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MATERIAL MATTERS

by

Thomas George Holmes

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
and the Department of English  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2016

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ABSTRACT

MATERIAL MATTERS

by Thomas George Holmes

May 2016

*Material Matters* is a collection of original poems written by Thomas G. Holmes, while a doctoral student at The University of Southern Mississippi. The poems explore the materiality of writing.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Rob Carney, Thomas Alan Holmes, and Rebecca Mae Holder for early readings, Dr. Craig Carey (who unknowingly is the inspiration/impetus for this collection), Dr. Charles Sumner, Dr. Martina Sciolino, Dr. Angela Ball, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank, and, of course, Max Macpherson.

## DEDICATION

“In Bas-Relief” is for Anna Beth Rowe.

“Dedication from *Love’s Apostrophe*, an Anonymous Book of Love Poems from 1082  
A. D.” is for Wanda Schubmehl.

“The Treasure Gaze as Explained by Abraham Cresques Using His Catalan Atlas” is for  
Bryana Fern.

“Finding North” is for Paul Allen.

“*Hic Sunt Vaccas*” is for Jennifer Bozzette.

“Guide to Medieval Reading” is for Maryam Ala Amjadi.

“Sometimes the Night Arrives Without Design” is for Ruth Foley.

“Sometimes I Contact My First Love Late at Night” is for Garrett Ashley.

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## INTRODUCTION

I wrote poems for about ten years before I tried writing a full-length manuscript, *The Cosmology & Particle Physics of Love*, which was a collection of poems with a cohesive scientific theme. I used my background in physics and read as much as I could about cosmology, quantum physics, and particle physics in order to understand the Big Bang, so I could then use the images and ideas from those fields to create metaphors and allegories about the failure of love. In retrospect, I think it was also about my failure as a physics major, my first major as an undergraduate. Since then, I have continued to write with an intense themed focus in mind. Each time I did, I thought I was just exploring a certain topic for knowledge, mining it for inspiration, and trying to understand the world around me. Now I look back on all the collections I wrote, and I realize that I was really writing about myself. For instance, in *The Cave*, a recent collection of poems about the artists and culture at the time when the cave paintings in Lascaux and Altamira were created, I aimed to understand the origins of creative humans in order to understand our place in the world today. On another level, it was really about me trying to understand where I came from before my parents adopted me. I completed *The Cave* while at The University of Southern Mississippi in the fall of 2012, and since then I tried to remove any masks (or what the Greeks and Ezra Pound called *personæ*) I was writing behind or through in order for my poems to be more personal and to create a more intimate connection with the reader. How could those masked poems in *The Cave* add to the conversation of adoption, or the issues an adopted person experiences, if the poem's images were cryptically hidden behind Paleolithic imagery? *Material Matters* maps the processes of my moving from the sleight-of-hand metaphors, allegories, and images to a

more personal and sincere approach that more directly creates an intimate relationship with the audience.

*Material Matters*, however, was not the first attempt at this type of intimacy. In between *The Cave* and *Material Matters*, I wrote another manuscript of poems, *Accumulation on the Door Hinge*, which like some of my earlier efforts aimed to be about my psychological and emotional states in a romantic relationship. After writing about ten or twelve or poems, I noticed the word “orange” kept inexplicably appearing in the poems, and so I kept using “orange” as an objective correlative that accumulated meanings and through which I could express my feelings. I realized I was still heavily influenced by Modernists’ conceits, and that maybe I could not write sincerely. I partially abandoned my attempts to write directly about me. I began a new project of poems focused on the materials of writing and publishing, which forms the observable theme of *Material Matters*.

I chose this subject matter because I was intrigued with how technological writing devices (stylus, pencil, pen, keyboard) and writing surfaces (vellum, paper, computer screen, metal) influenced the writing process and metaphor and meaning making, and I was interested in how the final published text affected the reader’s interaction with it. If I could not write about me, then at least I could write about the tactile devices that deliver pleasure and frustration to me, and I could explore how the final published text with its bindings, covers, papers, inks, paratext, and other materials frame the text and, maybe, provide extra meaning to the text. An example of this occurs in “Dedication from *Love’s Apostrophe*, an Anonymous Book of Love Poems from 1082 A. D.” (5). The anonymous author of this poem (the persona of the poem, the fictitious character who composed

*Love's Apostrophe* and its dedication) is surrounded by books, and in 1082 A. D., owning books is a privilege for any person. The words in the books inspire him, and he believes the words come directly from the author, and not "tired copy boys," who often made mistakes in transcribing what an author wrote or who attempted to improve on it. Important here is the question of authenticity, a major concern in the early years of books, since a scholar in Oxford could be reading a book by an author and another scholar in London could be reading a book with the same title and by the same author, but because the books were copied down by hand by a copy boy, no two books were identical. This caused concerns for scholars who wanted to critically analyze a text. This imperfect copying becomes the basis for my use of maps in *Material Matters* as a metaphor for writing and books, because in 1082 A.D. maps were drawn by hand, and even if multiple maps were drawn by the same expert mapmaker, no two were ever exactly the same – and this could cause serious problems for the user, especially if the user is at sea and lost or is responsible for gathering precious materials that are to be delivered to a person who funded the expedition. (Not to mention that images in maps and of maps are more imaginatively engaging than writing about words and bindings.) *Material Matters* then concerns itself with the materials of writing both literally and metaphorically by way of maps.

Returning to "Dedication from *Love's Apostrophe*, an Anonymous Book of Love Poems from 1082 A. D.," the author-persona performs other tests of authenticity by smelling the paper and ink. Once he has authenticated the texts, he can read them without doubt and with full belief. These words become inspiration for him to perform his own writings. He then writes his poems for his lover, but he uses this dedication to ensure her

that he genuinely wrote the poems and wrote them for her. Thus, she can acquire the same beliefs in the words that he did with the words in his book collection. Since he is a privileged person who can read and write, he knows the value of words, but he is unsure how well she can read or if she can read at all. To be safe, he ensures her that “each poem’s initial letter is pressed with gold” (14). In this way, if the language is not of value to her, if his written expressive actions are not of value to her, then at least each letter at the beginning of each poem will have value, and thus the book as a whole has value. He authenticates the value of the book for her in a new way. In other words, he realizes his written words have emotional value and the production materials of the book frame that value while adding another level of value – presentational and monetary values.

These competing value interests blur what “text as object” means to me. For instance, is the text (with its interactions with genre, form, language, and theme) the primary means of understanding culture and society in an historical period, or do the means of production (how it was written and published) and the final format of the text provide a better commentary? Can a scholar, for instance, gain a better understanding of the economic conditions of a society by reading texts from a certain time period or by studying the production and distribution of books? Or when someone asks if a text is “original,” is the concern with the author creating something unique or does the person mean the first appearance of the text in a journal or book or even a notebook? A literary critic might be concerned with the former, but a bibliographer, a textual studies scholar, or a book collector might be concerned with the latter. Further, a critic, bibliographer, textual studies scholar, or collector might look to the earliest version or rough draft of the text to find what the author “really meant” in his final “authorized” published text, as

there is a belief that the closer one gets to the original version, the closer one gets to the “true meaning” or intended meaning of the text. As a result, I became interested in exploring those questions to find how meanings arise or are made by the author and to find where else meanings might come from.

Perhaps another way to think about this is to consider my axiom: “to change the material is to change the perception.” On a simple level, this could be as simple as considering how the poem appears on the page by way of lineation, white space on the page, or the shape of the poem can affect the reader’s experience. On a more complex level are the ideas explored in “Political Spin (A Turn in History)” (4). In this poem, Archimedes is “contracted / to trace the origins of it all” (4-5) or to make a map of Earth’s place in the universe. If that contract were made today, a signature on the contract would be valid enough to make it legally binding. However, during Archimedes time, and as the poem suggests, a signature is not enough because the contractors made Archimedes also speak an “oath” (7). The suggestion is the contractors in the third century B.C.E. did not yet fully embrace the written word with the same authority as the spoken word. At the end of the poem, the contractors are even skeptical of Archimedes’ written “proofs / of revolution” (19-20) (both a revolution of the earth around the sun and political, religious, and scientific revolutions), so they burn the written proofs, as they “brand their gods” (22) or create and market their gods, as they see fit. The poem, on one level, suggests the materials of presentation change the perception of experience and beliefs by realizing the contractors did not privilege writing with as much as authority as other forms of materiality.

For *Material Matters*, however, I tend to privilege writing over sound, because I wanted to turn inward. I did not want the poems to have the distraction of outward music. I did this in part because some of the Deep Image poets I studied seem to write silently as they excavated the depths of the unconscious for images. Robert Bly's poems seem to have more resonance if read in silent mediation, but when read aloud the poem's sounds, to my ear, did not contribute to the poem's meaning and, at best, the poem's music appeared muted and not distracting. In addition, Robert Kelly's poems appear to be driven by language, image, and idea. The music of his early Deep Image poems was as flat as prose, to my ear, and I think it is because, as Robert Kelly points out:

[T]he fundamental rhythm of a [Deep Image] poem is the rhythm of images [...]  
The image, after its first appearance as dark sound, still lingers as resonance. [. . .]  
The subsequent image is conditioned, made to work, by the image that precedes it, and conditions, as it is finally conditioned by, the image follows it: through the whole poem. [. . .] Only the superior rationality of the dream is an effective impetus for the movements of the deep image." ("Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image" 15-16).

I understand "dark sound, still lingers as resonance" to mean "its shadow moving darkly through the poem" (16), rather than an auditory sound. It is an image that bridges the known and unknown, like Federico García Lorca's "black sounds" ("Play and Theory of the Duende" 49). I attempted to put Kelly's ideas into practice, such as in the "Cathedral" (6) section of the pecha kucha "Dream Atlas" (6-9), which reads:

The forest sways with 50-feet high toothbrushes.  
Each morning, the sky bleeds. The bristles drip  
long beady strings all day. At night, the dryness

arrives with fallen-egg-stenched winds shredding  
through bristles like songs through cracked ceramic teeth. (1-5)

The first image is a forest of toothbrushes, and the next image of the sky bleeding is conditioned by the toothbrushes that seem to brush against the sky and make it bleed, like gums sometimes bleed after brushing. The toothbrush continues to resonant as it drips blood until the brush is dry when the wind blows through it, and that wind smells like old eggs. The conditioning here is that eggs, perhaps or an associative level, fell from nests in the toothbrush-trees. Finally, the image of “ceramic teeth” arrive yoking the whole poem together by connecting teeth to the resonant toothbrush image.

Additionally, I lineated the poem by way of image. Again, Kelly says, “The image is the measure of the line. The line is cut with image in mind” (“Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image” 16). While Kelly says this and it influenced me, I learned to use the image as “the measure of the line” from W. S. Merwin, who in his unpunctuated poems tends to have one idea or image per line, and those lines and images accumulate into a bigger image or idea. His poems blossom from the movement of images. In this “Cathedral” section, each line is its own image. Line 1 is a forest of toothbrushes, line 2 is blood in the sky and on toothbrushes, line 3 dries the toothbrushes, line 4 is of odorous wind, and line 5 is the sound the wind makes. Even though some lines consist of the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next, the line itself can be read as an independent image, such as in line 2’s action image where the sky bleeds on the toothbrush bristles. In other words, each line can stand on its own as an image. By the end, the images blossom into the image of halitosis and poorly maintained teeth, plus any other associations the reader might find or experience.



Reading this poem aloud, however, might disrupt this imagery, in particular the slowed down and semi-clunky “50-foot high toothbrushes,” but when read silently in the head it moves along easier. The silent mind reading never gets tongued tied, but the physical tongue may. Nonetheless, a little musicality finds its way into the poem, for instance, with the chiming long *Is*, short *Is*, and long *Es*, but those sounds are not pushing the poem forward as much as the images. What pushes the majority of the *Material Matters* poems forward is the images and prosaic syntax. Even in the poems that are written in iambic pentameter or have an iambic meter in the background to play off against, the measure of the line is still the image, as in the opening poem “In Bas-Relief” (1), written with iambic pentameter in mind. Each “line is cut with image in mind” and less with the muted meter. For me, this rhythm of the images (with no or little musical interference) more effectively creates a sense of interiority, a way to express the personal through the theme of materiality and maps.

My move toward interiority might be seen more easily in the poem “Lesson Plan: Teaching Terroir 1638 A.D.” (10), which provides an example of how I think the poems in this collection work, especially in sections I and II. On the surface, the “Lesson Plan: Teaching Terroir 1638 A.D.” is about finding a place to grow and produce wine and learning how to bottle and distribute it in order to become a recognizable brand of wine throughout the world. The final stanza might act as key to my initial methods and goals:

When you bottle vinegar and wine  
and offer it out for trade,  
customers will learn your land  
by tasting where you found your way. (17-20)

Again, on the surface, the stanza is indicating that wine lovers will taste the terroir in the producer's wine and understand it to be a recognizable quality of the wine and as a region producing fine wine. On another level, the speaker is telling her/his winemaking student that the audience will come to understand who she/he is, or at least understand his/her experiences. The wine producer's personal terroir (as well as the land's terroir) will come out in bouquet and taste of the wine. In other words, on an allegorical level, my poems contain my own terroir despite being packaged in a metaphor or conceit, and *maybe* readers can sense it.

With all of that in mind, there is section III, where there is a turn to the attempt to be directly personal and intimate. The opening section of *Material Matters* presents the themes of the book (mapmaking, materiality, the measure of the line as image, etc.); section II explores the materiality of composition through the production of maps; and all of this is done in order to move into the closing section III, a map of my emotions in relation to falling in, being in, and falling out of love, as well as losing the ego-interference that interferes with my direct expressions (as can be seen in the run of three poems "Inscribing Myself," "Deconstruction," and "Under the Spell of an Increasingly Deadly Vowel Movement"). Section III opens with the extended pecha kucha "Exile on Longleaf Trace" (35-39) as bridge into the more intimate expressions. It uses trees as a way to negotiate the personal, similar to how I used the maps as a metaphor, but the details within "Exile on Longleaf Trace" are more personal, such as the "Crabapple" section:

I was first attracted to your stretch marks –  
shepherd’s crook scars like gray rainbows  
curled around each hip – complements  
to your mottled inner thighs (1-4)

This section of the poem uses detailed body images and real images from a person I knew and loved. This person’s “imperfections” closely relate to what most people love about their partner. Lovers enjoy each other, but it is accepting and embracing the imperfections that make for the most intimate relationships. However, this poem overall still hides behind semi-cryptic or masked imagery and tree names. The following poem, “Scripture,” evokes the formal element of “Exile on Longleaf Trace” to make the transition clearer, as it portrays a real mom, performing a real activity (mowing the lawn) and creates a correspondence to the materiality of writing, as she cuts lines in the lawn like lined paper and her shadow moves through the lines like written words or like Kelly’s “dark sound.”

The poem “Response” (45) gets more into the conflict between indirect and direct personal presentation, as its opening line suggests: “The challenge is to indicate where I have been.” In the opening stanza, the speaker initially confronts the dilemma of whether speaking or writing is the more authorial form of expression, which recalls the same dilemma with Archimedes in “Political Spin (A Turn in History).” The speaker in “Response” decides that physical inscription (writing or mapmaking) and metaphors are the mode to use, though both present the problems of what to include or not include in the expression, as stanza 2 indicates:

I could write a story or draw a map,  
either way, I’d make a long metaphor,  
draw out some significant moments  
and scratch out wherever I slept or pissed. (5-8)

However, the speaker also realizes that even metaphor is indirect, as it is like looking “though tinted windows” (9). The metaphor obscures the real. Eventually, the speaker realizes the only materiality that matters is the physical presence of a sharing “a space” (14). The poem is also aware of what the previous poem, “The Orange Movement and the Rise and Fall of *Orange Nucléaire*,” realized: there is “unquantifiable and emotional space between the work and spectator” (44), or in the case of “Response,” an emotional space between the spoken words and the listener. This, again, is like Kelly’s “dark sound” bridging the unknown and known, or the speaker’s lover and himself. As a result, the speaker watches his lover speak, as I watch my poems move with the rhythm of images. The speaker, I think, just “want[s] to invoke meaning” (16) in any material way he can, which is my struggle, which is the struggle of this manuscript. I do not know if I succeed because many of the poems in section III rely on surreal imagery to create intimacy. Even though surreal imagery hopes to make intimate connections with the reader by way of the unconscious, the surreal is still one step away from being direct. In the least, the images do arise from my unconscious, which is closer to the personal that I have managed in the past. Overall, *Material Matters* is an historical map of my writing process to create intimacy with the reader, while it leaves an uncharted territory that I will continue to explore and fill in with intimate details in future poems.

## PREVIOUS PUBLICATION NOTES

These poems or versions of the poems first appeared in these journals:

*Alabama Literary Review*

Dream Atlas (formerly “The Museum of Dreams”)

*Beechwood Review*

Scripture

*Birmingham Poetry Review*

The Orange Movement and the Rise and Fall of *Orange Nucléaire*

*Bitter Oleander*

The Cartographer’s Credo

Transcendental Homelessness (formerly “The Waftiness of Transcendental Homelessness”)

*Blue Lyra Review*

Arctic Circle Cautioning (352 B.C.)

*Carbon Culture Review*

1439 –This Is How the Middle Ages End

*Clementine Poetry Journal*

The World from a Genoese

*Dirty Chai*

The Mapmaker’s Drawing in Time

*Lyre Lyre*

Political Spin (A Turn in History)

*Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*

Lesson Plan: Teaching Terroir 1638 A. D.

*Of/with*

The White Space

*Product*

Drawing to Scale (900 A. D.)

*Route 7 Review*

The Museum of Cartography

*Sheepshead Review*

Even Now

*Sugar House Review*

In Bas-Relief (formerly “Anna Beth Rowe in Bas-Relief”)

Johannes Deville, the First Atheist Cartographer (formerly “Johannes Deville’s  
Shadow”)

Still the Bells

*Suisun Valley Review*

The Vertical Moment

*The Tishman Review*

Conversation on the Balcony

*Xavier Review*

Exile on Longleaf Trace

*you are here: the journal of creative geography*

Martin Behaim to Pope Clement VI on the Incomplete Maps (1342 A. D.)

“The Orange Movement and the Rise and Fall of *Orange Nucléaire*” and “Exile on the Longleaf Trace” and also appear in *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* (Open SUNY Textbooks).

“The Mapmaker’s Drawing in Time” was nominated for Best of the Net.

## WORKS CITED

Kelly, Robert. "Notes on the Poetry of Deep Image." *Trobar 2* (1963): 14-16. Print.

Lorca, Federico García. "Play and Theory of the Duende." *In Search of Duende*. Trans. Christopher Maurer. New York: New Directions, 1998. 48-62. Print.

I

1



## IN BAS-RELIEF

You said you found a city once in lights,  
with shadows worn into the roads and walls.  
You said you saw no people nor no names  
on street signs, and the city felt erased.  
At city hall, you trembled at the door.  
You said you feared a history of ghosts,  
or worse, no recorded history at all.  
You wrestled with the door, then found an in.  
Behind the entrance desk you saw, you said,  
the city on the wall in full relief.  
The rivers colored blue, the streets in pink.  
You traced where you had been and still to go.  
You wrote on it what you would later say  
and transcribed the city with where you'd been.

## THE MAPMAKER'S DRAWING IN TIME

Sometimes I steady my hand over Europe  
and Asia Minor and recreate the Dark Ages.  
Sometimes I press my palm on the wet ink  
boundaries and press it to my other palm,  
then cup my ears and listen to the prayers  
of believers in churches and mosques  
before executions, of mothers burned  
in purple and pink hijabs, and kosher  
grocery store shoppers before they're shot.  
I'd wash my hands of that but it's like erasing  
a country or lands from the world. I press  
instead my hands together and ask  
of Abraham to re-present the facts  
before him to be known and not believed.  
Sometimes I draw a boundless world.



DEDICATION FROM LOVE'S APOSTROPHE, AN ANONYMOUS BOOK OF LOVE  
POEMS FROM 1082 A. D.

The pigments and papers smell fresh, a sign  
of authenticity, and I am privileged  
to own this library and all its words  
transcribed from learned men to work through.  
I assume the thoughts are true, not figments  
from tired copy boys. No matter, I  
read them to recollect the words I need,  
when you are gone, to serenade your return.  
I wrote this book of lyrics with my hand  
and stylus. No copyist's instrument  
interrupted my lines. You can trace  
then where I have been. Each line is direct.  
In case you know not the value of words,  
each poem's initial letter is pressed with gold.

## DREAM ATLAS

### The Smartest Person in the World

They say her hairs are antennas. She's always receiving and quiet. When she's near, I don't know if I'm talking to you or if she is speaking through us. They say when she dies, she travels back in time and invents language. She's died many times. I don't know what I'm saying.

### Cathedral

The forest sways with 50-foot high toothbrushes. Each morning, the sky bleeds. The bristles drip long beady strings all day. At night, the dryness arrives with fallen-egg-stenched winds shredding through bristles like songs through cracked ceramic teeth.

### Judgment Day and the Undermining

The cave is filled with cops. They are freeing their prosthetic hats and batons. They are mixing tickets with melted coins. They are smearing it across the walls and floors. They are alchemizing stone and dirt to lava and flesh. They are discharging.

### Turning Around

I walk so fast through the apocalypse, skyscrapers wake in front of me. One bows so low, I grab its antennae and sing into it. It hurls me like a catapult to the world's edge. There's only salt here and a pile of blisters. There is no end or horizon to the beyond, but for a pair of shoulders.

### Moving Image

The long hall is lined with television sets –  
from spirals of apertures to detached picture tubes  
to extended plasma screens with remotes – at the end,  
a father is buried in a large maple veneer tv cabinet.  
I feel almost nothing except for disinterestedness.

### Medium Fairy Tale

I've been here before when there were more mountains.  
I would pluck and stitch them to my chin. When the moon was  
full, I'd cut them loose. They're now an asteroid belt.  
The moon is not anymore a mirror, but, when full,  
a palimpsest of my face inscribed with hardened lava pools.

### Play: Atlas of Pleasure

In the first act, she lowers her eyes. In the second,  
she's deep in the woods. She bites her nails and spits  
them every hundred paces. In the third act, she whispers *help*,  
a word she learned for God. In the fourth and fifth, when she's lost,  
her fingers stray and she forgets her lines.

### Troubadour and Toreador

She unzips her long red dress, steps from it, kicks the dress  
up to a cape and taunts the bull. The bull charges. She leaps  
and twists over its head and stabs it in the back with her stiletto  
heels and breaks the neck with its horns. High in the corner  
of the stadium, a poet with a stubby pencil takes notes.

### City of Trams

A thousand naked ladies pace the Parthenon  
with silk twisted through their hair. A cable car pulls up.  
A man in a three-piece suit steps off, drops iron pennies  
in the fountain, extends his paint brush, and approaches.  
Women seated on the balconies fan themselves with shackles.

### Untitled (Snail with Turtle)

At the garden's edge, a snail slides a sticky trail.  
A turtle makes wakes through long grass. It will take days  
before one yields their path and begs a pardon.  
Meanwhile, the snail rolls a pair of dice for fate  
to engender its sex, and the turtle turns inward.

### Backyard Help

The neighborhood pond is blue as a tailed monster's eye.  
When I strip, the houses turn away. My penis  
is a rudder as I swim in circles, then drift  
to the waterfall's pool, walled in with polished-off rocks.  
The pond fills with cattails and gathers spies on all sides.

### In Moon's Mud Time

I'm naked, again, of course, but I am not running away –  
there's rain and no one sees me or I them. I can stand  
in the waterfall's pond and spit and sing until it dries  
into this lunar field. There's the shack, where I write and hide,  
rising a little more each time it rains. It's only half under.

### Ringin'

After the apocalypse, it snows. Survivors wear wool coats  
and walk dogs. Gray buildings congregate and language fractures  
over crackling radios. The lunch lines are long. I remember  
my high school locker combination, and my first girlfriend  
is here. She says *yes*, but I can't stop thinking *last bell*.

### Last Call

As she tells me how her husband's mother insists she's not  
to leave the bedroom after dark, she lifts her left leg  
along the barroom table, I stroke her green sock and listen,  
she points it out, I drop my hand, I apologize.  
We're in the parking lot after hours walking away.

### Black Hole with Red and White Checkered Tablecloth

I light my pipe. She serves a plate of potatoes.  
She's laid out a bowl of milk, a cup of coffee, a basket  
of tangerines, a platter with a donut. A tangerine pops  
into its hole, another, a stream of coffee, milk, potatoes, the smoke, then me  
falling. My farewell stare – she's folding closed the tablecloth.

### Hallway

At the end of the hallway is a crack.  
With this step past the stairs, the crack is a door  
blossoming into orange poppy. When I reach to pluck  
a petal, the end of the hallway is a mirror  
with someone tugging my hand from behind.

### Night Tremor (after Alexander Long)

I'm reading back cover book blurbs when rain arrives.  
When lightning and thunder fall, I lock the front door.  
I re-cover my books. The dry morning wakes me.  
I open the door. Thunder is tangled in a tree.  
Lightning encourages it to jump into the light.

### Turned Back

It's my last day of tinkering with clocks  
and the angle of my car's rearview mirror. It's the last day  
I'll untie my shoes and count the steps to my bedroom.  
It is the last time I'll measure my life – my compass  
having drawn the full arc from the day I arrived.

### Empty Suit (for Sophie)

This CEO reminds me of my daughter doodling  
(though less responsible and loopy), but he won't spin his chair.  
His office phone rings and delivers urgent information  
as her play phone, though less charming and meaningful. I miss her.  
Only a graveyard is filled with the irreplaceable.



Untitled (Hallway with Binding)

The hallway curves into a vanishing point.  
On one side, the carved wooden rail. On the other,  
the wall and bookshelf with the book that anticipates me.  
It's soft and drapes in my hands. Each page reads  
to a story's end. Every morning begins like this.

LESSON PLAN: TEACHING TERROIR 1638 A. D.

The first time you're lost,  
scoop a handful of earth.  
Rub a smudge across your gums  
and tongue. Pocket the clump.

Do this at each occurrence.  
When you're home, redistribute  
the dirt along your kitchen  
table in regions like a king.

Where you were lost,  
press your thumb and spittle  
drool into the hole.  
Here, you'll grow your grapes.

And while you cannot mold time,  
though it can age, nor plot  
experience, you can name  
your garden, and water and twist the vines.

When you bottle vinegar and wine  
and offer it out for trade,  
customers will learn your land  
by tasting where you found your way.

1439 A. D. – THIS IS HOW THE MIDDLE AGES END

The last ship has docked,  
the captain kicks the compass,  
and the first mate rubs straw  
over loadstone. They are safe

and lost with no measurable true  
north. It's no longer a question  
of delivering cinnamon and dye  
to merchants or stories to harlots

and bankers in lieu of credit  
and debt. There's the continual  
explosion of a supernova –  
a long star arc through the zodiac.

It will not give up its assertion –  
light moves quicker than the word.  
Somewhere in the deepest library,  
a copyist begins retranslating  
the last straight inch of history.

II

## THE MUSEUM OF CARTOGRAPHY

### Medieval Cartographer's Prayer

I have seen the bright patterns that transmit  
a message without a tongue. It shouts no words.  
The pattern says, "Deliver me. Return me home."  
May everyone understand the mystery of these lines.

### Drought Season (Eurus Winds)

When the sun rises seven mornings in a row,  
the eighth will deliver hot winds and empty night skies.  
Newborns will wheeze through puffed, ruddy cheeks and swollen eyes.  
Mothers will have to milk the land. You'll need white limning.

### Early Islamic Stellar Cartography: Advanced Mediation

To sit upon an astrolabe and wait for God to intervene  
or for the Devil to ascend from below and enter  
into one's nether lands is the way of ventriloquists,  
for us, it is to transcribe the sky on parchment or a napkin.

### The Climate of Hell

Winter arrives from the north, an immigrant  
wind with devil wings. It freezes our hair, burns  
our faces, delivers us contradictions –  
we are coldest when we're closest to the sun.

### Dante's Map

Like most maps from the Middle Ages,  
The *Inferno's* a speculative map – sketched  
hope and allegory. It forsakes the accurate.  
It won't even help in forgiving our sins.

### Typhoon Season (Zephyrus Winds)

Typhoons always rise from the west in summer  
before the harvest when children learn to sing  
from swans. When the last sea anemone flies by,  
assess crop profits – color the land red or black.

### Letter from Giovanni Francesco Camocio to Paulo Forlani April, 27, 1565

The whiteness of the page is your anxiousness –  
it's the land you do not know. Since it's not yet yours,  
leave it unbound. Plant tufts of crops, score odd beasts,  
do what you will with this new world until I arrive.

### Blasphemous Mapmaking Advice from the Middle Ages

Every map must encode a secret – hidden  
treasure, a portal to hell, or proof the world  
is a sphere – and its key decodes on the day  
the sun casts no shadow and Cancer rises.

### Lost Letter from Beatrice to Dante, May 7, 1290

Do not read or decipher  
from the cartographer's map –  
they will fill you with false hopes,  
with visions from their own minds.

### Lost Letter from Beatrice to Dante, May 11, 1290

When you send me uninvited cantos,  
whose lines cut like paths through your version of hell,  
I know you have no soul, for the soul, like God, speaks –  
the devil is the one who writes the contracts.

### Vellum Riddle

A knife removed all matters of dross.  
Unable to speak, I could not say *no*.  
Hundreds of black parallels marked on my back  
illuminate the world. I tell you where you are.

### In Plague Times (Auster Winds)

The country moves with the southern wind. If a lake  
lies to the south, the wind draws frogs and grasshoppers  
from the water. You must rest your pen and strain egg  
whites on your map. When the world dries, scrape and revise.

### Antony Knivet's Notes on Simian Life in the Southern New World 1592

The howling monkeys do not eat or drink. They live  
off the air and roar like a thousand tortured zebras.  
The map I draw has no scythe or bones – Death  
treads water off the coast of Chile with wax in his ears.

### Ice Storms (Boreas Winds)

When the forest sags like melted wax,  
go to the printing room and cover  
the plates with dung and straw. The world's second  
edition will thaw similar enough.

### Jacob's Cross

Hold it like Captain Ahab would steady a rifle  
aiming to shoot down the sun. If you lack confidence,  
your sighting eye will go blind like every atheist  
who's sailing lost below the equator and cursing.

### A Lizard Log

Since the moon changed, we have seen neither horizon  
nor sun and have scarce a thing to burn. The alarm  
clock rings each hour – reminding me of my gout.  
We have entered an immeasurable ocean.

### Then from the Deck

The crew hands released the ropes. Were we looking up to them, we'd have felt the hurriedness of abandonment, the quick scaling of size. Looking down instead, we fostered our sense of scale. Our raft cut the sea, and we felt something colder.

### Dead Reckoning

We realigned the shock absorbers on the oars and keel. We tied fishing line to the chronometers and flew them like weather balloons through Jupiter's lunar eclipses. still the parallels form no better than dead reckoning.

### Medieval Stellar Cartography

Any planets or moons that enter your head or belly or anywhere and form in your mouth as words are divine, but should you write or draw from where they came, you will deceive heaven and find deafness in music of the spheres and your head.

### Man Overboard

Eventually, when you're sinking and you've lost hold of the rope, sunlight stops. You realize you've never seen black before, or violence. It's too late to change course, and bubbles chart your fall.

### Rough Drafts

Some maps get lost and disintegrate into the earth. Other maps blow overboard and sink. All treasure maps are stolen, memorized, and eaten. A few maps survive. I once burned everything I wrote, and left my mark.



## THE CARTOGRAPHER'S CREDO

You can always go more  
and more west. The sun  
never stops, even when  
it's under the earth.

Or if you're a channeler  
of night skies, black holes  
will appear like purple gyre  
spumes. You just have to focus,

or reimagine the limits  
of light speed, how you walk  
through time, or how you'll sail  
your ship across the ripples of space.

Like a man thrown overboard  
whose dying body pulls  
his shadow down with him,  
you must commit.

## THE CHOROGRAPHER'S ADVICE

Only so much can be realized  
with black inscription on parchment –  
the houses, the roads, the palaces.  
Your map may even lead the hurried princes  
and tithe collectors where they need to go.  
When your country becomes predictable  
to draw, materially dull, depict bodies  
of water as cultivated fields or untaxed farms.  
Your map is nothing more than a land  
bible filled with symbols  
to be interpreted when lost.  
Sometimes a country needs rediscovery.

## THE UNMENTIONABLE PLACES FOR THE CARTOGRAPHER

The edge of the world can be seen  
leaving her hand. There's no atlas  
or formally attired elephants, here.  
Obviously, nothing can stand  
in a swamp where light and stars fall –  
it's darker than before a dream.

And there are many swamps on the periphery –  
some evolve into the long futures  
of oil and stock exchanges,  
some are shoe factories, some a field  
in southern Mississippi with a white barn  
and hanging tree, some the Pentagon –  
you know, all the places you cover your eyes from  
and they write commandments about.

When her hand returns, she draws Victoria Falls,  
washes her hands, and regrets what next she will draw.

## THE TREASURE GAZE AS EXPLAINED BY ABRAHAM CRESQUES

### USING HIS CATALAN ATLAS

The tourist steadies this map to study  
its nodes. He tries to trace the spray of lines  
as paths. He views the world from upside down  
and clockwise round. He'll swoon in dizziness.  
But you, who have caressed a foreign lace  
and washed in porcelain tubs with perfumed soaps,  
move patiently with stares from flag to flag.  
You search for gold and turquoise I inlaid.  
At times, I sense you're feigned disinterest,  
your plottings to appropriate this map  
without acknowledging what I have drawn,  
like god recording treasures from the sky.  
Like god, I know your thrills. They're not for you –  
Cease your gaze. Read the map's legend for me.

## FINDING NORTH

The first mapmakers were anonymous,  
but we can know the time and place they drew  
by studying symbols of scale and space.  
Before Italians recognized their land  
as boot, they drew the winds as lines across  
the Mediterranean Sea, and drew  
the compass rose to point to where they blew.  
The Catalans invested first to sketch  
the coast then lines to navigate from port  
to port. To mark directions, they composed  
the compass chicken – its beak points true north.  
And now we know the Turks first rolled the earth  
into a ball and tied a bow of rhumb lines to the top.

## THE FIRST LINE OF PRAYER

The first line, as it is told,  
extended from me to you,  
from her to him. It zigzagged  
and twisted through town.  
It touched everyone,  
including the ungulates and cows.  
It rooted trails and roads to houses.

The line rose slowly and thickened  
into a wall. The Great Wall  
of China formed this way.  
You can still walk atop its road  
in two discrete directions.  
You can see it from space,  
if you're a god.

And in this way, houses rose  
into churches. The loftier  
the church, the more prevailing view.  
If you sang from here,  
the ungulates perked their tails.  
With the lower church songs,  
the cows laid down on all fours.

If you don't know today where you are,  
you won't know how to sing  
Your god – your mediation  
to your place in the world –  
is the origin point, if you plot it,  
to your yet extended line.  
May it stay grounded, tangled, flat.

## TRANSCENDENTAL HOMELESSNESS

There are noseless men  
fishing in the Red Sea.

Their tongues are bruised  
and their flesh flakes.

When the snow falls,  
they think it's from them.

If spring comes to them,  
they hope to sprout leaves.

As the sea freezes, they dream  
of flat fish and salted bread.

They dream their decaying bodies  
will have a transcendent perfume.

## ARCTIC CIRCLE CAUTIONING (352 B.C.)

If you travel north with urgency  
past the last measurement  
and through the speculations,

if you see atmosphere  
non-distinct from geology  
and ocean surface,

if you feel gelatinous,  
shut quick your mouth  
before it jumps and scurries off,

put your ear to the borealis,  
curl your fingers into canoes,  
hold your breath, and burrow.

The North will melt. You will float  
home – the home pockmarked by salt  
and pressure from a deepening sea.



## THE VERTICAL MOMENT

When he could not measure,  
he would weave  
with a slide rule,  
dashing as a shuttle.

With three-hundred-sixty  
woolen hemispheres,  
he was wrapped up  
in looming new worlds.

We unmade our beds  
and slept on their corners.  
We dreamed longitudes  
and woke to latitudes.

In the morning,  
he turned us  
to where the sun first rose  
then where the moon last set.

He showed us the curve  
to east-west  
and the gentle bending  
away of stars.

## JOHANNES DEVILLE, THE FIRST ATHEIST CARTOGRAPHER

He favored content over destination.  
If a child played hoops in the street,  
he mimicked her minutest detail.

He drew her with dots and the country,  
the houses and taverns, the ponds  
and goldfish. He drew with black

on white vellum. He drew the calf  
that gave its skin to this land.  
He plotted battlefields and graveyards.

Even the wind took hold with powdered silver  
scattered from west to east.  
He despised cherubs beyond the borders.

He believed in grounding observation.  
He's in every map below the legend –  
that tiny shadow holding a pen.

## THE WORLD FROM A GENOESE

In 1457, there is his eye-  
shaped world, a map, a catalog of beasts  
and fish. A dragon and cargo ships off coasts.  
A giraffe in Africa spots them.  
It sees everything before the mapmaker  
begins to think to sketch new territories  
or a slave at center earth like the small hand  
of a clock at three in the afternoon.  
In all the world there's only one sea  
for commerce. The whole world is  
the mapmaker's astigmatism. It's very dry.  
If he blinks, we'll be washed out and Africa  
will never trade with anyone on earth.

## THE WHITE SPACE

As noted before,  
you draw a map by ear.  
You listen to the land,

children crying,  
the ignition of canons,  
your instincts

of where the moral belong –  
the painters, the bakers,  
the weavers, the farmers,

the ones who create,  
the ones who use their hands –  
which is everywhere.

For the others –  
the bankers, the princes,  
those with scented hands –

you're inclined to give them space  
off the world map  
or at the bottom of a sea –

any place without sound.  
This inclination is not sound,  
or rather it is

the idea for sheet music –  
its arrangement of notation  
on a musical map –

the staff, the treble clef,  
the sharps and flats,  
eighth notes, and allegros.

Your inclination will chart  
a breezy composition for the handy ones  
and score the rest in blank tablature.

MARTIN BEHAIM TO POPE CLEMENT VI  
ON THE INCOMPLETE MAPS (1342 A. D.)

No two countries are the same,

and before Easter arrives,  
their boundaries will shift,  
again, from war or politics  
or the slip of a copyist's pen.

Or will be found a new animal,  
or a race of people will be acknowledged,  
these maps will read like stories.  
Or someone will invent a cross-staff,  
a compass, or a nocturnal.  
Or the discovery of precious mineral  
or spice will inspire accuracy  
in the maps you desire.

*Where does that land end?*

*Does the sea surround the world?*

I cannot know. The Pole Star  
wanders like a guard  
looking for a place to nap.  
Sometimes it settles out of sight,  
and I pray the Little Dipper  
to not disappear and for Spain  
to be where it was  
and always should be.

You can play your trumpet and hope  
angels echo you home, but often  
there is no horizon or boundary  
to discover. The world spins too fast  
to be transcribed.

THE MAPMAKER'S PLEASURE PRINCIPLE (1488 A.D.)

If on your travels  
you relocate a city  
closer to home

just because  
you like its taverns  
and pretty women,

leave a memorial  
to mark your stay,

but if you push  
a city away  
just because

you don't want  
to carry everywhere  
the alley with nameless children,

the church with unstained glass,  
the bakery with stale bread,  
the calloused memories you built,

erect at the city limits  
a marker for what  
you walked away from.

Scale your distances  
in inclinations.

*HIC SUNT VACCAS*

From here we walk a mile down this road.  
Before their war, the path was cobblestone,  
but now, packed rubble. Though the wall remains.  
It cuts our field in half. That side grows wheat.  
In fall, the husks spike red, and pests arrive.  
Something's always arriving – the lightning,  
the humid winds, the armies with their guns.  
A Tiger tank's tracks snapped off in that field.  
Sometimes the things that come retreat, like light  
of day, like onslaught of death, like their war.  
And here is where I was born, as noted  
on this plaque beside our memorial.  
If you move here, you will learn to not forget.  
And here are those cows you came to skin.

DRAWING TO SCALE (900 A. D.)

When determining distance  
between yours and theirs,  
don't rely on merchants.

Their world is larger  
and more valuable –  
fish became armor,

slaves were hairy giants,  
purple dye was stolen  
from slaughtered dragons,

and wool sheared by Cyclopes.  
You can measure a shadow  
or calculate the height

of star if you want,  
but on cloudy days  
or when lacking measures,

trust your senses –  
the windiest places  
are nearest oceans and seas,

the most populated lands  
are the most important  
and therefore the biggest,

if you think mountains  
exist, sketch in a range  
of binding treaties with spines –

draw the world flat  
so boundaries and conflicts  
may fold over.



## GUIDE TO MEDIEVAL READING

A book in buckled clasps will need a key.  
Save those for last. If bound in thongs or wrapped  
in belts, then you may open those. But first,  
lower your head. With your left hand, hold the spine  
and lift it lightly from the shelf. Then turn  
the pages with your right. Skim before you read.  
If the book is new, you'll smell the printer's hands  
and spits of ink, especially the reds.  
Don't read it here. Find a quiet corner,  
to better sense the tricks of tongue and teeth.  
The words might jettison quick, and you'll lose  
their meanings. Read slow. Listen with intent.  
But first convince the Curator to have you.  
Be blessed before you touch the books.

III

## EXILE ON LONGLEAF TRACE

### Wisteria

If you ever remove your orange velvet skirt,  
I will write clockwise songs down your back  
and counterclockwise notations  
of euphony up your thighs –  
but only if you gesture the *yes* to be entwined.

### Crabapple

I was first attracted to your stretch marks –  
shepherd's crook scars like gray rainbows  
curled around each hip – complements  
to your mottled inner thighs –  
procreation and death from the wild hind.

### Yaupon

Three uninspired moments of inspiration:  
your hips sliding into my jeans,  
Sartre's *Nausea* on the bar's sawdust floor,  
you secretly whispering in my ear –  
drink this black.

### Tulip Poplar

Each April, I hear words of your arrival.  
Sometimes in French, other times Celtic,  
though never my language of conjuring.  
Each time I hear your mistranslated name –  
a little deeper settles your spell.

### Shortleaf Pine

These are the letters you said you read  
but did not because I had not  
yet written them down or sent them out –  
these are all the words in our world  
that fell and settled like seeds.

### Blackgum

Our pillows are stuffed with feathers  
from quails, our mattress from partridges –  
the remains from a steady stream of meals  
to support us for as long as we fuck –  
until the river sinks our bed.

### Supplejack

Our first glass of red wine  
soothes our smoke-scratched throats  
as it settles down counterclockwise.  
I feel susceptible like a caged peacock –  
your hand gathers what it's brought forth.

### Chinese Tallow Tree

That first time you drew a bath  
and folded my pants and the years  
following when you wrote letters  
with purple dye, you were like common rice –  
something most useful to me and stickier.

### Bamboo

During dinner, you presented well my food  
and drink. At last call, you ornamented me well  
and cured my impotence, if only briefly.  
You were so versatile and enduring –  
now a memory hobbled with splints.

### Eastern Dogwood

“This is the twin bed we slept on  
for years. Here is our new king bed.”  
“You won’t be able to find me.”  
“You will need to amplify my dreams.” –  
“I will bake you each night a narcotic cake.”

### Sparkleberry

The first night we didn’t make love, your eyes,  
the dull hue of blackbird eggs,  
shook with every heartbeat.  
When we returned to the wild and needed courage –  
I gave you the lungs and liver of a doe.

### Groundsel

When I awake, you will have pinched me  
black and blue, and I’ll ask for the door.  
If instead I give to you a gift tonight –  
this lock – will you untwist your fingers –  
crack them in the hinges?

### Loblolly Pine

When I read the first page  
in your herbaceously bound book,  
I find copyright and colophon,  
then the accretion of poems –  
an inflorescence of meaningless rush.

### Southern Magnolia

You have never been to Mississippi  
except by email. You count happiness  
like buckshot wounds. You skip  
through every puddle like a scalpel through oil –  
I’m a Tiger tank spinning in muddy replies.

### Sandalwood

After you email me, I need a shot  
of whiskey and a long walk  
to where the hieroglyphs grow –  
where grass and sidewalk verge –  
walking back does not translate to reply.

### Sweetgum

My dear, wild pears ripen very slowly  
even when drizzled with honey.  
Take this slice of dry apple in the while.  
You'll like it just as fine –  
it ripened in the ice age and was stolen from a swine.

### Elliott's Blueberry

When you fly and your ears cramp,  
it means you have a secret you don't want  
to share. Chew on this parsley  
for courage. It blossomed up a chimney –  
from a pot of butter and dung.

### Beautyberry

You have arranged your dolls  
on the dining room table and bound them  
with rice straw. You serve them wine like adults  
and tell them how a baby is made –  
limbs and body stitched from skin of fallen cranes.

### Wax Myrtle

You have been carrying a stolen testicle  
since we met. You turn it in your pocket.  
On the gulf's shore, as salt and rain settle  
in your hair, you layer kelp across my thighs –  
I sink in the sand broken, wormy, punky.

## Lilac

It's time for me to love you again –  
here is our bed and here are our tourniquets.  
Tie one to each pinewood post.  
I will write you a letter about oranges,  
I hope you will flute a bluish song.

## Sassafras

When I step away from the library of trees,  
the sky is flat and long, meandering.  
I smell words like *first* and *last*.  
You can consider this a reply –  
an ungerminated seed.

## Longleaf Pine

If you boil my letters, a yellow dye yields.  
Paint with it. If you burn them,  
like salt they will flame orange. Cook with it.  
If you cut them, weave the shreds into clothes –  
do whatever is essential or do not reply.

## SCRIPTURE

I learned to write watching mother  
mow the lawn. Back and forth. Ruling  
perfect lanes that her thin shadow marked.  
She did this every week – cutting and marking.



## INSCRIBING MYSELF

There is  
a rack of skin

in place and time  
thinking like you

from left to right  
and down and down

the sound of your mind  
moving if it speaks

if it will abstract  
sounds from words

the pencil  
scratching paper

each poem is all the residue  
from that whole pencil

the nervous itch  
you feel at every line's end

## DECONSTRUCTION

He handed me my college diploma.  
My arm yellowed and stiffened with six sides.  
My arm an unsharpened pencil with cuffs,  
a hand, and a sheet of authorized paper.  
He congratulated my graduation,  
patted me on the shoulder, and pointed me  
off stage. I swung my arm to shake it loose  
and knocked a chair into the hardwood floor.  
It splattered *c, h, a, i,* and *r.*  
I hugged my mother into *m, o,* and *m.*  
Then my left hand dripped *f, i, n, g, e, r, s,*  
*h, a, n,* and *d* into a puddle.  
My world decomposed without my intent.  
I touched myself and dissolved into *e, g,* and *o.*

UNDER THE SPELL OF AN INCREASINGLY DEADLY VOWEL MOVEMENT

I did not show up today as I lost my E.  
Forward, backward, and right I could try,  
but only into a past without you.  
So I did not show to that party,  
now two months away from this May day,  
and as I hastily go, soon April and stopping  
in March, a month of mortality for I.  
What can a body say among rot,  
marrow, and loss? And now fatally lost, oh,  
what an abysmally bad day and why?

## THE ORANGE MOVEMENT AND THE RISE AND FALL OF *ORANGE NUCLÉAIRE*

The Orange Movement arrived in Luxemburg and Brazil independently, simultaneously, and in the final year of the war. In Luxemburg, the movement commenced at an art show with Oldenburg's *Orange Propositions*, and in Brazil with Barrow's dance performance *How to Explain Orange to a Gentoo Penguin*. Oldenburg's art arose from the Rococo and the Fauvists, whilst Barrow's arose from Geometric Abstractionism. Oldenburg's pigments were red and yellow, and Barrow danced with his feet bound together by orange ribbons. Both artists revolted. After the war, Pivotalist sculptor Tschirnhaus brought the two together in Antwerp at the *Orange Hour*, the first gathering of artists concerned with Space Age and the Atomic Era and who provided artistic resistance against the rising uses of technology. Gerhardt made an appearance with his musical number *My Position in the Battle Between the Threats of Seed and Pulp*, which confronted the issue of Ephemeralization in the modern age. At this one-time encounter, the four of them collaborated on the inter-medial art form *Orange Nucléaire*. This yoking together of painting, dancing, sculpture, and music was the first conscious endeavor where the media filled the unquantifiable and emotional space between the work and spectator. The effects were overwhelming as the spectators left vibrating with communal fusion for days. The irrational and imaginative space, the kinetic field of bond and flow, however, wholly evaporated at the showing's end, as did the spectators days later. With the middle space breached and with the art a remainder of object, the artists returned to their homes with a phosphorescent glow and conducted a long series of homages to evaporation and the end of orange.

## RESPONSE

The challenge is to indicate where I have been.  
I could point backward and say, "From there,"  
but the voice is a poor instrument –  
it can't erase, it can only speak louder.

I could write a story or draw a map,  
either way, I'd make a long metaphor,  
draw out some significant moments  
and scratch out wherever I slept or pissed.

If you like watching through tinted windows,  
my van could take us back on hard roads  
and a series of pitstop associations –  
we can remake a life together, or not.

Perhaps your question was simpler than all that.  
It's been so long since we shared a space.  
I hear between your words, but, more, I watch –  
I want to invoke meaning in your presence.

## CONVERSATION ON THE BALCONY

You're stiff as stripes.

Your hairs disappear into your robe  
like displaced ducks.

Are you a pencil or a pen?  
I want to click your head  
or erase with it.

Why do you float  
duck heads in our ponds?

To draw your hand  
from your pocket.

You mean unravel my stripes?

I mean, it's bedtime.  
You're like a tree.

Your thighs are like my nightmares.

I have an orange scarf  
across my breasts.

I shall pretend  
it's autumn.

Yes.

## GERARD MERCATOR DREAMS OF THE RHUMB LINE

This was the first time  
I was on this planet,  
or was it an island?  
No matter. The sun was the same.

The air she threw rocks  
against trying to make rain  
or snow or make a hole  
to crawl through was flammable.

She hid there like in an oven  
or a spaceship home.  
She twisted and rolled  
my maps into a fuse.

The last time here, I stack  
the rocks and patch the holes –  
the sun drifting across ashes  
like the first day of fasting.

## SOMETIMES THE NIGHT ARRIVES WITHOUT DESIGN

I've seen it twice before. The first, one spring,  
its sudden winds erased the daylit sky,  
and reinscribed with cold and larkspur blue.  
The second time occurred in middle June –  
the sea's horizon ebbed instead of rose,  
and merchant ships returning home sailed off  
their maps. Trade winds sank and water dried to land.  
Today I stare long into the east.  
I hold my saxophone across the wind  
and listen hard for changes in earth's pitch.  
I have my armor and butterfly net.  
The night will not surprise this time, I have  
apologies to write and shadows to defend.



## SOMETIMES I CONTACT MY FIRST LOVE LATE AT NIGHT

To draw Pangea accurately,  
not from the imagination of shoving  
together apparent facts and coastlines,  
one needs a time machine or very old pen.

A pen that old, however, can't be found  
unless you have a time machine. Of course,  
no such machine has appeared in our time,  
which means even the future is lost.

Thus, you need to meditate to connect  
to god. If you do, she will mediate  
through you to any old pen you have  
and push it to draw that desired contour.

I once had this straight, powerful line  
of connection with her. My hand moved.  
I touched the line. It fell. And leave it  
to my dog to gnaw that spirit's power line.

I could not reconnect and finish  
the coast just as I cannot create  
a time machine or retrieve an ancient pen.  
I don't know anymore why I try to write her.

## STILL THE BELLS

Each day the ground just looks the same. I turn  
around and walk away the day, then sit,  
untie my shoes, and listen to the bells,  
except there is no church or tower near,  
nor cat nor cow. It's morning dark. Just stars  
and grass. But there are words and they draw lines  
between the stars and count the blades of grass.  
The constellations always seem incomplete  
to me and *Leaves of Grass* a pointless prayer.  
But still the bells and words. My toes are cold.  
The sun is near and soon it will erase the night.  
I don't know why I write you every day,  
and wait till dark to send it in the mail,  
when still the ground's the same, when still the bells.

## EVEN NOW

Even now, there is pollen  
from the first sneeze. I've kept it  
under glass with your eyelashes –  
one day I'll blow it in your eyes.

Even now, my pockets are filled  
with handkerchiefs and worms –  
the birds wake me in the morning  
and I wipe myself dry.

Even now, when I burn a beehive  
your thighs come to mind,  
and when I eat hot honey,  
the roof of my mouth wrinkles.

Even now, the pile of bricks  
have been stacked into a wall.  
I hid one brick so there's a hole  
where we can pass each other notes.

Even now, in winter, you bury a sardine  
can with all your ideas and postage stamps.  
“Art,” you say, “requires no images.  
It's purely mechanics, like a clock and a bomb.”

Even now, there is no one like her –  
her frenzied mouth and right arm throwing wine  
glasses at my head. My timid soul would duck  
if it weren't already razed on the kitchen floor.

Even now, as I wait for the aliens to land  
or the bomb to drop, I learn new numbers  
for counting time forwards and back,  
but wherever I am, it's ground zero.

Even now, my long eyelashes  
blink and spiders fall  
from the ceiling. It's like flirting  
before the invention of money.

Even now, you are geometry  
with utilitarian meaning. Urge  
and urge, the aesthetics of sex –  
the quintessence of free will.

Even now, when I mix red wine  
with oleander, I'll walk the streets,  
dig a tall hole, plant a totem  
of you, and spit up foam.

Even now, you're a ballerina  
spinning in a mirror  
like your orange skirt wrung out to dry  
or your fingers in a prayer at last call.

Even now, I'm learning to fuck  
in a poem. Spondee. Spondee.  
Caesura. Stanza break. Who cares.  
It's over. I like to metaphor you.

Even now, boot black and orange  
are the colors of poverty  
and the disinterested.  
Your hair is their reins.

Even now, when you watch the puppet play  
within the puppet play, you think  
you're trapped or an unwashed sock  
at the doorway to a laundromat.

Even now, you blame the mirror  
for the flection of your face –  
yes, it's crooked like crisis,  
like debt, like the ledger of beauty.

Even now, my love is doomed  
to make me a cuckold, like betrayed  
Russian revolutionaries. It's what I want.  
Sex and self-sustenance are so tiring.

Even now, the Longleaf Trace is shady  
and dusty like your favorite book  
you've read through a hundred times – you've become  
accustomed to blisters and turn the page.

Even now, you carry notebooks and step  
across cracked pathway stones.  
Not breaking any backs, you're a hero,  
and a martyr for any word you misspell.

Even now, spilled wine  
is like forgetting a book.  
I can inscribe you again,  
if you can clutch a corkscrew.

Even now, the portrait I painted  
of you, the feet and ankles,  
the thighs, and the hips,  
is all I need to remember of you.

Even now, your nose punctures  
your face, your eyes draw  
in light, your lips suck atmosphere –  
you cut into space with little matter.

Even now, egg cowries wash ashore.  
They'll return to sea like birds,  
to farms where the scarecrow blows over,  
or to me in a canoe with a butterfly net.

Even now, my collection of holes,  
which blossomed grass and dandelions  
and flooded with black water,  
are labelled with tombstones.

Even now, the sun rises,  
a baby dies before it's born,  
a grandmother reasons with dream logic,  
and there are dirty dishes to scrub and stairs to count.

Even now, when I have breakfast  
in the nook and the orange sun rises  
behind me, I read the news and bite a peach  
like it will answer universal questions.

Even now, if I could see her again  
like a movie in an empty theater,  
the floor would be sticky  
and I'd be asked to leave.

Even now, I've learned to write  
in the X and Y dimensions – utopian  
and proletarian idealisms – I have learned  
to write the historical gaps of Z.

Even now, when I fuck against a mirror,  
the refraction of sex has a social side – utilitarian  
invention – our lovemaking, however worded,  
was like filing paperwork after hours.

Even now, I can still hear you complain,  
“I’m still so cold.” The frozen worm  
I fed you hasn’t yet thawed.  
When it does, you will protest the warmth.

Even now, I see your face in water  
at the bottom of a pothole,  
in the toilet before I sit,  
flowing through the hole in my canoe.

Even now, the stage curtain, the footlights,  
the proscenium arch are attacks  
on the lyric mode – on stage,  
which is everywhere, you are drama.

Even now, as I plant orchids in gunpowder,  
light a match, look to my watch  
and countdown, I notice you  
still have a time for a final smell.

Even now, each revolution, I mean, affair,  
is an historical instance to rename  
opportunity, I mean, who’s on top –  
the aura from a theatrical relationship.

Even now, the image is subject  
or the subject is abstraction or sound,  
even a post-it note can stand in,  
you, you, you are an object for you.

Even now, each month I receive a note  
from the usurers bearing interest  
from your carefree love. The smaller  
I make the debt, the less I remember you.

Even now, (hands on the city clock) (time)  
in Oneonta (counterclockwise  
maddening), (clockwise devised)  
a madman lives in the future.

Even now, the blackbird sings  
in the orange tree. If our bruises  
could sing, but they can't. So grab  
my ass and fuck me til I scream.

Even now, love does not flow  
from the poem. It cannot  
delight in itself :: fog on a stream,  
children's play in the evening haze.

Even now, the geese fly in an inverted V –  
the way your feet spread from years of suffering  
ballet or a trap a wolf gnaws free its paw –  
no, rather, in fact, it is a less-than symbol.

Even now, when I dry seaweed  
to use for your statue's hair,  
the salt eats away the face –  
you appear as a mask.

Even now, in the periphery,  
lampposts walk into southern magnolia shade.  
If the telephone poles follow,  
I'll send you smoked signals.

Even now, I don't mourn the loss  
of money I invested in you,  
I mean, in sustaining your privileges –  
I design inexpensive poems for non-consumers.



Even now, a river runs  
down the middle of your bed –  
a river runs through you –  
a river runs through a good cry.

Even now, the fifteenth anniversary  
of the bonfire where I read all my poems –  
spoken once then floated to ash –  
I rewrite on a hard drive.

Even now, the Longleaf Trace is moving  
like my favorite tune  
I've sung a hundred times –  
even with blisters, I walk miles to sing.

Even now, her lock of hair  
is tied to the bed post.  
I stroke it before I sleep  
and dream of temple doors.

Even now, when I go to sleep  
my eyelashes are ribs  
around nightmares and forgetting.  
In the morning, you spread them.

Even now, after all the bookcases and bookshelves  
and all that reading before they were stacked,  
I have not yet learned to properly read  
a goodbye, a tombstone, or “addressee has moved.”

Even now, the bed sags in the middle  
and smells of twenty-five years.  
I'd much rather sleep now or tomorrow,  
than tour another of our rivers.

## NOTES

“The Chorographer’s Advice” – The chorographer’s “concern is to paint a true likeness, and not merely to give exact positions and size . . . and no one gets it rightly unless he is an artist.” – Ptolemy.

“Transcendental Homelessness” is a term from Georg Lukacs. It means something like the longing for a place where one once belonged as well as the “nostalgia . . . for utopian perfection.” In a godless world, an emptiness is left behind for which the soul can find no place to exist.

A “Jacob’s Cross” (in “The Museum of Cartography”) is a tool used to measure the height of the sun to determine latitude.

“*Hic Sunt Vaccas*” translated from Latin to English is “Here Are Cows.”

“Even Now” is after Hugo Claus’s “Even Now.”

The line “a river runs through a good cry” in “Even Now” comes from the writings of Rebecca Mae Holder.

River – A large stream of water. Also “a term for the sag furrowed in a mattress by love-making” (Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*).

The characters in the poems are either fictitious (such as Johannes Deville) or once lived (such as Dante and Beatrice). For those that once lived, their events depicted in the poems are fictitious.

