

Paul Kahn Water Is Wide



The Water Is Wide

Paul Kahn

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These poems are for Dominique Negel

Heart of mine so malicious and so full of guile,
Give you an inch and you'll take a mile.
Don't let yourself fall. Don't let yourself stumble.
If you can't do the time, don't do the crime
Heart of mine.

Bob Dylan, 1981

Si conobbero. Lui conobbe lei e se stesso, perché in verità non s'era mai saputo. E lei conobbe lui e se stessa, perché pur essendosi saputa sembrare, mai s'era potuta riconoscere così.

They knew each other. He knew her and so himself, for in truth he had never known himself. And she knew him and so herself, for although she had always known herself she had never been able to recognize it until now.

Italo Calvino, *Il barone rampante / The Baron In The Trees*

The Lady of the Five Senses

If I were still a poet I would write
about a conversation that we didn't have
describing the imaginary life we'd lead
walking between the sleeping people of the city
as they hang in time. In that life we're distinct.
We can walk between the particles and waves,
between the Christmas lights and construction barriers,
in that space between the measurement of time.
This imaginary place resembles
an old passage way, a street left over from the 15th Century,
with shops that are always closed and dark, shutters partly drawn,
and a plaque remembering something that happened on this spot,
at least that's what it looks like in Paris. I've also seen such places
in America, beside a highway with no human
history, just pure ground to stand on.

If I were still a poet I would write
about your face. You are lovely in your
proportions and imperfections, a human face
of coiled energy, thinking of something else that needs doing,
a phone call to make, light upon your cheekbones,
surrounded by blond hair curled into a shape
no hat or headdress could create. In my dream this morning there was
a monkey wandering about the bedroom. He wore a chain
around his neck, like the one in the medieval tapestry.
I asked him if he would lie down
beside me and he responded sympathetically.
He saw I also couldn't sleep. Yes, I said, there's just too much to do.
There is a time.
There is a place.

The city is here because there is a river
that flows through it and there's a bridge
across the river, crossing the river
for hundreds of years and we stand on it
as the river passes below us and we hang
in the air. I *taste* a bit of vodka left
on my mustache and *smell* your blond hair.
The winter air smells fresh as the river
continues to move east to west. I *hear* an old

song coming from my mouth and see the
lights reflect off the surface, the skin
where the motion of water meets the less visible
motion of air. Its like lines from a painting, oil caked
onto canvas hanging on a wall, shimmering
only in my brain as the museum guard shifts
in her chair and wonders if I will get
too close and *touch* what I should not touch.
I will use my other senses because
if I use my fingers and run their tips
across it, if I caress the surface,
if I use my lips to touch it
then I will be asked to leave, I will not
be on the bridge on a winter night in Paris,
I will not be in a café sitting across from you,
I would not be in the library looking at a book designed to
contain the world, open to a page of paper cutouts,
anatomical layers of man on the left side
and wafer-thin layers of woman on the right. Perhaps
the King once peeled the layers back with his fingers, each layer
revealing another, as his fingers went deeper into the page. Above
their heads is the Hebrew name of God
written on a cloud, an oval
curled back slightly from the surface of the page. Surely
someone has lifted this in the past but
from where we stand beside the museum case
we cannot see what's underneath and
this is our only chance. It's too old,
too precious, too much has already happened. I will be
looking down at the ocean from the sky
unable to distinguish one feature
from another. Men will be speaking into cell phones
in German and there will be no monkey on a chain
leaping on the brocade drape that covers the wall
asking why I cannot sleep as I sit
inside this moving bridge for hours,
coming back to America.

17-18 December 1996, Paris

Candle light behind daffodils (Spring)

Soft brightness of candle light against cut flowers
sorrow is the dark vein of schist among the granite,
the rocks my feet pick across, here where
the ocean sea meets the new world, this broken edge
worn by the process.

A stream drains
from the marshy sponge that holds clusters
of growing things, but here everything is worn
naked and left in the shape of smooth stones,
the reflection of a palm.

I hold the sorrow in my gut and the rock presents
a pattern of dark and light. Turn it in your hand.
Dip it in the water of the ocean sea, never silent,
broiling, volatile. It slickens, clarifies the contrast.

I place this stone on the windowsill.
It is a small thing, this sorrow,
easily arranged, dusted,
lifted and turned against the toughened skin.

Light is the silence of a clear night.
Rain is darkness, the sound of water against slate and copper,
singing along the roof. Gravity
is attraction of one body for another.

24 March 1997, Cranston

Poem

I will manipulate the world
to place a hairy star
in the air above your head, the light
will seem to rise from the eastern ground
and the full moon burning red
will appear to grow from muddy Kansas fields.
Flowered trees will bend in a New York park and a space
will be reserved between seven-thirty and eight
beside the window for you to sit. You will appear
and contemplate the passers-by. Smoke will rise
from someone's fingers, a sound will cause your head
to turn and I will make an entrance. No one else
will see the force. There will be no door, no tear
in the fabric. Everything will be as it was before
snow covered April streets and sorrow stretched out
like a lizard upon the rocks. I will make sure
the people of Boston remember Latin, the earthquake
memory of San Francisco will not disappear,
the Indians will continue to gamble in Connecticut
without interruption. The ferry will leave for Staten Island
and a helicopter will land by the Hudson with a bouquet of noise.
My gift is to assure there is no separation
between your thoughts and the story I will tell.

11 April 1997, Cranston

The Great She-Bear

Lilac flowers are grapes on her breath,
she takes them in her mouth and eats
as she moves. The swans hiss,
white necks arching and the hostile sound
oozing from their cocked beaks. The mound of
reeds is their nest she steps on and she is not
looking at it. Her eyes are fixed on
other things.

The bird that sings
at three in the morning is singing
an irregular song, up and down in the dark
segmented by the regular sound of a clock,
the occasional hum of a refrigerator.
The breath of the bear is a song as she walks
across the night sky, first one paw
then another, the branches part against her body's fur,
cellulose bends and snaps back, a tuft of hair
wrapped around a thorn. She brushes
falling stars away with her paw like puzzled insects.
She is feeding as she moves toward dawn.
She is feeding in the darkness and the swans
move away, webbed feet stepping back and wings
moving in the dark with the sound of enormous
book pages flapping, covers snapping shut.
The Great She-Bear drinks the weeping light in the east,
her tongue and lips swinging
back and forth across the dawn.

10 May 1997, Cranston

Poem

I disintegrate into sleep black exhaustion
and reconstruct from my hands
the landscape of green fields mixed
with the gray brown walls of a city.
The window opens to a view of roofs
and I rebuild from the ends of my fingers
two bodies strewn, the air astonished
at the sight of their faces in the same mirror.

17 June 1997, on the train Paris-Montpellier

Without you, it is the time

It is the time when fruit is ripe, the peach
soft enough to press with the end of my
finger, insert the point of a knife and move it
in a circle, put down the blade, hold
each side and twist.

The fruit opens with the seed in one hand.

There is juice on my fingers where they pressed
against the cut. The clouds are made of soft wet air
bending light into flesh. Bending light
into the pink of muscle and fruit, the air is
an envelope. Bending light through the opaque membrane
of the eye speaking to the retinal nerve, the clouds turning
red as the sun falls below the sky, the heat settles
between the blades of grass and concrete sidewalks.
Blue chicory erupts from the cracks,
mosquitoes mine blood from the skin above my ankle
and the gauze curtain moves before the open window
responding to what is not there.

26-30 June 1997, Cranston

Thinking About Your Body

I am thinking about your body.
I am envisioning the relationship
between your clothing and your skin.
The contrast of your hair,
its mixture of blond, brown, and gray,
and the colors of your temples, pink and blue,
your eyes a hazel shade with lines that sparkle.
Black shoes.
A triangle of black lycra.
A beaded scarf and the flesh of your leg.

The back of my hand is pink with blue threads
like the back of your hand. I am thinking of how similar
the back of your hand is to the back of my hand,
though our fingers are so different.
In the sunlight I imagine I can see
the cells of my own skin, the texture of age.
Years repeat and numbers are abstract:
thirty, forty, fifty. These numbers
are actuary tables on life insurance policies.
I am thinking about the silhouette of your back,
how you appear walking away from me naked.
The human mind grasps first
a bold exterior shape, my teacher tells me.

13 July 1997, en route Toronto-Zurich, 18 July, Schwarzenberg Austria

Somewhere between the pleasure and sadness on my face

I have stolen a day from the machine
that churns them out, the next
commercial, the music video containing
the next slow motion sequence of exaggerated meaning
reflected on the polished metal surface of the chair
catching the corner of my eye, the rainbow effect
projected on the clouds beneath the wing as we approach
Paris. I have taken a night away from the sky
that rotates beneath an image of cosmic form
imagined and analyzed by centuries of educated men.
I am walking on a road that other men and women
dressed in red-black leather hurtle across
on Sunday's burning chrome, but I am lying
on my back in the ocean, I am
swimming beside the boat, watching the water
turn to clouds, the stars appear
beside a moon littered with abandoned instruments.
I am following the swallows with my eyes
as they graze the air around the roof and towers of the church.
I am watching the swallows eat soft dots
of insect flesh above the fresh cut Alpine hayfields.
They circle the tower of Basilique de St-Sernin
and I am flying through a wireframe model of its tower
fighting off exhaustion, struggling to throw
my soul forward and up into
the night I have stolen from a machine
that resembles an enormous clock, a beautiful
surface of waves rotating in cycles,
cold and hot, dry and wet, blood
pouring from a hole, water falling
a thousand meters over rock faces, snow becoming
sand and broken shells along the marsh,
flamingos scraping algae at the bottom of a shallow sea
with their horny beaks. There is a
tv remote and bible on the nightstand,
the windows open to a blaze of Mediterranean light
and memories of Swiss precision.

I am making love to a vision of the ocean
only I can see, crashing against the armoire mirror,
the landscape of imagined quietude at the still moment
of turning, the silk bosom of the rise and fall
found between the striking bells of the machine.

18 July 1997, Schwarzenberg, Zurich, Montpellier, Toulouse, Paris

The Craftsmen

Blood drips from the sword of the Archangel Michael
and the head of a serpent is in his other hand.
It is a boy standing for days against the wall
holding some props. The painter places a golden halo
above the boy's head and five hundred years later
you think you can see wings
and hear the beating of bone, muscle, and feathers
against the stillness in the room.

The world is in your mind and manifest
upon this space whose shape is endless
wrapping in and folding
like the lines around your eyes.
The form of things appear bit by bit
built up from lines, dots, suggestions of material
creating patterns in your memory,
the apocalypse, the unicorn, the phoenix
rising from a curve and colored line suggesting
smoke. A thousand years ago in China
a woman would perform upon the stage to foreign music.
The material that covered her was woven
from secretions of a worm and from each hand
a thin stick extended. On this stick
a scarf, also spun from the same kind of thread,
amplified her motion, repeated for the audience
the curves and patterns you see now
on a phosphorescent screen, the memory of light
left as the motion dies and stillness returns.

The world is in your mind and deep inside
there is a pattern, a shape, a rhythm
that sets you thinking of a place you've been.
You close your eyes and there is water rushing by,
there are fresh cut fields and machines pulling paper
over networks of rollers, plates, and shears.
There is a car being driven and you
are in a seat almost asleep, propped against
another body and who
is driving the car? What is the pattern
that you saw inside before you became aware

of another body, the cold glass window,
the white lights and the river of souls?

The craftsmen repair the broken tiles and
restore the tapestry thread by colored thread.
There is a pattern on the wall of the chapel
where the statue blocked the light for centuries
and you can see it now, the vaulted room is cold
and bare, the objects taken away to be repaired.
Elsewhere in Chateaudun is the muffled room
where the widow was locked to scream from grief
and meditate. You see the shapes left on the wooden walls
that appear, pictures suggested by feelings in the darkness.
The craftsmen remove layers from the surface of a painting
applying a liquid pattern of molecules and delicate brush
so in Milan today you can see
the color Piero imagined on the polyptych
for the robe of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino.
“One notes the difference in the color
between this panel and the panel on the left,
which has been recently restored.”
One notes the symbol for the sun beside his head
and feels heat upon receptors in one’s skin.

22 October 1997, Cranston

This scarf

is too small to cover your beauty
neither as black as the fierce pupils of your eyes
nor as white as the soft skin of your back
not as long as the blue veins on the back of your hands

This red scarf will shield
the concave hollow beneath your neck
a place precious to those
who know you

19 Sept-7 Nov 97, Washington-Cranston

At the end of the year of desire

At sunset I go out on the fire escape to view
all the planets line up, an event that occurs
once in a hundred years, faintly visible in my city.
Earlier that morning I sat before a computer
thinking of you. A small moment passed on the net
where desire is parsed into packets and machines
measure time in nanoseconds. A desire sent
from my fingers to your eyes
brings a desire in return. I lie in bed at 3:17
beneath the light of a digital clock
and think of the comet that began the year,
a brush of light above the backyard trees, bare for winter.

It is difficult to recall the times we were together,
choosing food in the market,
waiting on the platform for a train.
It is easy to recall the times we were together.
I rest my head against my own hands now.
I suck in air and slowly release it with a hiss.
I am in another airplane seat and you
are in the back of another taxi. You and I
are both a tiny piece of glass, one side painted silver.
I polish the surface of the other side
to see each thing we've known reflected there.

4-6 December 1997, en route Chicago-Cranston

I did not want

I did not want to wake up this morning
to the faint light of a hotel room.
I did not want the light to enter.
I did not want the scent of rain on the grass
outside the door. Against the windows of a tower
in Brittany the wind is splashing molecules
rattling the sills that brighten and darken as the clouds
flow across. The sea is steel gray
and white foam spreads in the direction of the wind.
It is not the smell of gardens arranged by a culture
refined beyond the means available to those of us
who speak in other tongues, it is not even the sound
of l'Eure flowing with spring rain or
windshield wipers scraping the glass of the Citroen
as the lorries send spray across the A13.

*They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind —*

and when they fall during battle their fellow men
strip the armor and clothing from their dismembered bodies
and record it in thread on cloth so we can see a thousand years
into the heart of man. There is a metal pin
to tease the meat from the smallest shellfish
and we graze on tiny mouthfuls in the evening restaurants.

I did not want
to hear the birds this morning and I do not want
to know too much of the truth. Imagine that
we live forever and I am always there
like some rock the tide returns to day or night
in the ice or in the heat of summer with vacationers
swarming on the beaches and their cars
filling the Sunday evening highway, brake lights
smearing red colors across the inside of your eyes
as you lay your head back and wish
this trip back to Paris was already over. I can imagine this,
it is in the past and you are with someone else.
Perhaps I did not want to know when it would be

the day to change money into dollars, the gray sky
illuminated just enough to see I am no longer
sleeping. I want to preserve for a moment
the impression of two eyes enveloping me.
Perhaps you can help me with this before you go.

5 April 1998, en route Paris-Washington

Not Alone

I listen to the cadence of her voice.
“You know,” she said to me on the last night,
“I am not always alone.” How many layers deep
can words penetrate the breast? I was expecting it
somewhere inside, the flesh coming out to greet
a knife. “In this time
there is a kind of madness,” she said, and again
I hear the sound of those words coming from
her mouth. “I speak very carefully when I speak
in English,” she said. I remember Franco’s
Italian voice now, coming from the other side
of the grave —

English is not your native language.

Language is not your native speech.

I cannot hold on to you
across a thousand miles, across ten centuries, across
a month of days that last from sunrise to sunrise.
She held me with the word *alone*
and I could have pulled her off
a cliff into the sea or we could jump together
but not alone. Alone it is better to survive. I held her
on the fortress wall and leaned her head back
against the sea and the wind, the black night of it
rolling in. I could not have stood there by myself
and thought this vision had the remotest trace
of beauty without her leaning back against the stones
and I was holding her, my hand about her throat.

*I leaned my back against an oak
thinking it was a trusty tree
but first it bent and then it broke
just as my love grew false to me*

*The water is wide I cannot cross o’er
neither have I wings to fly
but give me a boat that can carry two
and both shall row, my love and I*

5 April 1998, en route Paris-Washington

Reprise

You don't need me.
I am your twin, your mirror,
I am the man you would have been if you were a man,
you are the woman's soul trapped inside a body with all the parts
quivering meat. There is nothing there but a blinding emotion,
a sensation of surging power and penetration,
a mixing of fluid, membranes passing through membranes,
swallowing, chewing, absorbing and pounding of gravity and blood throbbing,
soaking through layers and layers and layers of cloth and consciousness.
There are roofs to look down on and birds swirling around steeples and waves
blown by wind
and fields of moonlight exhaustion.
There are bright points of sunlight reflecting off the airplane wings
and rainbows trailing the clouds out the airplane window.
There is water flying off the tires of cars and headlight beams
scattered by the water reflecting on your face.
There are ceilings made of plaster and wood above your head
but these things are not what you need.
These are an escape from what you need,
for a moment but not for long.
You need something else I cannot imagine,
something I cannot do,
cannot be.
You don't need me.

8 May 1998, Cranston

From a letter

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said
and out flowed the story of our sadness
the story of our love spilled from the tongue
that lived it. Words do fail.

What is *do*

What is *this*

A verb, a pronoun.

Adjectives? weight, scent, color,
sound. There isn’t even a name
for it, the unfolding, unrolling,
spilling out, the unpeeling of layers.

“I would like to know for myself
how I would feel.” That is you speaking English,
using a form of future conditional. I’d also like to know
what I will think in the future.

10-11 May 1998, Cranston

What I saw before dawn

A picture of you
standing with a Dutch bicycle
facing the camera, your blond hair
and beside your face a vase
with white and yellow flowers
on a table. It is incongruous
that you should be photographed
inside a house with your bicycle
or outside with flowers in a vase.

18 May 1998, Cranston

Sleeping alone

The world returns at dawn
in the guise of a hum beyond
the window by my head. The vocalization
of catbirds moving across the treetops. The stunning
presence of a pair of crows. The bakery truck
pulls up and aluminum racks begin to roll
up and down the loading ramp.
Cars displace air, neon atoms vibrate
inside glass tubes. The sunlight bends through
curtains and pours a thin film on the walls.
I sense all this as I run my tongue
along the edges of my teeth without
opening my eyes. The pillow is twisted
and gravity has rested for a few hours.
What was the name
of that fortunate man who wrestled
the angel? What was his name
when he awoke?

13 July 1998, Providence

Peace

Perhaps I am not what you need.
Perhaps love is not need,
love is a peaceful place in the body
and the body is yours and mine
in a foreign country.
The wind is silent tonight.
The flowers in the dark
give off their scent
for no one.

I cannot see
up close or far away from my face.
My eyes are in my skull
in a foreign land. The Russian optometrist
fits new dark glasses on my face
as his Russian wife stands nearby
and she pulls more items from the case
and offers me frames for driving a jeep
through the desert, frames for commanding
a submarine to a secret island in the Pacific,
glasses to hide from the sunlight in Cannes.
She smiles at me as her husband
goes back to his instruments to measure.
He brings two lenses, gray and brown
and I look at her through the colored glass
You look better in brown, I tell her
and she laughs.

I can see you now.
I can see you far away. Anger,
lust, possession, fear, uncertainty.
Perhaps love is not knowing where you are.
A pile of books, work to do, a million phone calls
on hold, small lights blinking and the sound
of fans pushing the last air of the century
against the sleeping bodies of the ones
we love. They are gone tonight,
they are not in the car we command,
they are not in a room nearby.

There is no one here who needs
to hear these words but the one
who makes them in his head,
whose hand moves the pen, whose mouth
sucks the air and smoke. They are gone
but I see them in my head
and the thought of a silent peace
in a foreign land lifts my hand.
Perhaps I need a drug that will close my eyes
and allow me to sit in the dark.
The cricket of summer rubs its legs
to the tune of moving bodies. The sun
will rise across the water and I
will be released from the judgment
of seeking you, knowing you, acting
the way I should for you. Anger is smoke,
lust is water tearing at a rock, possession
is a leather strap that cannot break
and cannot stop the motion of two bodies
struggling, fear is made of tangled
river weeds licking at your feet.
Morning begets uncertainty, my daughter's voice
floating in the sea, my feet tracing
the line of parks across someone else's crowded city.
The train departs, the plane arrives,
the disturbance moves up the coast
and the pavement is wet with rain.
There is nothing to decide, nothing further
to organize in the darkness. Only a memory
of love, the rise and fall of blood beneath your skin
as you sleep beside me. Only the sound
of love in any language and peace
that needs no understanding.

31 July 1998, Providence

Prelude

There was
some need, some place to leave from and
the need to leave. I have become an angel
removed from earth, watching people's lives.
He is beautiful, this man who is your lover.
When you leave him
he knows you are the most important person in his life
and the meaning of each street of the city
this history of events, the meaning of
lives and images and destiny, your history
is in his eyes and hands and lips.
What you want is there for the asking.
I am lost in a place where connection
is like music, there is music in the air,
a modulation like the sound of North African
wind, peaceful and warm. The spirit
is a promise of self-realization but
there is no self, there is no apology
or absolution. Secret lives, the
attraction of one body for another seeking
peace without connection to this earth
drift by my face damp with sweat.
I hear a woman waiting for her mother to die,
I see a father in his hospital bed
trying to pull the tubes from his arm,
acquiescing to a daughter, a wife, a nurse,
as she changes the sheets.
I have been to hell and back, the tide
comes in and out, the water is a brown soup,
murky scum one moment and the next
a crystal so transparent the rocks seem to be
beneath a glass, the jellyfish and minnows
float into the web of lovers strewn across
a bed. I was looking for something in a distant place:
French, Japanese, Polish, Turkish, Chinese.
Jewish boys in sloppy white shirts
wander across the busy intersection
absent-mindedly waving their prayer shawls.
Living in another world, where each idea
is to be learned and each page of the Book

is to be memorized and no word or idea
is as bright as the woman I am looking for.
I have been to hell and back each day,
the sun reminds me, the full moon
reminds me that time continues despite
the loss of all the things built up over the years,
the books arranged and misarranged, the papers
filed, reviewed, discarded, the home abandoned
and transformed into someone else's home.
There is no place for resting, there is no
other half, no soul to listen to the soul
moving like a angel, like a ghost, like a
child passing through a crowd of strangers
in a foreign land. She loves you but
what use is love when you are in a web
of lies and evasions, somewhere in hell
or back again in the morning wishing for
a place to go, a cushion to sit down on and
tell the story, where it all began.

10-12 August 1998, Providence

The Coastal Trail

1.

The mountain biker passes me,
his shoulder covered in filth.
His knee is bleeding. His breath
is steady and nearly silent.
I do not offer him my water
to wash this self-inflicted wound.

2.

From the top of the world I look down
at the beings below. They cannot see
what I can see. My foolish heart,
I see him down below
peering through the window of his room,
thinking that love will save him
from misery, running his hand along
the red vaginal wall of memory,
wishing to know something. He is
foolish because from here I can see
he is looking for the other half of his soul.
Idiot! Your soul does not come in halves.

3.

*Duua the Blind had one great eye in the middle of his forehead
And with this eye Duua could see a place so far away
It could take three days to reach it.
Looking out from the mountain
Duua could see a band of people approaching along the stream.
"In the middle of a band of people I see coming this way,
at the front of a black cart,
there's a fine-looking woman," he said.
"If she's not already promised in marriage
I'll ask that she be given to you," he said to his younger brother.*

With my two good eyes I saw you emerge
from the shadows of the breakfast room
one evening in December two years ago. I saw a crown

of hair and a quizzical look on your face,
eyes turned down but looking up with
expectation. I did not see many of the things
that stood before me, a woman disappointed
with her lover's attentions, fed up with her husband's demands,
disturbed by her family's expectations, unhappy with her own achievements,
and in the ways of love a master of deception. With my two good eyes
I saw a woman with the kindest face
and a smile that made my foolish heart feel glad.

4.

The mind constructs an image from the vision
in the eyes and if it doesn't know what its seeing
it makes up thoughts, conjecture and memory.
A ridge so steep soil cannot adhere. The vulture glides
along the face. The ocean mixes with the air
and sends crashing sounds at the ear
of anyone who walks this far. Gray brown foam
dapples in the sunlight, dark shapes form as the waves
pull and push and the mind completes
what it cannot understand. That is a log, no,
it is a seal diving, a silkie come to reclaim its child.

*I am a man upon the land,
I am a silkie on the sea,
And when I'm far and far frae land,
My home it is in Sule Skerrie.*

The eye sees what it remembers.

5 September 1998, walking the Marin headlands, California

Pain

Some things refuse to die
and stand brown in autumn
shorn of the colors and damp honey
brittle but upright in the wind.

Some things die slowly and leave
a shape reflecting light from the moon,
a single unflickering light
visible even in a city sky between

the trees that hold their leaves
well into November. It moves
at different speeds, this life
that leaves a shape, this light that does not

end when the sun falls. Cold, closed,
numb to the daily calling.

30 September-2 October 1998, Providence

The Theater of Memory

“A wooden Theatre, crowded with images, was shown by Camillo himself in Venice to a correspondent of Erasmus; something similar was later on view in Paris. The secret of how it really worked was to be revealed to only one person in the world, the king of France.”

Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*

I. Diana (the moon)

Tonight

I examine the memory of your body, your head bent to my shoulder, your hands folded inward resting on my chest. You are seeking a place away from the storm you see each time you open your eyes. You are seeking someone to touch you there and there, a woody root, a song recorded when you were a child and your father took you house to house repairing tubes that glowed like the fireplace tonight. You are covered in layers of clothing, sweaters, leggings, fur. Black woolen gloves are forced into your pockets and the tips of your naked fingers feel the cold inside. You are looking at the curve of the ocean, barely making out the waves at the curving line of the sky. It is endless and the winter birds splash in the sea wash beside the temporary sand edged with ice.

II. Mercury

A man who cannot lie and a woman who cannot tell the truth can cheat but they cannot get away. They meet several times each day in the sound of each other's voice, in the visible signature of the other's name, in the gaze of pain from the eyes of other lovers, children, friends who also bend their heads in the wind. It is cold beyond the window. It is warm somewhere inside. Late in the evening dinner is prepared. Loneliness is the lights of cars pulling in and out of driveways. Loneliness is the key turning in the lock of the door. The shower stall is lonely, the fork in the dish drain, the cigarette in the ashtray is alone. The taste in the mouth

mixes with the tongue. There is no home,
no old place, the bed is not prepared
for love. It remains exactly as it was
in the morning. It is the year of vast distance
and nothing can touch. The skin has been removed
and muscle tissue twitches in the cold night air.

III. Venus

There is the sound of steam
striking the metal bell of a radiator. The roar
of a jet overhead. The huge black television
stares back like an eye slit by a razor.
The huge black television stares back
like a withered penis devoured by a jackal.
The jackal stares with swollen eyes
seeking a kind hand to stroke the fur
upon it's belly.

IV. Apollo (the sun)

The light strikes a church
in Venice, riding on the water, an island
where the blood and stone feel the same
to the finger tips that grasp for some
surface, some place to rest. The air
is damp. The people circling the church
wave their cameras and speak
an unintelligible language.

V. Mars

And you and I
are walking on a street in Paris, returning
to the sound of African drums. Concrete barriers
define the street and all the shops are closed.
It will start to rain, the taxi circles
Nation. I see your naked back. The broken
window is lined with dark bottles of wine. The air
smells like candy.

VI. Jupiter

A black man carrying
groceries in a paper sack crosses Mass. Ave.
in the bright winter light. As the car
rides over the bridge we see the ice

on the water, rippled by the wind.
The match explodes and the nearly empty
pen balances on my bony fingers
like a plastic reed, hard, unbending,
insistent to perform the task it was
designed and manufactured to accomplish.

VII. Saturn

I take your nipple in my mouth and
listen to your moan. I cannot do
too much, I cannot love you too much, I cannot
sleep or stop or rest or finish singing
until the words are only humming sounds
and memory merges with forgetting. Somewhere
in my mind there is a record of every moment
I have ever lived and it is playing in a
theater near the border in a river town.
The projectionist is sleeping. The people
who wrote the songs are dead. There is a room
of LPs in a long gray box. They hold each other
up and the room is too dark for me to read
the tattered names along each spine.

6-8 January 1999, Providence

Moving Through February

1. Above Virginia

*Car elle est mon amour, et les autres femmes
N'ont que des robes d'or sur de grands corps de flammes,
Ma pauvre amie est si esseulee.
Elle est toute nue, n'a pas de corps - elle est troupe pauvre.*

Blaise Cendrars, Prose du Transsiberien et de la Petite Jeanne de France

The car rushes through the pre-dawn night.
The airplane rises into a path
over the ridges of western Virginia
green woody trenches shaped like sand
stretching to the haze in the north.
I am a small voice inside your head
analyzing the space between the layers
of cloud and the seam of coal beneath
the dirt. I am the beat, the tone and
timbre of the music playing in your ear.
I could cut you open to examine
the system at work, I could peel off
the aging skin beneath your eyes,
the bumps across your nose, the bone
beneath your chin could be inscribed
with Chinese sages climbing mountains
or German miners merrily chipping at the rocks.
Your sore and weakened chest could be buried in the sand
like a whale's carcass, exposed to wind and ice
until the air and skin are hard and sunlight glows
like fire burning where your lungs used to be.
Then you could use your hands to dig away the sand
looking for something beneath the face.
It is not still smooth water that you search through,
it is not a mirror of polished neolithic bronze,
it is not Italian glass with silver on the back
scraped off to form a Jewish star. I am talking to you
and I am talking to myself. I look across the reception
in a Washington hotel and see a man. He looks

just like me, the same head of hair,
the beard, the tie and jacket, he is holding the same
glass of wine, talking to the same stranger
I appear to be talking to. He introduces himself in French.
I ask you to tell me I am not insane, as the fiddle plays,
as I glide above the coal-rich hills
and fog snakes between the towns,
curling into lakes. We will pass plantation
ghosts, you will see the rivers that reach the
Mississippi, you will pass the plains of Texas dry and brown.
I'm knocking,
knock knock knocking,
knocking at your door.
Knocking like a pulse against the chest,
a bouncing bow against the fiddle string.
I'm knocking my finger against the guitar body
and this hit of human nail against the wood grain
resonates the skin, the surface of the earth.
I imagine your body in the shape of a flame
sheathed in the skin of a grinning brown bear.

10 February 1999, above Virginia heading west

2. The Tragic Woman Transformed

Her body is made of aged brown leather
inscribed with tiny Hebrew letters,
each minuscule carefully decorated
with a fine black crown. Her breasts
fall across each other as she lies
upon her side. She sits up and talks
in her sleep. Is she speaking to
her lover? They live in caves
dug out from the porous walls
that surround her, connected by tunnels
descending from the streets. She builds
the tunnels with her thoughts
and invites him into her life. And he tries desperately
to connect them all, to comprehend each sound
he thinks he hears, each word of love
or fury he remembers having said.

The air before dawn
forgives the anger of the day before
and she is transformed into a bird,
gathering soft objects for her nest,
placing nourishment into the mouths
of her children. She leaps up
from the bed and is on the balcony
folding back her wings
waiting for the Paris sun to rise.

16-17 February 1999, Paris-Amsterdam-London

3. The Nightclerk

The nightclerk is drowsy. He tears
the bill and fumbles with a piece of tape
to put it back together. He runs out
into the dark street to hand me back
the credit card. The taxi finds the airport.
It begins to snow. I rejoin
the crowds that travel before dawn,
sipping coffee and smoke, mouths
half full. Yesterday the train
was waiting across the platform
with open doors, as you commanded.
Each city is a movie set. Memories
are painted on the walls, the weather
is compared to the time in spring
when I waked along these canals
hoping to see you, running up steel steps
to a telephone, rushing from a meeting
to a station, sitting on the floor of a room
above the Dam, listening to your stories
and the carnival below. A bit of whiskey,
a cigarette to pass the time.
April rain has been replaced by a cold Dutch wind.
I shield my chest with a new leather coat. How the streets
of Paris change with every mood, the busy crowds
at La Republique go about their business
and each shop is a cabinet of wonders
collected by some master planner. How my eyes open
and another city invites me to read the signs.
I try to translate what I've said
before I close my eyes again.

17 February 1999, Amsterdam

4. Telecommunications

You have three telephones.

One is a blue cell phone.

It sits on the table of the room in the borrowed apartment
and vibrates while we make love.

You leave it on,
not to answer

but to record the message from the man you speak to by being absent.

This way you know he is calling.

You capture his voice asking for you,
registering displeasure that you are not there
to play back later.

The second is a gray portable that fits in a machine.

The machine greets the caller
and invite him to record a message.

It fits neatly in your palm and you can sit
anywhere, behind a door, on the balcony,
even by the bed and listen to the voice

or choose to speak. It rings
and you take it behind a closed door to speak to him.

He calls you from somewhere outside of Paris.

He doesn't need to ask you where you were
when you were not answering the other phone. Then hours later
when no one else would call,

when anyone would be exhausted from the actions of the day
it rings again and you leap to cradle it,

hold it in one hand and in the other place

a cigarette. No message could suffice,

no recording could convey the sound of someone else

in the apartment. There was something else he needs to know,

and again without a word he learns it through the phone.

The third is a white phone without a machine

that rings only when someone tries to locate you,

seeking to find out if you are not answering

the other phones. Its ring is insistent and loud, it doesn't stop

when a machine decides to stop. It stops when someone gives up

and cannot wait any longer. The phone of last resort,

the phone you told me I could use, the one you call me on.

On the floor of my hotel room I find
a red envelope the color of a valentine,
labeled "Eilige Nachricht/Urgent Message".
It is a fax you've sent because
there is no voice mail system.
I write you back: "I could not eat.
I became sick when I arrived here,
sick in my stomach, very tired, something in me is
both exhausted and upset. My eyes hurt. I did something very stupid,
trying to hook up my computer, used a knife to pry a phone connector
with a broken clip, and sliced my finger. I should learn to carry bandages
as well as my own shampoo. I should learn
to never use a knife when I am tired. My blood is red,
just like yours, even in Germany."
I plan to send it to you in the morning,
but before I get to bed
you call, you have made a connection
from your apartment to the room I am staying in
and invite me to remember with you
the bed where I was sleeping a short time ago.

As I board the plane in Frankfurt I stop to make a call.
Ten numbers written on a slip, a code to find the network,
eleven numbers to reach your phone, another fourteen numbers
to bill the call. Telephones are everywhere, like cigarettes. I talk
to the machine, first listen to your greeting, and then say
good bye.

23-25 February 1999, over the Atlantic en route to America-Chicago, Providence

Ashes and Steam

*"I'm living in the same time
with my dreams and with the reality....
Must I choose
between these two kinds of the way
I want to live?"*

I.

Blow smoke into my heart
and it will move
with the grace of a Viennese waltz
from chamber to chamber, beat by beat
like the gesture of hands
in an Elisabethan dance recreated
for the silver screen.
What love could learn
from pissing on a wooden post
a male or female gesture, letting go
a steady stream, steam
rising from the thirsty ground.

II.

Blow smoke into my heart and it will move
chamber to chamber
with the grace of a Viennese waltz, beat by beat
like the gesture of hands in a dance
recreated for the silver screen.
What love could learn
from pissing on a wooden post
a drunken male or female gesture,
letting go a steady stream, steam
rising from the thirsty ground.

III.

Blow smoke into my heart and it will move
chamber to chamber
with a waltzing grace, beat by beat
like the gesture of hands in a dance
recreated for the silver screen.

*What love could learn from such a sight
from pissing on a wooden post
a drunken gesture,
letting go a steady stream, steam
rising from the ground.*

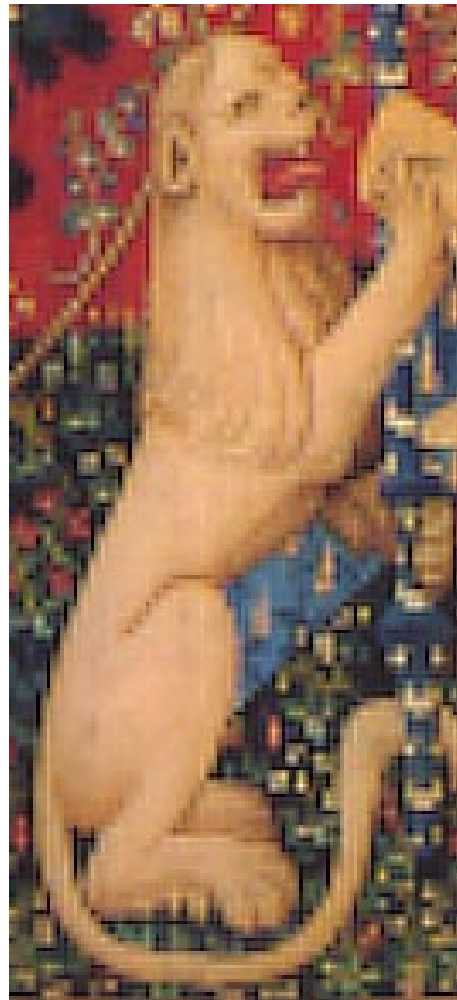
IV.

Blow smoke into my heart and it will move
chamber to chamber with a waltzing grace,
an archaic gesture of hands recreated
thirty-five very still frames per second.

In a bar the first night of our life
we did that with our hands.
They moved like puppets
caressing each other as I imagined lovers do.

What love could learn from such a sight
from pissing on a wooden post
letting go a steady stream, steam
rising from the ground.

*22 March 1999, On the back of a ticket envelope en route to Washington,
28 March 1999, Providence*



Sources

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Songs

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