

Wake Up in a Foreign Land



poems

Paul Kahn

Traveling with the Poet

for James Koller

I slept in the trailer on the narrow bed,
just turned my head to the wall
and closed my eyes,
turning my hand back under my pillow.

Does his snoring bother you, Clay asked.
No, not when I'm sleeping, I replied
just wanting to be honest.
It drives me crazy, he said.

Now I put myself either on the right
or on the left of this big bed, the shapes
of two sleepers pressed into the futon
making hard ridges, wishing she was here. It depends
where you lie down and what you expect.
Cold is as much an expectation of heat
as an absence of motion in the molecules.

We came back from a day of driving and found Clay and Rosie
walking with the baby to the bar.
I'd lost my way with a bad map,
thought I was on *this* road when in fact we were on that one
and so couldn't see what was right in front of my eyes,
passing signs that said Mount Beavray was on the left
when in my head it was on the right
until I gave up at the fourth sign and said, *Turn around.*

We snaked through the lumber forest
looking at lines of trees planted to be cut,
dark slash and twisted dry needles on the floor,
passing men and boys on motorcycle dirt bikes
until we finally came into the village from the back.
You turn left here, I said and then looking back, added,
I had lunch in this place once.

Where?

he asked. At the top of the road I said,
The monuments. You've seen the postcard.
Let's get out. Stone monuments. 1903. 1943.
1984 with the name of a president. A long view
from this opening of the trees, all the land below
divided by the hills and hedgerows.
Celts looked down from here, elected chieftains,
built ramparts, trading slaves and metal
for wine from the south. My eye recognized a chapel
from a hundred years ago. What kind of nuts

are these, he asked as we walked beneath a tree.
I held one I couldn't open, picked up empty shells,
rotted pieces from the floor. *This would be a great place
for a party*, he said. Then the plaque informed us
this field was where the fair was held each Spring
for thousands of years.

*What is the difference
between irony and sarcasm?* Clay asked
after I volunteered that sarcasm was
inverted sentimentality, when you defended yourself
from disappointment by cutting down
the imperfection that surrounds you
before it breaks your heart.
He sat silent beside me in the bar
where the patron turned up the radio
as soon as Clay stopped at the piano
to defend the men playing cards from silence.
I struggled to remember what irony meant,
could only think of a poem by a poet I met
near the end of his life. The year
police were beating students to defend
the Nation, this poet sat there and said to us,
the young men at his feet who could
barely imagine the world around them,
*You know I can remember the number of my gun license
easier than my own phone number,*
and proudly recited the sequence of digits.
But now I struggled to describe a poem
in which that poet had invoked
the river town where he'd grown up,
an image of young men throwing
bodies against each other in a game,
and how he ended his careful measured stanzas
with the line « I have wasted my life. »*
That's ironic, I said, not sure if I even believed myself.
How could we imagine
what the world would be like?

We came back
to the trailer in the dark, the lights still on inside.
We were quiet, hoping not to wake the baby.
I pulled the phone from my pocket and saw
the message, the sign that she'd called,
mechanically pushed several buttons and the device
called her device before I could press the button to stop it.
I didn't want to wake you up.

I'm not sleeping, she said,
Perhaps I was waiting for your call.

Was that ironic? Stepping outside I saw
huge white wings and a face fly
across the field towards the road.
Did you hear the owls? he asked me.
when I lay down on the narrow bed again.
I saw a huge white owl fly by.

They sounded like
the gray owls around my house in Maine, he said.
Maybe I imagined the color from the reflection
of the light. I closed my eyes,
not entirely sure what I'd seen.
Good night, he said. When I woke up
in the morning, his sleeping bag was empty.

Now unable to sleep in the large bed,
I roamed through books on my shelves.
Where did I put that poem?
By the time I found it
I was cold and, just as I'd suspected,
all wrong. My memory
had confounded two poems by the same man,
the desperate bodies of one thrown against
the finale of a second.

« It was a transmogrifying bee »,
the single line I will forever remember the oldest poet
reciting to the polite college audience
in his fabulous Tennessee drawl, ending
« And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death. »
as we sat with our polite hands folded in our laps.

Watching John Maeda's Nature

The geometry unfolds
That is the motion
The differences in location
Start with a pattern, a stroke
Repeated or amplified by the mathematics
Numbers I am seeing
A beautiful shape, an elegant curve

The movement will sometimes induce rhythm
In my mind, it is here
Much like the way notes strung together
A beat a beat a beat will
Small motion
FLASH

John wrote the computer
Is never tired of repeating
Instructions

Focus varied is like rhythm
What is sharp, the edge
The feeling of seeing a sharp shape
Everything is flat and a curve
Is calculated by whole numbers
Repeating with some dot variation dot

Can you hear a sound
In the dot another dot click
Click click
Shh
Sumptuous lugubrious voluminous
The beans of probability
Move by waves of muscle fibers
Tight then loose tight then loose tight then
Across the marvelous screen suspended
Depth of focus
I remember that light pattern how
Do you remember déjà vu
All over again
If you saw it again in a hundred years
I remember those cones and rods
A pattern I could not code
If my life depended on it, if my wife
And children depended on it

So much calculation going on in one

Place, moving from viewpoint to
Another. FLASH. Barnett Newman
Surfaces of flat pure color on walls
Entirely stationary dead blocks frozen
Only my eyes moving from
Surface surface surface broken by
White surface walked through. This memory
Did not occur in real-time in a dark room
Suspended screens lush it is not
Calculated light discrete light
Light imagine light someone shuts down
The machine black. Where
Did that idea come from Nature

Missing the Sunset

The quiet garden streets of Berkeley
People riding by on bicycles under helmets meant to protect their head
Cars slowly rolling or parked along the curb
People speaking to their neighbors
Stopped between the front door steps, the walk, the just parked car in the driveway
Greeting busy couples returning from a meeting while walking
The dog squatting on the pavement
Placing the blue plastic bag
Over a hand as they talk
Gathering the brown turd and knotting
The bag in a conventional way
Developed over years of constant
Practice.

People and their dogs live in
Responsible and creative
Freedom among automobile sculptures and energy saving hybrid cars
Designed by Japanese corporations
For the U.S. market. At the corner
Of the four lane avenue connecting the flats of Berkeley
To the flats of Oakland
Traffic signals count down the seconds that remain
And a sushi restaurant advertises
All you can eat for a predictable price
Leaving it up to the individual how much he or she wants
To consume.

People with deformed and malfunctioning bodies drive
Motorized wheelchairs along the even concrete sidewalks
Passing gardeners digging up the lush plants which grow too large
In places, preparing soil for other flowering shrubs.
It has a beauty that's more visible
From the hills where houses rise
To the occasion
Capping a settled life with views
Of the town below, of the bay
Beyond the town, the bridge
Across the bay, the vertical rhythm
Of the city blocks punctuated by erect constructions
Evenly covered by expected textures of enduring material
Rationally engineered to sway
When the earth rocks in response to a force far removed
From the pan-American pan-Asian pan-African settlement
Meant to look like it was always present
Before the hills that once were sand dunes made by

Waves of water drawing wind across
Open space spreading plants into the dirt that held the particles together against
Unmoving rock.

We looked down on it from
Several places, from the airplane
Turning over vibrant hued salt flats
To avoid disturbing too many
Human ears, from the balcony
Of the home anchored on the eastern slope facing
The boiling regular lights, from
The glass wall of the elevator
Piercing claustrophobic darkness
Into sunlight up thirty stories
Atop a hill above other hills and buildings blocking, out
The glass walls of the tower built
Upon the art collection from which
The tops of speculative office towers
Appear no taller than the landscaped trees in a park
And rhythmic neighborhoods curve outward to the shield of hills
Sloping to the hostile ocean.

We missed the sunset
By ten minutes
Though it will be back again
At a predictable time
Like a solar eclipse
Scheduled to be seen
From a calculated point
According to what must be
The laws of the universe
Much like the laws that govern
What bottles of wine will be on the shelves
Of the enormous supermarket
Devoid of trans-fats or which restaurant
Will attract a crowd large enough
To require waiting an hour on the sidewalk
To be served cuisine native to
A distant land.

The Wedding Gift

It is time that I tell you the truth. I am not your father. I am the man who played the role of your father, from your earliest memory of the large man who held you and cared for you until the day I disappeared. I acted out the part constantly, with short imperceptible pauses to take a breath, remember what was needed next, gather up my wits again and continue to be your father, carry you, push you, hold you, drive you, lift you, read to you, sing to you, listen to you, watch you, photograph you.

But I am not your true father. I am only the man you saw more than any other man as you grew from a curious crawling preceptor into a standing breathing balancing beautiful girl fierce warrior whining self-righteous passionate whirling spot of determination desire self-reliance shyness denial laughter belief and disdain, a woman with legs too short nose too long eyes that filled the desert with heat and the scent of almonds and fingers that manipulated a knife capable of separating a single cell.

The face of your true father is protean. He has eyes that turn from grey to blue to black. His eyebrows are delicate as snow drifts one moment and the feathers of a hawk the next. He is a man with an enormous belly and narrow nose. He has hair that grows up his back and the smooth arms of an elm. He appears each day in a nearby chair or on a television screen, greeting you inspiring you ignoring you teaching you forgetting you.

And you see your true father each time you see a mirror. He is hiding in your own face. Each time you look at the shapes that make up the two sides of your hands, you see the hands of your true father.

Now that I have told you, I must add that I continue to play this father role whenever I see you and think of you. I am by nature this man, not because of you but because I choose the role myself each day, each time I take a breath. And you are free to hear that and free to disagree.

The essence of economics is
separating other people from their money

I sit on the front steps
and watch the weather coming up the bay.
The clouds have direction without intention.
Like a storm seen from the windshield of a small plane
flying into one's own fate.
I stop along the descending trail to see
a cloud rising from the valley and disappear.
The essence of a song is its reenactment.
The Mongol knew each animal in his herd by name,
a complex language of hair color and anatomy.
Each time I arrive from the city
the winding road repeats the act of separation.
The ocean appears and the tight curve halts
my speed , enforces a slow descent,
a smell of eucalyptus,
the chemical air and a place to shed the car,
a walk past the mildew wooden houses to the trailer.
Someone had convinced me to waste my life
by driving the car into a garage,
the door would open by pressing a button on the windshield visor
and the florescent light would go on
automatically, the door would close
and I would carry the groceries
directly into the kitchen.
To purchase what I needed
I would find a place on the second level
of the Mall of America and walk
to the automatic door passing into
a curtain of air. There would be music
everywhere and twenty-seven
checkout lines, miles of isles, a plethora of packages.
I heard someone explain that beneath this appearance
lay a system of SKUs representing interchangeable parts
without intention, designed to separate me from my money.
I carried only a credit card
and required cutting tools to open
the packages. The essence
of a song is its reenactment.
If the river was whiskey, I said
as we drank a beer by a canal in Amsterdam,
and I was a diving duck.
I had seen a pair of swans drifting in the river as I walked through falling snow.
It was like a Russian fairytale.
It was like an illustration in a book.
I wanted to burn out the materials planted in my mind.

I wanted a brain transplant.
I wanted to live on moss and dew.

*I'll build a
Log cabin
On the mountain
So high*

I live in a land of floaters disguised as people.
A recombinant actor empowered by education,
eager to transform myself into a folk singer or an entrepreneur,
wishing someone in my network was a venture capitalist or a concert promoter,
wishing everyone would recognize my special gift and forget where I came from.
Wishing I could forget myself.

I confide to everyone:

I communicate in this language. It is the only language that I know.
No one at the table understands a word I say.

Crossing over is a spiritual act

In the world of memories
a poem by Sappho appears
recalling the experience of seeing a woman she desires
engaged with a man.

He is touching her
and she describes
the sensation of fire on her own skin at the sight.

Or perhaps it is a bad translation
driven by displaced desire.

Perhaps the word for fire is green grass.

Perhaps desire is wet clay.

Perhaps by embracing you I wanted to escape,
the swelling need to run my fingers

along your skin and sing

Ramona

Come closer

Shed softly

Yr wat'ry

eyes

They kill the animal
by holding its mouth in one hand
while slitting its chest with the other
and grasping the heart until it stops.
Several people get up and leave the theater
while the rest of us continue to watch
neither attracted nor repulsed
by the sight of death,
unsure how the story will end.

A confessionalist afraid to

Gradual confession
Festering confusion
Graduation day

I entered the room to see her
in bed with a young man
She smiled at me

That was quick, I said

The elevator became a helicopter
The pilot was a communist
He encouraged us to wave at people
watching us from windows

Each time she left the building
she looked up and waved
sweeping her arm in the air

I never turned
When I left the house
I never looked to see

Her mother and father are dead now

Embrace me, my sweet

A body and his mother
It would give her
Satisfaction
I wouldn't give her
The satisfaction
Embraceable you

So ugly
Don't be naughty baby
She woke up
After giving birth to a boy
I want my arms around you
And these were the first words she thought
Even though he's ugly
I will love him

Of course it wasn't me
I wasn't ugly
It was the difference between
The idea and
The information coming in
Eyes ears nose throat
It was the perfect idea
Perfect idea
Perfect

Don't be naughty baby
Nobody's perfect
My sweet embraceable you

Boundary condition

I had reached the point where each day I had to remind myself who I am and where I am. At certain times of day I grew dizzy and that grip, that sense of automatic control of reality would waver, wobble like a bicycle with a wheel slightly bent, just off from true enough that a coast downhill revealed the flaw, a problem nonexistent when pressing on or climbing a grade.

I had received intimations of what was in store many times. Some had made a deep impression on me in my youth. At the time, their significance was impossible to discern. Others had gone by me like the sensations of an ordinary day, though their detail stuck in my memory to reassemble decades later as possible epiphanies.

Apotheosis and epiphany had been interesting words when I first came across them. I painted each on a wooden sign, in the manner of a name plate, and hung them over the desk and bed of my college dorm room. I read my assignments under apotheosis and slept each night under epiphany.

The Market

The Friday market felt quite different than the Sunday market. It was smaller by half and that alone created a different atmosphere. The Sunday market was strewn across the same space – the island in the center of two streets flowing in opposite directions, planted with trees, set with benches, watered by flat undecorated fountains, cut by cross streets. The vendors set up in the three isles under canvas awnings stretched between the metal poles provided by the city market commission, but between these metal poles their furniture and signs were their own. The principle of organization was variety, each isle containing vendors who sold different types of food, though the types of vendors repeated from isle to isle: fruits and vegetables, general butches, fish sellers, pork butches, farmers selling their produce, specialists of products imported from the Middle East, Italy or Poland, cheese and dairy products, spices and dried fruit and nuts. At the Sunday market the isles went on forever, beginning at the faux bridge that arched across the border of a garden playground and continuing for blocks until the food stands hit the boundary of amusement stalls that seemed to guide the traffic circle of the Bastille from intrusions of ordinary life. And here, at this intersection between shoppers waiting on line for the opportunity to buy shrimp and mackerel at a good price and young men considering in which shooting gallery to vent their frustration, there were sometimes disagreements and harsh words spoken.

The Sunday market had an air of festivity about it, generated by abundance. In an area where the fountains prevented covered stalls there was a place for the vendor of Sunday newspapers to spread out a display of headlines, front pages, and special publications on a variety of cultural and historical topics – famous painters, movie stars, military battles. The language of the papers identified the origin and attention of the people who bought them, but they did not reflect the actual composition of the population in the district, not the ethnicity of shoppers pulling their carts or balancing baskets on their arms. The enormity and festivity of the Sunday market also attracted tourists who pushed their way down the isles carrying cameras and speaking to each other in foreign languages as they admired the variety and, to them, exotic presentation of the foods. The man selling the hand-raked sea salt had placed the names of his products in Japanese on clean white labels fixed to his stand.

The population of shoppers increased steadily at the Sunday market as noon approached, especially on a day when the weather was clear. The last hour was often so crowded that pushing through an isle where benches faced the stands became impossible, each option blocked by shopping carts, baby carriages and lines of people waiting for the best pork butcher or cheese seller to serve them. Few people arrived at the beginning of the morning on a Sunday. Or so it seemed the few times when he had gone, for he rarely left the apartment early on a Sunday.

But he had seen the Friday market usually as it began around nine, when the isles were almost empty and some vendors were still unloading from the trucks

parked over the bike paths on either side. And so the combination of the hour and the size gave the Friday market a very different atmosphere. He entered the market by crossing the street which itself was lined with stores just opening for the day – butchers, bakeries, and wine sellers. The market began at a bus stop on a cross street, and this day the bus was sitting there waiting for the light to change. He heard the heavy sound that buses make when they accelerate as he entered the shade of a stall selling men's socks, and that sound was followed by the voice of a vendor promoting his melons to no one in particular. He scanned the array of fruits to gain a sense of what would be available. Today there were peaches and apricots, strawberries, cherries and several kinds of melon.

He sat on the bench at the end of the first set of isles. Here the grey slab fountains began, creating an opening where the vendors with no stands and entertainers could set up. It was a space benefiting from but not violating the space reserved for the market sellers themselves – the paying customers – a kind of faux street corner where anyone could stand or sit on the edge of the fountain slab and face the passing customers.

On this Friday morning two gypsy women were stationed, selling bunches of peony blossoms. He sat on the bench in the shade, facing them. The woman on his side of the fountain had the pail of water in which the flowers had been carried. She was also stationed in the shade, and wore a long skirt and a quilted vest over the blouse. She held out a bunch of flowers in her hand and stared at the ground in front of her. Across the fountain the other woman stood in the sunlight. She wore a light dress that ended above her knees and as the sunlight passed through her the outline of her brassier was visible through the semi-transparent fabric. She paced slowly, holding her flowers away from her body with one hand and with the other hand gently stroked her stomach. She was facing away from her, and so he felt comfortable to stare at her from the bench. He looked at her face in profile and the face of the downcast woman in front of him, looking for the resemblance of sisters. The woman in the sunlight was thinner and taller than the woman in the shade. The sunlit woman moved toward a man as he walked passed her, offering her flowers to him and drawing his face in her direction. She walked along with him for a moment, exchanged some words and he passed her with a smile without breaking his pace. She stopped and turned back, returning to where she had been and again her hand gently stroked herself. Her attention was scanning the crowd, searching for a face to return her gaze. Her left hand held the bunch of flowers, bathed in sunlight. He watched the tips of her fingers press the fabric of her dress against her womb.

To wake up.

Light and sounds. Moving vehicles, a person on the street scraping a tool or a broom, a stick against the pavement. Footsteps. The cold morning air rippling under the curtain, striking my nakedness.

Gut sensations. What are these? What signals? Where are they located? The sensation – I try to connect the feeling to a location, an organ – stomach, intestine, prostate – does the prostate emit sensations? Is the sensation in my mind? All sensations are in my mind. But I can touch this place to the left and below my navel, press my fingers into my skin there and enlarge the sensation, increase the pressure. Do I feel pressure?

Balance. There is a lack of balance. Each day I build it up, this disbalance. Did I love her? How could I have loved her. Why did I become unhappy? How did I fail? Why did she treat me with such contempt? Why did she become afraid of everything? Why did she give up each thing she tried to do? What should I have done? I made her suffer by giving her children. I made her suffer by taking her from place to place. I made her suffer by touching her. I wanted to kill her. I wanted her to die. I wanted her to leave me alone. Then I wanted her to admit that she would be happier without me. She could make her own life, stop hiding, get over the phobia and depression. And she would not agree to a mediated settlement – the two of us talking, coming to an agreement. This is what I wanted. I felt so guilt, so much guilt for being the one who caused the change, who quit playing the role, stopped the social agreement of marriage. I don't want to be married to you anymore. I can't do this anymore. And she visits my dreams where I hear her transmit her suffering.

She didn't want me. None of them wanted me. I disappointed them all. I disappointed myself. The balance. Where is the balance? The swimming place at Tassajara Creek. A Japanese priest and a cocky meditation teacher from Maine who thrived on the dreams and struggles of his students. A place so remote. The creek slides over the rocks into a deep pool. And you place your body in the water and let the movement of the water change the balance of gravity that holds you in one place on the earth. You slide with the movement of the water over the rocks into the pool and down into the water below, enveloped by it, rushing, striking nothing, into water that surrounds you and you come up swimming with the flow and find a rock to hold, to balance against. The sun on your skin. Your skin on the rock and the moss.

7:00 a.m. the alarm. She turns it off. The sensation the feeling the point is there in my gut. If it went away would I forget all this? Would I remember the dream I had in the dark apartment, the little girl, our daughter, three or four years old, blond and speaking French to me. I asked her to marry me when I woke up. Where did she come from? Where did she go? This language, everyone else's language. Foreign language foreign land. Children watching their parents watching their brothers and sisters. L's daughter watching her brother with such eyes, such eyes are the window to the soul. I would not look at myself. I would not have a mirror in the house. What are you afraid of?

London

That was strange and interesting. Even as he felt the sentence forming in his mind, he had the sense that each of the adjectives were meaningless. The unexpected was simply what it was, the pattern of itself. It was attractive to the eye, the receptors in the retina. He had seen a boat anchored in the river with the word SALIENT painted on its bow. He translated this word into sticking out, protruding. Exposed, he thought. It was strange to be on the streets of a city at such an early hour. Perhaps it was the combination of calmness and the light. Such sunlight before six. Strange. As quiet as it was the night before as he walked in a circle, a way to explore the space and assure a place to sleep. He had the key to the apartment. He no longer had the key to another where the window shutters still preserved the metal plates installed to protect residence during the bombardment. Rain billy bomb bats. There were three keys for every door. In the cathedral he saw a book inscribed with the names of soldiers who died defending this foreign land. If my father's name were in this book, he thought, I would not be here today. Such an absurd sentence created connection and distance simultaneously. It was absurd rather than ironic, unless of course they had lied to him when they told him he was born after the war, rather than during the time when a different set of rules applied. There was another brother no one spoke about, one who had enthusiastically volunteered to go at the outset of the conflict, deserted his widowed mother, searching for some way to make a name for himself outside the petty business dealings of the clan of traders he had grown up with, leaving behind a girl he'd impressed once he had his uniform, already pregnant, writing to him daily. This young man had told only his second brother about the girl, a student he'd met in a bookstore. Take care of her 'til I get back, he said, and they never saw him again. After the war, the second brother married her, her father paid for a new birth certificate, and they brought up the child along with several siblings. So in fact his father's name was somewhere in this book, but he had no idea what the name would be. It made as much sense as walking into an art gallery and seeing that all the paintings on the walls were entirely red. Perhaps there was some subtle difference in the shades of red, the strokes with which the red color was applied. He could see in a few places the absence of red, and he wondered if this might have some aesthetic value or be an expression of fatigue or lack of attention on the part of the painter. It was quite possible that he was things when looking at the walls that were unnoticed by the persons who painted them. In fact, there was the assertion again of fact over fiction, he did see things differently and would never have painted a wall such a shade of red. He had also seen a room filled entirely with red objects and he'd had no problem discriminating each bit of plastic, cardboard, metal and glass as individual things. This was because the individual objects were not the color itself but rather each was an object on which the exposed surface had been colored red.

Listening to Ramon Dachs Talking

A long day of switching attention and location.
Keep the mind open and focused.
Be aware it is six a.m.
Take the metro at seven.
The emptiness of early hours.
Reading Norman Fischer's *Questions* on the same train
I reread Allen Ginsburg's *Wichita Vortex Sutra* six years before
in the month leading to the War.
I hear Allen's voice coming off Norman's page.
Ramon Dachs is speaking to me in Catalan,
showing video of ice drifting on the Antarctica ocean.
Piano music.
Ramon is reciting *Blanc*.
White on white.
Bill Evans was high on heroin.
Catalan a beautiful sound with suggestions of Spanish nouns.
Nada sixteen nada.
All possible combinations of the magic numbers.
You are driving along trying not to fall asleep.
Your life depends on not falling asleep.
How can the body be so uncooperative.
So unbalanced.
Mixed signals.
Punta Arenas where oceans meet.
More penguins than the eye can see.
Who makes waves.
Who eats clouds.
What fog sits on the mountain.
What giant squid eats the chocolate.
Show them photographs of the sea and the clouds.
Luminous.
Rolled and rhythmic words.
How uncooperative can be the muscle of the optic nerve.
Divorce.
A word he uses often in Catalan sounds like divorce.
Divorce.
A charged pattern sets off a bitter taste.
That color on the side of icebergs where the fracture enters the sea.
Mist where the sky was.
He was an Antarctic poet before he visited Antarctica.
He was a card player.
A book collector lived next door.
A guitar player translated from German.
Elongated figures standing in profile
identify themselves with the minimum number of lines.
A poem made of gold and wood.

A sail painted on a panel.
A symbol of the sun.
A sun.
A figure sewing the fields.
I am looking for the scriptorium.
I see a wind blowing dust across the road.
The means of production lay in the hands of the many.
China is an entire nation of synchronized swimmers.
As he moved across the field
his entire body flowed like a flock of birds
smoothly sweeping through the air.
Blocks of ice.
Release oh Lord the abyss hidden in the ground.
Whip up the whirlwind.
Cream.
Frog foam.
Papyrus leaves decorate McDonalds.
Don't purchase that refreshing cup of coffee in the airport.
Can I warm that up for you, Honey.

If I had possession of judgment day

Is it possible to walk in the same direction each day, starting from a different place.

Is it possible to sleep five minutes every hour.

When does your body become your enemy.

When do the pictures they make of your renal system become reconnaissance photographs.

When does the earth replace the sky in your dreams.

Information is not a quantity, it is a threshold. The moving swarm of birds becomes a shape. The rise and fall of ocean surface moves through the line of ducks. The perpetrator returns to the scene of the crime.

His father was a tree farmer. His mother drove a truck. His sister made jewelry from sea shells. His mother collected beach glass. His uncle was the president. His grandfather died in the war. His wife was a surgeon. His daughter died in a plane crash in Guatemala. He got the baby sitter pregnant. He had the hands of a violinist and the temperament of a tractor.

He could carry the canoe through the forest. He could hide behind a tree and watch his wife embrace the serpent rising from the lake. He could memorize pages of the telephone book and could recite the stations on the IRT.

He fell in love with the daughter of a film director. She became an orthodox Jew and had ten children. Each child became a color. The blue one went to Israel. The pink one was a prosecutor. The gold one gave a concert. The brown one burrowed under the covers. The red one tied herself into knots. The black one always came back. The tan one was the fastest swimmer. The green one grew a moustache and announced that she was gay. Her mother couldn't stand it. Her husband had to admit he didn't know who his children were after the seventh one was born.

Seven brides for seven brothers.

Seven days in a week.

Seven years of famine.

Seven sisters in the sky.

Seven seats.

Seven docks.

Seven dogs.

Seven boats.

Seven cars.

Seven swans.

When did your body become a strange animal. Don't put your hand near its mouth. Don't go into the synagogue. Don't stop loving me. Don't smoke another cigarette. Don't peel another fig.

Smoking dope yousta put me in a place. It's hard to explain, away from everything, looking back, that distance you felt was a power, to remove yourself from sensations. Get lost in it. I want to go away.

Some people are really smart.
Some people dream.
Some people sink.
Some people drift.
Some people hid behind their hair.

I have to spend tomorrow cleaning up a mess. I get paid for that. Then I can buy the groceries. Make breakfast. Do the dishes. I can fold the laundry. Weight the souls upon a scale.

Ricardo Emanuel St-Hillaire

He married the Filipino maid, much to his parents' displeasure, though it was their coldness towards him that drew him to her. He was attracted by her servile admiration for his downy arms and thin blond hair. She had made his bed and folded his underwear for a decade before he asked her to remove her shirt one day and touched the nipple on her breast with the tip of his finger. They were married shortly after she gave birth. He accompanied her back to Manila and left her there, where she lived with her parents until her child was five years old.

When she returned with the boy, she lived in a small house beside the manor. Her husband had purchased a cinema, against his parents' advice. He devoted his time to organizing festivals of animated films. He selected films from catalogs he collected from around the world. The boy was sent to school. His father began to travel to Central and Eastern Europe, where he attended private showings at small cinemas and visited local animation studios.

After graduating from the university, his son took his first commercial position at the bank. He chose the international investment division. He refused to accept any business coming from Asia, though the bank held many important positions in Asian countries. He focused all his considerable intelligence on trades involving the countries of South America. When he had made sufficient money from his trading, he moved to Brazil and purchased a bank there. He was murdered one evening during Carnival by a man who mistook him for his wife's lover.

A Dream

Many years ago I was living in a large house in Arlington Massachusetts. It was a three-story wooden structure with a stairway leading to a porch that wrapped around the first floor facing the main street and a side street. The house was divided Dutch style into two apartments, with each apartment sharing a part of the second story. The back of the house also had a porch on the second floor that looked over a small driveway. I would sit on this upstairs porch, which joined to the kitchen, and write.

I was remembering the porch, the wooden siding and rail and a chair in between, looking at the maple trees starting to fill up with leaves reflecting a color that only appears for a few days each year. The color itself is an accumulation of individual leaves unwrapping from the hard buds that formed on the ends of each twig in the fall and remain dormant through the winter. One day in March thousands, perhaps millions, of small nodes released by some signal transduction between cells create a color that does not exist on the surface of the leaf itself. The color is formed by seeing the accumulation from a distance, in this case across and down from the chair balanced on the second floor porch, each leaf mixing with the color of the brown twig and the other unfolding buds.

I either eat too much or too little. I am happiest when I am hungry, when the idea of eating occurs but is not so urgent that I need to stop what I would be happy to do otherwise, thinking that food would be the next thing to do, sometime soon. It is like flying. Flying is the easy part, just three-dimensional driving. It's landing and taking off that's difficult. Drinking, walking, breathing, all these activities seem natural enough when I am doing them. But eating is the difficult operation, as difficult as knowing which medicine to take when something has become painful or at least unbearable, and if not unbearable then not the way it was before as far as I can remember. I did not always wake up with this feeling in my bowels or whatever word we assign to this part of my invisible body beneath the skin I can see and touch.

There is nothing that bothers me more than pissing blood. Of course, I do not know what I am pissing but I see a color that makes me think of blood, the color I have seen when I run my finger against the edge of a knife and suddenly discover that the serrated edge is sharper than I thought it would be. That color. After I do it I can feel the place where the skin has been cut and I press it to see if blood will appear and suck it when it does, feeling stupid for not remembering how much pressure not to use when feeling a knife's cutting edge. I was standing in a store filled with dishes, cups, glasses and silverware, selecting items to bring home to the kitchen, sucking my finger, hoping the blood would stop. It stopped. I remembered that I had done this once before, in the same store, one or two years before, looking at the silverware.

I listen to the same music over and over again. This is a learned behavior that began in the last century, the age of reproduction and repetition. Before recordings and playback equipment made it possible to wear out the grooves on a

record, as we used to say when music was made by balancing needles over grooves in plastic, the only way to hear music over and over again was to play it, learn the piano or guitar, and perform it. Then the song was in your body, the way you moved your fingers and your breath. It was a pattern in your brain. I played records. I held them and read the text on them and listened to them. I looked at photographs. I watched performances on television screens and in movie theaters. We don't say I ate the music or I injected the photograph, yet the repetition performs an act not so different from ingesting a foreign object into your own body. When it is quiet, when the light is dim, I can hear the sounds and see the images. They are not coming in anymore. They are already there inside. The entire pattern can be invoked by the repetition of the smallest fragment, like those contests they had on pop radio stations to name a tune after hearing a single note. The winner proved that he or she was possessed by the pattern invoked by a single vibration.

As I sat on the porch that afternoon, I was possessed by a dream that had happened the night before. I could remember something about a hairy mass forming in a bathtub drain, floating up into the air and transforming into the elongated head of an infant. It was a personal horror movie without Sigourney Weaver to help me fight back against the monster. And what can you do to fight a floating jelly fish with an infant's face? Reach for the flame thrower? The horror movie or the gothic novel inside us is made from something outside that we've absorbed, digested and transformed into those mental secretions.

There are always more details than can be recalled in a dream. Much like real life, if I tried to recall everything I saw today, every face I looked into and every conversation I overheard, I would fail in much the same way I failed when I tried to write down a dream from last night or from forty years ago. Yet some images remain strongly present, whether they are experienced in sleep or wakefulness.

In the dream I was writing on the porch, I left the house and wandered the streets searching for a place I could go inside. There were many bars and restaurants I could enter, in a normal town of any size, in this normal place, but I was repulsed by each one I saw. I was unable to decide, I was not drawn into any place and kept moving, as I did today, walking by bars and brasseries and restaurants, unable to stop, unable to choose, unable to choose a place to stop and eat. In the dream there was a rising panic, that sensation of urgency to stop what might otherwise have been a situation no more difficult than walking down a street, much the way I walk down the street each night to return home from my work, passing people sitting in cafes and bars sitting and talking with each other. In this city many people sit outside, exposed to the gaze of any passerby. I observe them and I also observe the couples who sit at the tables placed by the windows that face the sidewalk. This is common practice in the urban environment where I live today, an openness to observation and being observed by anonymous fellow citizens, so that by chance any person could observe the way the hands of a man and a woman sitting opposite each other at a table move their hands towards or away from one another and express their mutual sense of intimacy or discomfort.

In the dream there was nothing to see from the street beyond the names of the places, their street signs and perhaps a decoration on the window. I don't recall what the street looked like but it was an American street in an American city and I was moving until I chose the door of a bar and pushed it open. No, I must have pulled it open. Perhaps I heard the music before I opened the door and that is what drew me in, as we say, to put the action outside rather than inside the actor. Something drew me to the place and what I remember was country-western music, a style of music so similar to itself, so uniform the name itself contains certain tones and a range of instruments and vocal expression sealed inside a comfortable box. Sinful men and cheating women, salvation in the face of despair, childhood poverty and coal dust recalled with simple rhymes, lovers separated by rivers and joined next to trees, beer, tears and whiskey.

I walked into this place and sat down at a table with two chairs. The music was playing the beginning and the end, sung by no one in particular, a recording like any other recording I didn't recognize but had heard a hundred times replicated in the sounds around me. There is no irony in country-western music, for irony is the antithesis of sentimentality, its evil twin, and sentimentality is the beating heart of country-western music. Was it the banality or the sweetness that made me feel so comfortable? I only remember feeling the panic subside, as though I had found something to hold on to after swimming for so long that my arms and legs were about to give out. I felt that I could stop flying or swimming or walking, whatever activity I had been repeating before I entered the bar. I could at least stop moving.

A waitress approached my table and asked me what I wanted to drink. Dark beer, I said. She smiled at me. Yes, we have dark beer, she said, and walked away.

I could not explain why this interaction seemed to resolve the entire psychic crisis. I forgot to remember to forget. I can't get her off of my mind. I could not explain it today. At the time, sitting on the porch, looking at the trees, there was nothing to explain. It was a sensation, complete in itself, raising no question in the mind, only the urge to transcribe the traces left by a dream.

A Dream of Metro Robespierre, 4 April 2010

There are some who believe that Eternity began in the morning when the first man made a pot of coffee. Coffee, the drink itself, is the end of this story. It has always seemed to exist in this form though its qualities of taste, temperature, aroma and somatic affect varies from telling to telling. The sound also varies so that performances of coffee being made at the beginning of Eternity, while clearly the origin of music itself, has produced such a range of aural expression that the difference between instruments used to celebrate the alignment of celestial objects and the first pot is difficult to describe.

The geomorphology of Eternity is a single street. The street begins at an intersection, making a shape we associate with the letter T. The directionality of the shape of Eternity is quite different from the letter, as it does not go across and then down, or even downward and then vertically across. Eternity begins at the intersection itself and moves away. The vast majority of people in Eternity experience this shape as moving in a single direction. They move in one direction on this street, sometimes going back and repeating a movement, but when observed from a distance the impression is of someone moving away. There are those who repeat the same movement in a circular shape yet the circle is not what appears. The circular movement comes back to itself, closing and shrinking to a point which has no circumference, or the circumference itself has no value in Eternity once the shape is closed. As each closed shape shrinks it does not disappear so much as become a point and the aggregation of these points becomes the larger shape describing a rotated form of the letter T.

There is a café at the intersection in which men converse. Most of them are standing at the bar, leaning against one elbow or standing with their back to it conversing with the men beside them. A few sit at narrow tables facing each other and on these tables a number of the seated men play games. Printed cards are spread out and each card has two sides. On one the value of the card is concealed while on the other side it is the sameness of the card that can no longer be perceived. The games include the movement of markers on boards inscribed with geometric patterns. The boundary that defines each board rises from the table surface to form physical barriers that contains the moving pieces.

Men stand outside the bar and smoke tobacco in Eternity. The smoke that emerges from their mouths drifts into the air propelled only by their breath, much like a conversation does, dispersing. On one side of the intersection people emerge from a stairway, walking upward to the street. Small groups reach the street and pause on the sidewalk. Groups of strangers walk to the end of the stairs and pause to orient themselves to the change of light, for the illumination in the tunnel is different from the light on the street. This difference is constant, though the quality of light on the street is always changing and by changing remains always different from the constant dim light inside the tunnel.

The people emerging come from everywhere and consist of every shape, size and color of the human species. They dress in clothing meant to protect them from all

forms of temperature, moisture or aridity, all variations of judgment as to what portions of their body should or should not remain covered to the eyes of their fellow travelers. As they emerge, they pause to readjust their senses to the change of light and choose a direction. The intersection embodies this moment of decision, the opening at the end of the tunnel that in its nature presents a limited set of opportunities to choose a direction.

Some people pause so briefly that they seem to be going about their business by crossing the street or continuing laterally to the right or to the left. The impression they make on the others who pause is that of travelers going to work or going home after a visit elsewhere. And this determination or lack of questioning may be only a lack of time. For each person that emerges brings with him a limited ability to perceive a difference and some do not perceive the way others pause before continuing. The entrance to Eternity is the place where Time intersects with Space. When looking at this we may set aside the metaphorical letter associated with sounds made by the teeth and tongue and think instead of water flowing from a spring. While we would be hard pressed to remember a spring from which water emerged to immediately flow in three directions, nonetheless it is this image which most resembles the place where Eternity begins for those who enter. This flow of humanity in three directions is both defined by and is the definition of Space. This Space, being the container of Eternity, does not evolve. It would appear to be static but for the fluid points defined by the emergence of each pack of strangers rising up the steps to the end of the tunnel where they emerge into Time.

Three Ten Nine Four

Three
is a sacred number. Ten is the digits
on two paws. It is true because
it happens three times. Three times
three are completion, are the decades
we can know. Each and every one of us
was once that innocent life.
From outside you see
a being that has done nothing
yet. Eyes that barely see, articulating
fingers and toothless lips.
Thirty years and thirty years and
thirty years rotate like a revolving door
at the entrance to a planetarium. I came
to learn about the stars, he seems to say.
He sucks in, exhales in four directions,
one for each generation
for each rotation
nearing the end
begin again

Three
is a sacred number. It is true.
Three times three are the decades
we can know.

Thirty years and thirty years and
thirty years. I came
to learn about the stars.
suck in
exhale
begin again

(for EWK)

My Life with Trotsky

On Tuesday evenings my mother would sleep with Trotsky.

His wife, she said, was off taking the waters.

My mother would wrap a dozen tortillas in a cloth

and send me to stay with the neighbors.

On Wednesday Geronimo would take me to join them for lunch in the garden.

Each week it was the same: at the end of the long table

was an Russian uniform stuffed with corn husks and straw. Atop the collar

was an oblong melon on which was pinned a photo of Stalin.

My mother would greet me by pulling me to her bosom, then Trotsky

would take the flesh of my cheek between the knuckles of his right hand

and pinch me. He would hand me a broom handle and I always

did what I was told to do: raise the stick above my head

and bring it down against the melon. I put down the stick and handed Trotsky

the large piece that remained balanced on the collar

and Geronimo, my mother and I would feast

on the pieces I gathered from the dirt.