Abstract

The following poems stem from an extended meditation on what it might mean to limit the agency and activity of the self. Throughout “Avenue,” the self builds less than it is built, even when in the position of a creator. Alongside and imbricated with the content is a high level of interest in the formal capabilities of extended, complicated, and broken syntax. Form and content broadly change with the three sections of the thesis: Part One seeks to explore the possibilities of the personal lyric poem, Part Two maps the thesis’ concerns onto a historical figure and a series of poems following a strict form, and Part Three attempts to broaden the personal concerns into social or historical levels through the figure of the city and that of the avenue.
AVENUE

by

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PART ONE
On A Clear Day, Agnes Martin, 1973

At the north end of the metro station
the roof stops and the floor continues for
another forty feet marking a line
where shadow ends and gives way to sun like
coming out of the mountains to prairie —
canvas pulled so tightly the pencil’s graphite stumbles in wheat stalks and at the wind’s invisible heft bumps against the texture in a wriggling failure to contain
all it apprehends in the shape of logic — always more in the moment of it
breaking out like the sun over the roof
lighting the brick pattern of the walkway
that seems to lift itself, its perfect grid
hovering now — and I am caught in it
as it extends past the train tracks that border it into the infinity of
a grid: everything becoming a
point, becoming surface, sent out — the view
is the narrow hall of a body’s shape
that sees that it will not see the shadow
or what is behind, evinces its lack
while the grid burrows into crevice and corner, flows into and out of the on-
coming train pointed south toward Virginia
and farther, piercing the Atlantic and
Brazil, the poles, and more, going on to all we will never know, discover, see —
Abstract

The emptiness it is — beginning
   blessed in the assonance of phrase
like a dream of what is coming, surreal and devoid,
at first, of sense,
   but later as apt as rain
— is all the more
   the excavated pit of a place
long dusted over by history and the improbable
   sandstorm that I,

ancient unknown even to myself until the pen chose the word
   out of the jet-stream moving
us along,

have recognized, by my dry eyes,
by the humidity
   and the chapped skin,

as the strong winds of the past recomposed
   to chip away
at the fragments of the future’s
unfinished sentence —
The New Vitality

I watched the sunset and tried to hear
the hills sigh the horizon of tomorrow’s
most pressing possibilities — a few
meandering colors, a wisp of cloud

like a blade of straw — but this was
the old vitality. You can come along,
dear blurred rainbow of ancient
promises, drafts of letters ripped up and

scattered wide — they are still
somewhere, right? And maybe that
is enough, to scour the flowers for
pieces and tape them together

in a museum or as replicas in our
breezeways. Anyone worth his couple
thousand gallons of bone pressed
by the world’s plates into this

stuff running through the organs
of an automobile knows enough to
look elsewhere: how quickly we
skipped beyond that sky once our

space was full of tiny, invisible ways to
exchange a city for a graveyard —
nervous marketplace of sticky
stocks and bindings — now stuck finger-
tapping at the carwash and its intestines
woven networked and chugging:
this iron lung is the new vitality of a
long drive home, evening-bound.
Abstract

I can yet see it through the snow —
friend, the letter you wrote to your parents

and the fierce weather of its words, outer figure
of unknown life against blank sky,

what I was given to read, the unspeakable
in the air — it was there, it was

— through the abstracted moment
of a cloud now melting into the brick sidewalk to leave the trace

of a single flake’s presence: there is only the movement
ordering the moments —

is there only ever movement ordering
the wild unknowable world,

its torrent of text no one
remembers

save by their ghosts: unseen,
unheard,

the
shadow of no object in the dark
Abstract

(As if trying
to forget enough might
move into the lamplight
with the ease and
panache of a foreign hand’s
machinations
attached to the
familiar body
Abstract

One occasionally hopes to take account
of oneself without the need of a single
bird — but the flurry

of these fragments
and examples of unspecific time sweeping
up unavoidably like the amorphous

creeping of precipitation-maps
is so many
poised swallows anxiously twittering

and ready to unveil in wing and rustle
not the heavy bell tolling behind the hood
of whatever hooded thing

but the uneasy Almost
which overflows to flood
to threaten to flood

in the precise added moment

that river risen behind us —
now, these waters are unfigured even by flight
or the well-tended border between the banks:

these lines and lines of one
of who one is
or what —
Sorrow shows up late. Somewhere in the third act after the rising action has risen and the masks begin to sag and the pen begins eying the end, Sorrow clatters into the door and sashays like a drunk moth through the enfurnitured scene. He throws himself across a sofa splayed like a dying philosopher, attentive students hanging on Sorrow’s every studied word. Sometimes there is a crow and sometimes we mistake it for a raven. Sometimes Sorrow sings and sometimes cries. Everyone, by the end, dies. But Sorrow stays to clean or just to linger. Slow and so unsteadily Sorrow fits the oddly shaped serving dish between the blender and the Thanksgiving decorations where bulky things go. No dry eye in the amphitheater because the amphitheater is in ruins, taken apart by history and Sorrow. This would be the hillside of a thousand graves had our neighbors not moved the bodies to the lowlands where the soil is soft enough to range the tombstones in ordered, planned rows composing the future as a pixelated portrait of Sorrow’s left hand turning slowly in the sun.
to hail a taxi heading anywhere else, like raisins in a loaf of baking bread moving out away from each other along all the graph’s axes which run like straight streams through hidden woods until they meet at nothing, in this opening, a lacuna of field where grows thorny Sorrow among the heather.
The New Virality

Airports closed across Europe
as ash swayed like shredded
curtains and in a Chicago café
I watched planes of light unsettle

the atmosphere into dust. The air was
bad, some unpronounceable
shoot emptying the Earth’s bowels
to scatter over its face from Scandinavia

as if trying to forget us and our
words for what is above. Come dinnertime
and I would sell without much swaying
the clouds for spread thighs

and a craning neck, whatever
skips this cratered, rocky distance
as if by this point you are
living from orgasm to orgasm

and maybe you are, the new
virility of an existence blowing apart
like paper. Each lost moment in the
immorality of a switched

pronoun is the replication
of self through time: you knock
on the table to register the table and
yourself along the knuckle; they were real

then. You are yourself going
viral through this alien world.
When its eyes lower enter in:
drink the canyoned coffee slowly.
Abstract

Tilling the reverse subtraction
to move the land from itself in rows

    the linguist wiped his brow
with a hand warm with sweat

and bent to take again the shovel and the plow
digging deeper and deeper

    until he buried them.
Thus are delimited in the totality of my body regions of silence. — Merleau-Ponty

On the other side where I
  staring
into some unthinking nothing
  heard a voice
like a whole world
  remind my mindlessness of the there
I was within
  in its saying
not to me nor anyone
  there
but into the phone at her ear
  I do not know anymore
what to do
  the words next to those
from the book in my lap mixing together
  in the nonspace of reading

In understanding others the problem
  is always indeterminate
what was hers
  I wondered looking through the window
looking at the window
  at her face in profile reflected in
the window
  through which the words
seemed to bloat and thicken
  into trees and cars
people walking by
    the phantom limb of grief

reached out like
    the case study in my book

an amputee forgets he lost
    his arm until the mundane moments

a closed jar or door
    register the absence and the world

changes only when habit itself
    feels the change and counts it

before mind does
    makes the mind after itself

like a word might
    or rather a name replacing the one

who is gone
    in the holy collision

of the memory and the missing
    of the tree and your motorcycle

I say it when you are not here
    and you are

something like you
    harrowing through sound

and digging a well in the present
    where I cup the liquid

of clear memory
    where I cup nothing at all

for no hand is there
    only absence stretching through language into
absence like her
  fishing in the air for the right word

to wrestle it into sound
  I didn’t mean to hear her but did and then did

mean it To feel emotion
  is to be involved in a situation

which one is not managing to face and from which
  nevertheless one does not want to

escape when she hung up
  a world closed behind her

something remained
  some silence full of names

she sat straight and stared
  out the window

and I was almost shaking
  though I did not know why

the body knows
  another knowing knows

I wanted to say
  are you alright

or be still
  I wanted to say

what was the name
  the one I thought I heard

gone so many years ago
  I looked across the space

to the other side and
  saw
The Weather of the Poem

Left on my bed where gather the pressure systems of sleeping worlds that, unpatterned by human footprint or speech, cover us like quilts, the poem has stirred the room’s embranglements to draft and rise above the furniture amassed in huddled watch — ruins of dreamy fables in which we discovered each other stretched along a futon or bent in pain or exhaustion over the low-lit desk — to mark with their design what is no longer here by a drawer open and emptied like a mouth, as if to swallow a part of the sky coalescing in miniature, this storm building over the bed in columns of blooming clouds to fill the impossible room where only the many-eyed walls can applaud the drama uncoiling between the unspoken stillness of a caesura and the unwritten ceiling, where only the ears folded into the bookcase will listen for the machines of thunder.
Abstract

Too large for these
    narrow beams of light

through dusty air
Abstract

The relief of an oak on a fall evening
   orange leaves like warm light through shutters
   lit from the deepness of itself

is an angel of fire —
   the mind or the memory in the faceless eyes
seeing the hole

of the thing and emptiness eternal of a
   tree
   knows

to extend the leaves and shake them off before
   a winter of naked angels

rings about like the peal of bells
   like the wind through the ages

   hammering the place
swinging the air to banner the pastness that always looks behind
the windy moment of this tree

praying skyward to the god
   of trees — they which steady, they which arbor, they
which count —

and History
   an acorn closed beneath its shell
capped tightly and drawn beneath the contours of its shell

is not here to who may unscrew it
to look into the seed of some other thing
   glowing dully.
Medium
— for J.

Through the half-light of our history,
I have started to scavenge for branches
bent with purpose and the soft indentations of feet
to tip me toward that of you I never
knew, never saw even the first collected fragments
of: like scattered glass in which
we read the accident and the object
whose transparency I have too easily mistaken.
That is how I apologize for my unknowing.

What I thought was simply the wood floor
cut me open. You can see through
a thing like how a voice works by bringing
you along in the music of its light
chains of reference, its egging-on to guess
that a payoff waits at the final, end-stopped
line; and you can see the thing itself,
like how a voice feels, how its physics
curves the air to buffet the body, waves overfull
and sense spreading out like heat, like wind, like rays,
like weather building the real
of the world through the invisible
idea of the idea. Younger brother, when I was told
you had begun to speak aloud to no one
in the house for the house was empty,
that alone in the nothing air you would read
the outlines of others, knowing the legibility
of utter lack, I wanted to tell you that
though ghost the receiver your voice
still built a world, though message became sound
it was still a carrier: this is no horror,
however much my skin stretches to avoid
the feel of a foreign truth pressed against it,
but rather the census of everyone

and the absence they own — this is no real
apology either, this poem. It is another voice with no
body in your young life: I am sorry.

You are many people. I am looking for you.
Abstract

Repeating the shape of letters

the

tip of an invisible pencil over

the phrase written at the top of the page

and left like the marker of a trail

now overgrown

and forgotten

tracks along the curve of a lowercase “o”

its prey that hides just below the surface of the paper

or not there at all

foxes forward into the eternity of a single furrow: to be the only moving thing

I wrote as another

as one brimming with right and proper intention

for a house much different than

this thin-walled model

where in the wind breezes from the outside

and the only containment

is a future of open doors and rooms sprawling into the woods —

I close the notebook and its blank pages overwhelm

the lone phrase like a symbol

for the possibility of making a symbol

like a glove in a field

and the cold hands of some maker

somewhere
PART TWO
The following is an account of the man who became Pope Celestine V. Born at the beginning of the 13th Century, Pietro Angelerio served as a Benedictine monk and lived in a cave in the mountains of Sicily for 60 years before being elected pope against his will. He served as pope for five months before abdicating the papacy, which Dante later described in The Inferno as “the great refusal”.
I.

Who are we anyway? A question in a cloud, low cloud come
down and fill mountainside cave, vagrant friend, childhood pal, old chum
who never knocks but never takes anything either, just sits
and wags his airy tongue until you are shivering in the midst
of it and even morning prayers can’t pierce the haze. Monk listens
to the cloud call his name. Only hears the quiet elision
of self. Pietro the monk is lost, though he knows where he is.
He has spent decades as the great refusal to become his.
When he sits desire flames up in front and he stares its waver
into ash. Shorn clean at the fine end of a long life’s razor,
Pietro counts the myriad fires he cannot quite put out
and names them we, for someone is legion. We open our mouths
and when we speak a smoke whispers out to curl signs in the cave.
Or the flames are memories — the old sheepdog his parents gave
him, the kind slope of farm, the day his sheepdog died like all things,
so his father had said, and we are them as well, for you bring
us with you, wherever you go, you can’t help it, we are here,
we come along, we ride like burs on the hem, fill eyes, fill ears,
fill the whole great body of the world, whatever we might be —
burned Pietro gaped: So many are the fires that ember me!
II.

One day Pietro became the cliffside, and he hung himself
from the sunbaked edge until he was a warm and glowing shelf.
Birds forgot him. For hours the sun stepped all over his back.
The mountain didn’t move all that much, even when it unpacked
its brigades into the space between hawk-screech and its low prey,
where we were, maybe where we already live — though who can say?
A voice comes together from the scrub and rock and high cool air.
We speak it, and it vibrates through our cloaks, dirty and threadbare,
worn loosely around the denial to be more than a leaf.
Pietro shakes with the season and hangs from a branch. Our grief
threatens above us, and then it happens, at once, like lightning,
flushing down, talons outstretched, on terrible wings fast-riding
until the whole poor mess of us is scattered apart like dust —
but one is caught and made, through grip and capture, through pain, one must
bear it all; the moment names him. Pietro sits and wonders
if Adam only knew an animal’s name when in thunder
he saw the split sky coming and the breath that will breathe no more.
Better to practice unbecoming, these things that are not born
and never die, just pass from thing to thing, God’s private mirage.
Pietro hides. He covers up the seams of his camouflage.
III.

Felt it first in the air unsettled as if a distant hand
had reached down from the sky and stirred up the world. Pietro scanned
the horizon, set his sight atop tall trees for perspective
and raked the country with falcon eyes after mice gone hectic
and scurrying: saw high the far dust kicked up by a hermit,
neighbor to Pietro by two days journey, holy, learnéd —
a visitor! The cave had the must of being long uncleaned,
and he rushed to hide a snakeskin, scrubbed his cloak until it gleamed,
rang his deer-bone comb through what frayed tangle he hoped was his beard,
tried to make himself presentable. Even bathed. He felt sheared —
sheepish and awkward. By dusk he heard heavy breathing outside
the doorway and saw the face of the breather: Goffredo sighed
until his mouth found a greeting. The words fattened and cramped poor
Pietro’s great refusal to own what he could not afford:
words the most costly. Goffredo was a tree of tiny birds
and when one stopped chirping another began until the sound blurred —
he wanted to stand and clap, at once, fly them scattered! *I fast
and I pray; is this all there is to a life?* Goffredo asked.
Pietro grew dark, stared him to silence as night came,
then raised his hands — on fire! — *If you will, you may become all flame!*
IV.

Pietro awoke missing a tooth — just one, but it was gone, leaving a gap he could breathe through like the sun picking the dawn. Still, though he hadn’t thought too much about it, he missed it now. All the normal places were searched: the pillow a boy from town had given him, his brush fashioned from the jawbone of a deer, the small hole mice sometimes trafficked. He grew confused, put his ear against the ground, and listened. No one spoke — but then the mountain began to beat a far-off drum that shook him and he counted the artery’s pressure and rhythms: ninety over forty.

A body set down its foot and turned slowly. There was glory in the ridge, glory in the crags, and the peak that was an eye bent over the town. We are the stretch against the rule to bind sky in skin. It streams out of us. Pietro moved and the world moved with him. Moved as him. Moved him. Vast wings lifted and unfurled.

It was then Pietro saw footprints leading outside his cave, and he followed them like the coast after a receding wave, coming to a home in the woods — saw his tooth in the palm of a boy who had stolen it as a relic. Evening calm spread as he watched from outside, candled thoughts flickering ruthless.

That night, ringed by white relics, a monk slept soundly, and toothless.
When the snow thawed he followed a muddy runnel of runoff down the mountain in its elemental pilgrimage, its soft padded holy procession, to the lowest point, wherever that may be – is this a parable held off for one clever enough to pierce the pieces? Bodies compelled like waterfalls to pool in purposeful places? Nature whispering its call to kneel? No, it doesn’t line up. What meaning is here is half. Is the fragment of a shattered thing not once seen whole. He laughs. We are the audience of reeds trembling at his windy jokes. Pietro is the punchline he doesn’t quite get, but he knows everyone will one day keel at the comedy. The thin stream is aimed toward town; the rooftops prick the sky to open the dream he never fully wakes from: in a candlelit, dusty room he sits before a book as blank and deep and vast as a full moon peering over the ivory land. Each page takes two hands to turn. When he opens it the world becomes translated and he learns the ancient power of words to raise their agile hands and make the fox and ferret, the desert and the daffodil. He takes a page and folds it, puts it in his cloak. Each morning he reads the words of everything to plant the world’s meaning seed by seed.
VI.

It was a virtue and so the sale of self began at the first blush of sky ashamed to mark hours that Pietro would soon rush out of. *If to die is gain*, well, he thought, *it is worth a try, then to wear it habit-like and airy*. He could spend his life like a rich man, emptying his pockets until all he owned was air. The wallet of his lungs grew fat with what he had loaned. Ready to begin ending, Pietro drew away his feet, praying the quick life out and making an orderly retreat like water wrung from a sponge, just colder. He had forgotten his legs by sunrise — half of a monk waited to be bought and sold to the stones. Becoming is so much easier when you do not stick around to see it finished: you can leave, refuse the most invisible desires, some great refusal to speak from a mouth and be either mouth or words, neither thing nor weak approximation of it. Is it too abstract? Oh he knows! But not for long: the beating history of Pietro flows like a river whose source approaches the sea with the river until there is no river at all — gone! The widening yawn of waves curl the sun; the air shimmers; the deep reflects the dawn.
VII.

There was a slump: someone had to be in it. *Might as well*, thought Pietro, *be me*. He spent himself to sadness and so bought the world another morning. A great effort — we all agreed. Things went awry: he stopped bathing, let his garden go to weeds, prayed only for escape from premonitions of upturned bowls, but you were the eternal blinking gaze beaming into souls and looking away: he withered in the brilliant light, too pure. When he stood, a shadow grew behind him, but he was not sure what was casting it anymore, or for whom, so he refused to turn around, walking wide circles instead. *I didn’t used to be such a meek downer I think but one must at times come to terms with the weather and sun and the air’s low distant hum.*

That week there were bees everywhere. On his better days he taught them to sing a song from his childhood: *Steam is in the teapot/ A spark is in the wood/The ocean is a single tear/Fresh from the Father’s hood.* *O*, he would say so the vowel would stretch his mouth and he could feel the form of absence, *O I have stayed long on my mountain too long I shall go to town I’ll parade about alone we shall take up the swarming blood in whose veins we are quite becoming and the sun on those wide open lanes—*
VIII.

The morning devotion wrote him. He was reading John’s Gospel when came up the skin like jagged-limbed insects, like a hostile army, the letters to checker Pietro until his flesh became Word — divine joke we stopped laughing at when in the mesh of text we lost sight of him. Idea am I — something else too: am I speaking or am I writing? I am the self’s shell filled with what I am not. The verses turn and you are the break that tells him where to start again. Uneasy Pietro aches for a metaphor! No word only, no mirror for the air gazing back at its empty endlessness, rather one aware of its weight on the tongue, bread-language, thick-speech, symbol that slides out of the mouth and pools below: a still lake as a disguise for the future buzzing in the cattails. He sings the crickets trembling in the warm air and feels the exact words to quicken the scene into existence collect soundlessly on the span of what once was his chest, now a stanza. Tomorrow will scan what today composes, but neither will know how to read it. Pietro is the great refusal to be quite literate: each unread word of him wriggles to settle the coming age. Prophet Pietro feels the braille on his skin and turns the page.
IX.

It was a kicked stone that leapt and ran an unexpected bell sounding the brittle air metallic and alien. He fell onto it, saw its inverse shadow flash sun-full and starry. Pietro looked into its blank, stupid face and felt sorry so many leaves had fallen before he had unearthed this man stamped and raised in gold: St. John the Baptist to hold in the hand. He knelt to dare to lift the coin someone had dropped, a florin, dull yellow, inscribed mystic and glowing, sign of a foreign language he knew not the grammars of. Pietro wanted it. The sides etched a geography of exchange riven and split by faith in the unseen answers to equations of desire: hand the coin to another, feel its living power expire in this literal metaphor — something is carried across, above the thing like a bird tracing the same path you are lost and wandering down. The moment he thumbed the coin he wanted to give it away for something else — its queer beauty haunted him and his secret savings for an impoverished future. In front of the fullest tree he tried to purchase a root or a limb. He held it to the air and asked for its windy psalms. He tossed it in the begging river, knew again his empty palms.
It is tending toward disarray and disaster and in the far-flung energies of a returning chaos we are our star’s shameful, red-faced cousin, impossibly untidy, unclean! Pietro shivers paralytic against the moving stream of dirt circling a world in need of being shaken out like an old blanket hidden away for guests. He is the doubt of shiny futures scrubbed into annihilation. It just gets moved around. What you leave behind is your oeuvre of dust kept neatly piled under rugs or behind the unopened door. Pietro studies the straight and narrow way to sweep a floor. This without much holiness is the great refusal to count the sum of self by its litter, as if the violin’s sound was measured by the sweat and grunts of a lesson’s exhaustion. Then the mess untunes him. Pietro is aswarm and lost in discrete elements that vibrate and pulse like living objects, impossible to judge which belong. Democracy collects it all, and at the curved suggestion of grape stems in the trash he turns to sweep the planet into his cave, his squirreled stash of everything, for it is him or someone. He cleans and cleans until there is no room left for him to sleep. But the world gleams.
He knows what it sounds like, don’t shake your head! Even monks may fall in love. Or rather: memory is a leopard whose hunched crawl bows its back taut behind the very leaves of the very tree in front of us — a form shakes the wind, a traitor eye insees the bent elbow we held long ago, with care, to keep her from falling. One is always about to lose the ground. The bright plum of the past rounds in his palm: it feels like youth if what is youth were a town we visited as someone else. Taste would be proof but Pietro fears the fruit exhumed from fact will disappear and erase the phantom girl with it, she whom, so many years ago, he had walked to the water with, before the promise and the hood, before the great refusal to be St. Thomas with his hands all over anothers’. They had spread a picnic of bread and fruit; she had hummed a hymn he didn’t know. It sticks to his tongue still. And when she peered over the edge the wet rock slid — he caught her, but only delayed the eventual drop that he now is, for memory makes it, each time. He has not moved from the tree, but when he searches for the plum the past brought back, he sees only the water. The current writes a letter. Pietro cannot make it out. He bends to read it better.
What does it mean to be a wind? The thought had come upon him from nowhere’s quiet vector out of a cloud’s impulsive whim. He felt it or did he? Impossible to tell a light wind from a shudder. Shake and silent. Then, stronger, wind wrote a hymn of the leaves and open spaces. Song of the lost disgraces it had whistled past, the rundown cities, the ruined places. Winds of sadness along Pietro’s arm and the wind it wept or he did — something was a tear. Something had carefully stepped with a foot disappearing into the air. He stretched his arm and it blew through the room, spooling and snaking its wispy yarn into corners and mouse holes. Wind he was, wind maybe always. He was tree top, wing release, dust mover, sky exhale, sun ray. Plane of the moment, every touch a mind ready to unwind self body-stuck and heavy. Pietro’s elongated spine coiled the world, weathered up, knew us all. You were so lonely, he remembers, and grey sky came, hair by sharp wind was blown, he ran you up, were you still alone? Did you breathe him in, spirit song, world-breath, O soul invisible, melody wind — hear it groan, murmur, exult. When the moon rose it froze the planet still As Pietro settled over the land. Light rain came. Blue chill.
Epilogue

Many, many years later a ghost wound through a library where every book possessed him. What is it we try to bury in the messy and unrhymed stories pockmarked with difference so complete that only reading backwards mines its hidden sense? Ghost searches all day for the call number of an ancient book to rest its disappearing arm within and find the name shook off like the skin that also used to stick. Pietro the monk became Pope Celestine V, then monk again, then sunk body cleaved from soul, hermit even of life, finally clear of guilt’s inborn, bloody lineage and the old prosey fear inside each thousand-year-old decision. Death was a cloister he cocooned. But now we have summoned him out either voiced or unvoiced through the past’s tatters, the well-worn cloak badly needing to be mended — ghost Pietro rises roused from our reading. He is prepared to answer these hands hovering over lines of terza rima, for a countryman, not naming him, sighs to his eternal readers outside the gates of Hell: I saw he who made the great refusal. Pietro toes the wide maw of his sentence as either fear or relief condemns a night long ended. He is ready to drop the banner. It feels right.
PART THREE
City of Heavens

I tried to fix the clouds in place with belief
and when belief failed with a
petition from the coastline.

Above the clouds unfurled like banners
of a great windy kingdom clean
of the past, no stain of history hiding

in the joists, no collected quiet memory
sleeping in the rafters —
the whole of it was breath and

breathing.
    I could not build it right.
With first rain the towers

came down, with storm
    the portcullis cleaved the air
and took on the fall of iron —

pieces of thoughts thought best
    or better whispered into the sea
like leaves,

dissolving into the
    art of a thousand failures,
the fog of an empty next.

I left the ruins and went home
    to rest my weary legs
on you.
City of Refuse

The neighborhoods like petals
coiling out from the center of town
grew accustomed to the lingering
odor of every decision. I finished
my soda and tossed the bottle,
listening for the faint hollow
spring of impact as it arced toward
the heap rising like a mountain.
City of Heizer

We slept outside to keep the city from our shadows and ate in the desert’s low balky shrubs, kneeling in huddled groups and tearing bread with our hands until the sun appeared and we worked: we are preparing the city, the future’s details and its interred skeleton,

It will have had too short a career if it disappears said the author of these blueprints of a language never spoken, only guessed at silently in sketches of sheep grazing, a thunderstorm. Coyotes whine when we come home through twilight. This is the city of art — no one lives here beneath its guard: it survives alone in
inward metal gaze,
shadows counting the day.

The sun spins us
into sweat uprising the

girders and digging
the foundations

but this place
throws its arms

around the universe of time
to build it, once.
City of Airports

I kept to a single rule: design without
the here, yet
the presence of a window

dreaming beyond its
enframement — that weedy land, the empty fieldhouse
corrugated and streaked

red — interposed the missing and inescapable
heresy against our
nowheres: manufactured from

dug-up and fire-worked minerals, I have thrown
away the world’s composite

offering of a candy wrapper’s
blazon, which, distant needle eying thread from
an imagined place,

outlines the politics of
abstraction
that govern the wide

grasp of weaving
departures and arrivals, like the wind
through your hair when

the car window
lowers, like light
bending along the empty

bell of sky to course
and underline the possible
paths a cloud of what may follow
Avenue

Shimmering behind the humid air, the grey and pink columns bare washed-out the perfect rectangles rose to plot geometries of dream and desire this no place, this nowhere the curved archways and empty arcades improbably swept the gardens weeded the fountains unfilled but also unrusted in wait for some rich age or the next season to be the only moving thing but for the air bending brick and cement even the gulls did not beat their wings soundlessly gliding toward the Red Sea as if pulled away from the land where no human was anymore, or maybe ever though when I passed through the shadowed frame of a half-finished beach getaway I heard a noise like one behind me, saw what appeared as a figure or the idea of a figure thrown out as a cloak onto the unknown in that place old as the world along the edge of the Sinai Mountains layered like the corners of cardboard boxes red on brown on brown, I looked out from the stories and tales of my youngest self across the sea and wavering just past my sight was a stretch of wide, smeared color between the hazy blue of sky and the deeper blue of water that I knew was the other side there are moments when the history of self bubbles up to overflow into the streams
and various pools of the records
surrounding one and others when
it is future that takes on

body years later I was at a lake
in America in the sun and
though I had not been swimming
much that summer I tried to follow
the woman I was visiting across the width
of it I thought
in the vibrant humming energy of
a body barely able to contain within
the limits of it its red
wants that to cross the lake would
be nothing at all a portion
of spent time that in memory
will be just one more
moment a single little blip
of something not particularly
wanted or unwanted just there
just happening and then happened
so I swam out toward the center
slowly dragged into the awareness
of my body’s weight and the
difficulty of going farther my arms
tightened and my feet dropped
to feel the tops of submerged plants wave
effortlessly against me a low embered
fire began to stretch through my arms
until it coaled into my shoulders

I was sinking
on such a sunny day
in the middle of the afternoon
with families scattered
around the lake
what a stupid time to begin
drowning I made it to the other
shore but that is not the important part
of the story what happens usually never
is if it is plot all we are here for to put on
a light jacket and skip out among
cold breeze and the trees full of
personality, their leaves just one more
whisper away from letting
go to document the fullest fullness
of the scene then one of us must stay
here in this spot to wait until
everything stops
happening and take note of it
while it does or doesn’t
this story
is so incomplete, so
rearranged like trying
to guess the exact tree from
the shavings curled
in one’s pencil sharpener not that one
expects anything else but here am I
unable to parse these crowded memories
and say what they are unable ever
to talk of the women at their edges
and the love of a year or a
summer the hooks invisible
that tie one to another and propel
like rubber bands one forward
into the coming remembered thing
and the me it recalls in the penumbra
of a new word writing it
opens in the mind an
unintelligible pathway seen as if
from a distance a place to walk
down, under trees but shackled
by what I’ve done and
by why I’ve left
undone the liturgy of confession
spoken while head
lowered as under a mighty
weight there is the dream of
one who comes from that distance
to undo it all who I read about, the
priest of Jupiter, even whose hair
trimmings and nail clippings were
buried in ceremony no escape
into the privacy of the private
life but must live within
the office of the order
I am in it now
struggling against the thick folds
of what is only half-held and slipping
away as I try to reach the
water that will not
displace itself once my hand stretches into
it—trying by rustling these
past moments to discover a line at once
haphazard and purposeful
that binds this me that isn’t
yet feels so is
and follows it into the station
of a future’s routine embarkation
and the amusements of a word that
once said implies
the next by sound alone—suddenly
an order revealed beneath the
will of ordering
stumbled into but cozy and at least
partly human for all its randomness
I am bored
at the kitchen table smack center
of suburbia thinking lazily about
the lake in Western Massachusetts and
Dahab, which means gold, on the
Sinai, and other places, and the almost native
struggle of getting anywhere at all
that is somehow different than
interpreting oneself in
reverse—digging to find the artifacts
of a past easily detailed once
enough of them are found—another struggle
exists at the limit of
the yesses and nos that
once collected
I call self

that time is no you choosing forward
but a passive bow to the fatal oncoming
at the nursing home last week I sat
to eat with the shadow of a man
who in his other life was my
grandfather—those parts abstracted now
into a cloud of recollection
shared among children and grandchildren
and the fields he
plowed and the low red pickup
I now drive borrowed before
the man drooped and the mind
retreated behind the hazy
thickness lolling out of
the mouth when an almost-formed
word is pushed through uncooperative
muscles lips still opening an O
at the corner in rhythmic memory
of his pipe there is the feel of body’s fear
when in the body’s future
wake I keep the truck cleaner than
he did having spent two full days
scrubbing the tobacco and ash
out of the upholstery as if the metaphor
of a quickly coming future
were haunting the place
I drove my grandfather’s pickup to Vermont
that summer and spent the entire summer
pretending I was in college cigarette
ash tapped off nonchalant
as if I were the father
of cool smoking as a metaphor
for breath haunted by the inevitable
dispelling that the future shakes us
into seed-future strewn over countrysides
like summers warm and bright but
at the edges haunted by the distant
volcano’s ash come slow weaving this metaphor
is the memory of my grandfather
animal strong and steady
who fathered six children —no seven
but the past-future of one boy is like
a metaphor for impossibility him stuck
one summer in a plow I was told
only the remaining ashes of that story
haunted by one image
I can still see haunting the current
disappearance of my grandfather
into this non-body like the scent of invisible ashes
curling from the future’s
briar pipe he carried the summer
body of his boy from beneath the
plow across fields  this is no
metaphor or if it is it is a metaphor
for itself  the symbol of haunting
and the haunted thing  since
the past summer he has
transformed into the father of
mythology I read about
in the songs of the nursing home’s pet finches
future’s messengers
calling into the ashes
  for some new thing to come opening out
like an avenue into a never
visited place  where to walk is to chance
upon the ancient high priest
of Jupiter  *Flamen diale*  and any
in chains brought to sentencing who
the priest passes must
be released at that exact moment
  and then the dream of
afterwards  red fields
promised by their avenues  by what
is coming from the other
side  just beyond sight this lined pathway
and its wide range of the leafy
possible  the moment before me
hewn into a manageable
size is that of ecstatic
prospect  sunlit or deep
shadowed divining the same
paths or the similar or
avenues of unconditional unknowing
  the newness old things take on
when remembered after an
expanse of that stuff of
once-future  the streets of foreign
cities  they that contour the coming
  built from the colorings of past
repetitions  —is that what I felt
cold and lost in
the old Moorish village
across from the Alhambra  crooked shapes
winding up the slight incline to
look over history’s evacuated castle
carefully preserved in mis-memory
of unhabitation the script
cursive on the palace walls writing
the names of God
as if the eternal can best forget
whoever is not buried either
here or in the narratives
of its country what stories
that stay to be read in the sixteen corners
of the Sala de los Abencerrajes
and the fountain in the
center where the blood of princes
rusts the stone and the stars
let slide jealous beams
remembering the always-now
where I can hear
the rattle of bodies from the
pool that the room opens into
where I stood gazing back
at time
one can take all of it perhaps in
in a breath even but no
imagined eulogy can sort the sense
of these empty rooms
or whatever the container is that
the moments skip over like the wind
across the mouths of caves and its howl
or hollow moan there is the self
sounded between element and
absence the unseen passes its fingers
over the harp of us in more
generous beliefs and in
the others a brief noise is all
that can be managed
against the stream either way
exhaled the world is
vaporized into
abstraction every second every
second’s second music into the meaning of
music slow looping backwards
turning to see the way
overgrown so many years
left unweeded by memory’s
rememberings this rising circle
spirals to pass the same
points in a different way the thing happens
and it happens again at
another time, called back into
the mask of being by the inreaching
and amassing mind to recollect to gather
and gather again these unrelated bits
into relation and bind
the sheaf culled from wide fields
to find the border
where ocean becomes sea
to tap the C-

note spine of this song In C by Terry Riley, its
single percussive sameness underneath
the undulating weft of players
swooning and swanning
fifty-three phrases cut-up and piece-mealed
in the morph of a snowstorm
when only single snowflakes
at a time are seen scooping
out the air’s angles as if the real expedition
into the vast
and terrifying
absolute emptiness of
the next line is restricted to
starting again something
once done before and perhaps better now with
the weight of
self-expansive history
pushing like an alarm
into repetition until that too
is made
and in its making
composes the maker orchid that
through the long invisible
tending of millenia
and what hidden machine
complements the earth’s gardener
takes the draped-
wing and slender-skinned
shape of a
dragonfly everything
doubles back on itself
   I was in a bar
named *The Raven* with cheap beer
and a TV playing silent
films the first experiments ever
with this new form of
seeing it was the aftermath of
the 1906 San Francisco earthquake
and men were eying
the wreckage in suits when at once
a man at the end of his middle years
sat beside me to advise
me liquidly of the women in the bar I
looked up and for a moment
thought of my father alcoholic
who has never had a
drink even here the ghosts
of a past whom one keeps trying to funnel
into the white spaces make their
way like the oncoming coming-on
   like the future contained
seed-like and despairing in
the lines and rings of past he was not
the figure I was looking for but
the repetition unwanted, expected this
is life’s carefully disguised sestina
this is the
inconceivability of the period da capo
with the eternal coda
and the emotion of these
strings sweeping clean
the floor of a room I have
slept in before in another time pressing
into the twilit pillow
and dread air of a visit
home to some home to a home some-
where the knowledge
of the armchair
and understanding of the end-table
sketched into it these rooms these briefest of
rests before the next
and all of it, oh it all running over
the air with a thousand canyons
opening wide below
unable to be filled
with these weightless memories
and experiences
what I have done or read or
forgotten still there
is, I remember, another
country far ahead
where history’s liberator
is almost lost in the
text of obscure books to come
and unlock what has been
for too long
locked just past the horizon-line
that whispers
and warps in the
heat against the blue of
sky and water
its blur and
messy composition
where I straining might
see myself
erase into what I
cannot see
until
set up
in the
shadows behind
City of Beneath

You came in the night
   low no-eyed silence

and measured the task in a
   thoughtful moment

that condensed into the moment’s
   white wisp of weather

doubting the idea enough
   to hide it transparent

—no, it was you who ran
   hands up everything along

the world’s prosaic rosary
   knowing each in its mirrored sphere

bead of laundry pile and bead
   of interlocking antennae

ribbing the stitch-work
   of a thousand beads

—or, it was neither of us
   but some shadowy third

who stole it out from under
   great tug of the tablecloth

bringing along the silverware
   to leave behind the empty spaces

of every thing, vacuums
   quivering in recent

absence holding shape of fork
   shape of gravy tureen

—it was someone far from here
   from some sandy place or
if we are in a sandy place
    from a rainy one who crafted

the replicas so perfect
    we cannot tell the difference

— but we can know it
    that beneath it all

is the nothing of
    once-was

that there is a conspiracy
    and we will breathe

until the worst of it
    is out of us

that we will make what we might make
    from dreaming about

what we never saw
    even the indentations

or scuffed corners
    of

but believe
    in any case

its lightning real
City of Storms

I only lifted a finger
to the wind
and along the ridged skin
a world came to
sing with no singer
beneath the quiet clouds