

CHANCE MUSIC



CHANCE MUSIC
Prose Poems 1974 to 1982

Henry Rasof

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Henry Rasof
116 Monarch St
Louisville, CO 80027
(303) 664 0183
consultingeditor1@yahoo.com

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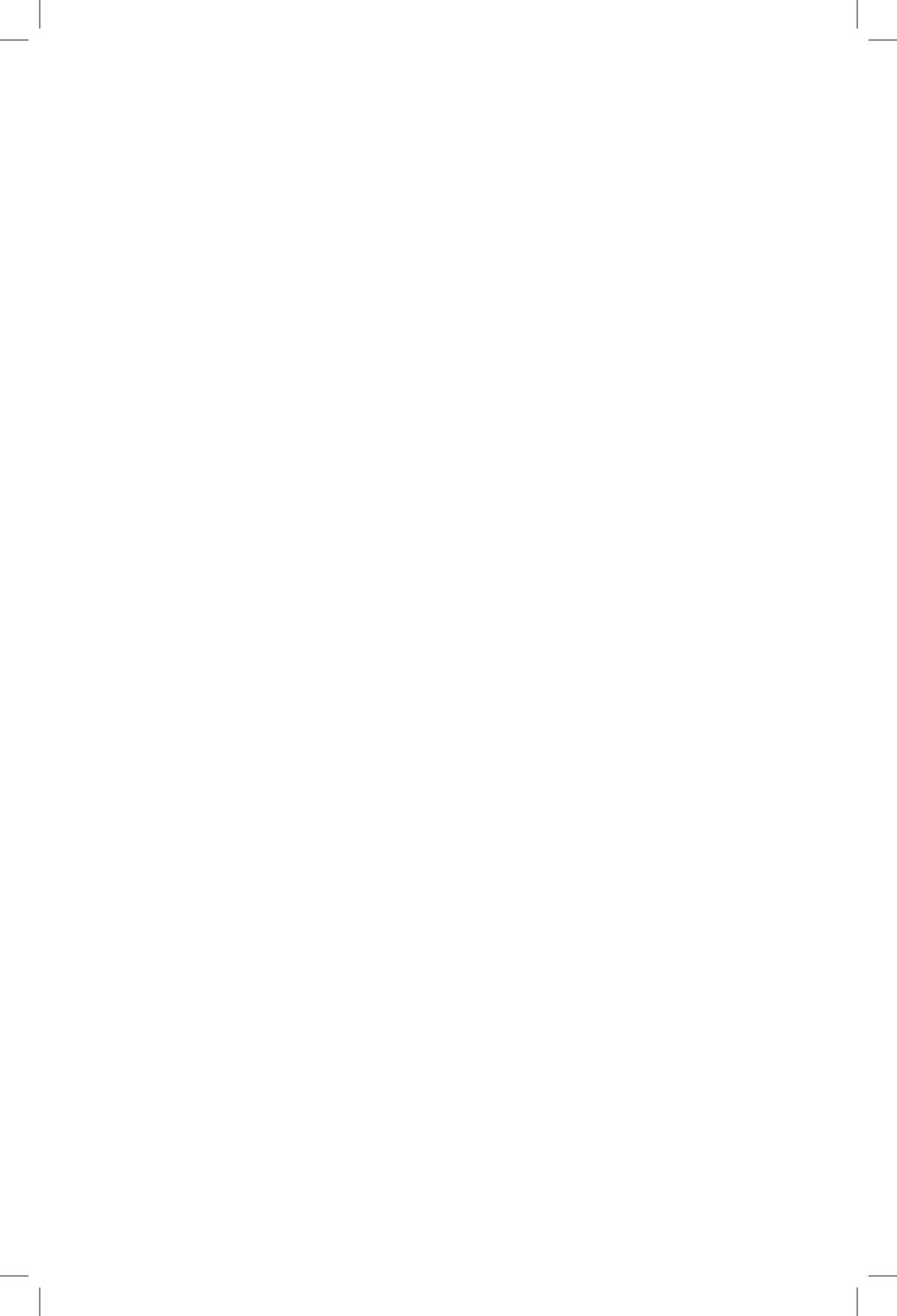
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THEORIES OF LIGHT



Metaphysics of Space

Space has five letters and a gold desk. Coins shuffle in its drawers. When a sad monk tries to fathom its depths all that happens happens underwater. During a blizzard an eclipse appears and empties the drawers of their mirrors. Only dreams remain.

The Rising Height of the Sun

At the wedding, where the bride's eyes grow wide with the dimensions of the altar, the bridegroom writes on paper already written on, allowing all that lives within them as passion to unite with a quiet wisdom. Longing for predawn light, she disturbs the silence and sees fields made fertile by the wholeness of the body. He is the bride's other, older self.

“Life’s Tilted Cup”

Could he have heard what the preacher said one day beneath the ivory crucifix?

He never glances hillward now. He has no fields of corn, no dreams to surmount midnight’s blackest span.

They brought him up with the saddle string. A feast was spread, for the magpies on the river bed.

Years passed. Everyone waved. He grew tall as an oak, wide as a bull, drunk as a drunken rape. Rabbits hide when he gallops into the rain, the moon, black across the intervening years, remaining beyond time and place.

The Most Important Thing

He heard her face harden, retreat into her imagination. Surely there had to be a way to outline the vague sensation of swollen eyes he always had after seeing her. He heard her hardening features recede into preoccupations with death.

Despite the ghostlike javelin set between her eyes, there was a sense of peace in the motion of her sleeping arms, inertness suggesting the serenity above timberline.

Out of simple desperation he avoided telling her about the photograph she never understood, and so her last call was not for help, but for es-

trangement; yet only insofar as one must assign a name to things.

The Missing Flower

At first her dreams were transcendent yet silent. But as the rewards and disappointments unfurled and the first fire went out, she undid her trunk and opened another door. Later she would say her dream of a white dance was her most precious souvenir.

She flooded the stage with an image more like a lily resisting a strong wind than like the dancer herself, which led her to remark that she would bolt to the end of life in a blinding flash of light.

Forsaking the extravagance and perversity of theatrical dancing she became the 'phosphorescent brilliance' of all Europe, a burning impress overgrown with tragic revelations. If in later years the old sentiments reeked of their exotic sources she could still give birth from her ribs to the humid longings of a nymph.

She justified her passing enchantments by returning to a simple, unhistorical world, forgotten in savage wines, grim branches, entire lines of slaughtered animals that once flourished in millions of grottoes, like flower points floating on a sea of color.

Even when she shot her eyes into the flickering crowds this woman in her blue eyes had a way about her that gave her entire being an aura like that of figures in Italian wall paintings. And when her apparitions, flashing across the Folies Bergère, united the mystical with the voluptuous she seemed to be chanting Mallarmé's unwritten masterpiece through the image of a dark angel, resplendent in the colors of the unconscious.

After the gem of romanticism was rescued and cut to the shape of her dreams, arbor after arbor of camellias was planted around her Salome, in memory of she who in this life called herself—and who may have been called—Loïe Fuller.

Farewell to the Hot Club of France

He shrank from sensuality. To each performance he brought glass dice, custom flowers for his partner. "After all," he would ask, "didn't the Greeks slay harbingers of bad news?"

The edge interested him, and surfaces generated by moving edges. With mysterious hesitancy he once remarked that "the era of summing up the past is here" and proceeded to make his dances no mere pretext for a story: No one could touch him as he hurried off stage to finish his rather unusual circular drawings.

Though all that remains is a nostalgia for the way his foot joined his leg there was a strong aesthetic attraction about him. Stravinsky himself was all smiles. "But why do you emphasize the inflexible limbs of the dancer?"

"Because the dream, sometimes so near, usually if not always inexplicably and completely fades after a while."

Lake Dwellers

She tries to smile: she may never see him again. He would have her smile at him unless she would have him go away forever. She would smile at him with her troubled piercing eyes.

Winter is over and the lake is again free to swim. The lake is free and across the lake something is waiting for him. She would smile at him for she fears the lonely spring and the lonely summer and then the winter. She would smile for him but can't. There was nothing there, ever, for her to smile about. She sees him swimming across the empty lake and goes back inside. He disappears at the end of the lake and she is inside alone. She would be by herself forever in this small cabin by the lake.

In this small cabin by the lake in the country she was living alone and did not want him back. She would not smile for him or at him she loved no one. She lived in her cabin under the pine trees by the cold lake. At night when she tried to dream there was nothing. She heard the branches scrape against the roof but she could not dream. She tossed and turned near the lake but she would not dream as she dreamed when young. He was across the lake waiting for something. He was sitting in a chair looking across the lake thinking about the cabin she was living in alone. He was thinking about his wife who would not smile.

At night near the lake in the moonlight she would lie awake listening to the trees scraping against the roof of the house. She could not dream and would never smile and did not sleep. Across the lake he would sit in his chair, thinking about the cabin across the lake and the woman he had called his wife but she was not sleeping and could never dream and was just listening to branches rustling and scraping against the roof of a little cabin under trees by a lake in the mountains. She was lying in bed and could not close her eyes and refused to smile and didn't dream either. All she could do was listen to the trees scrape against the roof of the little cabin that was now hers alone. She knew the sound of trees scraping against the roof of the house. The world was hard. All she would know was the scraping of the trees against the roof.

The Boxer and His Double

With each romance comes proper meaning, contentment where no prayer is possible. His kind of ending is to walk around a catastrophe and heave his thoughts into the center of the galaxy. In asylums, paper is creased, endlessly. No crowd can lift the boxer, wet like lovers' throats, out of exile.

Seasons on the Moon

In the courtyard, intermittent chatter. Someone draws the shades and enters a back room where music. A sense about it most athletes lack, scours the lake with applause. The crowd gathers, full of nostalgia, and so she lies around, worshiping a remote heaven. Huddling against rows of double feet, the athlete sings her swan song—sex, like a loaded gun, on her mind. As a ballerina exposes a pair of long, unreal legs the landscape begins to thaw. Confusing nevertheless are the latest stock quotations, which resemble seasons on the moon. She wants to ski, but the storm blows over an unplanned voyage.

Two Homages to the Art Critic Charles Baudelaire

1. The 1846 Salon

I understood the journey would be tragic, but I was concerned only with style. It was part of a violent, unpredictable philosophy: to live each year more dangerously than the one before.

The views were always beautiful as in Athens, which itself is the perfect place to abandon one's reputation and let go a streak of voluntary reflections on the state of the atmosphere.

First I would collect bags of paints, clothes old enough to wear to public meetings, musical ensembles capable of playing my favorite atonal music, and just enough foliage to lend a festive touch to the forgotten eloquence of the avenues.

Then I would look for subjects from faraway countries on whom to practice my travel lectures. It is of course all in the delivery, and a scintillating monotone was just the thing to drive home my abusive diatribes on the evils of progress; my sanctions bored them to tears.

One day I walked into any public place and gave my equivalent of a series of nervous daguerrotypes of celebrated amnesiacs, when I lost control of my limbs and caused the audience to see a train full of dead and wounded soldiers, returning from the East. As the crowd applauded and subsequently began to thin, the whole vast, undulating apparition lodged itself in my brain at the speed of a bullet. I was carried away suffocating in a mountain of pink carnations, the ultimate show of appreciation a country can display toward a departing foreign dignitary.

2. Delacroix, after Baudelaire

Who is Delacroix? What is the aspiration of his conclusions?

As in a Buddhist ritual, where the sound of woodblocks permeates the air with transformative austerity, his “work” embodies a grand sense of what is not. By always seeming to forget itself, it lacks the secondary *appareil* of work.

Determined to find the sources of the visible in rapid-fire contradictions, his paintings demand permission to call their viewers by names found in no dictionary: One time, one time only, an ancient music, played with an obscure futility, rings through the cheeks of his women.

Who is the painter? One claps, one chants in language one does not understand. Quietly sitting, one holds one’s hands and breathes.

River People: Homage to René Char

The vanishing sun leans over
a cliff
to watch the children whose revealed love is a road
plummeting into the haunts of snakes. In the forest, where a chrysalis
turns its clear face into a marching in my bones, my sister moves
past her sister past ceremonies of choking animals. My sister, and her
sister, during the rainy season, far into winter.
One measures enigmas,
by the closeness of their contours, by the angles be-
tween lovers
without love, using a bottle of imperceptible sadness. In a few
moments the quality that makes eternity seem tragic becomes a simple
drunkenness, even for lovers; and my sister, and her sister, turn
over in the sun. A butterfly flies somewhere,
at the angle of
incidence from which
no backward glance is possible.

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Chance Music

At the heart of the *I Ching* is a region whose terrain we do not know. Except in rare moments of imaginative daring we have denied ourselves permission. To enter, unhesitatingly, the sound of a flame-wood lamp, we must wash our wings, mount our chosen steed, follow the tracks of shooting stars.

There seems no connection with our world, no logic but that of accident following accident until the sound of a key turning in a lock in a faraway room can be heard and discerned from similar acts, then placed in some sort of context. The fish are thick with rage. In our turn some of us will have to forgo the long-awaited cup of tea for a long white corridor. The starvation conditions of overenthusiasm and faith occult the portals of truth. Nonetheless, the ancient-burning spark looms in full view like a ship ready to disappear into the ocean during a brilliant summer.

No, the *I Ching* is a solid companion to both the corner druggist and the sherpa. In turning our heads for an instant, the contrast between a cow and a wild duck grows faded and more apparent: a crane calls in the shade and we answer. Though we keep still and allow our thoughts to seek their own level, this is no serendipity. Just as a cubist sculpture cuts through many planes of perception and the *I Ching* incorporates, after three thousand years, the latest developments in quantum mechanics, so must we accept the connection between fifty yarrow stalks and the intensity of our laughter. Thunder brings about movement. When Guillaume de Machaut was born, about 1300, France was at war with England.

We walk through the snow, but the snow is simply the place we meet. No one could predict the fate of the next hundred years. I almost fall down. I leave and open the door. Things seem arbitrary. Like the color of milk. Why is it white? If no answers are forthcoming, it is because a point is always oblique. Sudden attacks of pellucid thoughts leave pools of dangerous obstacles, on which we thrive. Lacking meaning, one compensates by making sense. One tries making sense and fails. Teeming with both wandering joys and violent storms we sense something but are not ready to articulate it. Machaut, in allowing his structures to follow their own rather than

purely textual limitations, demands the most scrupulous attention to his detailed observations of the fruits of grace.

As for the *Book of Changes* I rarely if ever talk about it directly: too much open discussion may weaken its effectiveness. For example, many Native Americans use a “fake” name and never reveal their “real” name. A fire on a mountain cannot be extinguished except through hard labor, but when the fire travels one must be prepared to follow; and when it dies, one must die with it. However, realize that the value of a painting doesn’t always go up in time. The moth fly, shooting through the air, lands on a leaf, checks its drone, then drops its head and falls to the ground. Such is death these days. And such is the fate of those who charge for the future when the past is in such bad straits before even leaving the present. During Machaut’s lifetime the popes lived in Avignon, but French sacred music was intense and developed; at sixty, he fell in love with a teenage girl.

It is an amazing love. They meet twice, and once he kisses her in church, between two pillars. Like butterflies clinging to new leaves we cling together, and the more aware we become of the house we live in, the more accurate the picture the *I Ching* can depict. Even if none of the choices before me is the proper one to make, if I were an old man I would not hesitate to win my woman.

The sun moves lower and lower. The long darkness of winter can be felt through the paragraphs. Slowly turning around, I begin to realize that good things usually happen when one’s back is turned. Already I can feel a difference. A streak is in the eastern sky: a skylark shapes its dappled wing.

Movement Underwater Brings No Grief

A door slams, and suddenly I am terrified. It is nothing I have ever experienced; but more than that it is what I have prayed for for a long time. Farther along, down the road, men cut trees. For that reason grief is but another harmless rumor. We all know the story, how despite various scientific feats the skies grew darker until it was too late for the audience to break into applause. And so the answer was obscured in opposites.

The Pure and the Real

When Buddhists bend their heads their troubled minds are cleared.
When they dance, their bright-yellow robes cover their emotions.

Ideas disappoint me. Compared to water, which makes everything slick and spreads as far as a landscape will allow, ideas are a layer of pebbles at the seashore. Dust cut from granite nourishes appearances into realities.

The beaches are black; your ankles flower. When I am asleep I stretch alongside your immaculate naked body like a lavender skyline. I had too much freedom before meeting you: I had never touched a king.

Hall of Gems

Although ready to lower my voice and submit to anyone who has never touched a door I avoid ignoble pleasures. Sadness echoes off a bottle. In the nearly imperceptible quiet that lately has been making its presence felt, a promenade of ancient races savagely smashes itself to a pulp against turning doors. Along the edges a momentary flow and hesitation I fear will never
end.

Apocrypha: A Quirk of Fate

One day I took off my glasses and beheld the world as it is, a new world, what it always was, what it never was. There was a mild euphoria, as I took in the sides of vision I had not seen since I was five, that perhaps I had never seen. And the world that was, that seemed as if it had always been, became a story, to tell my friends.

I felt strange, as when in a fever everything is out of focus. All that was was a general outline, a sense of shapes, of forms moving into other forms, without distinctions from one another. As the world became vague I ran out to greet and be greeted by my friends and found the world warm and soft, not altogether unbelievable, separated as I was from it by my vision.

The story, as I began its telling, was long and detailed, and I told it over and over. But it was not my story, my own story, nor mine to tell, though I was telling it anyway. It was a familiar story, one told before, though not necessarily the same story.

Unable to see me clearly my friends drew near. Unable to see my friends as they drew nearer I let go my eyes and watched my friends interact with one another and with the story as it was being told, the story of a story being told, of seeing in a new kind of way, of friends drawing near, and nearer, to me, to see me, to see me seeing them, if in fact I was seeing them at all, for me to see them, as they were seeing me. I watched something detach from myself, detached from myself, as something detached from myself, as I detached from the world, detaching my self from myself and from the world, detaching from the world I had created, or at least always known, and always, so it seemed, seen, or not seen, however you look at it, entrusting it to my friends, whom I no longer could see as I had seen them, as it were. But because it was not my story, my own to tell, I let it all go. I let go the story and threw away my eyes, again and again, until I entered the world, the same world that was, but this time through another entrance. Then I relaxed my hold on my friends, and they came to me, closer than ever before.

As it was, as it never was, I threw away my glasses and by a quirk of fate saw into the patterns that hold us as we are, make us what we are, hold us in and to who we are, contain us in our

vessels, that contain the vessels. And the patterns were full of light, and of darkness, the one generating the other, out of the other: sounds becoming sights and a power between all things, between all living things, between earth and plant, plant and human, star and firmament, between energy and matter, between all that exists, that has ever existed and will ever exist, though not necessarily in its present form. I saw the sides of my vision, that I had not seen since I was five and was five again, and the sight that was, was good. I beheld the world, and the world, as it was, as it is, was good.

Poem with Shape

The image blurs, the city behind me. Emerging from a forgotten child,
coughing on the street; I am slowly succumbing to the world.

There's something I want
to remember. Each day it is ready to leap off my tongue: "You'll live
to bury us all," said a poet, to no one in particular.

It's beginning to be
rainy again. The holocaust goes answered, even by the most all-em-
bracing of us, because in truth there is no cause to anything. But alas,
nothing is more than a slice, composed for the instant, to applause:
like being in a real wood, by a real lake, looking at the sun; everyone
will return, someday, if only for a minute. Yes, it is.

Blurred, the image
grows sharp. We are young, so there will be other times to remember
our treasures, as treasures to remember. I sleep: there is nothing.

I want to remember.
My hands take shape in sleep; a body, rising, plods about, looking for
something. Yet it is here, all of it, as it appears. Even so, to convince
myself rain is a good way to stop a holocaust, I try to remember
something—dense like banana trees in twilight. Child coughing in
street. Nothing comes to anything. Along the edge we slide, listening
to sirens, pushing against traffic,

Something

The Long Rest

You have no vantage point in time
from which to flay the fate the heavens hoard against your will. You
are part of rain and candlelight: ineffable.

It is incredible that life should know
oblivion—if it does—the way a mole knows earth. And surely it is
terrible how the white blue-veined trillium finds a strange peace in
your hair the color of buckwheat honey I love to braid whose damp
fragrance I love to breathe.

Now you step back a little to one side
and unbuckle your sandals, as if to signify that tomorrow's dawn
once again will lie heavy on our lids.

Preamble

Our history, noble and tragic, is like a walk through a turning point in time. I'll translate: My first movement is behind me, the future on the left. Even without new clothes I am a good listener.

Each morning I assemble my day. Where can I go? After the sound of a distant flute? To the family estate? No one is there. The front line? "Know neither grief nor the other." I am protected. Seeing people born, I touch them.

Prison

From houses I have lived in, where the flaming meridian sun now floods surfaces with reflected darkness, I hear clear fire burning in the essence of all things, so that one day language in the old sense, in our sense of the word, may be the harvest that everywhere holds men and women to themselves.

End of an Era

Who is to say that love produces life,
or that in setting fire to a lock of hair it wouldn't be better simply to
raise my glass and salute the beginning of spring?

Sometimes I wake up, not because I
want to, but when the clock next door chimes twelve. Then I dive into
a deep lake, on whose surface swims an intense, empty profundity.
Something is always disturbing me. Obscure purity. A veil of regrets.
Rather life with its waiting rooms than ballet with its audience of
crickets. Rather life like a virgin passport than an illusion of vespers.
Gide said: "I wish to disrupt harmonies, wherever they exist."

The sun in the lovely garden
pierces the golden clouds, throwing my face into a strange relief. I
no longer can stay awake. A train enters the tunnel. I could be on
that train, shooting through echoes of infinite transparent vegetation,
luggage filled with sand, not my own.

Arriving on a lost beach
I would again raise my glass and, on a long stairway whose
movement over the waves is filled with the perfume of a formal
sorrow, salute the end of an era.

At the Dock

I sit on an edge and watch
the sailboats go by, going by, as if on an ocean, any ocean. But there is
no ocean, isn't any ocean. Yet my eyesight is poor, very poor. And yet
I never sit, never. But what edge? Which edge?

But what edge, jutting out of a line
meeting a line, from a line, the angle of the word as it joins its
meaning, a meaning, sometimes the meaning, an only meaning,
meaning, the intersection of a meaning and its sound, or meanings
and sounds, meaning and a sound: meaning and sound? Sound. The
rhythm of meaning, as it goes by, as if on an ocean of sound, as if a
sailboat going by.

Everything is connected anyway.
My friend opens cans all day anyway. She tries to open her hands and
say something. My friend plies me with suntan lotion. It's a hot day:
It's going to rain. Now it may rain. And my eyes are red. Red eyes.
Red eye. But she's waiting. Yet she is smiling, and laughing. She sees
me. And I hear her. But when was I? Where was I yesterday when
after looking for something I thought I had lost then found, I saw her,
standing on the corner and without an edge?

Where was I. This voice, this sublime
passion, so rude, so laughable, leaning into every weekend with a
rare exultation drawn from forces deep within my imagination. Yet
she was all this and more. Yet she was there, to be sure, smiling. And
I don't really know her. I don't even know her. Yet her hair is wet and
salty.

But it's time. And it's time. It is time.

The Theatre

The chair
is yellow, and yellow as it is, with grey scratches, is an interesting
chair.

The floor
is gray, and the bits of metal, pressed into the carpet. Behind me,
the posts. My shirt is pink. The ceiling is blue, and the ocean, here,
in front of me, near my house which is brick red, brick. But my eyes
are brown, brown. The world isn't flat, any longer, no longer and the
telephones are black; black. And the limousines. The shoes on 42nd
street.

The chair.
As I said, the yellow chair, here, with grey scratches. Signs
everywhere flash: exit, no exit, exit, no exit, intermission, smoking, no
smoking, smoking, no exit, exit. But the lights. And the small amount
of fun I am having. A neat kiss before dinner. A hand in mine. My
hand in yours. The floor still gray. All ways.

Fifth Daughter

There is no reason for my presence. My arms fall to earth. Higher up is a fire of burning oak. Imagine the prison has an echo and the staircase steep to all who suffer when the sweating body torn from sleep howls with rage at the departed form of darkness.

Yet iron and brass fill the shoals with a sacrificial grief. In the portals of burning cedar a tribe of women starves to death. On known rivers, garlands of grape. On the village doors axes cross points and men without limbs worship the ocean.

One woman, returned from the mountains, threatens the ranks with her great strength. She raises her clear, high voice and orders the tumult to cease, for the soldiers to hurl themselves off cliffs. Fields of dark, ripe wheat quiver in the deliberate sunlight; the earth throws up the dead. Mind transforms nothing. Old women are no longer women, nor old men men. A slaughtered deer is no longer a deer.

Wherever my presence dwells, rivers overflow, lives are put at my disposal. Imagine a prison. I plan no careful overtures to spread throughout the world. I recognize the edges of leaves, turn doors, and whisper into casks of new wine. Redwood garnishes the paths I follow.

Neighbor Pierre

The experience of marble is like that of virgin flesh. A woman enters my house, clutching her forehead. She is wearing a simple blue skirt; she has a small face. She is coming toward me and has just passed the almond trees. I open my arms,

In the half-light of the moon she is superb-looking, like a male peacock spreading its tail in full sunlight on a white field. Her robe leaves nothing to the imagination, and so the day passes, after a slow beginning, full of careless satisfaction.

In a full, billowing skirt, a young woman comes to me. Everywhere, as if in the final emotion of a first awakening, the sky seems to flow into her legs. She lands in a flower bed. No one sees her pass the vineyard. The cold marble feels hot.

Two scenes come to mind: one of rustling palms under an ominous sky, lilies bursting into flames on streets cobbled with odd-shaped marble wedges; the other of daylight exploding through my house during a thunderstorm. Naked in full sunlight the girl, looking out the window at the roses, strikes the perfect pose for my fantasy. Suddenly the room becomes invisible, filling with fine green dust. We speak quietly in French. Her accent is flawless, as if she were French, or had been raised in the best sections of Paris. The doors have been closed to protect her from the heat. Standing before her, both of us motionless, I admire her breasts, and the Picasso-like colors of her light print dress. She averts her gaze across the courtyard, then turns to me in the half light of afternoon.

Three women turn to me. The dense birch thicket in the part cuts out most of the light, so I cannot distinguish their faces. There are no shadows or strong contrasts between the woman and the trees. The sky is on the right, the river on the left. One woman wears impeccably tailored clothes—wool and silk, perhaps a two-piece suit or even an evening gown. She is smoking and whispering to her friends. “The important thing is to envelop objects in a heavenly and delicate haze which bathes both light and shadow, effaces solid angles, and by its scented spell imposes upon the restless mind a variable rhythm whence it may fall to dreaming.”

There is a knock at the door. The maid answers, and from the

corner of my left eye I see a woman, about thirty, enter, wrapped in a voluminous black mantle. Her body is excellently proportioned. In fluent English she asks the maid for the address of a certain local painter.

“Ah,” she exclaims, “is this the house?”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” the maid replies.

“Monsieur, monsieur!” she yells, when she sees my head poking through the door. She runs to me and starts speaking in broken French.

My lover, Françoise, interrupts the conversation. “The moon is full tonight, so we must pose for each other. We must not let the daylight interfere, though it will try.”

“What does it mean?” the girl asks Françoise, who has put on a fresh white skirt and blouse. I answer that every nuance, every change of color throughout the year is part of a vast and lovely, unknowable cycle. She approaches me, effacing her smile long enough to pose once more in anger. The beaded necklace is now on her right wrist.

After a short struggle I lay the limp body on the canvas and cover it with a thick layer of sky blue until her body is floating like a buoy. It looks like a cumulous cloud. “If only slabs of marble would float too,” I mutter. My wife is pleased. Françoise smiles and splashes me with her hands and feet, like a little girl learning to swim but more interested in playing. I close her eyes with my fingertips, cross her arms over her chest, and push the little girl away, far away, into the horizon, all the while remembering my first time with her, at eighteen, and the feel of her arms around my waist as I move toward her, from the opposite direction, from the other side of the world, turn on the light in the studio, and call the maid to fix dinner for one.

At the Opera

What ever happened to the sixties, to struggles along the edge of night as a young and restless world turned? For ten years I danced in green and yellow rooms. Now I live alone in dying embers of a redwood forest, watching the history of the human heart unfold in piles of discarded, unused hands on wet black bitter earth.

Blue Four

I saw not the music in the cave, quivering. The boat fell out of my hat
and I did not see it. Flying over a lake
a priest threw out a parcel of water. Yet the same thoughts
always pass by. The moment
of
truth is
inevitability.

Meditation

Aunt Jane says my nonsense is flagging. Anyway I'm nuts: I can't even hold my shoulders upright. Taking from this and that isn't money in the bank, either. My eyes aren't so good anymore. Pills are my thing, problems of the heart, old movies no longer silent. May I see you today, say at eleven? Is this senseless, like murder followed by decapitation? No worse I suppose than people complaining chokers are illegal. Murder never was, at least

with our kind.

LAKES OF THE CLOUDS



Lakes of the Clouds

I

To what parents do we aim wet fingers when another month passes and thoughts turn to green woods and white water? A woman dies but the wind holds as the boat fights a way into hills of burning cedars.

From broad plains to the smallest spider imaginable climbing over tundra to embrace the dew the eye misses nothing to which it turns: follow the sun around the world and the ancient ways you claim to follow decompose under your feet.

II

Who has died? Our mothers, whom we fought along flooding streams, think only of the way in which our boat passes over rivers like wet fingers. The shapes dissolve, leaving white clouds puffing out of some old part of us, forming in the valleys then rising out across the horizon but never succeeding in changing the way the dead woman thinks of white cedars and her mother. Rivers descend from the sun. Your father calls out his name to you and we flip the calendar page to October. It is, however, not a special month after all. There was only one death, and no funeral.

Miracle

Painters sing of immense fields of new-mown hay; of lampshades, torn but charming; of petrified wood found the world over. Examine collections of perfume bottles while musicians break their legs listening to the birds of the world; to ancient volcanic explosions. Wear long fingers of pleasure. Inexpressible promise circles the ground until all that remains: a basket piled high with olives.

Rondo

Six floors of passion support a teapot. Imagination lives between cracks. In a dreary age, everyone talks about Eve. Bells have their own poetry; music is the confinement of history to the ear.

Full of ointments, astrologers prattle their sympathies the way strong tea runs down stairs after stolen blessings. If treaties are meant to be broken, why do churches peak in a crest of joy when their keepers sleep with angels? I pray for Aunt Jane. Ellen harks and harks until the shameless immoral story of my life grabs her and shakes her intelligence for all it's worth.

My feet ache again. Ellen cherishes my split personality as if she's Horowitz playing Scarlatti. Vinyl won't fade, sure, but bright rubber rooms are better for newlyweds. History waves trembly fingers everywhere.

Intermission nears

End of Silence

The outline of a skyscraper offers sublime hardiness. Bursting with enthusiasm the windows announce themselves over the rhythms of the foundation. Those trying to disrupt the tableau by linking arms with a proffered sort of geniality meet the triangular plaza of sexual beauty near their self-portraits in black wax. Fondling one another in the crowded pavilion, models recite, pretending to be in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "Nature is a vast dictionary on which to roll and consult oracles with an eye on the profound. There are no conclusions, no incomplete misunderstandings, no remote histories if we dismiss the doomed darkness of necessity from the necessary notions of precedence. The unthinkable option of suicide is ridiculous."

Beyond the Horizon

Surrounded by arms and separated by breath from a remote country
I am unknown, held in some angular moment by imagination
surrounded by soft arms. A woman embraces me and holds up her
son—all these years of division. Our relationship was never solved.
We chose to remember the only thing of importance in the way we
held each other's breath, unknown to ourselves, even to ourselves, in
a moment without power.

Testament to Grey

In the music is a sad sense of waiting, an illusion of exact facades, trembling in the sky.

Neither a recurring language nor irrational chatter, it is more like a man, for no reason at all, playing the guitar; or like two women playing checkers on two checkerboards, talking about him.

One woman, seductively extending a thigh, directs a visitor's gaze to the left side of the table as a violin fingerboard interrupts the evening quiet. When certain moves are attempted, there is confusion and the man looks as if the checkerboards are overlapping or the other woman is pulling taut the skin around his eyes.

Seen from the perspective of the man at the door the guitarist seems to rise up awesomely behind the women. The effect is highlighted by the way some of the lights appear to grow brighter. "Everything all right?" he asks.

At times the checkerboards coincide with the guitar atmosphere, which seems to underlie everything, ruffling the dank air like a Spanish dancer. Then the wallpaper, formerly white, acquires designs, after which the man at the door—asleep in the posture when he first knocked—the man at the door asks the host to serve dinner. "Only after the guitarist resins her bow and takes off her dark glasses."

Large silver trays, stacked with mounds of yellowish-brown rice the color of decaying teeth, are brought out to the accompaniment of the violinists. One of the women, a black checker in each hand, joins in with a song, while quietly around the corner her double strolls up and down the room, flashing her thighs so that one violin looks lighter in color than the other. Meanwhile, everyone is eating dinner with enormous relish, dying to be the first one finished.

One man who cannot wait asks the host again to turn down the radio. Thereafter an argument ensues between the two men, causing one woman to knock on the door, dropping a red checker.

But when the hostess calls from her chair that no one is home, at that moment the silence, dropping over the room like a parachute, is unbearable.

Cult of Kali

The blissful life has a technical as well as an eternal name, a relationship between power and exhilaration. Small reddish signs appear like soft hairs sprouting from dried bamboo leaves. When one commits suicide as a victim of beauty no beauty is ever so dimmed.

Beating the Dog

In severely abstract forms there is a stark engineering.
Sometimes it is necessary to extenuate the circumstances.
Max Jacob said to release a breathtaking grandeur.
Whatever he was reading was a good place to begin.
Even when fear took his wind there was a chilling devastation of truth
and beauty, the grimy sort of haste that wrecks reality.
Still he could linger forever immune to romance.
Innocence was the best investment. Better than a textile museum.
Max Jacob changing his mind said a rationale underlies all art,
even the art of circumstance. "There is no message to make succinct,
no experience of definition."
Only surgery.
And idols without heads.

Pillar of Light

Watch the tall woman whose plays obsess the dreams of autistic children, the woman who's a man when lights dim. Aim for her—or his—small white square. Laugh through your beliefs the way starvation pushes through the navels of sickly children. Raise your eyes from that steep forward motion along the surface of the earth and show the judge that prison is no illusion. Then raise the beam and forget any luminous ideas you might have. Serve no meals, pass no drinks; the end is near. The one dancer who always is dizzy and hangs over the ledge of his fathers moves out of her square with feline precision, guided by the movements of the planets. "It is night," the legendary Greek chorus sings to the departing audience.

Art of Dance

To dance correctly with any partner requires not only knowing the steps and having a sense of rhythm but being able to pace oneself according to a felt sort of luxury—an inclination of the head, usually—as if the body, in responding to another body, always automatically adjusts to, and complements, that of the partner. The left foot is extended, then the right, then the body is advanced. Finally the arms are raised and the forms, drawn to one another by the sheer delight of wandering through an easy literature of mutual admiration, entangle in a vernacular revolutionary mirth.

A Delicate View of the Steeple

Our rage is the trance of the seventies. Night after night the hum of a perfect relationship can be heard over the sound of hammers. Hiding in a garden without rain we expose the dark mist of our souls. Tables and chairs, blurring together in general weariness, lie on their sides, gathering dust.

NORTH-SOUTH GAME



Miramar

At night I often hear a voice reaching out of the wilderness, out of the silence forced upon the room by the directionlessness of my thoughts, a voice that seems to come off a page written in a barely translatable language, decorated with a black rose attached to a mysterious sentence, intricate with nuances of punctuation and turns of speech, resembling a photograph of an ancient pathway to heaven. Then you come with the tea and we sit, facing each other, quietly chatting before going to bed. There is none of that old arbitrariness in your movements: They are smooth and deliberate, as if controlled by a single, devoted, and focused thought.

Though I have been reading the lore of ancient books over the years, and within me feel that somewhere is the author of that lore or that I am or will be part of it, I still am forced to ask, over and over as in a mantra, why is the Way so remote, of which they speak, in their roundabout fashion? And why were some of the old sages distracted from the cyclical transformation everywhere present in daily life, into the remote science of preparing elixirs? The rain that today floods the streets and tomorrow flows into the sea will next year fall over a faraway mountain range and bury everything in sight. Each day something we sense sinks into us only to be transformed into a consoling or sustaining feeling, else how could we go on through that which moment by moment seeks our end? But must I sit all night in a simple hut, dreaming of immortality, instead of coasting in a cozy bed next to a beautiful woman from one pleasure to the next, and during the day when others are at the market, working, or raising children must I be like the crazy old men who tried to sprout feathered wings so they could rise weightlessly in flight?

Breaking through the mind reveals vast emptiness containing the weirdness of everything that happens, as it happens, only once, the way it happens, in a lifetime, as we know it. One night in my sleep I touched a white tower growing out of an immortal tomb. Yet that world comes and goes in its own fashion, now leaving the taint of luxury, now a strange seashore among trees, on the outskirts of the city.

Naked I ran, over shells and pebbles, searching for insoluble stones, for an original wisdom unfettered by the imagination of others, for a paradox unlike the empty space that everywhere seems to invade our speculations and so foolishly forces us to lie down at the end of each day and absorbs us, leaving our bodies in variously contorted positions like victims on a battlefield. Then I approached the dark side of the moon.

Attending toward unfoldment, a process of thinking, forms. At first people grow restless, then hungry, slightly bloated, and weak, then emaciated and overflowing with visions and delusions; finally they swell into nothingness. In this territory the handiwork of the sun is self-evident in the landscape of bones that lie scattered like slivered almonds in the parks everywhere. O unreal fire of days blackened by the absence of love. Hours spent traversing the villas of the mind, looking for the one I own but have never occupied. Thoughts leaning against one another, leaping around the inner sanctuary of the soul, trying to break in and envelop the blue and silver ocean in an oppressive palette of horizons. Lost again, I try to remember the rustic exit by which to escape the tenantless house and join my friend in summer, in the forest.

Is this, then, the roundabout way in which I must search for a way to contain the raging fires lest they consume my individuality amidst the dizzying heights of an unreal tower? Is there no other way to escape the ensuing famine but to flee? No longer can I enjoy simple pleasures as I used to, or the old-fashioned devotional passages in a religious poem, but must begin to admit that what I once thought of as a story in itself, a complete story, is only the interior landscape of a pure poet, daydreaming and clamping onto objects and fragments hanging all about like bits of ribbon in a ribbon factory, and that instead of a predetermined end there are many ends, some determined but others led astray by the forces of chance sewn into the very fabric of the process of narration itself, or else allowed to fall here and there between otherwise sensible thoughts.

Literature of Mountains

In the north, where the film of life is thin and highly vulnerable, winters are brutal yet full of a beauty as subtle as the language of whiteness is diverse, a sensation of warmth emanating from the permafrost.

There is no *where*, when year after year a nightless succession of visions leads to a limitless horizon over which ships move a cargo of whispered secrets to the unreal scaffolding of cities.

A Sustained Tone, Jumping in Place, Colliding with a Friend, and so on

Near the San Andreas fault the earth bulges. No one lifts a finger, the weeks miles apart from one another, highly evocative images.

In a culture of homes bleached by years of scrubbing, a forest with more natural struggles. Between connections we grow old, older, part of buildings moving by as we move by silent, silently every hour ordinary.

As if nothing happened so long ago, designs form out of a tendency toward decay, terraced fugues, hints of things to come.

Search for Survivors

It is being lost in Death Valley. Too anxious to seek an exclamation you step over the threshold into an abysmal chaos only to discover a white angel whose incredibly soft body just is. Having waited long enough for your father, for the romance you always seem to miss, you remind me with your look of the way two hills at night sometimes seem inseparable. Still there is something almost sordid about the way you love to walk in the forest from which only you know the way home. Who will know when you are gone? Who will point to the haze that settles at dusk and acknowledge the enormous life lived among the balconies of New York?

Mediterranean Sunlight

Everything is enmeshed with arid regions. Yet the vertical lines in Mondrian allow us the same miles of arduous meditation as the horizontal lines extending through long nights of inner clarity watching ships disappear into the vanishing point. We go for a run and watch the jagged edges take on the angular shapes of ourselves. Like an act of passion, the reward returns us to the world before it was justified, then

cut in half.

The Scrupulous Grace of Winter

We walk through the snow, but the snow is simply the place we meet. Ready to slide into the next hundred years, an ancient-burning spark looms into full view like a ship ready to disappear into the ocean during a brilliant summer.

To compensate we try making sense but cannot articulate the connections with our world. Accident follows accident until the sound of a key turning in a lock in a faraway room is heard and distinguished from similar events, placed in some sort of context.

In this region we do not know a crane calls—through the thickness of rage—but we answer anyway, with the scrupulous grace of winter. Thunder brings about movement.

The Visitor

High in the blue lawns of air a voice appeared, and a face like a rare orchid. A strange and haunting music came to me, and I found myself entering another world.

In the pearl light of dusk he looked like a lantern fish shimmering in the depths of the ocean. I continued walking, lost in rapt contemplation. He said, "Stay here among the jasmine, build a goldfish pond, watch the scarlet shapes glide beneath the lilies, their masked faces like the faces of masked dancers in a supernal drama of apparitions."

Seeing the forest changing from green to blue, I grew afraid and decided to leave, saying, "I am filled with rage and sadness at the thought of leaving this beautiful world, but I cannot sleep with my back to the sun."

"These are my gardens," he said, his clothes fluttering about him as if a wind were blowing. "If you stay, together we will glide over the pale grass as if on air, into other worlds, where music is a scent of lilac, a red coral mountain."

Soon I was running for the green lace of tamarind trees where the worlds interpenetrated. A wild torrent flooded me and spun me around, and with a reckless and magnificent gesture he forced himself on me; but I broke free, calling on a wild and untamed force within.

From outside the lace of trees his eyes glittered, red rimmed and half closed, like precious stones in the circular darkness. Something in me, dry and narrow, opened up, becoming a vast, immeasurable gulf. High in the blue lawns of air a voice appeared, and a face like a strange orchid.

Then it was gone.

The White Dog

Her eyes were hot rivets. As the waves rubbed against her legs, as the mist hissed on her tawny whiteness, she tried to remember where she came from. She was only a dog, but in her was an ancient anger. Her teeth were knives, she was mean, she attacked lonely sailors on the docks. When she yelled she swelled like a man bitten by a cobra. Men passed her often, in the dark alleys over the years. At night she paced the planks, ripping at legs, men turned away when they saw her lurking behind the powder kegs. Sometimes they fought her on the new snow, the whiteness shining like porcelain on their dark faces. One spring the sailors were trying to board a home-bound ship when the white dog tried leaping through a porthole, missed, and slipped into the ocean.

Three Stories

the crops were not ready. The bamboo clumps and thatched roofs were turning brown. All day a girl sat by the fields, hearing voices wafting over the long rows of rice. She sang to the voices, stirring her tea with a finger, cool tea, long, thin finger growing from long, thin hand, attached to long, thin arm. Waiting for the mist, with its foretaste of rain.

Across the plain ran a road. On the road a procession of cars, carriages full of fresh-looking, beautiful girls, going to the mountains. Everyone was drinking tea, eating green vegetables and steaming rice. And there was laughter.

They waited

The House in Vermont

Her hat is in ruins. With deliberate cruelty she lets herself go; her hat wraps about her ears as if she alone were experiencing winter. Los Angeles teaches her to build soft stone pyramids and how to adjust reality to circumstance: Only in her pride does love seem apparent. The ruins under her hat are immense; the moon guards her sexuality, for her lovers lack continuity the way her nakedness gives her no delight. While smoking opium she enjoys holding on to her small breasts and groping for the impermanence of her shoulder blades. In the distance, for as far as she can see, fires burn. Fires burn in the ever-present distance. Fires abandon her to chance, to the house in Vermont.

South of the Border

Before me is a great oak, flowering everywhere out of the ground, shading the hacienda. Before I was born, spontaneity was forbidden, also unnecessary. Musicians imitated paintings. A man my father knew—tall, with long, well-manicured nails—had trained in Russia. So my father became an irascible free thinker, dazzling everyone when he described trees in perspective.

Though harsh, winters were well thought out. The daring got rich. Even lacking extensive resources they created religious frauds and grotesque images characteristic of the early films of Buñel—his *Mexican Bus Ride*, for example, about a small coastal village whose serene inhabitants support neither church nor. . . .

On the deepest level a priest symbolizes what within me evades the embattled style of today's sexual relationships, visually elegant but beneath the surface losing air, sinking into pulp romance, because the low level of existence, which everyone experiences now and then, is overripe and attracts a large audience of "watchers," eyes turned in three "directions," fearing involvement or loss of enjoyment.

Still, eyes are extremely important in life, even life with a small "ell." Indeed, death-bed converts are rarer than ever, leading me to wonder even more about the depths of life's ambiguities, for after all ambiguity, like hostility, being an antipode of heroism, is really no more than a lack of interest in decisiveness and the realization that while Mexico is south of the border, Mexican landscapes can appear anytime, anywhere.

Remembrance

A strange sense of relief came over me when I finally knew the bed in the living room was just for me, no one else breaking through walls or dreaming of long winters in Antarctica reading novels I had never read. When the first ship broke ice, who swam out to meet me, waving his hands over his head and kicking his feet like fins?

The napkins on the dining room table had been folded and neatly awaited the procession of mouths to share the last crumbs of their pleasures. It is these napkins that, in my oldest memories, sail across the immense sky like ancient sailplanes from another world. But in the last incandescent fragment of childhood that belonged to no one, there were no tables on which to eat, no glasses of water to pass around, no Schubert piano tunes on the hard trail across the perpetual planes of ice. Instead as lines in front of stadiums fold in upon themselves, one hysterical voice pierced the quietness of the Brooklyn neighborhood and I knew, for perhaps the one time in my life, that the ocean never again would be encircled by mountains of repose.

Theories of Light

The sun shines toward an edge. Along the ascent of Mont Blanc, clouds the color of faded schooners empty from the wild expanse of sky. Then the whole world, perfectly visible under a lunar halo, unhinges its confessions in the plumage of certain birds. In the shadows, through the aperture of the sky, stars recede in time. At the hour of love, blue eyelids where I have never been; amid the caresses of your hair, colors no one can mix.

At the Peak

for R.C. Morse

The candles have burnt to the end: I am so alone.

Neither nostalgia nor self-surrender, but more like the climb to the top of Buena Vista Park in summer, remembering oneself means breaking through mirrors and opening the angles between trees and clouds, “looking through a fire of pure, unwashed memories.”

To penetrate the remote past requires supplementing the customary landmarks—love affairs, accidents, deaths—with various signposts of imagination drifting along the path.

Remember me as I was, hiding in an armchair; avoiding everyone; looking for the woman, unable to move even reluctantly; still awaiting her word that would stay my obvious, deliberate disintegration, extract me from the spiderweb in that corner of time.

Ink drips off my desk onto the floor; a young boy points to a hawk circling a distant lake. What is a signpost of the imagination? Occasionally one flies through the deepest parts of the mind, holding to no correspondences whatsoever. Objects, no categories. That is one kind of signpost. Another is the panther at the foot of Mount Shasta in winter. Still another: Highway 1 north of San Francisco, where pain lives in silence but with words.

Her flesh soft as mustard flowers, the purple light of youth shining in our eyes, impulsive—still, we never collected driftwood, razor-necked clams, or even sand dollars. Burying my head in my arms, disappointed and relieved, I ran away . . . only to encounter a new kind of pain: earth exploding through a dormant volcano.

Shift the tenses, shuffle the incongruities, in that way arrive at another marker: hunger for the absolute city that was, as it was. Return to oneself; abandon oneself to the new day: Paper absorbs sentences the way white noise absorbs music. Unable even to cross a

street, I realized the future has conclusions but no fixed tonality. No tonic can wake me, no dominant lead me to resolution.

The newest landmark is the dust storm. One loses ground, I suppose, to modulate into new sets of friends: Even the Taj Mahal took years to build. Unable to lose ourselves in the technical details of a relationship, we could never fuse the gaps to prepare for a fresh onslaught of the *other*—preventing the last signpost of the imagination from fully, finally absorbing us into its texture.

North-South Game

Envelopes, telling of Hong Kong romance, call a man to a statue of himself, emerging from thin air. Out of control, he spreads his influence along the borders of his country. I follow his thoughts, forming a perfect square around old Roman bath sites. In a way I am going for the box of gunpowder on the mantel. A roaring fire has been set, with slips of green paper, freshly snipped off Idaho evergreens. No one can know the size of the explosion. Its shape however is imminent.



THE HOUSE AND ITS STORIES



The House

The house is full of people. Fortyish couples chat with serious young men. Ladies in red velvet chat with ladies in purple velvet. Musicians in black ask one another questions, especially about the house. When did you first hear about it? Where do you go at night? Magicians do acrobatics on the beds, touching the smooth white ceilings with their disciplined feet. In the backyard, various languages are intoned. Lilies, roses, gardenias, petunias, and hyacinths never stop blooming, are always in season behind the house. The oranges are as big as grapefruits, the tangerines taste like limes, the apples look like lemons. Picking them, my friends always ask the same question: How did you happen to come by this lovely place?

On the second story we put on theatre, three nights a week, three acts a night. Forever the maids bustle about, serving cool drinks. Forever the butlers open and close doors. Doormen take wraps and fan the ladies. All day long, all night long, elegant cars pull up by the curb to drop off their elegant passengers. The short climb to the front door is worth the mild fatigue inevitably caused. Vitamins greet the guests; spoonfuls of tonics; mirrors that take years off their age. The house, sitting on a hill, overflows with wicker chairs and white gowns. Red theatre seats line the second story. I once caught a huge blue trout from the balcony. When the guests left, I reeled it in and sat quietly on the lawn, contemplating the shadow of the fish against the unnaturally pale green grass. The moon is full, as it always was in those days.

Three nights a week the actors speak in foreign languages. Language, abounding in the house, is never really studied, but sometimes echoes of an academic bent can be heard near the love seat by the bamboo grove on the east side of the garden. Then the "pearls" on the necks of damsels sparkle and the "pearls" on their ears reflect the light from the dining area, and most nobly too. "Pearls" hang everywhere, but not real ones. There are no real pearls in the house, nor are the guests allowed to wear them. Why, I can't really say. It's simply custom.

In New York the house is built of steel and glass, and of brick. Instead of bamboo on the west side, rows of maple and elm extend as far as the eye can see. The leader of the house braids her hair, trims her nails, puts on nylons and powders her nose, grows noticeably more silent by the minute, eats Northern Italian food in expensive restaurants, and dresses casually on weekends. Each of her performances brings new acclaim. The audience, surrounded by the house, laughs and cries as it never has. The house envelops the entire block, the neighborhood, the streets for hundreds of blocks in every direction. When you are in the house you feel the pull of the shutters, the force of the wooden floors; you know when the house is tired, when it wants to close for repairs, when it is in love. But with its moonlit evenings, New York skyline, and fountains with colored lights, the house is in love, always.

The house appears differently to different people. To some people it looks solemn; to others, gay. To the ushers the house is always one way, but what that way is they never know. To the manager the house is a good crowd-pleaser, and he lives well. Cab drivers thank the house for a bit more fat in their diet; bus drivers pray for the day the house packs up and leaves, never to return. Fame has its way with them: They prefer serving to seeing what the fuss is about. Their families are more anxious than usual, their bosses less friendly, their grammar shakier. When the house settles on stage, the whole city breathes a sigh of relief that curtain call is on time. Next time they hope it will be even more punctual, if such a thing is possible, though the house is always there, always on time.

In California the house has two stories; there is more privacy on the second, and you can see the mountains from one window and the ocean from another. There is a fireplace on each floor; a large, square lawn out back; and cement walkways wide enough for two, that expand to accommodate more if necessary. In front are a round patio, a green birdhouse, and seven birdbaths. While staying in the house you never grow old; your skin is always soft, your hearing excellent, and your beard stops growing. Your words form shapes and colors, depending on the day of the week. The scent of orange blossoms inspires you, and whatever you do—paint, draw, write, sing, laugh—

is graceful and easy. It is hard to stop singing in the house. Once you start, you go and go for days and weeks, until finally you have to sleep. When finally you do fall asleep, an hour is all you need to do it all over again, which you always will do.

In the house, the guests look from one wall to another, shaking their heads in disbelief at the beautiful scrolls, at the iridescent colors, at the omnidirectional sound coming from what sounds like a symphony orchestra.

The bookshelves were once a good conversation piece, but some guests missed their tennis, so courts were built in a corner of the racetrack, where there are benches for giants and fountains where the dainty ladies can wet their toes; where children can float forever, freeing their parents for the views of the Alps. On very clear days you can see the Himalayas too, and in January, if you stand near a small sphinx by the handball courts you can feel the icy air blowing down from Mt. Everest, tempered of course by the tropical sun. It rarely rains, but when it does, the musicians move under a frescoed terrace and we take lunch under the veranda by the wisteria and plan trips to Machu Picchu—where else? The house can take us there; the house can handle the reservations; the house is expert in luxury, in group travel. We always stay four nights and three days—for reasons that can be neither explained nor fathomed—and return with bold, revolutionary suntans.

I wasn't born in the house, but ever since I first stayed in it, I have taken care of the gardens, front and back. Along the sides of the house are a filamentary canal with teakwood houseboats for the flamboyant guests, and a cold Northern river inhabited by rare rainbow trout, for those who like roughing it. Waterlilies float in great masses, like seaweed on the Sargasso Sea. In Florence the house picked up on the design of the Boboli Gardens, so I built three lovely fish ponds and four marble fountains behind the cinnamon trees. Now a quiet breeze often pervades the center of the anterior garden, rustling the honeysuckle, and the view from even the smallest hill is simply magnificent: In the distance are the Duomo, the palace of the Medicis, Fiesole. The Roman amphitheater holds enough guests

to stage a full elephant-laden production of *Aida*. Beyond the wall is a cherry orchard, overrun in August with small children carrying brown paper bags, their fathers carrying tan knapsacks, their mothers and grandmothers packing Mexican straw baskets, the old grandfathers sitting under elms, sipping syrupy juice-filled summer drinks from enormous crystal goblets and occasionally brushing the hummingbirds from the wide brims of their Panama hats. Thousands of cherries are swiftly eaten; the rest are canned for winter. The dry dirt of the orchard is hard on the feet, but once a year we joyfully prepare for the event.

In late winter I prune the citrus trees. In spring, after marking the ends of the roots with a chalk circle, I turn the soil and transfer the bulbs from front to back and from back to front. Each week I water the maples, carefully soak the junipers, sprinkle the cypresses. From their quarters in the blue-cedar forest—a copy of the one in the Bois de Boulogne—the musicians move into the courtyard, like a desert caravan, and dancers weave among the nearby stands of redwood. I am always in a gay, generous mood during these times, and the rooms overflow with friends from around the world. The headlines are always full of the house: *The House Is a Hit*; *The House Is a Smash*; *The House in Los Angeles*.

When the house goes to Europe, I go too. Its modesty impresses the French. The Germans like its efficiency and the way it can drink beer after beer, day after day, until even the stoutest shopkeeper has to concede victory. The Italians worship the house for its spirit, for the elegance with which it rolls its double r's. All night long, month after month, visitors come to the house and leave singing. The Swiss take it skiing in the Alps, though of course the house has its own Alps and skis whenever it wants. The Belgians feed it mussels. The English take the house for long rides in the country: The house appreciates the rolling green hills and quaint farmhouses as if it had always lived in a big city and never seen the country. In Spain the house beachcombs, goes fishing, drinks lots of red wine, whistles at the pretty *senoritas*, and flirts with the tall, dark men.

Wherever the house goes, it makes hundreds of new friends. The

house is loved wherever it goes; and whatever language is spoken in the house, everyone understands. The Japanese understand the Bulgarians, the Roumanians argue politics with the Scots. The Irish make friends with the Lithuanians, the Armenians with the Israelis, the Liberians with the Turks. People who haven't said hello since the Tower of Babel cannot hug one another enough; the air echoes with thousands of years of family news. Needless to say the conversation ranges from interesting to exciting to downright juicy. An iceberg is anchored to the south wall to hold the hundreds of thousands of Danish emperor penguins that settle there for the winter. The patios overflow with barbecues and séances. Downstairs in the game rooms, pool and snooker are shot twenty-four hours a day. Dinners keep coming and coming. Endless processions of cooks, waiters, hostesses, and butlers tumble through the endless rooms, filling the countless sets of china, paperware, and wooden bowls with meals whose menus would fill a thousand volumes. New dishes arrive each minute, thought up by the guests and requested in their thoughts: Naturally the house reads minds. Then the kitchen help remove their aprons and tuxedos and eat the food they cooked and served. Everyone laughs and cries and shouts, and no one is ever misunderstood. The stagehands have the lights running more smoothly than is humanly possible. The makeup hands do their jobs in breathtaking fashion, creating entire races of beings in the wink of an eye, making everyone look like the same person, bringing out the best—as well as the worst—in everyone, depending on the occasion. Costumes are changed instantly, or so it seems. After each act, the house changes colors. The astonished audience claps and claps and claps. Then the audience, like one actor, takes a bow.

No one knows how old the house is, when it was built, or where. Yet all around the world, people know of the house. In Kiev, the house received a standing ovation, long before the city got its present name. The Chinese knew of the house, several thousand years ago: The *I Ching* was first consulted in the house. The Sufis believe the house was the home of the Prophet; it is also what you would see if Khidr appeared without his green cloak. Some people believe the Temple at Luxor was an early form of the house. The Maori sing of the house in their beautiful four-note sings. The songs sung by Miriam and the

Hebrew women after crossing the Red Sea during the Exodus were a celebration of the house, symbol of the world that was, is, and will be. Amen.

In summer the leader of the house comes down from the mountains, by the back stairway. She writes the music, plows the fields, invents the texts that guide the actions and gestures, the thoughts and words. She throws the parties and fixes the rooms for the guests. Her prayers float over the vegetable beds like fine morning mist. When the tide is low she carries huge boulders from the islands to the highway and changes the direction of the traffic. Her silences guide the tone of the evenings. No one ever starves when she is at home; she is always at home in the house.

The gates of the house rise a hundred feet. On the summer solstice you can walk through them if you have an invitation. Only those who try too hard are never invited—at least until they stop trying. In early summer, when the house is cool and inviting, the guests never go outside, but lie in their rooms, sleeping and dreaming, or sit, meditating on large pillows. You can do whatever you want in the house, but when you leave, everything returns to the way it was, except your mind, which can be as different as you want. Blue jays and mockingbirds flood the gardens with their songs. Horses run across the fields; in a special area, dinosaurs roam as they once did, in all their ancient abundance. At the height of summer, the ocean is brought to one of the side gates. The water is especially cold, though warm spots exist for those who prefer warm water. Cruises leave twice daily. There is nothing magical about the house and what it can do: There is nothing the house cannot do.

The house has room for everything; the house has room for everybody. It is always here when needed; it is always needed, though not everyone knows this. Not everyone knows of the house. When you are away from the house, you always want to return. When you are in the house, it is as if you had never been anywhere else, as if nothing else existed. That is the nature of the house, of those who know it or know of it or live in it, though the house cannot be lived in. Few who go do not return; few who leave do not want to

return. Those who stay cannot speak about living in the house, until they leave; some who leave forget the house, over the years, until it is a vague memory of something good, like a happy childhood looked back upon in old age. If they return in old age it is just as they remember it, with a few changes here and there: new paint, refinished floors, different music, new musicians. The leader of the house remains the same, though of course some could swear she is different.

The house is like a house without a history; when you are in it the past doesn't exist; what you do leaves no traces. But the house has a history; it is just not in the books. When you are away from the house, it sometimes seems unreal: The pull of life outside is ever so strong. But the house is real. The house exists—wherever you are, whoever you are, have been, or want to be. The house, which is always on tour and has been everywhere, which never really goes anywhere, exists in every place on earth, in every time in history.

A View of Mount Washington

We emerged from the forest and trudged up the hillside. The eastern face of the mountain was still deep in blue shadow, but later the reflected light from the snowfields revealed the clean-cut edges of the hanging glaciers. Even as I watched, there came a distant roar, and an avalanche, detaching from the northern face, dispassionately slid along the precipices, wrapping the mountain in a soft, grey shroud.

The Departure

The lack of water alarmed me. I didn't know why no one had come to my rescue. Something must have happened. I grew restless. Amusing myself with toys, I prayed for sleep. Fighting off confusion, I started singing, to soothe myself. The air was getting thin; no one was in sight. I felt the blood rush to my temples. I kicked the walls and began caressing them. Deliverance was at hand. Could I not hear moaning in the distance, waves beating against the walls? Would I have to resign myself to unknown animals? The gloom of the prison matched the darkness of my thoughts. If help were close at hand, the unexpected would be my friend. What little I knew of love might soon be gone. My folded jacket hung above me, like a sleeping bat. I spoke aloud; a lizard flew from the ceiling. A ladder dropped. I tried to shout, I had no fingers, I felt my legs lifted out of my body. Strong hands carried my head. I could not awaken. The voices sounded frantic, but my eyes would not open. No one came to my side, no one would move me. The sound following the departure was like that of the ocean, battering against a fortress.

The Ant and the Bull

Under the bull's hooves the ant struggled to breathe. The bull trod off, looking for a way out. He snorted, bent his knees, drove at the ebony walls. The ant looked around, stood up. The smell of home came through the hot dust, slid over the ant's body, settling in its mouth. The ant flew through the torrid air. Glowering, the bull turned, his ears perked. He kicked and roared, grinding hundreds of ants to dust. From the sky came a high whistling sound. The bull turned. The red cape flashed. On the gate the ant paused, looking around. The sharp dust on its jaw had cleared. Everything smelled of home. When the bull struck out, the man lanced it and the ant entered, fully, the world of honeysuckle. The smell was a thick, bright red.

The Rising Height of the Sun

At the wedding, where the bride's eyes grow wide with the dimensions of the altar, the bridegroom writes on paper already written on, allowing all that lives within them as passion to unite with a quiet wisdom. Longing for predawn light, she disturbs the silence and sees fields made fertile by the wholeness of the body. He is the bride's other, older self.

The Day of Our Lives

At arm's length we lead lives burdened with expectation and speculation and with the lazy filigree of a lurking depression. But most of us have a hard time of it. For instance, we take the new compact for a ride in the country. It's a fine day, and the radio is carefully tuned to a recording of Telemann's "Socrate" that, though not commercially available, we nevertheless have read about, when all of a sudden something strikes us through the dazzle of the music; something penetrates to the depth of damage and we turn away from the white line just long enough for a thin plate to appear and momentarily obstruct our vision. If we could cry out the way babies cry out (as if) while dreaming, then at the point of collapse we simply would let go the plate covering the limping god we imagined to be our salvation and cross the same line the Texans crossed at the Alamo. But a thousand horses lead us away. Light begins falling from a lamp, and after the remnants of a previous explosion have cleared, only our core itself remains intact.

Apparently insignificant incidents can thus cause the gap between what is and—with respect to the start of a breakdown—what was, to widen in such a way that besides cutting off the light (if only temporarily) there is the added risk of even the most nerve-rackingly regular of us getting, as it were, "wiped out." Though all of us carry a cross, usually one has an entire lifetime to accomplish one's work, even if the most perfect relationship of all is with "the angel who drew the plan." Even when every moment is deliberate and full of meaning, some of us turn cold and rigid as the choicest mango of realization is waved before our noses.

Wouldn't it be nice, then, if in three-quarter time in a beautifully decorated seventeenth-century French drawing room, after a fourteen-course meal and twenty-five-year-old cognac, we could peacefully and soberly "turn our bodies over" the way one turns in the passkey to the desk clerk at the end of a holiday at one's favorite resort? In would burst the stream and our souls would drift away into the sky, where the spring clouds are like white cranes, the summer clouds like dark peaks, and the winter clouds sadly pale; there would be no autumn clouds, because in autumn one can enter the vanishing point on the tip of a flower.

No Simple Affair

He comes from a great family. No wonder his lady pleases him with her great prudence. With special softness she responds to his every urge. Orgasm comes quickly, on both sides, and when he stops being the decent fellow, she can go on for hours. As one of a kind he evokes in her a feigned playfulness from which she rarely recovers. Of course, he's been pre-shaped by a long, colorful history and so after receiving his deluxe package of delights she's never the same. But she's handsome enough for a hundred of his kind; thus her skin is never sallow.

The Things We Do Well

She fed him a mouthful of hair. He was drunk but sharp as night. On top of that he never felt better. She wore little to cover her soul, which by now was flirting with the walls of the room. His thick smile assuaged her fear; yet his way of bucking responsibility irked her. Tenderly he kissed her, long and delicate under the bower. (How many times, she asked herself, does one get kissed that way?) He knew and persisted, entering her room late one night to undo her defenses. Tenderly but not completely she succumbed to desire. Then his Andes adventures surfaced. Still, she pursued, tossing feathers at his barren soul until finally, frowning mercilessly, he gave in, there, in her room. So the hair fell from his frown, and her legs finally and fully relaxed, after much tenseness.

Fool's Gold

cowritten with Ellen Levine

Her left leg, whose lower portion is only suggested, punctuates the fingerboard of the guitar with a rhythmic shading like a piece of ruffled, shiny cloth.

Its parts are square and superimposed on a checkerboard lying to the left. Strangely, the nostalgic elegance of the situation insinuates a veil of black and we become involved with chapters of the earth and other lavish interests.

Often while listening to music we pass ourselves on the way home, waving fingers wrapped in torn cashmere, an image made explicit by romantic arguments that, like elaborate allegories collated with examples of finery, follow the dawn and become outdated. Cutting out all the colors should make it more bourgeois—but doesn't. Nor does it make the whole thing any less a hard-hearted progression of obvious questions to answers appreciated by the world at large.

She furnishes the convenient symbol by which everything in its turn can be summed up and neatly tucked away—as if the one who is sorely tempted by the glitter as well as the security of the terrible strings of the city can never escape the thousand rills of progress that subjoin her window pane to a rich silence.

Out-of-Season Fruits

for Ellen

I'm startled by your clean-cut advice. To ask so many questions, with an eye on my forehead is to suggest your hope of penetration. Yet what is there seems to have risen to the top, in one tidy heap. Still, there is no flow, nor can one safely say that things are even as elusive as in a ten-year-old dream.

The horns cut through the violins, the oboes strike against a fortress of bassoons and contrabassoons; you begin to emerge from this prose poem in the night-quite-clear guise of a woman who has lost her children in a fire but whose husband has always existed in the sponge of another man's calamity.

To invade the fine line between silence itself and the perception of silence is not the same, however, nor is stealing one's breath from one's friends the same as remembering the way she tries to seduce you under her husband's vigilant eyes. Though I am tempted to go even further, as usual the paper is wearing thin around the edges and there is nowhere to go, save into the sound of arrows striking a target on an overcast Sunday.

I am tired. Each day the spring of my sixteen-year-old way of walking says a bit more. Like leaving with reluctance the city you moved to with a similar reluctance. Or trying to evade the hour after you wake up the morning after a lovely dinner for two in a small, downtown French restaurant. Yet, when all the ribbons have been smothered in boxes of hard, black shoes, when each attempt to least pry open the shutters in the living room at supper has met with one too many failures, then and only then will I let my answers slide into your lap, spread on my bed like the Bermuda triangle depopularized, condensed, and flown to that city of thresholds, of daring heights and reluctant illuminations, that city of bridge after bridge of silent summers acquiring prestige whose very heart is the hallucination that clings to the page after page of splintering texts I call my life.

And this is only the beginning. For the wind has begun changing directions and now comes from the east, and each day spent in a different house is one more movement in a long waking process. The anticipation of summer excites me. Themes fall at my feet. A strange and new rapture is preparing itself for an invitation to dinner. I can no longer gauge its depth.

In the Stars

And before you know it a beautiful fan-shaped mailbox attaches to your house. The charming bamboo compartment holds all your heart desires—even a minute of strenuous exercise. In that minute you also get sweet, juicy vegetables without snails, and a garden, as a personal touch to your love life, that begins growing as if moonless nights weren't the only outcome of devotion. After the frost danger passes, whatever doesn't sprout is a cactus. The handy stump remover works well, too. It's such a pretty way to save money that soon everyone will be planting summer squash in winter.

Letter from Venice

for Bob Flanagan

Exciting things were happening. Tired of sitting around in a deep coughing sleep and running like a roller coaster I broke into a million fears and doubts and returned to painting. In spite of everything, including summer.

The Bicycle

The world is against me. Huge oaks and elms offer shade, though, and discipline is a problem, but not because there isn't much else. Every time I stop pedaling, someone tries to hop on and steer a new course, usually for the back door of a plutonium farm. It happened to Rachel, once the toast of Cuban cabarets, on the way to Buffalo. And since I am always snatching pets from furious owners one day someone probably will snatch me away. It happened to Rachel, once the toast of Cuban cabarets, when she stopped pedaling.

An Experience in the Mountains

Strange are the ways of those who live. When I was a child, on rainy days my father would hand me a cake of white soap and suggest I whittle some wild animals. With each chip of the penknife would then come a characteristic force, which I could feel direct my hands and even today can sometimes feel when all the tangential stresses of daily life are held in abeyance and the freeflow emerging in cresting waves from my turbulent core is harnessed—or rather, allowed to be.

But usually the days are full of arid regions whose animals tag after me everywhere and whose stemless succulents of responsibilities cannot be pried loose—perfect camouflage for those afraid to leave their native habitat and venture beyond the confines of self. Unlike a tree that yearly forms a pair of new leaves and absorbs the old ones, I let myself be carried over the upper surface of my skin, never quite sinking far enough into the fissures to allow the streetcorner grit to shake free.

In turn the distance to the hothouse seems greater and greater, and finally, dimensionless. Unperturbed, the flow of my most mundane conversations goes on, jostling every new thought coming my way. Pierre Louÿs quotes Herodotus as saying that “among some barbarous races it is considered disgraceful to appear naked.” Yet wouldn’t it be nice to be able to work with soap—or even with wood—anywhere, or to take my flute to Times Square and watch the snow quietly fall, at first just a few flakes, later becoming so heavy I would remember when the hemlocks, unable to keep up with a real snowfall, became indistinguishable from one another and from everything else—and remember so vividly that the whole insane mob could see my vision?

Dead leaves are discarded. The soil becomes saturated and presses into the bedrock. My small vision becomes important to everyone who can share in its larger protuberances, which extend in every direction like solar prominences. In pairs and threes its branches, in a world of smiling faces, put out new, beautifully light green tips, so that it seems like spring in the deadness of an eternal winter. My vision may resemble that of others (and be susceptible to the rot the mimicry plant can fall prey to), but isn’t every

vision somewhat alike in its self-definition and pleasant as well as unpleasant smells, in its busy clumps of mottled spheres? Does not the long root of the creosote tree serve a similar function as the cone-shape of the pine? Flowering stones, and soapstone carved by young children, owe their unique appearance to my well-intentioned father, who taught me to discover for myself both the tigerlike jaws and the pale-pink buds of nature. It is not success that I have thus learned to carve for myself in my inhospitable environment, but a feeling of warmth while facing the sun. Young seedlings may need protection from direct sunlight, but one who has survived long enough to know that propagation in an era of clumping together without closeness is next to impossible for very long, is able to push through the shuttered windows and reach the sunlight everywhere, always everywhere, always there.

The reward is not bitter. Roots produce new sprigs, each of which will lead to a new row of bumper crops. Often baffling, however, is the humor that may “crop up” when I turn even the smallest iota of attention away from the garden. Nevertheless, the whole experience makes a first impression of “exotic delicacy in the service of enchanting loveliness.” But stopping, even to admire my newest lover, is no longer possible. One by one each thing I do becomes laden with an intensity I can no longer afford to ignore or let slacken, for each move I now make is calculated, at least the first time, and by pausing carefully to examine each simple profile, each lock of hair, each eyelash encountered, it is possible to extract from them all that is needed in the way of astounding detail to carry me through the day with no less than amazing finesse.

Everything is enmeshed. Coincidences overlap with acts of will and violent passion to create an almost impossibly decorated personal history. Despite my education and meditations, and the fact that I think I know myself, when examined in microscopic detail for years at a time everything hangs together in such a way that I don't know what to marvel at most. One by one the drawings I looked at over the years have become exhausted, so that a casual passage over their formerly exquisite surfaces is no longer useful. If the idea of cutting a lake in half with a pair of ordinary scissors sounds fanciful at first, the resonance of the act seems to justify it: dangerous for my course is the growing allure of a traditional view of things.

How then can I return to the starting point, to that primordial energy, before the world was cut in half and rotated into vertical and horizontal? Are not the vertical lines in a Mondrian along the same miles of arduous meditation as the horizontal lines that extend themselves through the long night of inner clarity?

A sacred mountain grows out of a city choking in rubble. Far off in time, a village grew to be, and beyond that a plain, dotted with hamlets and bamboo groves. Decked in heavenly attire I am summoned to this spot to meet my bride. It is a story told and retold again and again, an old story, from which all other stories form and back into which all stories go. And now it is happening here, in this story. I have begun to tell an ancient story: the Ramayana. From this tableau woven from the threads of different stories, this particular one arises. The music stops. In an instant Laksmana has slashed Ravana with his sword. Why the Ramayana? There is a dreamlike experience we all share but which instead of standing at the center of a tribal ceremony has become suffused into daily life, gradually losing its fire and turning into angular shapes or jagged edges, into bizarre contrasts or into irony, into sad echoes of itself.

We go for a run and end up telling our personal histories. Yet the more I tell my own the more I embellish it because I no longer believe it because I no longer believe it ever happened. At night we escape the false ego limitations that trap us in memories of long-dead friends, on remote continents, in resurrected childhood scenes, and, freed from disturbances or from the static of restlessness, transmit signals to, and receive signals from, each other as in the old, nonverbal days. Though much of the show has come to be bound together by the intrusive echoes of other artists as well as of the crowd; milling about the fire, sharing speculations and expectations (the way they used to tell about a hunt or about a nightmare or vision), everything is still there for advancement to the depths, for a synthesis of our own developing mosaicism with the narrow regions of random change, to bring back a few pearls and make complete the daily plunge into the heartbeat of life.

And so the strange ways of those who live in the country no longer seem strange, for our houses are all very much alike, as are the wedding nights many of us experience, where much is left unsaid.

And as a bridge is drawn over a meeting of rivers, so too

can an extremely cerebral celebration of disorder become a tidy and elegant translation of chaos into a time when everything is still again. I take from you and you from me. Someone enters the room, and soon a photograph of it appears in a magazine, in which we find ourselves in a curious blend of tension, darkness, and Mediterranean sunlight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry Rasof has a B.A. in music, an M.F.A. in creative writing, and an M.A. in Jewish studies. For many years he worked in book publishing as an acquisitions editor, doing trade, children's, text, and reference books. He then taught composition at community colleges and creative nonfiction at University College at the University of Denver. He also has been an oboist and chef.

He has been exploring and stretching artistic boundaries and transitions for over fifty years, first in music, then cooking, later poetry, and more recently prose. His prose poems, sound poems, and regular poems have appeared in various print and online publications, including *Black Box*, *Text-Sound Texts*, *Partisan Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Monkey Puzzle*, *Numinous*, *Pinstripe Fedora*, *In Stereo*, *Poetica*, *Jewish Currents*, and *Midstream*. In 2006 the new-music group Ensemble Green performed his sound poem "Wichita Falls" in Pasadena, California.

In 2007 he launched www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org, the first large web site devoted to medieval Hebrew poetry and home to some of his poetic-biographical sketches. The great artistic, philosophical, and mystical flowering in medieval Spain exemplifies the artistic richness that can arise in a crossroads culture whose essence is transitions and shifting borders.

Finally, he has taught workshops to adults on writing Jewish ethical wills and liturgical poetry and on making Babylonian-Jewish incantation bowls, and to children on Jewish creative writing.

