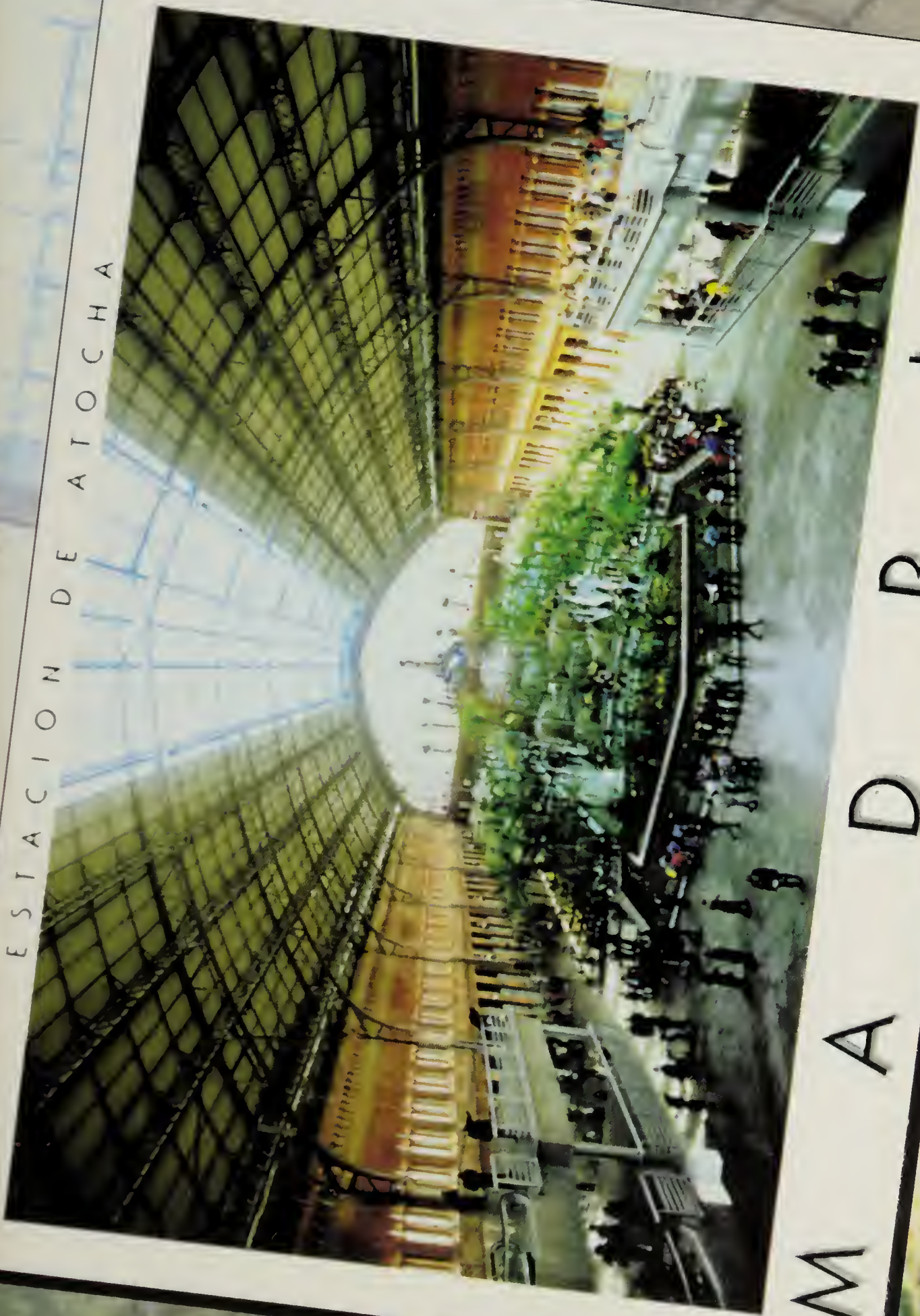


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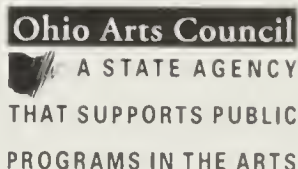
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JOHN ASHBERY

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

JOHN ASHBERY: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Admired by and influential among a relatively small but important group of poets through his first six books, Ashbery entered a new phase of his career when *Self-Portrait* was awarded several major prizes in 1976. On the one hand, he began attracting the attention of literary critics; on the other, he began to be more widely read among contemporary poets.

It's the latter that concerns us here. Mischievous, unpredictable, deliberately self-subversive, at once lyrical and almost anti-lyrical, celebrating decreation alongside creation, Ashbery has opened doors of possibility for poets of many different sensibilities, expanding our sense of what poetry can be and contain and do. Readings that press Ashbery into the company of safely canonized poets have not been very relevant to practicing poets who are his contemporaries. Their reasons for valuing him are more practical and more immediate, as the following responses suggest.

For this occasion, we followed our usual practice and asked a number of poets to choose a poem and comment on it; we deliberately sought poets whose own aesthetics would at least appear to be quite different. We hoped that this would help us assemble our own multi-faceted portrait of a writer who has produced an extraordinarily large and rich body of work, and whose rhetorical strategies, musical powers, wit, intelligence, inventiveness, and evasiveness continue to delight and astonish fellow writers.

Our Ashbery, then, is a moving target, appreciated in the American poetry community for his high spirits and astonishing humor, and valued for his obvious resistance to cultural pronouncements that would freeze and immortalize a free and active spirit.

ILLUSTRATION

I

A novice was sitting on a cornice
High over the city. Angels

Combined their prayers with those
Of the police, begging her to come off it.

One lady promised to be her friend.
"I do not want a friend," she said.

A mother offered her some nylons
Stripped from her very legs. Others brought

Little offerings of fruit and candy,
The blind man all his flowers. If any

Could be called successful, these were,
For that the scene should be a ceremony

Was what she wanted. "I desire
Monuments," she said. "I want to move

Figuratively, as waves caress
The thoughtless shore. You people I know

Will offer me every good thing
I do not want. But please remember

I died accepting them." With that, the wind
Unpinned her bulky robes, and naked

As a roc's egg, she drifted softly downward
Out of the angels' tenderness and the minds of men.

II

Much that is beautiful must be discarded
So that we may resemble a taller

Impression of ourselves. Moths climb in the flame,
Alas, that wish only to be the flame:

They do not lessen our stature.
We twinkle under the weight

Of indiscretions. But how could we tell
That of the truth we know, she was

The somber vestment? For that night, rockets sighed
Elegantly over the city, and there was feasting:

There is so much in that moment!
So many attitudes toward that flame,

We might have soared from earth, watching her glide
Aloft, in her peplum of bright leaves.

But she, of course, was only an effigy
Of indifference, a miracle

Not meant for us, as the leaves are not
Winter's because it is the end.

LUSTER

It was my friend and fellow poet Monroe Lerner who first read me John Ashbery's astonishing poem, "Illustration." We were both students in the Writers' Workshop at Iowa, and I'd come there barely knowing any of Ashbery's work. It was very late at night, Monroe was chain-smoking and talking about Billie Holiday (who was singing in the background), Frank O'Hara (whose work, especially *Lunch Poems*, I knew a bit better than Ashbery's), and finally about the poems of a book that Monroe loved, *Some Trees*, Ashbery's first and Yale-winning collection.

Monroe had that Corinth Books edition with the rough salmon-pink cover, and the smoke in the room made its color even more mysterious and fleshy—clearly, a talismanic volume. As Monroe read "Illustration" aloud that night, I knew I was hooked; there was a tone, a manner, a sleight-of-hand, and a philosophical nonchalance in the poem—in much of Ashbery, I would soon discover—that won me over instantly.

That initial moment in the first line, that rhyme of "novice" and "cornice," just floored me. Following close on the heels of that verbal delight came the tonal twist of "begging her to come off it," with all of its multiple and layered meanings. The figure of the novice nun, of course, becomes pure illustration—she "makes intelligible," she "clarifies by example," she "exemplifies," she "adorns and elucidates" . . . exactly the way the dictionary tells us an illustration should. She is herself lustrous and splendid, and it is that (to my mind) illustrious splendor that part two of Ashbery's poem asks us to consider in such a profoundly metaphysical way.

What is *physical* (and metaphorical) in the "figure" of the nun at the poem's opening is turned to the speculative and the *metaphysical* at its close. We are asked to think of her as much figuratively as actually in section one of the poem; indeed, she herself says of her imminent leap and suicide, "I want to move // Figuratively, as waves caress / The thoughtless shore." Of course, in her leap, that is precisely what Ashbery allows her to do. Even her lofty perch "high over the city" at the poem's opening doesn't

bring her close enough the mind of heaven; her final ascension begins only after the plummet of descent. The choice of “thoughtless” also reminds us that this is very much a poem of the mind at work.

The novice is a figure of pure mind—Ashbery’s mind—much in the way that Ashbery’s most powerful precursor, Stevens, brought us figures and characters of pure mind and imagination. Here is as pure an “illustration” of “reality mediated by the imagination” as we are to find outside of Stevens himself, I believe. The novice denies and refuses all the accoutrements of the real world yet reminds her supplicants (those who are offering her gifts and begging her to “come off it”) that she “died accepting them.” With this, Ashbery tells us, she “drifted softly downward / Out of the angels’ tenderness and the minds of men.”

Yet not out of the tender minds and imaginations and speculations of the poet and his readers. Section two presents us immediately with the more highly rhetorical and (one could even say *mock-*) philosophical tone that we now associate with some of Ashbery’s most famous later poems. Here, to my ear, it echoes both Stevens and Eliot (if you want to see the depth of Eliot’s influence, go back and read “The Skaters”).

Ashbery declares that the discarding, the denial, the dismantling of beauty is necessary in order that we, poor creatures, might think better of ourselves. How we burn to *be*, he says, all of us just little moths—though they, he suggests, “do not lessen our stature” in their ascent to/into the flame, even as we “twinkle under the weight / Of indiscretions.” We twinkle, Ashbery notes; we don’t burn. So much for our own mundane luster. Of course, there are so many “attitudes toward that flame,” that we too might have been transformed or transported by the witnessing of this act, but “she, of course, was only an effigy / Of indifference,” because she is the illustration of our own fierce inability and/or unwillingness to join our lives to our own ideas or beliefs. (Ashbery reminds us with the use of “effigy” that the nominal body of the novice, the “figure” of the nun, has been a relatively crude representation, an illustration for the use of the mind, the use of the poem.) Therefore, because of our multiple refusals (like her

own), including the refusal of the poem itself to understand her as much more than a useful fiction, a figure, an illuminating instant of pseudo-flesh, she is "a miracle // Not meant for us," the poet reminds us, just as "the leaves are not / Winter's because it is the end."

What an extraordinary ending to this poem. The leaves of course are not winter's because they have already fallen. The leaves belong to an earlier season, fall (The Fall?), and they fall much as the nun has fallen. The leaves, forming the "bright" pepalum which helps the novice momentarily to "glide / Aloft" will fall as she falls, and she will fall as those leaves must, because—for the novice, for the poet, for the season, and naturally (with these last lines) for the poem as well—"it is the end."

Two of my teachers (and now close friends) at Iowa, Marvin Bell and Norman Dubie, were also admirers of Ashbery's "Illustration." The sweet, delicately punning language play (quietly charged with philosophical suggestion) throughout the poem is something that Marvin Bell has used with great success from the very beginning of his career, certainly before he found its echo in Ashbery. I also believe it's no coincidence that Norman Dubie titled one of his collections *The Illustrations*, having perhaps noted in Ashbery's poem the great power of these illuminated instants which reflect the "act of the mind" that Dubie, like Ashbery, so admired in Stevens. Of course, should one wish, it might also be possible to read many of the poems in my own collections *No Heaven* and *The Red Leaves of Night* as vignettes having their origins in that arc of intelligence and image marked by the leap by one serious nun through the mind of a not-always-serious poet (and volume of poems) into the heart of a deeply enthusiastic ephebe.

A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

Yes, they are alive and can have those colors,
But I, in my soul, am alive too.
I feel I must sing and dance, to tell
Of this in a way, that knowing you may be drawn to me.

And I sing amid despair and isolation
Of the chance to know you, to sing of me
Which are you. You see,
You hold me up to the light in a way

I should never have expected, or suspected, perhaps
Because you always tell me I am you,
And right. The great spruces loom.
I am yours to die with, to desire.

I cannot ever think of me, I desire you
For a room in which the chairs ever
Have their backs turned to the light
Inflicted on the stones and paths, the real trees

That seem to shine at me through a lattice toward you.
If the wild light of this January day is true
I pledge me to be truthful unto you
Whom I cannot ever stop remembering.

Remembering to forgive. Remember to pass beyond you into the
day
On the wings of the secret you will never know.
Taking me from myself, in the path
Which the pastel girth of the day has assigned to me.

I prefer "you" in the plural. I want "you,"
You must come to me, all golden and pale
Like the dew and the air.
And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.

ENLIGHTENED TRUST

A track or path that goes around and comes back to the same place: my infatuation with the poem, the poem's refusal to settle into simple comprehension, thus keeping alive the value of *astonishment* which Longinus thought (along with clarity) part of the sublime. Here, it is syntax that acts as a thread or hall, with curious confusions between inside and outside, between bedroom and rectory and public garden. We might talk about the glassy, transparent, reflective architecture of Modernism, and the rooms, the stanzas, in which things happen, or do not happen, in a poem. What happens in a room in which "the chairs ever / Have their backs turned to the light / Inflicted on the stones and paths . . ."? It turns out what happens in the room has to do with "remembering" and with "you," although "you" is not the normal "thou" of the I-thou equation, and memory never reveals its content. It seems to be a "you" which allows the I to "pass beyond," but to where? "Into the day / On the wings of the secret you will never know." This secret remains secret, or disguised, but migrates, or *morphs*, pulling the speaker away from himself on a path, the "pastel girth of the day," although he has already attested that he "cannot ever think of me." The path of the poem is desire's, that leads at last to a new you, a "plural" you. The poem thus turns us, you and I, from conventional lyric toward an expansion, from the address of intimacy to something we might think of as a public disposition, at once democratic and ecclesiastic, where one might, if one were lucky, "start getting a feeling of exaltation." The poem seems to argue for the conversion of the fundamental desire and power of Eros into a temperament of inclusion, as generous as it is mysterious, as necessary to memory is it is to enlightened trust.

"A Blessing in Disguise" attests to the poet's desire for an audience, for an audience capable of the intensity and the intimacy of a lover. It argues for the reader. It argues for "us," for the humility of "I" in relation to "you." Ashbery is the great poet of the reader. *And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation.*

SUMMER

There is that sound like the wind
Forgetting in the branches that means something
Nobody can translate. And there is the sobering "later on,"
When you consider what a thing meant, and put it down.

For the time being the shadow is ample
And hardly seen, divided among the twigs of a tree,
The trees of a forest, just as life is divided up
Between you and me, and among all the others out there.

And the thinning-out phase follows
The period of reflection. And suddenly, to be dying
Is not a little or mean or cheap thing,
Only wearying, the heat unbearable,

And also the little mindless constructions put upon
Our fantasies of what we did: summer, the ball of pine needles,
The loose fates serving our acts, with token smiles,
Carrying out their instructions too accurately—

Too late to cancel them now—and winter, the twitter
Of cold stars at the pane, that describes with broad gestures
This state of being that is not so big after all.
Summer involves going down as a steep flight of steps

To a narrow ledge over the water. Is this it, then,
This iron comfort, these reasonable taboos,
Or did you mean it when you stopped? And the face
Resembles yours, the one reflected in the water.

CRYPTOGRAPHY, DESIRE, AND THE
SECRET LANGUAGE OF NATURE

All longing converges on this mystery: revelation, unraveling secret spaces, the suggestion that the world's valence lies just behind a scrambled façade, where only the limits of ingenuity stand between him and sunken gardens. Cryptography alone slips beneath the cheat of surfaces.

Richard Powers, *The Gold Bug Variations*

It has become a commonplace that John Ashbery is a centrally important poet whom "nobody understands." (I'm quoting the poet himself, from a 1979 interview.) In one sense this is an empty claim: Ashbery's work has attracted powerful readers who have had much to say that is serious, insightful, and illuminating. At the same time, all of his books, even those which have been widely acclaimed, have frustrated numbers of sophisticated readers who find them maddeningly, even perversely, out of reach. This is hardly surprising: Ashbery's turn-on-a-dime sensibility, his delight in paradox and non sequitur, his deft command of pastiche and parody can challenge even his most sympathetic readers to see how the parts add up to a whole. And frequently, when critics do succeed in articulating a persuasively coherent reading of a poem, it is only through imposing a thematic template onto it and trimming off those elements that don't conform—those elements, ironically, which make Ashbery's work most distinctive and original. Nearly half a century after *Some Trees* won the Yale Younger Poets prize, readers and critics are still learning how to come to terms with the mysteries of Ashbery's writing.

Finally, of course, whether you find these poems meaningful depends upon what sort of "meaning" you expect to find in them. It's certainly possible, for instance, to enjoy Ashbery's work as the pure play of linguistic possibilities. The poet's rhetorical and syntactical energies, the deadpan puns, the astonishingly slippery range of idioms and tonalities, the Houdini-like escapes from where he seems to be heading: all these qualities exemplify

a dazzling wit and technical control. And yet, I confess that finally I require something more. For me, Ashbery is most powerful when I'm able to see beyond the fluid temporality of his language, or rather, when I make the leap from hearing that language as the performance of a virtuoso to inhabiting the poem's imaginative moment so that the language seems to become my own. He described this transformation, whereby the poem seems to turn itself inside out, in a 1990 lecture at Harvard: "The actual sense of the words is that the poem consists of speaking what cannot be said to the person I want to say it. In other words, the ideal situation for the poet is to have the reader speak the poem, and how nice it would be for everybody if that could be the case."¹ This is of course a Romantic ambition in the mode of Keats's negative capability, which will jar those readers determined to see Ashbery as a proto-Language poet. But much of his distinctively dislocated tone may be explained by understanding him as a high Romantic sensibility in an ironic, attenuated, postmodern world, cut off from those sources which provided continuity and inspiration for Keats and Shelley. Pop-culture banality, distraction, and cool nonchalance are all elements of his persona, but it is those moments when the irony gives way to expressions of nostalgia or longing or intuition—when the poet reveals the face of desire, in short—that the poetry is most resonant and acute. Not that anyone would mistake Ashbery for a confessional poet, far from it: it's the productive tension between control and release, detachment and revelation, that leads to such striking results.

Part of the challenge of reading Ashbery's work, but surely also part of its appeal, is the sense of intruding onto private ground. Mysteries abound: often we feel as if we're inadvertently watching the second reel of a movie first, or eavesdropping on a conversation without knowing its context, or interpreting a stranger's dream. The events and syntax and logic all seem plausible enough, and yet nothing explains itself in conventional narrative terms. Even without the overt references to riddles and re-

¹ Quoted in David Herd, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (NY: Palgrave, 2000), 7.

buses, to illusion and detection and sinister strangers, it would be clear that the reader is frequently cast in the role of detective, as though we are meant to puzzle out a solution, to crack the code. But this is not the world of Agatha Christie: often the mystery remains stubbornly resistant, the code remains impenetrable, and the only revelation is the intensity of our desire to solve it. Shawn Rosenheim has written compellingly of the pervasiveness of the trope of cryptography in modern literature and culture; as he notes, "cryptographic writing stands as an affront to all master theories of the text, simultaneously producing a fantasy of reading as decipherment and undermining this promise with the possibility of further levels of encrypted significance."² Ashbery's work embodies this insight, tantalizing us with the possibility of knowledge, while preventing us from achieving it except in isolated and fragmentary ways.

The notion of decipherment, of course, refers not simply to the reader's relation to the text; it also allegorizes the process by which we all attempt to make sense of the world. "Summer," from *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), explores these associations through the metaphor of natural process. It begins with what is surely an echo of "The Snow Man," Wallace Stevens' meditation on nature's blank and inscrutable face. But whereas Stevens' poem proceeds through an act of radical scepticism to a degree of certainty about the absence of meaning in nature ("Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is"), Ashbery remains tentative, provisional, unsure:

There is that sound like the wind
Forgetting in the branches that means something
Nobody can translate. And there is the sobering "later on,"
When you consider what a thing meant, and put it down.

The title locates us in a particular season, but immediately the poem's world is established as predominantly metaphorical and

² Shawn James Rosenheim, *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1997), 4.

abstract. Nothing is pinned down precisely: the sound is not the wind but merely *like* it; the wind is “forgetting”; it means something, but not in a language anyone understands. Recollected in tranquillity “‘later on’” (the quotation marks lending a certain archness to the occasion), nature’s meaning remains elusive at best: “you consider what a thing meant, and put it down,” which may mean “write it down” (the code having been cracked) but may also mean “lay it aside” (the solution deferred).

In the second stanza the frame of reference shifts subtly from sound to shadow. Again the emphasis is on the momentary (“for the time being”) and indistinct (“hardly seen”). The shadow’s amplitude is at issue presumably because it offers respite from the summer’s heat, yet in the drifting clauses of the sentence, that respite is progressively attenuated, as it is divided among the twigs of a tree, and then among all the trees in the forest. In a characteristically sly move, what looks like a somewhat casual clarifying analogy (“...just as...”) raises the stakes and darkens the mood: the shadow divided among trees becomes life divided up into smaller and smaller portions among the living. The next stanza draws the noose of the syllogism tighter, linking the end of the first stanza to the end of the second: “And the thinning-out phase follows / The period of reflection.” The “sobering” moment leads to intimations of mortality, and the unexpected discovery releases a new immediacy and precision in the language:

...And suddenly, to be dying
Is not a little or mean or cheap thing,
Only wearying, the heat unbearable....

This frankness about the fact of death, its refusal of melodrama, its grounding in the reality of summer’s heat, is especially powerful in light of the rather tentative and distanced mode in which the poem began. It has the force of genuine revelation, and for an instant we may feel as though the text is about to tip over into the confessional or sentimental.

It’s at this moment, the exact midpoint of the poem, that the possibility of knowing the truth of things begins to recede again,

frustrating our hope that the secret language of nature could be so fluently translated. Ashbery accomplishes this partly through syntax: the fourth stanza begins with another "and" clause, ostensibly introducing another parallel, yet in fact what follows the "and also" bears no precise relation to what precedes it. What looks like the grammar of logic turns out to be the grammar of desire: faced with the wearying, unbearable fact of death, the speaker can only talk on into the void, and and and, the sentence piling up clauses recklessly, plunging forward past sober reflection into private memories and associations:

And also the little mindless constructions put upon
Our fantasies of what we did: summer, the ball of pine needles,
The loose fates serving our acts, with token smiles,
Carrying out their instructions too accurately—

Too late to cancel them now—and winter, the twitter
Of cold stars at the pane, that describes with broad gestures
This state of being that is not so big after all.

There are hints and glimpses of a shared history here, but they are so covert as to be practically unrecognizable. The tone is rueful, even bitter. Action is construed through fantasies, which in turn are filtered through "little mindless constructions"; further, moral responsibility is deflected through the metaphor of the "loose fates," compliant servants who carry out their mysterious instructions mechanically and irrevocably. Particularly in light of the way the sentence began, the guilty secrets here have an ominous ring, which the poem's consciousness seems to register when it abruptly shifts the subject again, this time to the antithetical season. One hardly knows what to make of this detour into winter: it seems so out of place, so much an afterthought, as to appear the shallowest of feints. Reduced to pantomime, winter is only crudely communicative: "this state of being" (which, exactly?) "is not so big after all."

Immediately we return to summer and a more sustained metaphor, yet the earlier sense of precision seems irretrievably

lost: "Summer involves going down as a steep flight of steps / To a narrow ledge over the water." This is not quite English, like an inexact translation or an imperfectly decoded message. (It's the "as" that does it; we want to read the sentence without it, but "as" remains stubbornly in the middle of the line, interposing a simile in the midst of a metaphor and undermining both in the process.) The general implication of the image is clear, though: summer is now figured as a precarious descent, and the poem's accumulating sense of danger threatens to culminate in a violent fall.

Yet there seems to be an iron railing around the ledge at the bottom, meant to prevent us from tumbling over, and the poem pauses to reflect on it: "Is this it, then, / This iron comfort, these reasonable taboos, / Or did you mean it when you stopped?" This reading involves a good deal of speculation, of course; there's no unequivocal reference to a railing in the poem, and a line like "Or did you mean it when you stopped?" is infinitely suggestive, even within the bounds of the metaphor that has been established. But this is precisely the point: caught in the web, framed by possibilities, we struggle to decode a world whose terms keep changing, whose very existence is frequently in doubt. The poem closes on a poignant and quintessential Ashberian note: "And the face / Resembles yours, the one reflected in the water." Marooned on the narrow ledge, momentarily at rest, we peer down into nature's face, still hoping perhaps to learn its language—only to discover there, like Narcissus, the image of ourselves.

A TONE POEM

It is no longer night. But there is a sameness
Of intention, all the same, in the ways
We address it, rude
Color of what an amazing world,
As it goes flat, or rubs off, and this
Is a marvel, we think, and are careful not to go past it.

But it is the same thing we are all seeing,
Our world. Go after it,
Go get it boy, says the man holding the stick.
Eat, says the hunger, and we plunge blindly in again,
Into the chamber behind the thought.
We can hear it, even think it, but can't get disentangled from our
brains.

Here, I am holding the winning ticket. Over here.
But it is all the same color again, as though the climate
Dyed everything the same color. It's more practical,
Yet the landscape, those billboards, age as rapidly as before.

RUDE COLOR

"A Tone Poem" appears in *As We Know* (1979). The title of the book is significant because the book is about consciousness: "Color of what an amazing world / As [my italics] it goes flat . . ." As we drift in the poem's spell, we almost forget that there is no clear "scene" that we can envision. The propositions themselves suffice as a kind of imagery: even though the passage above is extremely abstract, we take it almost as description.

In stanza two, we find a proposition that invokes simultaneously two kinds of epistemological convention. The concrete overtones of "plunge blindly in" give the sentence the logic of an image—of physical description intended to speak for itself—yet the abstract quality of "the chamber behind the thought," enhanced by the definite articles, together with the "we," which emphasizes the range of the proposition, gives it the quality of a generalization.

Is the poem parodying ordinary language? Sort of. Is the poem parodying philosophy? Sort of. Is the poem parodying modern music? Sort of. Is the poem parodying modern poetry? Sort of. At moments, the poem sounds melodramatic:

Eat, says the hunger, and we plunge blindly in again,
Into the chamber behind the thought.

Is this a sexual image? Sort of. Yet for some reason, I also kept hearing it as "Into the chamber behind the pot." Is the poem parodying a Wordsworthian "conversation" poem? Sort of. A stand-up comic act? Sort of. The overall effect of the poem is comic but, except for the hilarious "It's more practical," not the laugh-out-loud kind.

Like virtually all of Ashbery's poems, it raises the art of parody to the highest level—well above even that of Jonathan Swift. As we come away from "A Tone Poem," we realize that it is beautiful, and we are ready—even eager—to re-read it. Like the various discourses which it has been recapitulating, it is *about* beauty. It dramatizes beauty. Ashbery has been, from day one, the ultimate comic poet, regarding human history and human language *sub specie aeternitatis*.

JUST SOMEONE YOU SAY HI TO

But what about me, I
Wondered as the parachute released
Its carrousel into the sky over me?
I never think about it
Unless I think about it all the time
And therefore don't know except in dreams
How I behave, what I mean to myself.
Should I wonder more
How I'm doing, inquire more after you
With the face like a birthday present
I am unwrapping as the parachute wanders
Through us, across blue ridges brown with autumn leaves?

People are funny—they see it
And then it's that that they want.
No wonder we look out from ourselves
To the other person going on.
What about my end of the stick?
I keep thinking if I could get through you
I'd get back to me at a further stage
Of this journey, but the tent flaps fall,
The parachute won't land, only drift sideways.
The carnival never ends; the apples,
The land, are duly ticked away
And we are left with only sensations of ourselves
And the dry otherness, like a clenched fist
Around the throttle as we go down, sideways and down.

SAY HELLO TO THE NICE MAN

There is really no reason “Just Someone You Say Hi To” should have received more attention, as part of John Ashbery’s 1985 book, *A Wave*, than it did. Without the brilliance of the book’s title poem this is a small work, modest as its title. And yet it is part of a subtle dialogue (as is quite common, even invariable, in Ashbery’s books), elusive and fascinating and, if not what is usually recognized as brilliant, still shimmering—the way a carpet’s surface darkens, lightens and glistens according to the direction of the light.

In an interview with Sue Gangel (originally printed in the *San Francisco Review of Books*, November 1977), Ashbery said, “I’m sometimes kind of jealous of my work. It keeps getting all the attention and I’m not. After all, I wrote it.” This facetious separation of self and work to the detriment of self is a variation on Descartes’ separation of body and mind, or earlier splittings into self and other—soul and body, ghost and machine. The poem “Just Someone You Say Hi To”—the title says it all, I could end here—begins:

But what about me, I
Wondered as the parachute released
Its carrousel into the sky over me?

and the game is on. A parachute deals with descent—makes descent survivable—but also becomes play, suggestive of carousing, and is *above* the speaker, the I, the someone you say hi to. If the self is unknowable, or never more than just to know in passing (!), then the detachment which follows is understandable, the mechanism for salvation (from the fall) being separate, saving itself...or of course the descent could be a dance, not a Miltonic *felix culpa* but just *felix*.

Should I wonder more
How I’m doing, inquire more after you
With the face like a birthday present

I am unwrapping as the parachute wanders
Through us...

The parachute is above us, is through us, is a carrousel, and later
a tent, all part of the carnival. And "you" is me, too:

People are funny—they see it
And then it's that that they want.
No wonder we look out from ourselves
To the other person going on.

Ashbery began such looking-out-from-himself earlier in this book, in the poem "But What Is the Reader to Make of This," for instance, in which change in point-of-view causes (or allows) "the centuries [to] begin to collapse / Through each other, like floors in a burning building..." so that the same falling occurs on a larger scale, not the parachutist hoping (maybe not really, maybe going through the motions—what else is there?) to control his landing, but history, the centuries themselves, collapsing through each other.

Still, it is the personal,
Interior life that gives us something to think about.

And later in the same poem:

At the edge of a forest a battle rages in and out of
For a whole day. It's not the background, we're the back-
ground,
On the outside looking out.

Another poem from this book, "Try Me! I'm Different," delights in boundaries denied ("...fundamentally unlike us as the ocean when it fills / Deep crevices far inland, more deeply involved with the land / Than anyone suspected"). Here, too, the issues have to do with the line separating or connecting the writer to the written, the self to the other self:

If we could finally pry open the gate to the pastures of the
times,
No sickness would be evident. And the colors we adduced
Would supply us, parables ourselves, told in our own words.

Prying open those gates is breaking down the barriers, crossing the borders—to what? The words and the parables add up to us, to men made out of words. Which brings to mind Stevens, one of Ashbery's major precursors, a man made out of words who also observed (in "Esthétique du Mal") parachutes falling ("At dawn / The paratroopers fall and as they fall / They mow the lawn"). But I begin to stray too far from the poem this musing started from: I was just about, for instance, to quote Pessoa's lines about the poet as pretender who can "pretend so completely / That he can pretend pain, / The pain he really feels." But I will succumb to the temptation since musing, sliding sideways, straying, is part of what it means to be just someone you say hi to:

This parachute won't land, only drifts sideways.
The carnival never ends; the apples,
The land, are duly tucked away
And we are left with only sensations of ourselves.

I am no more privileged in my knowledge of myself than of anyone else—I have only sensations to know and to guide my knowing?

And the dry otherness, like a clenched fist
Around the throttle as we go down, sideways and down.

Yes, well, of course—fallenness. Who is in control? Falling. And the sense of control, of being a self, is like those elevator buttons that say "close door," something to fiddle with and give you a sense of authority and a sense of purpose, connected to nothing—our bodies go on living our lives as we go on thinking we are *above* them, by thinking—meanwhile always falling through.

CROSSROADS IN THE PAST

That night the wind stirred in the forsythia bushes,
but it was a wrong one, blowing in the wrong direction.
“That’s silly. How can there be a wrong direction?
‘It bloweth where it listeth,’ as you know, just as we do
when we make love or do something else there are no rules for.”

I tell you, something went wrong there a while back.
Just don’t ask me what it was. Pretend I’ve dropped the subject.
No, now you’ve got me interested, I want to know
exactly what seems wrong to you, how something could

seem wrong to you. In what way do things get to be wrong?
I’m sitting here dialing my cellphone
with one hand, digging at some obscure pebbles with my shovel
with the other. And then something like braids will stand out,

on horsehair cushions. That armchair is really too lugubrious.
We’ve got to change all the furniture, fumigate the house,
talk our relationship back to its beginnings. Say, you know
that’s probably what’s wrong—the beginnings concept, I mean.
I aver there are no beginnings, though there were perhaps some
sometime. We’d stopped, to look at the poster the movie theater

had placed freestanding on the sidewalk. The lobby cards
drew us in. It was afternoon, we found ourselves
sitting at the end of a row in the balcony; the theater was unex-
pectedly
crowded. That was the day we first realized we didn’t fully
know our names, yours or mine, and we left quietly
amid the gray snow falling. Twilight had already set in.

TECHIE

I'm wary of writing about poetry because some criticism—more correctly, some critical theory—seems to want to hog the spotlight. I think a lot of us—and by “us” I suppose I mean people who write poetry and people who read poetry (picture a Venn diagram with the first group orange-wedging its way into the larger globe of the latter group)—a lot of us may feel this way: that reading poetry has been eclipsed by the study of critical theory which somehow seems more “serious” or “philosophical.” Don't get me wrong: there are critics who devote their lives to reading literature with intelligence and feeling and, dare I say it, love: so many poems flying through the air like snowballs after a really big storm, going splat against the library window, and who wouldn't want to go outside and play? What bothers is me are students or colleagues who can quote Derrida (for example) chapter and verse and who use poems as mere supporting data for critical theory.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I teach at MIT, in a writing program, but it feels different from being “in the academy” because who goes to MIT to write and/or read poetry? Still, there are MIT students who discover they aren't built for engineering or science who don't drop out and who return to an earlier voice before their high school guidance counselors told them they were good in math. And I'm always stumbling over a poetics of MIT—no, not of science: I hate this parlor game of showing how science = art, which it does not: science, like critical theory, has also overtaken poetry; so has technology which everyone is gaga about: think of the once-upon-a-time cultish, nerdy contest in course 6, excuse me, EECS, excuse me again, the electrical engineering and computer science department at MIT, where students build robotic vehicles for one-on-one battles, an idea which has been stolen for “BattleBots,” a program on basic cable's Comedy Central. The WWF and MIT and the video-game industry are real hotbeds of pop-culture artifacts and narratives (you heard it here first—the next big thing: transmedia storytelling, now in the works at an Institute near you), maybe more

so than your typical liberal arts college, an emerging poetics in which technologists (as a colleague in the MIT Media Lab has written) are the humanists of the 21st century. Poor poetry. Poets as the unacknowledged techies of the world?

I'm also wary of writing about John Ashbery's poetry because he has been a friend for about twenty years since the time I finished at Harvard and went to study with him at Brooklyn College where he taught in the MFA program. I couldn't believe it: there in my hometown—and Brooklyn yet!—John Ashbery to study with, learn from, if only I could get accepted. Ashbery is the least autobiographical of poets, and I've run into people who spend time around him and then write about his poetry with "insights" taken from his private (you'd think) life. Must feel like being visited by an anthropologist, and him a lonely tribe member. So, for me at least, intruding upon his privacy—something I'm not going to do here—is a little like what committing a sin was like when I was in Catholic grammar school. If it please the court, I would like to note for the record, your Honor, that Ashbery was (and I'm sure still is) a wonderful teacher: Ashbery has one of the finest critical (that word again) minds of anyone around, a memory which is staggering, voiced in class with gentleness and generosity and humor. I think we used to think of this as the way people in the humanities *would* behave before the culture wars and the triumph of political conservatism in public cultural affairs. Also, someone somehow has managed to turn everything into a commodity, even the secret and the intimate: come up here, smarty pants, and parse "secret" and "hidden" and "lost." Me and my fellow students at Brooklyn could never figure out what poem Ashbery would like of the ones we were going to review that day in workshop: sometimes before class we'd meet at the Junction Bar (at the junction of Flatbush and Nostrand Avenues, which ran out to the end of Brooklyn and thence to the ocean) and we'd try to figure out whose poem might win favor and we always got it wrong. That surprise was a useful lesson.

Another reason I'm uncomfortable with writing this essaylet is that my favorite Ashbery poems are the really long ones, especially the most recent book-length poem, *Girls on the Run*. His big

poems are the ones where I can get really productively lost, meaning dazzled, meaning I suppose *found*, where “it’s enough to make you ache / with hunger at a banquet” (*Girls on the Run*). Ashbery’s long poems have always seemed to offer me proof and solace, proof of things I wasn’t aware I needed support for except everything else in this culture said they didn’t matter or even exist: this is the solace his poetry also offers (Note to life: I’d like to get this from you too sometimes):

When it was all over, a sheep emerged from inside the house.
A cheer went up, for it was recognized that these are lousy
times
to be living in, yet we do live in them:
We are the case.
And seven times seven ages later it would still be the truth
in appearances,
festive, eternal, misconstrued. Does anyone still want to play?
(from *Girls on the Run*)

In some published interview Ashbery once said that we read to escape life. Philosophy, like academic critical theory and technology, tries to console us, tries to explain things to us. But philosophy, like criticism and technology, is constrained by its technicalities and its notions of truth and justification and decorum (different versions of this from both the right *and* the left). Maybe that MIT professor was right about technologists being the new humanists because we seem to be afraid nowadays of certain words and what they stand for, afraid of the human in a weird way, afraid of the “humanities” which has become fearful even of itself. Pop quiz: from the following list choose the words you wouldn’t use for fear of being laughed at by your colleagues: joy, life, love, death, sorrow, human, regret, soul. For extra credit share a joke with us in front of your colleagues. Wittgenstein’s “case” and Wordsworth’s “sheep” along with Biblical phrasing and childhood play loiter in the stanza above, as they do in life. Technologists and critical theorists and philosophers are not allowed to allow such stuff to loiter for very long—if at all—in their work.

"Crossroads in the Past," a poem from Ashbery's most recent book *Your Name Here*, captures the feeling of a longer poem in the space of a page. The title hints at some fateful, probably ancient Greek, decision and its corollary life, and the poem plays with the technicalities of philosophy and religion ("In what way do things get to be wrong?"—that "get to be" sounding strangely like a positive thing); the poem alludes to choice and contains "dramatic" dialogue (external turning internal); and the ever-present *now* ("my cellphone") and the ever-present *then* ("my shovel"—a child's plaything and the tool of our later interment) allude to beginnings and leave-takings (think how many poems by Ashbery have train stations in them). For a non-autobiographical poet Ashbery writes a lot about origins, implying, as one must, its twin, fate.

So all of that is there, and if I had the space it would be instructive to talk about the rhythm of this poem, the technical sophistication of its levels of diction, line-break meanings, and a stanzaic structure always in tension with a slightly longer syntactic paragraph which haunts many of Ashbery's strict stanzaic forms. These combine to give us a sense of a longer span of duration (time, life, fate) experienced within the poem. In fact, I wish I could call up the spirit of a critic right now, a spirit who might offer some insights into the relationship of Ashbery's poems to music: poetry as music—not as "sounds" but as the strange feeling one sometimes gets in listening to music that an argument is unfolding, the terms of which are mysterious but nevertheless deeply and immediately felt as real. That is how I feel when I read an Ashbery poem, with great delight. I wonder if in saying we read to escape life Ashbery is also implying that we are free in the triumphant technical sense of that word to slip anchorage along with some of the big mythic narratives we grow up with that also escape "life." (Freedom is a complicated thing in his poetry; think of "There is no freedom and no escape from freedom," as well as "*Frei aber einsam*" from two earlier poems; there is no simplistic liberation poetics going on here). "Crossroads in the Past" seems to enact how we continually trip over a lost or waiting or forgotten life—surprisingly, joyfully, tragically—at any of

the many crossroads we encounter in daily life (without knowing it—unless we have been reading a lot of Ashbery poems which can serve as a manual for this sort of thing), places of recognition where “we first realized we didn’t fully / know our names....” In a poem that asks “In what way do things get to be wrong?” and disavows the search for a pure beginning (after all, if we don’t fully know our own names...the poem is silent about what happens *after* “we first realized...”) the poem offers another gift, a kind of secular blessing: “We’d stopped, to look at the poster the movie theater / had placed freestanding on the sidewalk” and entering into the movie house (“It is afternoon,” remember, which now that I think of it was Wittgenstein’s favorite time to go to the movies)—and we discover that “the theater was unexpectedly / crowded,”—a line that brought tears to my eyes when I first read it: this theater filled with others gathered in by the same ordinary sign, the same variable fate, equally unsure, alone together in a not very momentous experience except that it composes us (“and we left quietly”) returning us to a changed but unromanticized landscape (“the gray snow falling”) maybe a little too late (“Twilight had already set in”) to do much with our new awareness except live it out till the next crossroads.

GET ME REWRITE

The
ghoulish
resonance
of
a
cello
resonates in a neighbor's cabana.

What do I know of this?
I
am
sitting
on a pile of dirt in a neighbor's back yard.
Was there something else to do?

Long ago we crept for candy
through the neighbor's gutter
but found only candy wrappers
of an unknown species: "Sycamores,"
"Chocolate Spit," "Slate-Gray Fluids,"
"Anamorphic Portraits of Old Goriot."

The way a piece of candy seems to flutter
in the prismatic light above a clothesline, stops,
removes all its clothes.

There was a bucket
of water
to wash in,
fingerposts pointing the way to the next phenomenon:
sugar falling gently on strawberries, snow on a pile of red eggs.

None of us was really satisfied,
but none of us wanted to go away, either.
The shadows of an industrial park loomed below us,
the brass sky above.

"Get off your duff," Reuel commanded.

(He was our commander.)

"You are like the poet Lenz, who ran from house to forest
to rosy firmament and back
and nobody ever saw his legs move."

Ah,
it is good
to be back
in the muck.

I WANT CANDY

"Get Me Rewrite" conveys an irrepressible joy even when strained through an irrepressible melancholy, an elegance even when striving to be clumsy. Like so many of Ashbery's poems, it is shaded toward affection. Certainly it conveys no orphic pretension demanding our exegesis. The poem doesn't so much confound the pedant in us as nuzzle the pedant in us.

In Ashbery's twentieth book of poetry, the familiar things of childhood are looked for: kittens, tricycles, Old Maid, homework, the candy of "Get Me Rewrite." Familiar poets and familiar poetry emerge as well. *Your Name Here* resonates with echolalias of other poets: Shakespeare, Herrick, Wordsworth, Keats, Rilke, Frost. The beginning of a famous line of poetry may be introduced only to veer, accumulating new language as if it's a graft meant for humorous wilting. Consider a few: "My mistress' hands are nothing like these" ("Invasive Procedures"). "Turning and turning in the demented sky, / the sugar-mill gushes forth poems and plainer twists" ("Paperwork"). "[W]henas in silks / you go, past the cat's dish / and on into the living room" ("Another Aardvark"). This technique isn't so much a body slam on treasured lines of poetry as something quieter, a sliding away from origins, even a eulogy for origins as Ashbery takes note of the things we consider "past" and the structures of meaning by which we know them.

The word *anamorphic* refers to an intentionally produced distortion. The word appears in "Get Me Rewrite" (as "Anamorphic Portraits of Old Goriot") and seems, not coincidentally, a way of working that is profoundly pleasurable for Ashbery. The urge to revisit and rewrite becomes an urge to distort into new forms. The fun house mirror, the convex mirror, glassy reflections of various sorts have served this poet since early in his career to project a view of words as being peculiarly glasslike—or like the cellophane of film—and subject as such to illusory effects, reversing, dissembling, and multiplying. I'm reminded of lines from Wallace Stevens' "Asides on the Oboe":

The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, the man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

In many of Ashbery's poems we've come to expect distortions of convention, a cracking of the glass of agreed-upon sense into reflective shards. His means are now familiar although relentlessly deployed in new orders: wandering pronouns (particularly the often-summoned second person); ersatz grammatical connective tissues; a sincere lack of "seriousness" in the limited, cloistered sense of that term; a refurbishment of common phrases as each is wrenched off the track of linguistic probability; a melding of language registers; and a preference for film conventions, both sudden juxtapositions and slow fades. (The titles of five poems in *Your Name Here* refer to film, and one of the book's central images, the spool, may relate to the reel of film as a series of speeded-up stills which create the illusion of continuous and realistic movement. A similar illusion is created in these poems; disjunctive elements are smoothly embedded in syntax. As in a movie, events pass at a pace that mimics the natural order; editing is all—or nearly all.)

The title "Get Me Rewrite" may immediately call to mind the bark of the studio mogul dissatisfied with a film script. The phrase itself is a cliché of movies, a movie cliché from the most clichéd of movies. The titular "Get Me Rewrite" puts before us a view of language as acquisition, and rewriting nominalized toward absolute anonymity. It doesn't matter who rewrites, or if the "product" is made by an individual or a team. The demand is for language-as-thing, a new and improved formula meant to elicit predictable responses in an audience. In turn, "Get Me Rewrite" would seem to be a comic deflating phrase that reflects upon the poem it heads (and the book of poems it occupies). Not only does the phrase suggest dissatisfaction with the poem, but given that the poem focuses on the past, the phrase suggests the failure of the past to satisfy: *Get me rewrite—of this poem and, while you're at it, of my life.* In turn, we might think of Rilke's most well-

known phrase, usually rendered in English as "You must change your life," while Ashbery's poem works up another "distortion" of sorts. Ultimately, we must keep changing our readings; the freely floating titular phrase casts readers back upon their own resources. As his speaker complains in "Lemurs and Pharisees," "Next time, you write this."

"Get Me Rewrite," however, is a romance of sorts—insistent on the mysterious seductiveness of things encased or wrapped: a cello in a cabana, candy in and out of its wrapper, a man between an industrial park and a "brass sky," a man in the muck. The poem, in some ways, is a disquisition on wrappings, of all things; the discovery of the containing paper itself, the search for substance in our neighbor's ditch. *Love thy neighbor*; look for candy. The poem is not so much disappointed at missing the candy as it is interested in the evidence that tells us what's missing: the wrapper itself. The poem fetches for us sensations of both enclosing and dis-enclosing, wrapping and unwrapping, and a desire for discovery that amounts to sexual yearning. The opening cello's reverberant quality, after all, is increased by close quarters, as if the musical instrument is contained inside another musical instrument. The poem's language play is accompanied by image play with a sensuous edge. Surely there is something suggestive of sexuality about the cabana, and an instrument in the cabana. In this context, we shouldn't forget that the speaker in "Get Me Rewrite" primarily recalls searching for candy. If in the fourth stanza the candy seems to take off its clothes, well, we should know by now that candy means more than we once thought it did when we were in grade school.

Ah, but where is our hero? To the uninitiated eye he will stay put in the dirt. Yet the poem enacts his imaginative and compositional travel—his invisible imaginative fleetness, as in the image of the *Sturm und Drang* playwright and poet Lenz put forward by the character Reuel (Rule?), a name that seemingly requires its bearer to be in command: "You are like the poet Lenz, who ran from house to forest / to rosy firmament and back / and nobody ever saw his legs move." While the poem is in love with mobili-

ty, it is at least as much in love with quirky halts, with slow-simmering patience, with "the muck."

The line breaks have everything to do with this. The first quick-stopped, comical line breaks cast the poem immediately as willfully engaged in toying with us. We may feel compelled to pause; we may like these line-breaks—they're the fingering of our stops just as the longer final lines of the first and second stanzas provide their own sort of mock pay-off.

The last lines of "Get Me Rewrite" are perhaps most winning—so preposterous are they with their ponderous/comic line breaks, their insistent hard-stopped consonants, their near-identity of sounds, and their calling out of the sensations of being in and of the earth, loving our neighbors or detesting them, but alive and resolutely in our neighbor's "muck." The poem's final sentence should be spoken aloud—and often. With a variety of inflections.

Given that a man on a pile of dirt speaks, the poem may call to mind Wallace Stevens' "The Man on the Dump." In that poem a man sifts through the discarded images of his culture and of aesthetic history. In the dirt, Ashbery's protagonist recalls his childhood search through his neighbor's gutters, his own meeting up with waste. But instead of finding, as Stevens does, "the wrapper on the can of pears, / The cat in the paper-bag, the corset" or language such as "*aptest eve*" and "*Invisible priest*," Ashbery finds "candy wrappers / of an unknown species: 'Sycamores,' / 'Chocolate Spit,' 'Slate-Gray Fluids,' / 'Anamorphic Portraits of Old Goriot.'" Ashbery comes to the effluvia of ditches and finds a character out of Balzac.

Both Stevens and Ashbery display fondness for speculation, for gorgeous turnings of phrase, for the rigors of evading categorizing and expected meaning. Yet Ashbery is certainly the more sociable of the two poets, with a sensitively developed fondness for melding bits of trash with a disguised (or not so disguised) tenderness toward the reader, even what might be called a certain sweetness. Sweetness, after all, is a primary referent in the collection in which "Get Me Rewrite" appears; the elegaic tone of the

collection is cut with what amounts to a fleeting sensation of the sweet that attaches itself to the mind's workings, as in "Strange Cinema":

Now, according to some sources,
new retrofitting trends are a commodity,
along with silence, and sweetness.
Doucement, doucement...

And when the sweetness is adjusted,
why, we'll know more than some do now.
That is all I can offer you,
my lost, my loved one.

Can there be such a state of mind as giddy serenity? Ashbery works in the space between our common definitions. Elsewhere in our daily experience we may be cheated by singularity disguised as multiplicity. We're cheated most often, or cheat ourselves most often, because of simplistic ideas and their incredible tenacity, the crazy glue of insufferable received opinion. Ashbery would effervesce above received opinion and received sensations. As "Get Me Rewrite" would have it, the feelings welling up for us in the place of accustomed reaction are disarming and avid, with a foretaste of sadness.... A kind of grief bottled with fizz.

THRESHOLD

The car that knocked the deer to the roadside
is long gone. Maybe there's gray-brown bristle still stuck
to the fender, maybe a dent in the quarter panel.
This time of year they don't decay so much as deflate,
the rawhide bag leaking until it's flat,
the hair matted and sodden with cinder-pocked snow.
Come spring, there'll be a scar in the shoulder grass
where the doe sagged into a tattered rug,
welcome mat at the random threshold of the next world.
The pond is holding up the stone a boy threw.
He won't be here to notice, he may no longer be a child,
when the ice softens just enough for the rock
to ease through and plunge to the pond's dark bottom.

AT THE WILCO WITH SOME FOUNDING FATHERS

Down the Havoline, Quaker State aisle
goes Jefferson, if his shirt can be believed.
The red stitching over the right pocket
proclaims this man to be a namesake
of the author of the Declaration of Independence
and if you can't believe a man's shirt
what are you going to believe?
Hamilton, what a strange coincidence,
doubts aloud that the cashier
cannot access the safe and Franklin,
spook me out, is eyeing the better wines
while recommending the Appalachian spring water.
It's all here—White Rain hairstyling spray, Tic Tacs,
flashlights, corn chips and nation-makers.
And now Jefferson, who wanted to be remembered
for penning Virginia's statute on religious freedom,
says a standing silent prayer over a chili dog
before taking a bite and heading out
through the calibrated doors, he's nearly six feet I see,
into the republic of Friday morning.

FROM WHENCE

Tonight, the moon is hauling bituminous,
two hundred cars.
When it hits the trestle you'll hear the deck timbers rattle.
Cinder chips spike the black roundabout.
This is the dead light, just bright enough
to make a shadow if you're out in the dark.
The moon has the throttle and the all clear.
The moon is on government business
and the rails are empty all the way up the valley.
This is light enough to read a short note by.
Tonight, the moon's got papers and two pushers.
It's highballing combustible rock to a fare-thee-well.
Head lamp rocking from the soft roadbed,
this is light with a load.
This is light there's no stopping.
This is dug up light, light from all the graves
when the graves give off light.
This is light with wheels.
Come shine, silver me awhile.

WALKING THE DOG

Dark night, flashlight,
you and the dog walking.
He's got a companion...
at first you think it's just a shadow.
But what you think is a shadow
becomes a dog you actually knew,
a dog who once lived with you,

a shadow so much the other side of light
every time your black dog moves,
the other moves,
and in between their two tails
a triangle of light connects them,
your black dog
and the dog that's not a dog,
the figment real as a shadow,

a shadow conveying the intensity of fur,
that plays with him,
turning as he does, accurate as himself,
twisting around some invisible center,
his familiar—
a shadow that whispers
in all the shades of black
come back

this thing that being alive is,
something you forget
that remembers you.

WHEN HERMES WHISPERS

Oh good,
you've had a lucky streak,

Hermes, who's saved you time and again,
is here for the last time—

the one who turned the feet of cattle backwards,
invented shoes that hide their own footsteps,

that one—
who makes you invisible,
all the while a dog barking at your heels—

he guides you into the tent of Achilles,
gives you a last good meal,
saves the body of your oldest son,

then sees you off at dawn into the arms of luck,
the beginning of all things.

THE COUPLE

I

Small as wrists.

Look, our silent airplane,
the child's kite,
no longer held
by fingers over a coast
where one says
Good Night now.

The carrier pigeon between us
rises higher and higher.

We're in a nice house
without doors, sky,
a blue on our bodies
that can't be wiped off.

II

The other life—
with two pairs of eyes.

We're feverish,
like stones
in the sun.

The still-life of discarded clothes.

Our darkness—gleaming oil,
carelessly spilled out the window.

Our breath hurries out
of our single mouth.

WAY DOWN BELOW

It rustles to the floor like laundry.
We put a stop
to the ticking of time—
a wrist watch laid aside.
Let's see what you have there.
Our trademark, I mean:
you strip your shoes
off your feet, are crossways
over the chair now, your hair
tumbling over my knees.
I say what comes to mind.
And you've already done
what you wanted. Dragonfly,
I say. The way easy
love is. As if blinded
by the light of a lamp.
Everything's a trial.
A shiver runs over your back.
We take what we need
without hurrying. Everything
that we can get from each other.
We chew hair. I'm simply
me, myself
and you, likewise, with the back
of your head hanging
way down below
and your mouth open.

translated by Stuart Friebert

1939: DUKE ELLINGTON: THE KISS

Where water touches
a dark without reflection,
no eye for it
and not even star or moon,
whoever sends down
the rope only looking off at trees
or a shadow from a lamp
inside a house—

A chain of receptacles,
cups and pails,
his fingers her straying eyes,
along the way each losing
part of what it holds
(cool of grateful splash,
hungry drumming of the boil;
the sun lifts off light
and flashes a wall,
the air spirits wet smoke)

along the way meeting
what would depose it
from its interior,
mushed love of its own weight,
slippery substratum of its possession,
the same, the same, hunger for escaping itself—

Dark spill,
star-worms sloshing the lip,
the scroll of galvanized
thick as a finger
or slight as a tongue's moisture
(He tells his driver one time: *I have probably made love
to more women than any man alive.*)

where a face leans
and another face,
where a sky of lights tilts and shimmers—
Who holds the bucket of air?
Who feels the trembling
a second gravity bends
to the hand?

Who pours, who drinks?

A MOON, A MEMORY, A PAPER BOAT

Away and afloat is where I'd spill to
given the choice this Tuesday morn.
Or off in Sandusky or a silent moon.
Dusky is what she said about it and meant it.
But no one reminds me of anyone else
I remember she said that, and nothing is
where the needle was threaded on Main Street
where the memory of a mother stands over
a memory of a tailor she calls father.
What I use is already used up, no tea
to spill, no ogling moon, no street up
and over, down to the sea like gabardine.
Well no wonder I slap against the June,
tear pages off and fold a paper boat.

LOGIC OF ALPHABETS

If you think it will why won't it then.
Yet it's a posture difficult to unbend.
If the room from another year is always open.
If the voice is almost always closed.
If you find yourself knocking on wood.
Once is too much to forget if you live
as if it will or possibly might.
A quick blur out the window of a car,
a film you've seen before, a veiled face,
and after a time everyone from the neck down.
Everyone has the same name or it begins with N.
The name of the street you lived on once.
Like S your skin was thinner then.
Silk. Severity. Something something night.

LEAD

In Latin *plumbum*, which came to mean *lead worker*, a plumber and his pipes which turned into aqueducts, Roman plumbing zigzagging the plains of Europe until it meant *the dead straight, the true*—lead bob on a plumblineline. Gutters on Paris rooftops running with rain, great domes of Hagia Sophia, document bags on submarines so in the event the sub sinks her secrets sink faster. To Dante, the envious wore cloaks of lead, eyes stitched shut with leaden wire; this man beside me in the next cubicle, every morning his girlfriend calls and when it's her his voice softens, slides down like music. Sometimes she calls and I just have to get out, take a tour of these hallways. Other times I'm too heavy to move, his phone rings and I couldn't leave my desk if I was drowning, the dark hum of that voice saying *lunchtime racetrack ferry so do you tonight.*

SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

It's the alchemist who lays the handful of gold
on the lead, saying *Here, this is your brother,*

glitter as he does. Like New England farmers
dipping the apple tree's branchtips in buckets

of apples *Lady increase,* or gamblers who won't
wash the hand that stroked a rose-laden winner.

Call it sympathetic magic, this idea that each
of us carries a template of our essential nature

and with a touch can transmit it. It's why you
try it again with the frozen lover, who can look

at you naked beneath him and tell you *I'm afraid,*
who won't close his eyes when you kiss and can't

meet your gaze when he comes, comes and doesn't
call out but swallows the sound like a cinder—

it's why you still toss off your clothes so sure
passion, like pollen, must dust your palmprints

and the dead tree burst into flower. Magician,
lie down again, a handful of gold with the lead

saying *Here, this is my body, glitter as I do.*

“THE DEAD, SHE SAYS...”

The dead, she says,
are closed in upon themselves like blood
like glaciers
useless to search for their outlines in the marshes' putrefying
sludge
or in the water's concentric eddies

Their voices alone pass through all obstacles
without sorting blackboards from brambles
deaf to the multiplication of partitions
to the division of the soil by the odor of wheat

Their linear howling adheres to slippery surfaces
mirrors windows glasses
The clinking of cracked crystal is their disapproval of an earth
lacking compassion and sun
the rustling of a coleoptera's wings their revolt against the com-
ing of winter

The dead
tardy workers who labor without a pickaxe
without a foreman
without a lantern

With only the noise of the branches
which draw undulating women on their ceiling
whose sycamore arms enfold them in their cavities and make
their tears chime

“THERE IS WINTER IN HER SLEEP...”

There is winter in her sleep
the dead who flow over her walls go from drizzle to downpour
She shifts in her bed to change dreams
turns the dogs loose to chase the rain
The tree which has pursued her since the storm bows its head to
enter her dwelling

She hides her cry in the hearth
her nakedness in the flames' panic
Her dress which trails on the tiles is pink in December
its stains hide the blood of a long-ago childbirth

She says no to the plane-tree which demands its humus
and long ago used to draw the same dizziness on her belly and
on the sapwood
linking her lot to the forest's

"SHE SAYS..."

She says
migrating birds won't replace the road
and it's not breadcrumbs that will throw the swallows off track

Early this morning
she announced to the larch that her cherry-tree had borne its first
fruit

It repeated this to the other larches who spread the news though
the forest

a forest strong in its privileges which never returns the winds it's
been lent

it turns them into howls beneath the trees' bark
and into gallops among the branches
into echoes which lean on the mountain to throw themselves on
her cherry-tree

To leave with a tree under your arm is hazardous
a stream draws a closed circle around her house
once stepped across, the water sours like milk

"WINTER IS PAINFUL TO HER..."

Winter is painful to her
when a narrow moon disposes of its deserts and its dogs on the
 saint's tomb
which they sniff around looking for the unlikely door
She prefers the wolves who make the countryside smoky with
 their black sweat
leaving their prints on invisible things

The wolves she says
are former dogs who've been shamed by their masters
they come back as quarrelsome guests
clumsy avengers

Sometimes
they disappear for a winter or two
and she marks off her regret with dark stains on the soot of her
 gourd
never for more than two winters
enough time to scatter the winds that bark in her throat
anyway it's not a question of winters or summers
but of the distance between two snowfalls and two moons

translated by Marilyn Hacker

PREFERMENT

In that country no one spoke about the terrible things that happen to girls. Snow, the barricaded door, drifting scraps of news. Such as one might crease and fold, a paper boat

bobbing to the rocky island—one girl, one blanket, one black goat. What child hasn't launched a newsprint skiff on the wave? When it tacks back, her brother

beats his hands in joy, scoops it from shore. Plunked upside-down it's an admiral's hat admired until bedtime. This is what brothers do—flutter paper wings from crags,

braid intricate chimetails and swing the plait over rafters. Who remembers the sister, who distinguishes her shawled back? One fist resting in one palm.

AIRING THE SICKROOM AFTER A WEEK OF RAIN

Month of privet berries ripening. Month of fat birds. Pruning shears winging through bare branches, sap in a clear drowse. She raises the head of your barred bed. He leans a ladder to the Modesto ash, cold air and *thwack* of work barge in. Both sharp. Wan light pierces soaped skin, privacy's undertint blue as milk. What about the soul, a cardinal caged in branches? How can it weather the white roar of winter ahead? Shears startle a nuthatch blur, Egyptian eyes. What about beauty—kohl-sketched feet, berries burning frost. The spoon ferries porridge and last June's glossy peaches. A leafless tree—do we stretch the allegory? The way it suffers wounding. And cradles the sack of fat twined up, a bloodless heart.

VERTICAL MELANCHOLY

Poor moth-eaten lawn, weedy and pissed on,
poor maple trees, dry and brittle in June.
I came out to read De Andrade
tell himself *Carlos, keep calm, love is what
you're seeing now...* And maybe I dozed,

that's why in just four stanzas the sky's grown
heavy as rumpled bed sheets. Now a creak,
casket-like, from a scary movie,
or a sign swinging on one rusty hinge
in a storm. Birds content with bare branch

markings on their backs. That creak again—*saints
crossing themselves, vertical, melancholy?*
Or just these two slender trunks rubbing
each other? Desperate, undomesticated
tree-love, here in my parched yard

where the clothesline has squealed on its pulleys
all spring, and my friend will never again sit,
asking, "why don't you throw out that wreath"
still hanging on the fence, hardly more brown
than the leaves—color of choking, her voice

trying to clear itself, that shallow cough.
And her husband can do nothing now,
her teenage daughter can't find a book
long enough, deep enough to hide in...
And now the first raindrops magnify the words:

*Love in the dark, no, love in the daylight,
is always sad*—Because the last hinge
wears thin, words blur, puckered by rain.
What are words, anyway? Let rain
with its pure invisible ink write this

letter to the trees, to the men and women
in their motel, lying in one another's arms—
today a kiss, tomorrow no kiss... Let rain
fall on the person writing these words
who for once doesn't care what she'll do

with the heavy weight of afternoon
falling like flowers dropped on her friend.
It's useless to resist... Let rain ask all the bereft:
could even this be love, love in the dark,
no, in the daylight, what is pouring now?

A TANKA

for Gwendolyn Brooks

A bird perched in my
Window box while it rained, its
Throat empty of song.
When I looked again later
It had flown. She, too, had gone.

BLUE

The sun shimmers
on the hands-up spruces
and the blue silo
where a man holds fast to an iron railing
on the way up to a platform.
You can see his hands.
You can see his feet and imagine
he feels compelled
to count the 83 smooth steps
and the 80,000 clucking beings in the space below.
That he counts and counts, but dreams
of casting himself from the top
and in the last second before hitting earth
being caught up. Borne
by the wind's whisper
in the blue spruce.

WILD PURSUIT

Drowned in wine
or water or chemical
blue intoxicants. There are many kinds of darkness
to go into just to lie there dead in rooms
named for animals. There are many kinds of sob-dissolved
forms of dog or rabbit
to chase out of the body. You only have to
bare your teeth, white wild cruel
shining human like.

SALT

Foam-sprayed and black and white waves
of cows come rushing
down over the hill.
Until they stop at a hedge.
Abruptly. Suddenly. With their hooves
deep in a puddle and contemplate the owned.
Us who shudder
at the sight of dirt and the thick blue tongues
that shine like the dead.
And at the thought of foiled again the wolves pace
through our eyes: Has someone faxed
called or e-mailed? Would we miss something
if we threw ourselves plop in a ditch
and only breathed the air?
The cows stand
and lick salt
and stare until they are called in
by the drifting sky.

translated by Marilyn Nelson

ADDICTIONS

Dawn flutters its bruised eyelid.
Torqued sideways, bellies pink-struck,

gulls hang-glide above the Yankee-Mart
yelping like manic dogs. Last night

in the dream, we kissed—my wife walking in
just as I slipped my hand inside your blouse.

We sleep, obsessions unspooling,
the mind's little video nattering on—

I still dream of lighting a cigarette,
fifteen years since I quit.

We sleep, if we're lucky.
Then we wake up. The Pilgrim Tower

vamps in its gown of fog. All this time,
you're still making trouble—blue drift

in the lamplight; dark seed in the lungs.

ARS POETICA

It's not the dog, or even the ghost
of the dog, but the ghost of the dog's
lean shadow, camera obscura sketched

on the canvas—the north window's
steeped light not the light in the painting,
the girl in the painting not the girl

on the chair, the ghost of the light
and the girl deep in Vermeer's dust,
the ghost of the shadow of the ghost

of the girl in our heads, walking home
through the twilight's blue fade,
the painting alive on its dark wall,

the poem alive but asleep on the page,
till you, dear reader (how are you?),
open the book and fall in,

ghost, shadow and dog. The book's almost
over, here's my advice: put it down,
go to bed, wake up your wife.

Tell her you can't sleep. Tell her all day
you writhe on the cross of desire.

SEX

It's good, Uncle Id would say, to live
in these bodies, walk them around
the frozen lake, sit them down by the birch—

log fire, fat book and whiskey-glass,
dinner soon and sleep soon, deer and red fox
writing the past outside in the snow—

here's where we were, and here and here.
The Tao says live in the moment, stop
wanting—easy for old Lao Tzu,

who never cupped your breasts
inside a cashmere blouse, never
licked your knee-pit's lavender spice.

Wind-surf in the pines, squirrel flounce
across the snow-enameled lawn;
if you were here, you'd perch a hand

on the chairback, step one foot and then
the other out of your shrugged nightgown.
Alone, I doze on the couch. The room

fills with snow. I shovel all night,
but the room keeps filling with snow.

EARLY MARCH, ST. PAUL'S SEMINARY, MINNESOTA

Seminarians smoke cigarettes in 10° sunshine. Squinting, most of them, outside their dorm on the shoveled walk, two feet of snow piled on either side. If only the path to salvation were that clearly marked. One of them wears an enormous foam cowboy hat and swaggers comically. Their laughter is—is beautiful, ringing into clear blue air. Their exhalations of smoke barely make a dent in it. I don't know what brands they're smoking. They greet me shyly as I pass. It must be hard to have such a narrow range of vices. These young faces scrubbed pink with cold and early morning prayers. The sun off the snow is nearly blinding. I hear them stretching out the joke behind me, eking out a few more hearty, open-mouthed laughs. Of course, I'm lost. There's a map posted somewhere past that huge crucifix. Of course, I'm jealous. Hanging out with the boys, grabbing a smoke before class. I don't care what they believe in, I believe in it too. I turn around to look one more time. The guy with the hat is singing a country song with an exaggerated twang, the perfect hymn to carry the day as far as it can be carried.

THE LADY VANISHES

The subject is appearances—don't be snowed by Hitchcock's smoke-and-mirrors plot about a governess spying for the allies. Imagine those kids, the stories they'd tell to the tabloids: my nanny, the undercover operative, she hid a blade in her hosiery, vial of truth-serum in her pocketbook, wore a walkie-talkie bra. We all want our 15 minutes and will resort to the vicarious, if need be. I interviewed the chief justice, once, Phyllis Schlafley returned my call and I dated a gaffer whose crew carried lights to the stars. Margaret Lockwood starred as the ingenue, Iris, fresh as a big-faced, Gerbera daisy, which played a supporting role in my own wedding, which, if you ask anyone there, was lovely, on a cliff overlooking the big-faced Pacific, which, if you ask anyone there, made the trip worth it, as well as witnessing our public declaration of what no one can really promise. Michael Redgrave acts the witty Gilbert, a surprisingly modern man obsessed professionally with the genuine—old folk tunes and dances taken none too seriously. (We were up on chairs, my husband was dropped, he could have been trampled underfoot during the *hora*, suffered concussion while I whirled in tulle and satin—it looked more expensive than it was). These are occipetal habits, especially when the free world's at stake.

(RETURN OF) THE LADY VANISHES

"I've no regrets," says Iris. "I've been everywhere and done everything...eaten caviar at Cannes," (her champagne reacts, the bubble size attests to quality) "...sausage rolls at the docks... baccarat at Biarritz...what is there left for me but marriage?" Her friends have been reading Byron and rebuke her for no mention of love, reading Buber and console her with *I and Thou*, reading Nietzsche and try to convince her not to settle—their valises laden with language's weight and theories of existence. She descends into the underworld and emerges with a man in tow, the lady Orpheus only it worked this time, she marched straight ahead, as the modern woman does—no regret for this Lot's wife. The secret? A tune, a war-winning code that dear Miss Froy (the spy) memorized—we heard it twice: during the opening credits and again outside her window—but we did not pay attention because we have forgotten how and like this film's Brits, we ignore clues, caught up in our ceremonies, bought and paid for, deceived by our digressions, charmed by the camera, its wily angles, while the leitmotif taps on our shoulder and myth nibbles our cuffs. We are eroding, inattentive while Miss Froy is drugged and wrapped in bandage, awaiting a fate we can't let ourselves imagine—death incorporated exit stage right never say never endless night. I dreamed of being married while crossing a fictive border, my subconscious craving the most mundane metaphor, one state into another. What puts the plot into motion is an "avalanche" in ambiguous Europe and soon you have a train, sneering Germans, an importunate porter, infatuation banter—oh Froy! Oh Freud! Such fantasy. In real life the lady doesn't vanish until after the wedding.

BOOKS AND MONEY

Because who has the money seems decided.
Because a one-legged woman in a housedress
leans her good hip against the stove
and makes soup from frozen vegetables

she doesn't recognize. Because she wonders where
her other leg was taken, how it became a myth
in the hands of a kid with a night job at the hospital
reading in the basement by the garbage chute,

hunched in the light of the incinerator.
Myth was a word she had learned in high school
in the story about the Greek guy who slept with his mom.
Her leg was a myth the kid told tomorrow.

Because even on TV the winners
have been decided, and when they win
they spend all their money, and then
they're watching again like you or me.

Because a rich guy leaves millions to his kid
as easily as vegetables make soup.
Because this morning she found a green garbage bag
full of books, and she laughed right there in the street,

and then she was crying, she thought
it would be money. The books
had no covers, someone had torn them off,
but no one would buy just covers,

that would be like living in the woods
and subscribing to *TV Guide*.
Because after the vegetables boil
the soup simmers, which is like

feeling something go
and then not feeling it again.
Because the bag of books was a myth
she would tell her group Wednesday night

when they got together at the middle school
to sit at the carved up desks in the library
and talk about what they were missing.
Because you can have plenty,

two good legs, soup, and money,
and still need to be there
early every Wednesday, to make sure
to get the desk by the window.

YOU WERE RIGHT

I see now
you were right from the start
about sleep and dreams about the trees and their deep roots

what can I say
you were right about the years
passing about the thrush and the vole about the wren you were

dead right
right as rain you had it right
all along it *was* getting warmer it *was* risky to drink the water

we should have
listened you were right
about the tongue and the undersong you were right about hunger

and happiness
about the shovel and the other tools
we didn't believe it at the time but it's clear you were right

about wind about
iron and calcium the quickening
pace of life you were right about sex we rubbed till we bled

you already knew
all these things didn't you
about loss our need to touch about the spangled void of space

about the bittern
and the blind eye you were right
about the turnip and the oboe about love and its opposite fear.

HAMMER

You hold the tool of doing
and undoing. The weight of the head
fighting your wrist, drawing itself toward
pound, the handle's grain ringing. Two fingers
steady the nail, then the gentle tap
preceding the blow. How can the nail
stand it, this swift betrayal?
The hammer is the soul of change.
The pictures float on the wall,
the roof crouches overhead—
can things really stay like this?
The forked claw slips against the wood,
the satisfying squeak of lost resistance.
I am the stuck nail bending.
All morning, the sound of distant hammers—
I am so tired,
I lay my head on the table like a watermelon.
A man carries nails between his lips,
as though explaining a plan.
The nail steals the hammer's act—
we say Christ was nailed to the cross,
but he was the carpenter's boy;
they hammered him there.

DRESS

Something useless about a dress
drives my search for the perfect one,
the one that will take away my legs,
make me stand still or
arrange myself in a chair
like a pudding settling into a bowl.
A dress is a hole to slip through.
I am the food of cloth,
teeth of the zipper pulling me in,
breaking me into bust, waist, hip—
the language of dresses: dart, bias,
flare, yoke, gore—
this is not about delicacy.
The dummy inside me
keeps changing her clothes.
I hear the hangers dangling,
the metallic sound of transformation.
Men, I pity you in your obvious pants.
The perfect dress has a certain murmur—
I am the dress's painful secret,
the one everyone knows but no one mentions.

A COLORED WOMAN CANNOT SING

of metallic hydrogen, amethyst
or anemone, turtle shells beside
an empty bed, or broken diadems.

A colored woman cannot sing
of Hassidim, the salt-rimed stones of Antioch,
how the Aegean tastes of sperm, and a sturgeon
squeezes black garnets from its rectum.

A colored woman cannot sing of I-beams
or derailleurs, the impact of microwaves
on Southern dialect, Froebel blocks,
or the smell of milk on your mother's nipple.

A colored woman cannot sing of tangerine
juice spilling on the ankle of a white girl,
tangerine mist on a white ankle. A colored

woman cannot sing of standing stones,
why dark matter in the galactic halo must
be nonbaryonic, or even hum *The Marseillaise*.

A colored woman cannot sing
of pilgrims casting garlands into the Ganges,
one hundred red spiders dancing on a gray web,
or Nanjing and seven heads bobbing in a greasy pool.

A colored woman cannot sing
of minuets and manatees, the flutter of moths
on an infant's tongue, nutmegs and milagros,
or black tulips buried in a field of snow.

WHAT THERE WAS

Pine, catalpa, pin oak, persimmon,
but not tree.

Hummingbird, hoot owl, martin, crow,
but not bird.

Cannas, honeysuckle, cockscomb, rose,
but not flower.

Wood smoke, corn, dust, outhouse,
but not stench.

A spider spinning in a rain barrel,
the silver dipper by the back porch,
tadpoles shimmying against a concrete bank,
but not silence.

A cotton row, a bucket lowered into a well,
a red dirt road, a winging crow,
but not distance.

A rooster crowing, cows lowing in the evening,
wasps humming beneath the eaves, hounds
baying, hot grease, but not music.

My mother running away at fifteen,
my grandmother lifting a truck to save a life,
an uncle at Pearl Harbor, Webster sitting
at the back of the bus when he looked as white
as they did, but not stories.

The entrails of a slaughtered sow, the child born
with a goat's face, the cousin laid on a railroad
track, the fire that burned it all, but not death.

This poem, a snuff tin sated with the hair
of all our dead, my mother's long talks
with her dead father, my great-grandmother's
clothes passed down, passed down, but not memory.

TANNER'S "THE BANJO LESSON," 1893

Angled and awkward between the knees
of an old man, a barefoot boy stands
cradling a banjo. Firelight whets
the old man's eye, and his right hand,
strong as hearthstone, curls inward
as if bracing an enkindled flame.

How does it feel to run the tip of one
finger along the edge of a banjo wire?

Which is heavier, a banjo
or an old man's breath?

The sound of banjo strings
plucked by a colored boy is the sound
of twanging, of *tur-pen-tine*, *pine tar*, *plank*,
of pennies of rain spattered on scalded tin.

Boy and man frailed by light and strokes
of paint, surrounded by chair, table, kettle,
crock, a cooling skillet, a pipe exhaling
smoke, and mystery: beside an unseen
pane—a black coat: journey, the small
griefs we throw across our shoulders.

Between daylight and firelight,
these bright embers, O trembling
strings! Darkness is never satisfied.
Beside the useful plates, pitcher, and bread,
on the table's altar cloth, these questions:

Should we buzzard lope and knee bone bend
in a ring dance of stuttered steps, or strike
the drumhead, strum, strum, strumming
strident chords? Should we pluck the reeling
notes or embrace and blow embers into flame?

Pull a vein from your right ventricle,
stretch it taut, slant one thumbnail and pluck it.
Listen—does it sound anything like rain?

SONG #1

Because the song we sing is pain, we sing
another song we say is painless. Say
it's love. Say it's want relieved. We sing
and feel a little less like dying. Day by day
we sing, until we find one day the song
has stopped performing what we say. We hear,
as through the cosmic noise of systems long
exhausted, news we can't ignore: pain's come near
again. At this, we vow to give up sung
things altogether. Say, perhaps, we'll paint
instead. But soon, beneath our strokes, our tongues
discover notes we say we'd lost. And so again
we sing, but in this singing find our ruling star:
not we who say we sing, but pain whose song we are.

FIVE POEMS

Wind blows strong across the pier. My eyes
take in the light's serene performance.
A bent sail passes, steered by
a man reclining in the silence.
A cap flies softly from a boy's head,
and the sky rests on the sea like a ball.
A flame persists within
the light's cold performance—
his tangled hair.

The doors of the world don't know
that the rain outside searches for them.
It searches. And searches. Patient,
it disappears and comes back. The light
doesn't know about the rain. The rain
doesn't know about the light. The doors,
the doors of the world are closed:
locked to the rain,
locked to the light.

A rhythm's restored. Springtime
in the carefree city, where a boy runs up
to a brass band as it passes. Where the churches
forget the faithful, and abandoned bicycles
sleep in the flower beds.

The shadow of a light cloud
led me to a boy
who'd left the current and stretched
out naked on the grass.

I felt
like I did after my first communion.

And overhead
green days rolled by, all the same,
and monotonous nights with women
lingering in the doorways of desolate streets
manipulating their combs and hair.

For Eugenio Montale

Sunday at twilight, I walk
away from the crowd as it leaves
rushed and elated from the stadium.
I look at no one and everyone.
A smile reaches me now and then.
Less often, a cheerful greeting.

And I can't remember who I am.
So death upsets me.
To die seems so unjust.
Even if I can't remember who I am.

translated by Adam Giannelli

PROVIDENCE

Sound of rain or smell
Of sweet bread in the street. A glance.

Graze of a sleeve—what could change us

Forever? How could we know
When every morning returns

Us to ourselves, a gift? A man

Breaks the glass, reaches
For the doorknob—night's face, forbidden,
Never meant to be seen—

And all the while we slept: raindrops

Like the seconds between
Us and what might have been

And now, as if nothing had happened, murky
Sunlight, nothing
But ourselves. Where could it be—

A night that has nothing,
Nothing to do with those we love?

Sweet bread, turn of a cheek.

Sunlight touching our faces,
Eyes, eyes opening—

Whatever robbed us while we slept

Could not be changed.
Your hair is silver again, streaked,
As when we were children.

UNSPOKEN

A market, no, a festival: carts
Of flowers. A balloon rose slowly, tentatively

I wish—you held out your hand
I wish I'd never

Then flowers. Children wearing masks.
Pigeons reconfiguring in the branches overhead,
Still green, the children

Running towards us,
Abashed, as if something could happen.
Masks. Hawk waiting

In the branches; the sentence
Rising until it reaches the heart—

The heart that, captured, flutters
And coos, the hand
That reaches out to hold it firm—somehow,

As if we'd been apart, we found
Each other in a crowd—*don't say it—*
And as if nothing had happened

It was still there: hovering, unsure, then taking off
Above the buildings, higher,
Beyond the cathedral.

VIEWPOINT

If you look
this way and that
you will see things

differently. This way
you see the fisherman
in the blue cap

is holding a net,
in fact he is
mending it,

retying a knot
that has come undone
at one corner.

You imagine the net tonight
filled with the silver gleam
of fish scales

as his boat bumps
against the dock, its deck
luminous with his catch.

But if you look that way,
you see the fisherman is holding
an enormous number

of holes tied together
with string,
and he is trying,

by knotting the corner,
to keep one of the holes
from escaping.

SOLITUDE ENCOUNTERS

solitude encounters another solitude
says one solitude to the other
go to my solitary home solitude
and the other solitude steps into the solitary home
and the first solitude steps into the second solitude
there are two solitudes one inside the other
there are two solitudes sealed into one
solitude
says one solitude to the other
did you give me all you had to give solitude
now I'll get unglued and be a solitary solitude
wait calls the other solitude
wait before you become a solitary solitude
the first solitude then lies upon the second
lies down as it has never done before
the second embraces the first into an embrace of flames
blue flames as if solitude were burning
it squeezes it rolls it burns it beneath itself
go now it says be your own solitude
go now be it says to the ashes under it
to the ashes that no longer respond no longer sigh
since ashes are disintegrated solitude

WOMAN FROM A DESERT

woman from a desert
has breasts of sand (red)
her navel is a hollow in the sand
as if drilled by a sandpiper

there is skin between her thighs
moist sand: out of it grow
ever changing desert flowers
opening their wet mouths
into the sand

when he touches the woman from the desert
she is red fire
her hair flames blue
it swirls red from her navel
the orchid between her legs doesn't burn
but grows larger
envelops him with flowery lips
with mouths mouths everywhere

as they cry out scorched
they disintegrate into red sand

the woman from the desert vanishes
he looks for her in the sand
finds no trace of her in the sandy sheets

RANSOM

You will pay for everything.
Just being born is the highest price.
A flock of mockingbirds will hunt you
relentlessly.
In the hour of repose
and the hour of anxiety
they will alight upon your chest,
demanding the toll.
You'll be paying and paying.
And, since there is no forgiveness,
there is no redemption.
No saving grace for man.
There is nothing
with which to pay.
Your life—the ransom.

translated by Sonja Kravanja

WHEN...

When,
 this middle March
at six A.M.
 the frozen shadow
of the still
 unbudded lilac
first appears
 then darkens
like an X-ray
 limb by limb
on that senile
 stroke-seized face
two black windows
 and a door
might seem
 to likewise make
from Mrs. Merkle's
 falling-down
one-car garage,
 it must be time.

Precisely
 time in fact—

as in some cosmically
 coordinated
Aztec ritual perhaps...

wherein,
 once more,
 at the coincidence
of true dawn
 and the equinox

one of the ancient ones,
 one

of the grandmothers,
is chosen.

And then,
her nervous
half-blind
oldest daughter,
arriving
in a blurred sedan
of blue feathers
for all her mother knows

climbs the steep
pyramid steps
and rings
the ceremonial bell...

Whereupon,
they must both descend
of course,
inch by shuffling inch
toward that selfsame
feathery
blue sedan,
and hence,
the underworld...

which is somewhere
just south
of here I think,
a suburb I forget
a little east
of east St. Louis...

But once there
I would imagine

she will have
to surrender finally
her tiny,
two-ton vanity case—

a medicine bundle
she refuses now
to let her daughter
even touch...

full as it is
of all her earthly treasures—

spring mornings
that go all the way back
to kindergarten
with their feathery lilacs
and beautiful birds.

DRINKING

A co-worker says

"We're thinking about doing a happy hour,
wanna join us?"

And you recall the night you found your father
slumped over in the kitchen chair
after one shot and one beer too many,
the cigarette between his fingers
burning itself into one long ash.

But you go anyway because
it's Friday and your job sucks,
and drinking invites camaraderie.

Besides, deep down you know you love this—
the two-for-one specials for drinks called
woo woos, kamikazes, blow jobs;

the bland bar food and the jukebox
blaring *Proud Mary* over the crowd.

And while you have a break between rounds
you think you see your father sitting there asleep in the dark
with the bare bulb of the porch light
casting shadows on the pots and pans.

At this point, taking off your bra and dancing on
a table seems reasonable. Asking the bartender
to come home with you is not so far-fetched.

And while you couldn't possibly finish
the last cold fried cheese stick on the plate
you think of leaving but where would you go?

You are no longer attached to this world.

Putting the key into the ignition becomes a real task.

So you sit there, angry, watching his head bobbing
to stay upright, like a prisoner who's just been interrogated
and told you everything he knows.

STUPID

We were so fucked up,
She says to her friend, laughing.
We were so fucked up, it was,
It was like...
And her friend says, yeah,
We totally were,

And I wonder
What it would be like
To be permanently stupid,
To go through life
At that altitude, just clearing
The lowest rooftops and TV aerials,
Heading for the mountains...

My friends and I used to try it,
Sitting around a day-glo bong, brains
Turned to low, then lower,
So unmoored and adrift,
So hopelessly out of range
Of our calls to the lost
Vessels of each other,

We could only giggle, wondering,
Even as we did so,
Why.

Now and then
The crippled sub of an idea
Would try to surface out there
On the stoned moment's
Glassy horizon

Where the strawberry-scented candle
Burned like...

Like...

CORDELL

I drove the tiny, grasshopper-green
Motorcycle to the town's edge,
And for the first time
Bought gas, counting out dimes
And quarters to an old guy in a bill cap.

For the first time
I pondered the venous skin
Of a map, and charted a route from Burns Flat
To Cordell, a little town
On the Oklahoma plains. The day
Was sparkling and unrehearsed, the air
Cool in the morning, and for the first time
I went out on the public roads alone,
Despite having no license, the world
For the first time passing in a rush
At the tips of the handlebars
On the little country road, a pick-up
Passing now and then, the farmer inside
Raising the index finger of his left hand
An inch above the wheel, a man greeting me

As a man for the first time,
The little engine whirring under me,
The scissortails watching from barbed wire,
The road unspooling for thirty miles
Just as my map had promised, and for the first time
I paused to rest on a long journey,
In this case in the town of Corn, its sole street signal
Flashing amber at the crossroads as I sat
At a picnic bench under the green dinosaur
Of the Sinclair station sipping a root beer,
Staring at the town and the little bike that took me there,
Feeling, for the first time, like a traveler,
A sojourner of the plains,

And I drove on to Bessie, where,
For the first time, I ordered lunch,
Reading from the menu in a little café,
Speaking seriously and in what I took
To be a manly way, the way of a sojourner,
To the pretty waitress, and what I'd give

Today to see myself sitting there in terror
Amid the half-dozen farmers eating their chicken-
Fried steak, their untanned foreheads white as halos
Above their sunburned faces, and for the first time
I left a tip, counting out a silver gift for her,
And walked out to the bike
That waited for me among pick-ups and tractors,
Moving on, for the first time leaving
A woman behind, someone to watch
And acknowledge how the road pulled me away,
Someone to keep on looking down that road.

JENNIFER

I step naked into the back yard
Under a full moon
And piss on the rich soil
At the edge of the flower bed,

Feeling both Whitmanesque and dog-like,
Mystical and silly.

When I was a kid my friends and I
Would pee together, crossing
Our yellow swords,
Seeing who could go longest and farthest.

And over the years
Three or four women have asked shyly
If they could watch
What might have seemed to them
The essential male act; brutish
And comic, complexly hydraulic,
Full of archaic territoriality,

The one act of the penis
Over which we have more control
Than they do.

Maybe that's why,
When I walked home a little buzzed
From a Denver bar one winter night
With a girl I hardly knew
And desperately needing a convenient tree

She took me in her hand
And wrote her own name in the snow.

BURNING

Where is the mind that asked whether the drug store
that stood at the crest of a hill and had a beacon
as its emblem, and I ate fruit salad sundaes there
and grilled cheese sandwiches, was or wasn't a tower,
in the sense that there were porches, windows and staircases,
in the sense that there were mirrors and shining lamps
and one or two banners, and what was a tower doing there
with me walking to the library and post office,
and only a Chinese restaurant next door;
and where is the mind that abided the large plaza
outside the drug store and made its own canopies
and beautiful flying objects, and where did the tower
come from and the dream of emptiness
that has abided for more than fifty years,
and the heart which burned, such was burning, and such
was the tower, it also burned, only in that case
it wasn't attached to anything, it burned
of its own volition and mountains in Pennsylvania
still burn, alas, they have an abode, and empty
bottles explode and paper flutes burn and birdsong.

ROSES

There was a rose called *Guy de Maupassant*,
a carmine pink that smelled like a Granny Smith
and there was another from the seventeenth century
that wept too much and wilted when you looked;
and one that caused tuberculosis, doctors
dug them up, they wore white masks and posted
warnings in the windows. One wet day
it started to hail and pellets the size of snowballs
fell on the roses. It's hard for me to look at
a *Duchess of Windsor*, it was worn by Franco
and Mussolini, it stabbed Jews; yesterday I bought
six roses from a Haitian on Lower Broadway;
he wrapped them in blue tissue paper, it was
starting to snow and both of us had on the wrong shoes,
though it was wind, he said, not snow that ruined
roses and all you had to do was hold them
against your chest. He had a ring on his pinky
the size of a grape and half his teeth were gone.
So I loved him and spoke to him in false Creole
for which he hugged me and enveloped me
in his camel hair coat with most of the buttons missing,
and we were brothers for life, we swore it in French.

ALPHA AND OMEGA

Three blackbirds tear at carrion
in a ditch, and all the light
of the stars is there too, present
in their calls, embodied in their ebony
beaks, taken into the cold wells
of their eyes, steady on the torn
strings of rotten meat in the weeds.

Starlight pierces the sea
currents and crests, touching scuds
and krill and noble sand amphipods.
It moves so steadily it is stationary
through the swill of seaweed, the fleshy
shells of purple jellyfish.

And all the light from star masses,
from constellations and clusters,
surrounds the old man walking
with his stick at night tapping the damp.
The light from those sources
exists in his beginning, interwoven
with his earliest recollections—
phrase of cradle and breath, event
of balance and reach.

Light from the stars is always
here, even with the daytime sun,
among cattle on coastal plains
and the egrets riding on their backs,
shining on the sky-side of clouds
and straight through the fog of clouds,
between white fox and white hare,
between each crystal latch to crystal
in snow. It illuminates turreted
spires and onion domes of foreign

cities, enters the stone mouths
and grimaces of saints and gargoyles,
touches the mossy roofs of weathered
barns, insect-tunneled eaves and the barbs
of owls, and all sides of each trunk
and shadow-blossom of bee-trees
and willow banks, filling orchards
and aisles of almonds and plums.

The starlight comes, in union
and multiple, as weightless
as the anticipation of the barest
rain, as the slightest suggestion
of a familiar voice sounding
in the distance. It is as common,
as fulsome as the air of a mellow
time with no wind. The light
of the stars encompasses everything,
even until and beyond the last cold
passing of the last cinder-bone
and minim of the vanished earth.

A STATEMENT OF CERTAINTY

Here we are, all of us now, some of us
in emerald feathers, in chestnut or purple,
some with bodies of silver, red,
or azure scales, some with faces
of golden fur, some with sea-floating
sails of translucent blue, some pulsing
with fluorescence at dusk, some
pulsing inside shell coverings shining
like obsidian, or inside whorled
and spotted spindle shells, or inside
leaves and petals folded and sealed
like tender shells.

Because many of us have many names—
black-masked or black-footed or blue-
footed, spiny, barbed, whiskered or ringed,
three-toed, nine-banded, four-horned,
whistling or piping, scavenger or prey—
we understand this attribute of god.
Because some of us, not yet found, possess
no names of any kind, we understand,
as well, this attribute of god.

All of us are here, whether wingless,
clawless, eyeless, or legless, voiceless,
or motionless, whether hanging
as pods of fur and breath in branches
knitted over the earth or hanging
from stone ceilings in mazes of hallways
beneath the earth, whether blown across
oceans trailing tethers of silk, or taken
off course, caught in storms of thunder
currents or tides of snow, whether free
in cells of honey or free over tundra
plains or alive inside the hearts of living
trees, whether merely moments of inert
binding in the tight blink of buried
eggs, or a grip of watching in the cold
wick of water-swept seeds, this—beyond
faith, beyond doubt—we are here.

CONTRIBUTORS

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ious jobs and often bordered on poverty. His translator, ADAM GIANNELLI, a recent Oberlin graduate, lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

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LEE UPTON is a frequent contributor and was also part of our Rilke symposium last fall. Her books include *Civilian Histories* (poems) and *The Muse of Abandonment* (criticism). She teaches at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania.

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IN MEMORIAM

This issue of FIELD is dedicated to Tom Andrews, who died this summer at the age of 41.

Tom was a student intern at FIELD during his last semester in college, the spring of 1984, and he subsequently took an active interest in the welfare of both the magazine and the press.

Our decision to add contemporary American poets to our list, by means of the FIELD Poetry Series, in 1993, was undertaken in great part through Tom's encouragement and commitment to help, and our annual poetry contest was initially his project, for which he served as first reader over the first two years, 1997 and 1998.

CEDY for photo, E 655, 745, 888/10 Madrid 24-II-99

1103 MADRID
Estación de Arocha

Dear David: when are you when I need
of writing many times.

you! This card I have done and of writing the books I tried
you in Madrid I am taking the books I tried. We are all

Charles Robinson, as I know did in Field. We are all
old father William but I am on trying.
I remember you all because

I would had as much fun over at my university other that.
Perhaps it was our age, our interest in poetry. Roberto.

At any rate I would your course
criticism if I am ever going to get this one. No only

191 Vanderbilt U.P. I'll need you to tell me a whole
power will give which I will need you to tell me a whole

power will give which I will need you to tell me a whole
power will give which I will need you to tell me a whole

power will give which I will need you to tell me a whole
power will give which I will need you to tell me a whole

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