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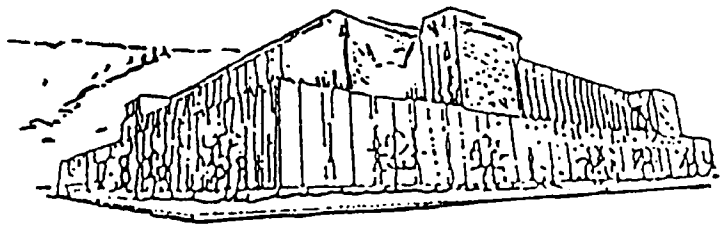
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AN ARROW OF HOURS

Poems

by

Christopher Leonard Spinelli

B.A. College of William and Mary, 1994

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1999

Approved by



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

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Exquisite Corpse: “An Ethnography of Keys”

Gulf Coast: “On Being Fired”

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Poetry Northwest: “Grad School Admissions Rejection”

Verse and Poetry Daily: “A Sleeper’s Guide”

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Guripda malul halka hani guriwo

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I. Poems for Morning

Arise; take up again all the burdens of life; return from the false to the real world!
—Giacomo Leopardi, “Song of the Great Wild Rooster”

Notes on a Mirror

You are not you; immediately you assume
A look, a turn, a smile that is you, perturbed,
Self-conscious. This silver glass can shine
Like the moon, like a pool around
A monument. Turned up, it holds stars,
Jets, all the hovering lakes of cloud.

It can hold your face, of course, your hair.
It could brood upon your nose
For a lifetime. It marvels at your eyes
That eat words like silverfish,
But don't look too deeply.
You may find something operatic, inconsolable.

Hidden like underground waters,
Mirrors prevent the dead from importuning,
From mouthing words of honor and regret.
Now they cannot see. Now they want everything.
(Avaricious dead! Coins cover their eyes!)

If you break a mirror in a dream,
It's auspicious. When you wake, you'll meet your love,
Be elected to high office. Kind words
Are potent then, giving grace, granting—yes, succor.

An Ethnography of Keys

There is a key concealed in cloud.
It is sometimes white and feathered.
It unlocks oaks and the undulant coil
Of exiled angels, forgotten reflective gods.

Keys also grow in the trunks of trees.
A cocooned chorus, they ring together
In rain and damp. They turn the tumblers
That turn the world, its dream of balance.

Keys have been hidden in water.
Tiny as homunculi, they rattle in rain
And clatter with the lobster.
They unlock strongboxes of coral.

There is a key in every stone
Larger than your fist. They can open
Dead-bolted dolmens and mountains.
Their word for *water* is *diminishment*.

One key, burnt and flaming, pulses
At the center of things. It is huge.
It dismantles suns and poems.
It is so hot it is almost not there.
If a sea were to cool it, it would sing.

Waiting for Sunrise on Jiri Mountain

South Korea

All that night my friends slept fitfully
On our tent's mat; I couldn't rest at all,
Even after the lager we'd bought

At the clawed mountain's foot, the mantras I'd mouthed
To sleep, the—yes, leaping sheep in their green
Pasture, a scene so far from where I was now.

I'd lie to say, like a country song, "My aching heart
Brought me," to this nation, this mountaintop.
I had a heart then, as now, sure, and what's more,

It drives me to blind acts, like everyone.
But it was something else then, an urge
Toward movement, any kind, toward shifts from here

To here, always curious and then turning away.
I wanted to see everything! I envied the mobility
Of photons and the ethereal light and wind that brush

The vast space behind words. But by then
I didn't know one word well. I'd already studied
Too much. I moved to greet the somnambulate stars,

With their own ringing distances. Opening the tent-flap,
I stumbled outside in the night. The lower mountains
Spanned below me, clouded at their nadirs,

Lit variously by a temple here and there glowing
Like the nacreous center of a heap of pearls.
Meanwhile, a slow dull gleam flushed the east now,

Like water licking an ochre river stone until it shines.
Nearer the summit than I, some Koreans brewed coffee.
Clean in their camping clothes, they ate and sang

And joked, waiting for sunrise. They saw me then,
Grinned to see an American, a *wehgobk*, here.
But nothing too uncommon. I was, after all,

An ordinary bird flying into their light
And then softly back out into the cold again.

Before Waking

I'm teaching a college class, being observed,
so it's important that I do well,
speak clearly and slowly, and with humor,
explain several times, in at least two ways,
move discussion along.

But I am tired and instead
curl up under the blackboard and doze.
The class is puzzled.
My observer departs, shaking his head.
I can't seem to lift my eyelids.

* * *

I carry a lamp in a field at dusk.
I have worked here before.
I step between ragweed and clover,
and know that down that trail a lake is breathing,
that kerosene for the lamp is behind the shed,
that my battered canoe is neatly stowed nearby
with the others, like a cluster of manioc.

There in the evening light, I see a girl I once knew.
She was never here.

We speak—I don't know
what we say. But I flare with hurt,
and think once, hard:
New York!

* * *

I'm walking through the fish market,
past a thick-armed woman clubbing eels,
a squid flailing in a vat,
racks of dried stingrays,

and realize I've left my coat behind.
It's in my boss' office, but I can't go back
because we just quarreled over money.

I see my friend and ask him
to pick up my coat for me.
Forget it, he says.
I try to forget.

Rivers and Sky

Waking always in the bed of an oxbow lake
That has long since foamed into cloud,
It's inevitable that I've come to see
The body as floodplain, a bundle of streams.
Whole Volgas, wily Nigers of my own
Rich blood meander, bright and clean, around
A levee of lung that is still young.
Tributaries give me to myself, continually.

So often given up, thinking of nothing,
Not knowing my own mind, I can't help but know
Mind as sky. For, after all, it too sizzles
And flashes, growing alternately less and more
Childish. Limpid, it grows pearls that will fall.
It is clear for years maybe, then fills with fog.
It leases a light, hard as marble, cool as pear,
That is briefly tender, like us to one another.

Invitation

If, as Larkin wrote, each moment
Is the arc of an axehead cutting wood,
Let us make a bonfire with the timbers.

We'll set rings and roots aflame, hurl
Beech trunks, oak trunks and cedar
Into the pit. We'll fan it white-hot
As we kick our heels and howl.

Visiting Poem

Morning was cold as a silver plate
That day in DC. Frost fiddled at the black gate
Before my apartment, rising up
A white wave
Cold over my cartop
Covering my windshield in a thick dish of ice
That I chipped and broke for good fortune. I restored
Sight by that one act,
I could see
Ahead, knew my friend waited for me.

Driving up 95, I saw sun
Flash on the mirrors. It was no egg, no omelette—
It was the sun! I drove through
Baltimore,
A blur of steel bridges,
The road two guitar strings that buzzed like bridge girders,
Delaware, Philadelphia, the bridge that leads
Into New Jersey,
The blue road
That led me to Nutley, Jason's home.

The town was clean, with one restaurant
(Chinese) at the entrance, and one movie theater.
Ranch houses, a Catholic Church, and
Old maples
Filled my rearview mirror.
Then I stopped at the address—behind the first-floor
Market was a set of stairs. I walked up, stretching
Out my back and legs.
It was him,
I could read Jason's name on the door.

I knocked and he answered. Together
We cheered. *Your hair is so short now*, I said. *Your hair*
Is so combed now, he said. He showed me
His kitchen,
His red den and study,
The glinting World Trade Center, barely visible
When we peered from the fire escape like two pigeons.
He gave me a gift,
Ground coffee
From his last trip to Costa Rica.

I gave him a slick black address book,
My telephone number inked under the ess'es.
Then we cooked noodles in his kitchen,
And talked, talked
About his job, the sick
Patients' delusions he worked hard to understand,
About the stories he worked on, nights.
At ten we went out
To a bar,
Beer for me, water for Jason now,

Now water, doctor's orders. My friend
Had to keep regular hours too—couldn't stay up
Talking. The streets emptied, the last beer
Glass emptied
As well. We went back home.
Jason found blankets—I lay in his den and spoke
Jokes to his bedroom. Tut-tut, the thermostat ticked,
And I lay like clay.
In the night
I heard cold winds roll, but I was warm.

* * *

Jason, I'll never forget how once
In college you stopped sleeping, battered your keen mind
Against itself until mania struck.

Ulysses

You knew, front and back, but
It was the last page that was the best, you shouted
Before the worried professor called the police.
We walked together.
You sobbed then—
You sobbed and said you were tired; you punned

While we walked to the clinic. You laughed
And told amused doctors that Thomas Pynchon
Pinched pennies, and *Che Guevarra lives!*
Those next weeks
While you mended, something
Unnameable kept me angry. I shot bad pool
And abandoned all my readings. I almost drove
Everyone away.
I'm thankful
You recovered, finished school with honors.

Do you remember the notes you wrote
In the hospital, where you were called The Rooster
Because you kept everyone awake?
Do you still
Have them? I don't want
To valorize your illness, my friend, but I can't
Forget your odd advice: *Give doorknobs a little
Air and light, and they'll
Glow softly,
Phosphorescent when we need them.*

Apology

I am sorry, cow, for having taken your life.
Further, I am sorry for not knowing the Apache tongue—
Arguably more elegant and familiar to your ear.
Lo siento, I can say, in the language of *los vaqueros*,
Lo siento, el saco venerable de los mugidos,
With humility, I have taken from you a swathe of leather,
Crushed and folded like a tablecloth.
I need your hide, you see, for my briefcase, my bag.
It will hold my papers, my work, the strange currency of poems.
It will hold my pressing ambitions—
(They are like angels with their weaponry.)
It will be a gift to me from someone I love.
Its handle, made from your ankles,
Will darken from contact with my hand.
Its clasp will never be locked—
Doing so is to go against the grain of your own generosity.
I will carry my briefcase out of lecture halls and theaters,
Like a fallen squirrel, a squalling baby.
It will be my Spartan leather shield,
To protect me, charm-like, from the pressures of my heart.
In the rain it will shrink and recoil; it will lie down on the ground.
It will rest when I rest; it will crouch on desks and chairs.
Please, cow, I urge you,
Don't fill my nights with dreams of pastures,
Don't curse me with a constant thirst for milk.
Sweet Bessie, may you meet your kin again,
In some new shining world, some clover-crammed bank,
Where saltlicks grow like ragweed, and every milk pail is a chalice.

My Hands

Open, they are two pale salmon
That flap and swim. They float
Like Aegean islands that harbor children
With fierce eyes. Or they are a pair of sparrows,
Troubled by the tether of my wrists.

Their backs are fine, with bones like organ pipes
Under skin. They are mottled, pink and white and lizard-blue.
The fingers are long and at each end is a nail,
A marked fleck of quartz, an old typewriter key,
A slow-scrolling history of my health.

Ridged and slender, the palms are stamped as well.
They hold my accounts; they hold me accountable.
Two sand-dollars, twin convergences of the five paths
Of my digits, from these, all are shaped: my life,
My luck, the ballasts of my illimitable want.

Fisted, my kissing hands fit at the knuckles
Like two continents divided long ago.
Their many languages share one ur root.
Ironically, it is the sound of one hand clapping.
My fists are white cliffs from which terns launch.

My hands cover my face when I am ashamed.
With them, I salute the gibbon.
They can sometimes conjure doves.
My hands can play a few tunes, punch, hold tight,
And carry me until I am finished.

Praise

There are
few creatures
slipshod as slugs.
Flabby bags, bilious,
they simply arch to food
and moisture, organs be damned.
They are supposed not capable
of discernment. (Loam, after all, is
both their platter and bath.) There's no brooding,
no mood music, no *Is it just this?*
for these leaf-labelers, these kings
of an inch. Hooray for slugs,
maestros of the gelled life,
uncertain squatters
in limpet shells
and unseen
places.

Clean

You can't know what the word means
Until you know dirt. Let's say
You know that. You know the varied dirt,
Have held council with silt.
You have learned from ash.
Even the charred trees know it's time.

You will never be strung along again.
You will come back to this
When you are older, when
You are stronger, more refined in the art
Of revenge, your shirt more luminous.
But you will never be wiser than now.

Bold as blood, you wear your best suit, better even
Than your father's. You walk outside
In a country of wind and bright hills,
Advance to a trembling barn
And a rusted well—

With a gesture, you rinse your eyes.
From today, only you will mislead you.
Your own true voice flutters back:
I change my life. It is right and proper to
Be arrogant then!
To unlearn everything—
This act engineers the new last maps,
The first streaming waters again.

II. Noon Poems

Dressed to die, the sensual strut begun...
—Dylan Thomas, "Twenty-Four Years"

Poem on Breathing

Beyond the storehouses of hail there is a library.
All day, the four winds, like pensioner chums, play
Drinking games on its large white steps. Past them, inside
The vaults is recorded the number of breaths
I have taken, will ever take. Marked there
Like an index of fortune is the depth and reach
Of each breath, every inhalation I have ever made,

From the deep gasps after a dive or a climb,
To the slips of air, like mints, when I am sick,
To the steady pattern of decrease when I, a first grader,
Voluntarily wore the zoologist's snake around my neck—
A defanged trophy tie. Also in that library
One can find my recorded exhalations as well, my sighs
That contribute to the heaped continents of cloud,

My sneezes that in part scatter and cleave
Those clouds, my coughs that are the plush moving sidewalks
Of spirit and germ. Of course I can see on microfilm
How many breaths I've shared with Buddha, Christ,
Saint Paul, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, John Donne.
Of course I can compare the rhythm and sweep of my breath
To my grandfather's, whom I saw only once. I was a baby

In his barbershop and I had no hair. Perhaps our final numbers
Will be similar. I can also see my pauses, my delays in breathing.
I actually stopped breathing when I was first seen,
When I heard my first songs, when I saw my loves
For the first time, when I saw water and sex and first books,
When I disrupted everything, aware of my own presence.
I was a stubborn drum of skin and wind.

And I can see there the call of my own dissolution,
My finish, on a cosmic scale so shortly after my beginning,
And I can see the number of breaths I've left to take,

And I avoid jogging. Those breezy gamblers, the winds
Of mobility and investigation, can't expunge, can't erase
The dates and numbers that are written there, that could never
Burst, like marigolds, into flame, though I hold the match.

Michele Spinelli

My grandfather, thirty-nine and unmarried;
Thirty-nine and childless—now it's no crime—
It may even be laudable, but at that time,

That desolate place—*Che e il problema?*
Razed by family, mocked by the coal-miners
Of Tams, West Virginia, my grandfather Michele,

Born in Italy, barber in America, whose eyebrows
And nose and curly hair I have inherited,
Michele, the bachelor, finally found a wife.

Italian too, she lived in the same boardinghouse.
For their honeymoon, they drove south, as far
As they could in three days. Michele stopped the car

In Georgia, turned, and drove three days back,
A newly minted married man. Probably he thought
Of *soldi*, money. He was a skinflint, so the stories go.

He wouldn't buy an indoor toilet for his growing
Family in America, but he paid for three bathrooms
For three brothers back in San Michele di Bari.

(*Padrone!* my grandmother gripes.) He watered cola
To save money. He only heated the barbershop—
The rest of the house aching cold in December.

He made his own wine, blindingly bad. He sold it too.
Michele drove the same Ford for fifteen years.
My father remembers laughter on the street, behind him.

Later, Michele, after years of boarding-house life,
Moaned over his children's expensive habits,
The way they wore out their brown shoes, their pants,

The cost of medicine, and glasses, and cussed style.
When my father's new young wife, my mother,
Poured cream for stray cats in the rose garden,

Michele sighed then too! Little did anyone know
That under the house, in trash bags, he'd hoarded
A small fortune. Here is an old note he mailed

My father when I was born. The cramped, soiled
Lines are shaky, waver like water and oil:
Congratulations on having borned a beautiful baby boy.

High-School English Teacher

Mr. Hagadorn yelled and jumped and taught.
“Bring your books to class!” When he yelled, we’d cringe.
When he jumped, his thick neck-muscles grew taut.

But the teaching, that was quite the act, a binge
Of poems and symbols. That winter we read
“The Snowman” as a charm, a slightly unhinged

Ritual to summon snow. We pushed ahead
With William Carlos Williams’ carrot leaf,
And Yeats’ swan’s feathered glory (snort), the bed

Of ignominy. On Shakespeare’s songs and grief
He had much to say, an actor himself.
(We seniors rumored that he played beefy

Boss Hogg’s cousin for one episode.) Self-
Hood changes, we learned, or at least heard
Him say. He was wise to us, almost Delphic,

But how he’d bitch when we provoked him! That third-
Period class sometimes became his platform:
“School is not a three-ring circus!” and “The birds

In that tree outside, their feathers and forms
Are better than your TV any day!”
He sure was cranky, but his heart was warm,

Generous. We met again, he and I, in May
Four years back. We had a pitcher, “mainstay
For teachers,” he joked. He shouldn’t have paid.

Grad School Admissions Rejection

Maybe it was the essay.
Maybe you seemed too certain,
Too sure of yourself in fields
That celebrate the multiple piracies

And confusion behind words. Maybe
It was your record, not without flash,
But far from stellar. You can recall

What a friend once said
(I will write): *Maybe we've got to fail*
Something colossal
Before we have a sense of the world.

You have not failed anything colossal.
Your blues are as temporal as candy.
Now please yourself. Embrace distractions!
Books, those wan moths, may escort you

To lightness. That one there, on Sir Francis Drake,
Contains copies of misleading maps
And records of meals no longer exotic.
Like everyone before you, you too will try
Some strange new meat the natives eat,
Some red and flashing berries.

Factory

I'll make no pretense at having liked the work,
Or being good at the assembly line, or having savored the job
In my alternately speculative and banal journals of the time.
Frank O'Hara might say, *I hate all that crap*, but I'll settle
For a rather more subdued, *I don't*
Care for it, neither the tedious work itself
Nor dishonest posturing long after the fact. Still,

I remember mornings spent cleaning the literal tub
Of guts, hogshead of pig sphincters, intestinal tubes
That farted in my hands. I'd wash off
The ice and salt with a hose and watch the guts
Unfurl like windsocks, streamers of meat.
I'd listen to stories from my floor neighbor, one vat over,
Who spoke of army hookers, army sergeants. At lunch,
In the factory cafeteria with nickel hot dogs,

I'd lounge, reading Heidegger because I didn't know better.
Afternoons I'd spend alternately lifting racks
Of Italian sausages or unrolling hog intestines,
Condom-like, over an open-ended pipe that pushed ground pork
Into the pig gut, ballooning into sausage.
When the machine operator called me *Goofy*
I'd laugh, a goofy kid. I hadn't yet learned dignity's
Coordinates. I'm still learning.

Almost everything of that sorry time is gone: the money spent,
My hot dogs and kielbasas long since consumed,
Even the factory itself has vanished. Only memory,
Revisionist by nature, grasps at some flutter for a while.
May a stray muse restrain us from praise!

On Being Fired

It comes as a relief, a sort
Of confirmation. *You were not*
The man we needed. Outside,

Birds troll and coo in the parks,
Freighted lemonade is mistral-cold,
And girls are smiling from escalators.

Today, you don't resent the beggar
With his sunshine. (His home, after all,
Is where his heart is.) Today,

The drinker in the room upstairs
Will have visions. Today, careless men
Will be slain in every city, and, later,

The ruddy sun, a burning apple,
Will conceal itself. Your own heart
Found music today, despaired,

Then found it again. It is not
Without love; it is not without
Joy. This may be an understatement.

On Leaving DC

Dirty City, America's Dear Core, Desperate Courage, Doubtful Commuters, Darling
Capital, darlings killed, District of Columbia farewell!

No more wine and oranges with Mia during a summer play.
No more dozing in the public library over history books.
No more sleeping in my unwashed shoes.

No more on a green park bench, reading novels.
No more police sirens nearby. *Changeling!* they accused.

No more to see Massimo for Italian lessons in his spotless basement apartment.
No more vegetarian dinners with his blue-eyed baby and American wife.
I won't hear him tell me not to be so serious.
I won't hear him laughing at his son scrambling over the futon.
Va via, Simon! he would cry.

No more reading lessons with institutionalized Sarah, with her smile and disheveled hair.
Her six children were taken away by the state, but she had taken herself away long before
that.

No more Mary Ann, except in letters.
She was so beautiful that I couldn't believe we were together, and wasn't surprised when
we weren't.

But still Kallmann Syndrome.
I had an arrangement with God—Let that syndrome be the worst thing to happen to me.
Then I had a protective stamp on my forehead, visible only to the angelic orders.
They could hear my cries.
I was a really noisy guy.

No more file-clerk job, where I scrawled my own initials two thousand times a year.

No more parking tickets on sunny days.
No more shattered parking meters—their strange fruit burst for the quarters inside.

No more hydrangeas by the low black gate; no more tulip bulbs.
I never planted them; they were pre-existing and perennial.

No more tyrannosaurus bones, excavated from Montana.
No more Madonnas in blue, with placid northern faces.

No more with Greg on Sunday on his porch to toast the passing buses.
Always we'd see, through the bus windows, the silhouette of a passenger toasting us in

return.

This cheered Greg considerably, Greg with his Russian novels, Greg the indefatigable houseguest of everyone he knew, Greg the sultan of sofas.

No more free lectures at the Library of Congress: Plato and Blake, Boswell, the evolution of feathers, Hubble telescope, Umberto Eco's condescension.

No more poetry slams where the person on-stage before me simulated orgasm.
I discretely left before my turn.

No more underground photocopied poetry magazine.
I was an intelligent editor, only sometimes sinister.

No more Metro cards.
They still leap like crickets from my old coat.

No more my roommate saying, *Don't go to Korea. You like beer—they don't have beer in Korea.*

He was wrong.
He kept my room deposit. He kept a Harley in the den.

No more asking myself what I was doing with my flagrant years.

I want now to see the me that was then,
And tell that me *I feel nostalgia for you.*
The younger me would think I was crazy.

But I thought practically everybody was crazy then.

Classroom Poem

South Korea

“Superstitions,” I wrote on the blackboard,
and my students, from Pusan National University,
stopped their clowning, their jokes and braggadocio,
and looked into their English dictionaries.

“In my country,” I began, explaining
that a bride and groom don’t see each other
the day before their wedding—it’s unlucky.
Also, we kiss strangers on New Year’s Eve—

generally. “What are Korea’s superstitions?”
I asked then. Of course there was a silence.
I crossed my arms. Traffic rolled. A girl spoke up,
“To cut one’s fingernails at night is bad.”

Then someone said to dream of pigs or shit
was good, and meant wealth, and someone else
said to step on the threshold of a door
was unlucky. “Like this?” I asked. *Ae Gob!*

they cried, laughing. Then, magpies in the morning:
good. Crows at noon mean death. Dreams of rivers:
speedy travel. ‘Seven’ means longevity,
while inauspicious ‘four’ means death.

Then someone said seaweed soup was lucky,
and someone else added, “And delicious,”
and a third, the girl, knew a good place nearby.
and the fourth, the pig-dreamer, suggested we eat it now.

We walked out together into the day.
The traffic thrummed while ten thousand
signifiers moved past us: in bird flight,
in discarded shards from the potter’s shop,

in the deep river seven blocks away,

in salted seaweed suspended in a pot,
each urging, for good or bad,
its own provisional claim, its own translation.

Korean Vowel Lesson

After Rimbaud

ㅏ for father, in kindness and fear, absolute and wavering, supine but rising, a talismanic hoop with rays, pleased sigh at morning with the fat sun is conjured again.

ㅑ for the caught fish, taut and stunned in air, still arched against a current it no longer feels, scales flashing like a signal mirror, the hook a beard of grief.

ㅓ for this book, open on a table, and you looking inside.

ㅗ for one stark tree that cuts the wind, black bark spongy and sharp, limbs deracinated, roots splinters that cling and pierce, limbs twisted by the earth's implacable roar.

ㅜ for a tiger, sprawled and dozing, stripes smoking, paws, arrowhead ears, gazelle in the belly. (Ethics are easy after eating.)

ㅛ for that which orbits, spinning and tethered by invisible thread to the cloud and milk of the world: attenuated-gold satellites, stones, thrumming iridium, rocky ice, one abandoned pocket camera.

ㅜ for moon, mirror, woman in blue, with open arms, starry cored apple, blazon of every place we will never see.

Poem

A succession of ordinary days and months
Have passed since last winter, when we warmed to touch.
The balletic skaters on the lake we drove past,

On your way to the airport, will soon return.
The gray sky, publisher of jets, never left.
The tawny hills here will glitter and burn

Cold again in just a little while. That day I saw
Only a penny-weight of light on your thin shoulders,
The hilltop cairns, the traffic signs, your upturned face.

You shone too, in your way, when we kissed goodbye,
Your black hair a quiet flame. Doves, filthy
But still emblematic, jostled on the windowsills

Five stories up. But it's hard to stay relevant
So far apart. Noon here is a moon where you are.
Over the phone, your voice, charged to light, delays itself.

Between us now are the yellow bilge-clouds from China,
Miles of sea and its mountains, a half-globe of it,
Vast bivouacs of fish, furrowed by the west wind.

Then a coast, high glinting mountains again,
Scored like tusk, turn of foehn and water,
And I am here, near a lake. Let's forgive each other
The distance. I'll start with this.

December

In this northern part of the country
An ice-heavy cloud can lie low, tree-
Like in Montana fields. Altogether,
Vanilla-white clouds, acres pale as paper,
A glittering river, are the sum. There *are* keys,

But no locks. There are no vernal fees
To be paid to seasonal gods anymore. Money
Only will get you far from home. Rather,
Newness is all.

From my height now, I can only see
Snow-hoarded land, a mountain bird, foggy
Headlights on a highway at noon. Weather
Makes no promises, has none to keep either.
Newness is all.

For Stefan

This afternoon I had a beer and thought of you.
When our high school let out, we'd start drinking at two.

Stumbling, we'd walk together to work.
Washing dishes, we'd strut and smirk.

We'd buy a case, then, concerned, buy another.
Saturdays we'd hide the beercans from your mother.

In college, we'd match drinks, can for can.
Turning green, I'd vomit, the bested man.

With office jobs we'd start drinking Thursdays at five.
Sundays we'd have pitchers in a Richmond dive.

In South Korea together we switched to *makkali*,
Rice wine. Cheap drinks would cheer us, made us rally,

But started to hurt. The hangovers felt like a crack
In the braincase. Thank God we wised up, cut back.

But now, with your mother so sick and in pain,
And you, new to weeping, beside her, strained,

I'll have a drink for you—I'll drink *your* fill.
A candle will burn all night at my windowsill,

A useless gesture, I know, from another time,
But it helps me to grieve, like a wake, like rhyme.

Las Vegas Poem

Caesar's Palace

Frescoed skies never fade or cloud,
Never shift their unwavering blue.
The artist tastefully omitted birds of prey.

Flashy indoor boutiques with just ten items
Sell huge ruby rings for ten thousand dollars,
Handbags for a grand. I gape like a rube.

No kids run here, spending parents' pelf,
Rifling through the Armanis. No kids allowed.
I think what it would be like to make, say,

Fifty thou a year, and still be single.
So does everyone else: *Honey, sit on this!*
One husband calls from a massage recliner.

But instead his wife, martini in hand, stands
By an enormous marble fountain. It's crammed
With six-foot statues: paunchy smirking Bacchus

In the center, of course: Apollo and Aphrodite
To the sides. Sure, it's hideous. The gods'
Rubbery white skin hangs in folds like drapery.

I'm waiting for the show! she answers her husband,
And within minutes a crowd gathers, lights dim,
And one spotlight beams on Bacchus. Unbelievably,

Incredibly, the god bends his white neck back,
Convulses once, then laughs, automaton-style.
Lips moving, he booms, *Eat, drink, and be merry!*

Then changes the subject. He mentions a sale,
Spins in his throne, and calls Apollo to play
The lyre. Apollo obliges, blinking, and Aphrodite,

Fresh from the half-shell, sings something wordless.
What fun, to be here, where silly statues speak
And urge us to have a good time, to spend money,
To hope, despite odds, that we are foreordained lucky.

On the Particular Child You Cannot Have

The doctor clasps your shoulder, man to man:
You can't have a baby.
You don't stand a chance
Without impossible sums of money.

Even with them, being mauled by a bear
In the library is, you imagine,
Only slightly less likely.

Like a bear, you drift to a dark place
For just a little while.
You admire the torque of your hands,
Your straight, imperishable teeth.

It doesn't matter, your lover comforts.
But in five years, will she be terrorized
By nephews? Will she moon over baby shoes
Small as an ear? She takes your hand now.

You promise her good humor near uxoriousness,
Travel, many guests. You say you are up
For anything. The words become true
As you say them, like reasonable prayer.

Child, spoken then, becomes a cave in air,
Waits to be filled with all the cloudy grace
And griefs you can heft:
Dreams of blunting winter, the heraldic stars,
Honey that is bright and slow to fall.

III. Night Poems

The great wings sing nothing
Lightly. Lightly fall.

James Wright, "You and I Saw Hawks Exchanging the Prey"

Poem at Twenty-Seven

Some self-help books naively urge us not to think
Of anniversaries, because they cause us pain.
They are silver nails hammered through us.
They bloom like fireweed.

But pluck them out, and there are no feasts,
No candles and cakes, no champagne glasses
That spin light. The year has no center
To wind its tail around.

I am obdurate, clutch my bad mental habits
Like an executive briefcase. I consider
Last year's options, tally my profits and loss,
Compare my heart to a feather's weight.

I make a list of last year's events:
That entrance exam I fretted over,
How it monopolized one whole month;
The summer teaching in Rapid City;

That trip to Seattle, fog settling like the sealed puff
In an aspirin bottle; "Appassionata" on tape;
Our time in the condo, moon over the sea
Ravaging our dreams with its keening.

My list is not whole, is inexact, elides.
But we agree to this, more or less, the first time
We wrench our tongues to name our own,
What is kin to us. What, then, is kin to us?

This day burns like furniture, and as my friend
The photographer said, I look behind me.
Whole seasons, households, fleets of ships are left.
But turning, I hear your question—this nail is singing!—
And I prepare an answer, the best one.

Birdwatching in Montana

Near us now, two trumpeter swans splutter
And float, stand and shake out their snaky necks
As elegant as ice. They crouch, as white as cake,
And float again, placid in the lake and welkin,

So unlike those hosteling Canada geese over there.
Brown and black and bleating, they rise together,
Turn, and three seconds later, splash back down as one.
Their wings glint in the sun, making a restless

Necklace across the water. Herons fishing
On the other shore strut and lunge. They keep
A distance from each other, keep vigil as well.
One shakes wings big as mudflaps while another yelps.

Its cry is prehistoric, and I think of new
Fossil finds in China: feathered dinosaurs!
I don't speak this aloud to you, who have
Withstood my various obsessions: last month

Neanderthals, this month bird-hipped lizards
With claw-prints so like these prints pressed
On the pungent marsh. I know fetal birds have claws
Where wings later grow, just as I know in our sleep

Before birth, we dream of all that have come before:
Fish, frog, pig, the ideas we inhabit when we wake.
But it's time to go. You're thirsty and tired,
And night gathers over the resting birds,
These firs and hills, that monumental dam.

Crow

In winter crows are absent from all but the most southern parts of Canada.

—Donald R. Griffin, *The Lives of Birds*

Winter will press down its book of Braille
That drapes the earth's stray words.
I shine like iron filing,
And the green world's blood tugs.

I fly south past the mouths of rivers,
Past human children with their glittering candy,
Past broken cities full of light and bars,
Gleaned fields that are never empty.

I devour the worm with its bouquet of mushrooms,
Rough up the hare, filch the pond frog.
Then I scrape my beak on a concrete slab.

When I caw, I call down my kin,
Who live in the last star, and in my eyes
At dawn's daily turning, when clouds burn.

One night soon I'll roost on your rooftop,
Turn to the lower currents that covet me.
I'll admire the crammed sky from where I've fallen.
Sturdy orphan, I croak, *My world is not yours.*

Long-Distance Conversation

You worry I will change.
How to reassure, then, now—
“What do you fear?” “You.”

On my end, candle flaring—
wax swells,

imperfect beads, measurable
only by displacement. The cup
runneth over. I am at a loss, for words
my mouth is sealed like wax.

Your fear runneth over, again.
Also mine. We think and think.
“We are not fortune-tellers.”/ I said that.
I said so much.

On Preparing for Law School

Don't listen to the great crying rows of herons,
Each bird flying south with a seed and a stone
Together somewhere inside. Don't think about
The strong girl who is waiting to marry you.
There is always someone who is the first to applaud.

Don't listen to the huge shining elm outside
Whose leaves grow light and dark like Reformation glass.
You will never see this light again as it moves
Through these trees now. Green and doomed,
Don't apologize, don't neglect the Doric aspens.

Forget the swimming fish, how they tumble and flap.
Never mind the clapping rain-shower, perfect,
Water moving regularly in descent from sky
To this earth to this lowest place. The clean moon
Rolls away, shadowing a moose somewhere.

Study, you urge yourself. You listen. You study
As you once studied that deer-knife an uncle gave you,
How it mirrored your eyes, its handle smooth as horn,
How, when you trembled, it cut you.

Five Haiku

Sokkoram Buddha—
Your gem crossed seas with soldiers.
How can it return?

A burning firebrand,
I wanted to make my mark.
Now I sit and hum.

City lights below,
Temple torch from Mt. Gum-Jong—
Threaded prayer beads.

Come on, come and drink
With us, with us! We're the winds!
We mean you no harm!

Misters Choi and Lee,
And chicken, and drinks, and me—
“You look Korean!”

One Haiku and one Tanka: A Correspondence

Embers flash in hearths
And in this earth's wheeling sky—
I remember you.

* * *

“Remember”—a word
Whitened, like an albino
Snake, or the sad cane
Of the blinded. Seas roll cold,
Pears ripen. Where are you now?

Birthday in Korea

Two birthdays have already passed since then
And memory slowly weakens, like a seawall.
I am compelled by my nature to make
Of that time some token that on paper
Will outlast me, like a tree that swells
Around a slain bear's jaw, or an old
Silver penny pressed into a plaque with words
That read, *I was here.*

I was there. In that Pusan bar called *Wild West*
I met my friends for cheers and drinks,
And the gift of a new wallet, bolted in brass,
And the shouts, the various profanations, the wooden cups,
And the surprise birthday cake hidden behind the bar in advance, white as a girl's
sweater.
It had sliced kiwi and cherry tomatoes on top.
And the official semi-solemn step into my mid-twenties,
And the late arrival of a pest we hadn't particularly invited.
He sprinkled lager over my head—*It's good for your hair!*
And another guy, Canadian, coming on to some girls.
He was a linguist, he said, and began helping them pronounce the English 'f':
Fish; fat; foot.
And he was a boor.
And the band, with bass guitar and drums and their blissful breaks,
And my friend Carl, who told me if I wanted to be a poet I should change my name to
something Islamic,
And the free popcorn, heavily salted, spilt and twinkling like snow on the tabletop,
And then the walk outside, the movement of people, young girls holding hands, older
girls with their pet dogs, old men in plaid, spitting,
And the doltish high-school tough-guys swaggering in tight black muscleshirts, mocking
And cawing after us, with their menacing, *How are you!*
And the makeshift sidewalk with planks placed over gutted pits as deep as a man is tall,
And then the drinking tent, my glasses fogging, friendly salarymen with their business cards,
And raw fish flashing on a plate like silver coins,
And my friends half-falling asleep, falling off their stools,
And Kumar from Pakistan with money from his mother,

And somehow all the tabs were paid.

And somehow, gabbing in English at four a.m. near Korean soldiers, I was silenced,

And their *Cheep' Ae Kah!*—Go home!

And somehow I made it home.

A Somewhat Vertiginous Book Review

The poems of the first section of Lothario's newest book, aptly but obscurely named, *Obuli*, are a saucy pack—one beats its wings in the void, while another ensorcelled its comrades into hiding in my draperies. Their songs are fine and crystal-throated, but they howl as loudly and rhythmically as infants if you try to wash them in the sink. The poems here all boast as stridently as any second brother in Valhalla. A particularly defiant one told me that it could float like ninety-nine butterflies, while another chomped what I took to be its own heart. (Upon closer inspection I discovered it was only a lump of star plasma, somewhat cooled.) These poems, though braggarts, are well worth any loss of hearing and eyebrows you may experience.

The second section took me by surprise because of its silence, so resting after the clamor of the first. Above the arched gate leading to this section, there is a sign in elegant script that reads, "All language is a manipulation of silence." Indeed! After I entered, one veiled poem brought me cool fruit; another offered me its pipe, but none spoke a word. One poem was busy translating itself from one form of silence to another. It was unfaithful in its translation. Another poem had been transformed into a pillar of salt and was waiting for rain. As I left them then, a shout rose up all around me, and to my delight I realized their silence was something of an act, put on to gain tax-exempt status!

Lothario's poems remind us, with a certain half-savage grace, of our walk between the worlds. As Einstein said, everything is a miracle or nothing is. As Lothario writes, a person you love, when she sleeps, will curl up the way she was born—from a walnut.

A Hijacking

From today Spinelli storms the sun.
It glows and tuts, a wound-up clock.
Mercury. Where? It was a hard candy,
Venus a lost marble, flicked with a spark.
Oh Superfriends
, your powers are useless!

The moon I'll spare, if it meets my demands:
Give me unlimited quantities of X.

Why not. In my right hand, I have my father's good looks.
In my left, a vacuum cleaner.

When I turn north, music makes my mouth ache.
South, I am a refugee.
Everybody, I am a refugee
Who has traded his white shirt
For a crimson one
To conceal his bleeding heart.
This is a trick we've learned from history.

I found my Way of Life sprayed on an overpass.
My way is of no flesh.
I am the eternal subversive butler.

My eyes are fish that have no need of sight.
Before weeping, I take a drink of saltwater.

My lips are creased like steak,
My tie a snake that yearns to hiss,

My teeth threaded clams, my nails
Quartz stones that clatter in a bag.

My hair is a subversive; it plots departure.
Like a barber's pole, I blaze and blaze.

A Sleeper's Guide

First, make sure your bed, your craft, is sturdy.
It mustn't leak that strange water like ether,
Or collapse like a camel under the weight
Of troubling dreams. This has happened.

Then, drink some tea, or milk, or eat
A spoonful of warm honey. Don't wash up.
Leave the utensils out, for the remnants
Are offered to spirits you will need to court.

Stepping into bed is an acrobatic show.
You must choreograph an enormous number
Of leapfrogging muscles. It's up to you
To do so with aplomb, without regret.

In darkness, wait for peaks and troughs.
This is like tuning a piano; you match
One tone with another. Meanwhile, clouds are flying!
A flapping owl launches across ravines.

Dreaming now, you are a hostage to yourself.
Never mind grass that grows the same everywhere.
Never mind rivers; never mind ponds.
Never mind the cool hills and elegant coast
Of the country you have just left behind.

And we'll have the Truth, the whole Truth with a capital T!
—Luigi Pirandello, *It Is So! (If You Think So)*