

# Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

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Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 18

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June 2009

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### Recommended Citation

Glaser, Elton (2009) "Seven Strolls Without a Map," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 18.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol9/iss1/18>

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SEVEN STROLLS WITHOUT A MAP

Elton Glaser

*As a man walks he creates the road he walks on.*

—Louis Simpson

1

One foot into the future, and I'm out  
On the streets, in the city of a hundred tongues.

I know what language they speak in this quarter  
Of doormen idling under the canopies  
And jasperware looking down from the china hutch  
And children, in their new Monet pajamas,  
Muffing their prayers beside the bed,

Far from that avenue of roller blades and guacamole,  
Where women in blue bandanas lean out the windows,  
    laughing,  
Watching my awkward walk, as if I'd just  
Suffered a coup d'état in the nuts.

2

I take my bearings  
By a small dog at a lamppost  
And factor in the breeze.

Over here, the bell tower and the bingo game,  
Afternoon confessions in the cool dark.  
And over there, by the Cadillacs,  
The hush of a funeral home, the corpse inside  
Banked by lilies and loved ones, looking  
Life-size even in death.

Everything's a mystery  
If you stand too close to it.

3

At that corner where I once heard  
The teenage harmonies  
Tie silk knots in a tune, I lose myself among

A dozen rappers all reciting at once, serial poets  
With the blood of language on their hands, squeezing the  
oxygen  
From the public air. I make my way around them,  
Following my own lines, always  
One pace behind the gorgeous, one step ahead of the raw,  
Like Rimbaud talking trash with the seraphim.

4

Twilight of gnats in the sly alleys. It's getting late  
For the old guys elbow-deep in the gadget bins,  
Closing time for the slowpokes at the haberdasher's  
And tourists fingering each souvenir, asking their wives  
How much is that in euros.

I see myself in the plate glass, head propped up  
On a pyramid of aspirin, or one more dummy  
Among the cocktail gowns and stoned accessories.

Anonymous. Bait and switch. Off-the-rack hairshirts  
Going for next to nothing  
From the trunk of a bottomed-out Impala.

5

Debris of picnics across the park:  
Chicken bones dangle in the dwarf azaleas; napkins  
Ghost the grass. Why should we worry about nature,  
After all she's done to us?

I pass the diners and the dim cafés,  
Kitchens of Little Armenia, the hash houses

And the chop joints, where grifters  
Sit beside the gumshoes at a greasy counter  
And take the daily special, whatever it is,  
And put down a two-dollar tip  
For the waitress with red hands and a sour smile.

What hunger can the body fill?  
Why should I give in to appetite,  
After all it's done to me?

6  
Somewhere the sun sinks on top of itself  
In a sleek sea. Somewhere a prom queen  
Slips from her garter  
A flask of Four Roses, a nip and a tuck  
Before the blackout of oracular sex in the back seat.

Even three blocks away, I can sense  
A bridegroom sniffing the pillows for brilliantine,  
And those self-basting boys lonely enough to  
Change their names in a chat room—

Love that lingers and love that comes to harm.

7  
By what radar have I arrived  
At the end of the dead end,  
In a broken neighborhood, the moon so bright  
I could count every wrinkle on a crone?

The last house leans against the wind,  
A gutsprung tatter of shadows, the walls  
Slick with night sweat,  
And mice breeding in the baby grand.

I'd need a fire hose  
To clear it all out. Or a purifying flame.  
But why not, wrong and ornery,  
Call it home and live like a spider  
In the slow dust of every room,  
Beyond reach, on the other side of silence —

Right there,  
Where I always wanted to be.