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Eighty years ago, in the summer and fall of 1926, Hart Crane had a spell of very productive writing, finishing much of what would become *The Bridge*, and drafting a number of new poems for a never-completed third book. This seems a good time to commemorate that creative outpouring. The essays for this symposium embark on a re-reading of Crane. Five of them deal with poems begun or finished in that 1926 burst of creativity; two others treat poems from earlier in his career. Together, they constitute a fresh look at one of our most problematic modernists.

Crane has always produced strong reactions in his readers: intense affection, rampant irritation, pulsations of bewilderment alternating with gusts of elation and bedazzlement. His ambition was huge: to be a poet in the mold of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, as if the entire Symbolist movement could somehow be transported to northeast Ohio; to rival T. S. Eliot as a spokesperson of the Zeitgeist; and to follow Whitman's example as a bard, extending a tradition that was seen as quintessentially American. No wonder he often stumbled and foundered, given such lofty goals! And being openly gay, alcoholic, and usually without funds through the American Twenties complicated his progress as well. Nonetheless, he lived and wrote with high spirits and enthusiasm, seldom letting his ambition flag, up to the moment of his despairing suicide in 1932.

From the time of Crane's death until the mid-1970s, there seemed to be a concerted effort to promote him as a major poet. That effort, essentially, has failed. There are simply too many problems of diction, syntax, prosody, structure, and vision in Crane's work to validate that kind of claim. But perhaps it was not all that interesting an assertion in the first place. Once we take Crane down from his pedestal and simply begin to reread him as the gifted but inconsistent poet that he was, with flashes of brilliance and an only partially realized promise and ambition, Crane is more interesting, more touching, and more clearly worth exploring.
The essays here reflect that more recent sense of Crane's place and interest. They are clear-eyed about problems of structure and consistency, and they take from the poems only what they can offer—here some uncanny music, there an unforgettable image that may be of continuing interest to working poets today. Bringing Crane back in this way provides new ways of seeing him and understanding him, a recognition that he is still our contemporary in many ways, vital to our language and our ongoing poetics, a figure of pathos, mystery, and vitality, sometimes wonderfully refreshing to reread.
MY GRANDMOTHER’S LOVE LETTERS

There are no stars to-night
But those of memory.
Yet how much room for memory there is
In the loose girdle of soft rain.

There is even room enough
For the letters of my mother’s mother,
Elizabeth,
That have been pressed so long
Into a corner of the roof
That they are brown and soft,
And liable to melt as snow.

Over the greatness of such space
Steps must be gentle.
It is all hung by an invisible white hair.
It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air.

And I ask myself:

"Are your fingers long enough to play
Old keys that are but echoes:
Is the silence strong enough
To carry back the music to its source
And back to you again
As though to her?"

Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand
Through much of what she would not understand;
And so I stumble. And the rain continues on the roof
With such a sound of gently pitying laughter.
In Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1987), John Unterecker describes the poet in Akron in winter, 1919, working for his father’s chocolate business in the Portage Drug Store. Crane, he writes, spent long hours behind a specially installed seasonal candy counter, surrounded by Christmas boxes of Mary Garden Chocolates. Since his father hadn’t advertised the chocolates as well as he might have, business was slow, and Crane passed his time in relative isolation, sitting cross-legged on the floor behind the counter, chewing on a cigar, studying poems. He’d built a secret, makeshift shelf on which he kept, among others, copies of The Little Review, Eliot’s Prufrock and Other Observations, and Pound’s Pavannes & Divisions, which he returned to again and again.

It was during his moments of free time, surrounded by Christmas cheer and holiday sweets, that Crane began to compose “My Grandmother’s Love Letters,” shipping various versions of it to friends (among them, Sherwood Anderson), struggling with the ending, writing at one point, “if I cannot carry it any further, I may simply add a few finishing lines and leave it simply as a mood touched upon.” (For his part, Anderson replied: “Let me speak of your poem. I can speak frankly because I have so little knowledge. It does not give me anything of yourself, the bone and flesh and reality of you as a man. Your letter does that so your letter is to me the better poem.”)

Somewhere along the line, Crane finished the poem to his satisfaction and found that (Anderson notwithstanding) it met with an offer of publication from The Dial and some critical acclaim. Still, it’s an unusual poem for Crane, or any modernist, both for its expression of his deep, personal attachment to his grandmother, “that dear old lady,” and for its sentimental tone.

What are we to make of this seemingly soft, nostalgic poem, its occasional gentle rhyme and slant-rhyme, its contemplative and measured tone? Clearly, it’s a poem about memory and the irretrievability of the past, about our inability truly to know anyone, even those we are closest too. (Crane wrote “My Grand-
mother’s Love Letters” shortly after a visit to the old woman in Cleveland.) It begins optimistically, the speaker looking into the empty, starless sky, imagining that it might be something like his mind, wide and full of room for memories. He conflates his descriptions of the night with his grandmother, telling us that rain falls from it as a “loose girdle,” that “it is all hung by an invisible white hair. / It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air.”

But into this idyllic and lovely description, Crane interjects self-doubt. “Are your fingers long enough to play / Old keys that are but echoes,” he asks himself. “Is the silence strong enough / To carry back the music to its source / And back to you again / As though to her?” The implied answer seems to be “no”: the speaker (and the reader, for that matter) hasn’t the power to reach into the past of another person, to draw her out as she once was and so to know that person as intimately as he would like. Still, he would try to conjure the younger self of his grandmother, even as he acknowledges that their worlds are in ways alien to each other, that to do so would be to lead her “by the hand / Through much of what she would not understand.”

Even in these moments of self-doubt, however, the poem remains nostalgic and yearning, sentimental and bittersweet, the speaker longing for something he cannot have, yet acknowledging the beauty that surrounds him. It’s only in the last two lines that the tone shifts dramatically. The speaker stumbles, “And the rain continues on the roof / With such a sound of gently pitying laughter.” No longer is the rain a loose girdle, nor do birch limbs tremble. Instead, the rain laughs at him, as if to point out the emptiness and hopelessness of his endeavor.

“My Grandmother’s Love Letters” is a beautiful, moving poem, and one I wish I had brought to a conversation a few years ago with a group of more successful poets of roughly my own age (then, about 30). Over dinner that night, several opined the existence of too many “grandmother poems,” and one (an editor of a prominent literary magazine) said she couldn’t stand to read them and rejected them out of hand. At the time, I was already becoming frustrated by my generation’s near obsession with ironic distance, self-reflexivity, coyness, and pop culture. I longed
for earnestness among the fragmented *ars poeticas*. I wanted the risk of sentiment, yet felt surrounded by (sometimes brilliant) linguistic pyrotechnics or (usually awful) odes to Barbie dolls and superheroes. I didn’t comment—I hadn’t yet discovered “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” and didn’t feel confident enough to offer an opinion—but I thought that a really good, serious, unironic grandmother poem or two might be just what my generation needed to wean us from the dubious influence of John Ashbery, James Tate, and Roland Barthes.

And tonight, reading his poem again, I’m thinking about Hart Crane, sitting on the floor of the Portage Drug Store, looking at the spines of those books by Eliot and Pound, composing in his head the first lines of “My Grandmother’s Love Letters.” Neither great modernist would have approved, I think, not in that other era of ironic distance—and for that I appreciate this unusual, sentimental, striking poem even more.
—And yet this great wink of eternity,
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings,
Samite sheeted and processioned where
Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;

Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptred terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,
All but the pieties of lovers’ hands.

And onward, as bells off San Salvador
Salute the crocus lustres of the stars,
In these poinsettia meadows of her tides,—
Adagios of islands, O my Prodigal,
Complete the dark confessions her veins spell.

Mark how her turning shoulders wind the hours,
And hasten while her penniless rich palms
Pass superscription of bent foam and wave,—
Hasten, while they are true,—sleep, death, desire,
Close round one instant in one floating flower.

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.
Charles Wright

IMPROVISATIONS ON A LINE BY HART CRANE

Confession: I’ve never been much good at writing about, or talking about poems. I’ve liked a lot of them, and didn’t like others, but was never able to say at length, or with continuing precision, just why exactly. Mostly I’ve loved lines,* and groups of lines—I’m talking about lyrics, of course, not Dante or Homer or even The Dream Songs. Why is it I’ve loved “Among School Children,” “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” “Canto XIII,” “The Far Field,” most of Hopkins, most of Keats, most of Dickinson, and find myself unable to talk about them? I feel, I guess, that facing a great poem is more or less like facing a great painting—amazing, isn’t it. What’s there to say? This has been fine for me personally, but not so impressive when asked to be a critic about, or to discuss, a given piece of work. A real critic (at least a theoretical one) would have no problem—he’d just write what he was writing about. I don’t have—at least not here—that same possibility of self-satisfaction. But, as Beckett says when he can’t go on, I’ll go on.

Like many, many others, I’ve loved the work of Hart Crane since I first discovered the beauties and possibilities of poetry. And particularly—and again like so many others—I’ve loved his great lyric poem, “Voyages,” and, more exact, number II, and even more microscopically, its last stanza. And, more ground down still, its last line. There are many lines, over the years, I have tried to launder, rearrange, rephrase, and reclothe into something resembling something of my own. This is one of them. You would never know it particularly, but its music, its vision, its ambition and its beautiful audacity is, or has been, a beacon to me, a light

* “On, to the great cliffs of amber”
“Sunset like the grasshopper flying”
“Perche no spero di tornar giammai, ballatetta, in Toscano”
“Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.”
“She walks like Bo Diddley and she don’t need no crutch”
“Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”
And on and on and on...
that both beckons and warns me off. There are many, many great lines of poetry, and of which Crane has more than a few, but this is the one that keeps shining in my eyes.

My old friend, the poet Henri Coulette, once told me that Crane had originally used the word “findrinny” in place of the three syllables “wide spindrift” in the final line. This may have been a well-known fact to others, but it was news to me. Fascinating news, really. I can’t find the word in any of my dictionaries (but I don’t, up here in the back country of Montana, have access to many), but one has little doubt as to its general meaning. An unusual word, a good word. But, still, just a word, while “wide spindrift” lifts the line and the whole poem up and up, into another realm. “Findrinny” keeps it down at sea level. Who says revision is not worthwhile?

“Bind us in time.” “Bequeath us to no earthly shore,” indeed, “until is answered” “The seal’s wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.” Now that’s the way to hook our hearts and minds. Pentameter can press no organ pedal more sweetly or more strong. This is the sort of thing that language was invented for. This is what raises Crane from a drunk to a saint. This is the gift of God’s right hand. One looks on and listens in amazement, no commentary necessary, just contemplation. Of all the offices of attention, my favorite.
THE HARBOR DAWN

Insistently through sleep—a tide of voices—
They meet you listening midway in your dream,
The long, tired sounds, fog-insulated noises:
Gongs in white surplices, beshrouded wails,
Far strum of fog horns . . . signals dispersed in veils.

And then a truck will lumber past the wharves
As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck;
Or a drunken stevedore’s howl and thud below
Comes echoing alley-upward through dim snow.

And if they take your sleep away sometimes
They give it back again. Soft sleeves of sound
Attend the darkling harbor, the pillowed bay;
Somewhere out there in blankness steam

Spills into steam, and wanders, washed away
—Flurried by keen fifings, eddied
Among distant chiming buoys—adrift. The sky,
Cool feathery fold, suspends, distills
This wavering slumber. . . . Slowly—
Immemorially the window, the half-covered chair
Ask nothing but this sheaf of pallid air.

And you beside me, blessèd now while sirens
Sing to us, stealthily weave us into day—
Serenely now, before day claims our eyes
Your cool arms murmurously about me lay.
400 years and more . . . or is it from the soundless shore of sleep that time

recalls you to your love, there in a waking dream to merge your seed
While myriad snowy hands are clustering at the panes—
your hands within my hands are deeds;
my tongue upon your throat—singing
arms close; eyes wide, undoubtful
dark
drink the dawn—
a forest shudders in your hair!

The window goes blond slowly. Frostily clears. From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters—Two—three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk The sun, released—aloft with cold gulls hither.

The fog leans one last moment on the sill. Under the mistletoe of dreams, a star— As though to join us at some distant hill— Turns in the waking west and goes to sleep.
—with whom?

Who is the woman with us in the dawn? . . . whose is the flesh our feet have moved upon?
For a long time, Hart Crane was a poet whose intensities confounded me, whose tendency toward syntactical murkiness and eccentricities of diction intrigued yet barricaded me from his poems. I found his language gorgeous, overwrought, unwieldy, impenetrable. The abstractions liberally mixed with images often struck me as off-kilter: they unbalanced rather than clarified or opened the meaning. I’m not sure when or how I began to appreciate this loss of balance, this feeling of teetering on the edge of known sense. Perhaps my rather controlled need for exactitude loosened on its own, perhaps I had come to the limit, in my reading and own writing, of what precise clarity offers. But somehow I came to realize that in challenging my aesthetic assumptions Crane’s poetry confronted me with myself. And I began to enjoy it, the poetry and the confrontation both, much more.

The glosses that appear alongside many sections of The Bridge are a case in point. They used to make me agonize each time I came to them. Not because they were hard to understand (they’re not usually) but because they’re hard to read alongside the text without breaking the lyrical flow. Unlike most of the glosses in “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner,” they aren’t self-contained, they don’t come at the beginning or end of a self-contained stanza, they aren’t really commentaries on the action. They are like the murmurings of a parallel consciousness, and seem to call for a simultaneous, secondary voice; for a performance, a duet—raising the poem beyond the scope of a solitary reader. The reader has to choose: break the lyrical and sensical flow by reading them alongside the text, read them beforehand, read them afterwards. Or read and re-read doing a little of each, ignoring them one time, highlighting them the next, skipping back and forth for a third round. At some point I realized I had to give up my desire to experience the text and glosses simultaneously, and settled for reading and re-reading, trying to keep more than one thing in mind at once. Eventually my feeling that I had failed the poem waned.
"The Harbor Dawn," the first poem in the "Powhatan's Daughter" section of *The Bridge*, satisfies my visceral desire to have a poem *absorb me*, and then fling me out, my nerve endings changed. Set during the moments between sleep and waking, those liminal moments when one swings between the world of spirit and the world of matter, when even as we are half-dead to the world we are most alive to it and its miraculousness, "The Harbor Dawn" is written primarily from the point of view of having one's eyes closed, and thus is full of sounds and veilings, textures and temperatures. But mostly sounds—so much so that it implicitly reflects back on poetry itself, and poetry's resonance with and ability to create states of deep consciousness.

A poem is, of course, by its nature, its means, full of sounds—it's made of sounds. But here, in the first stanzas, Crane creates a profusion of imagery to describe sound along with a dense interweaving of sounds so that the "tide of voices" that meets the sleeper "midway" in his dreams also overtakes the reader. This drawing in of the reader is underscored by Crane's use of direct address ("your dreams"), which seems, at this point, general—inclusive of both the poet's own experience and the reader's. Only halfway through the poem does the "you" become individualized, as it is placed alongside a "me," transforming the poem into an aubade.

Structurally, "The Harbor Dawn" both honors form and flaunts its departures from form's strictures. Six of the nine stanzas are quatrains and, overall, it has the measured balance, the flush carpentry, of iambic pentameter rhymed quatrains. But before the pattern is set, the poem opens with a five-line stanza, as if more material was hauled up than a quatrain could contain. The fourth stanza, that begins "spills into steam"—the only stanza to begin with a sentence that has spilled over—also overflows, with seven lines. In the seventh stanza, the emotional and erotic center of the poem, the pattern is dropped entirely: the first line overflows to six beats, and from there the rest of the stanza, an interlude of sexual ecstasy, bursts free, italicized and open-field.

In its rhyme scheme, "The Harbor Dawn" is similarly strong-minded, both rigorous and free. Almost all the end words, aside
from those in the italicized interlude, are rhymed, and many of the rhymes are full rhymes. But because that first stanza is five lines, it has room for a cross-rhyme, a couplet, and an unrhymed line—a pattern, an expectation, that the other stanzas can't meet. Instead, the stanzas, mostly rhyming only on two lines, run the gamut, with couplets, cross-rhymes, and one envelope rhyme. Rhyme also interlinks the stanzas: "dream" in the first stanza is picked up by "steam" in the third; "deck" in the second by "disk" in the seventh; "wharves," also in the second, by "star" in the last. And some already rhymed sounds are repeated in later stanzas, such as "veils" and "wails" in the first with "distills" in the fifth. "Bay," "away," "day," and "lay" move from the third to the fourth to the sixth stanza, where the last two words are cross-rhymed. The last line of the poem, which ends with "sleep," is one of the few unrhymed lines, but its assonance with "dreams," in the middle of the stanza's second line, gives it the deep resonance of rhyme, and calls us back to the first stanza, where "sleep" and "dream" are also paired. Furthermore, the long e sound they share is fundamental to the poem, appearing over and over: meet, stevedore's, sleeves, steam, keen, sheath, weave, serenely, deeds, released. To my ear, this recurring assonance, along with the density of rhymes within and between stanzas, and the lack of a set rhyme scheme, are crucial elements in the rich complexity of the poem's music. The rhymes and assonance are its "distant chiming buoys."

But in the first stanza, what is particularly interesting to me is the way fog and sound are synthesized, reflecting both harbor weather and the inner state of hearing in one's sleep. Every sound is muffled, baffled, veiled—"insulated," "beshrouded"—and the multiplicity of sound emphasized—"a tide," "gangs." The vowels are drawn out and layered: long i's of tide, tired, white; short i's and e's extended with s sounds (insistently, listening, insulated, surplices, signals dispersed); long e's (sleep, meet, dream); and long a's (midway, insulated, gangs, wails, veils). In the stanza's last line, the complexity of sound is complemented by a complex image of sound: "far strum of fog horns." Suggesting a guitar.
“strum” in effect pairs the fog horns with a second instrument, creating a fuller, eerier, music.

Though the sleeper awakens in the next stanza and the encroaching sounds are individualized, coming through more clearly, more stridently—a lumbering truck, a throbbing winch engine, a drunken stevedore’s “howl and thud”—the motion from sleep to waking is not a straight one: “And if they take your sleep away sometimes / They give it back again.” This is one of my favorite turns in the poem: simple, graceful, restful, true. The rest of the stanza, “the soft sleeves of sound,” “the pillowed bay,” is like bedding.

In fact, the sleepers in this poem never fully waken. They have an erotic interlude, in which the lines are italicized and broken up; dawn clears the sky. “The window goes blond slowly”—“blond” is another wonderfully original word usage. Every time I read it, I think “blind” and also think of a classic blonde, like Marilyn Monroe. But rather than following the lovers as they rise, the poem follows a star that “joins” them as it “turns in the waking west and goes to sleep.” In that sense, the poem is not a lover’s lament for the morning that will part them; instead it keeps them, and us, abed, subverting the traditional aubade.

And what of the gloss? Asking questions, it weaves an otherworldly, mysterious, thread into this sensuous poem, a spirituality to the lovers’ embrace. While the main poem takes place one dawn, the gloss opens with “400 years and more”; while the text is enveloped in sound, the gloss reminds us of sleep’s “soundless shore.” And while the poem leaves the genders of the lovers unspoken, a once common tactic among homosexual writers, which Auden also used, the gloss, asking “there in a / waking dream / to merge / your seed // —with whom?” calls us to ask who the speaker’s lover is. Significantly, the gloss also introduces “the / woman with / us in the / dawn,” the feminine spirit of the continent, more fully explored two sections later, in “The River.” Its music is like lapping water, soft, lulling, almost inaudible, alongside the poem’s densely packed sonorities.
O CARIB ISLE!

The tarantula rattling at the lily's foot
Across the feet of the dead, laid in white sand
Near the coral beach—nor zigzag fiddle crabs
Side-stilting from the path (that shift, subvert
And anagrammatize your name)—No, nothing here
Below the palsy that one eucalyptus lifts
In wrinkled shadows—mourns.

And yet suppose
I count these nacreous frames of tropic death,
Brutal necklaces of shells around each grave
Squared off so carefully. Then

To the white sand I may speak a name, fertile
Albeit in a stranger tongue. Tree names, flower names
Deliberate, gainsay death's brittle crypt. Meanwhile,
The wind that knots itself in one great death—
Coils and withdraws. So syllables want breath.

But where is the Captain of this doubloon isle
Without a turnstile? Who but catchword crabs
Patrols the dry groins of the underbrush?
What man, or What
Is Commissioner of mildew throughout the ambushed senses?
His Carib mathematics web the eyes' baked lenses!

Under the poinciana, of a noon or afternoon
Let fiery blossoms clot the light, render my ghost
Sieved upward, white and black along the air
Until it meets the blue's comedian host.
Let not the pilgrim see himself again
For slow evisceration bound like those huge terrapin
Each daybreak on the wharf, their brine-caked eyes;
—Spiked, overturned; such thunder in their strain!
And clenched beaks coughing for the surge again!

Slagged of the hurricane—I, cast within its flow,
Congeal by afternoons here, satin and vacant.
You have given me the shell, Satan,—carbonic amulet
Sere of the sun exploded in the sea.
I was a sucker for Hart Crane’s poems even before I moved to Akron, where I learned, as Crane did before me, that “in this town, poetry’s a / Bedroom occupation”—which has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with aesthetic isolation. But I’m only a displaced Southerner, while Crane was an exile in his home state of Ohio.

Over the years, one of the poems I keep coming back to is Crane’s meditation on death in the tropics, “O Carib Isle!” Two quotations spring to mind when I think of this poem. The first is found in a letter from John Keats: “The excellence of every Art is its intensity.” Has there ever been a poet of higher voltage than Hart Crane? Combine his verbal intensity with his intensity of vision, and you get lines that often crackle and shock—and sometimes blow a fuse. Densely musical, semantically daring, syntactically complex and unorthodox, Crane’s poems can feel thrilling and impenetrable at the same time.

The second quotation perhaps bears more directly on “O Carib Isle!” In Wallace Stevens’s “Nomad Exquisite,” he notes the oppressive fecundity of life in Florida, in his image of “green vines angering for life.” What Key West was for Stevens, the Isle of Pines and Grand Cayman seem to have been for Crane: an alien playground as frightening as it was voluptuous, nature seductive and out of control.

“O Carib Isle!” is representative of Crane’s mature work. The poem is written in a twitchy blank verse (with an occasional drift into rhyme), the kind of “ghost meter” that Eliot described, advancing and withdrawing from the norm of iambic pentameter. Whatever the number of feet, the iamb dominates, and the lines often approach a mighty Marlovian grandeur in their muscula-
ty. One of the odd things about Crane is how vulnerable he seems even as his lines grunt and surge in their compact power.

If you can resist the first line—“The tarantula rattling at the lily’s foot”—you’re immune to poetry. The hairy menace of the spider against the delicate display of the lily, the compressed sound (suave Is threatened by the bullying ts), the sinister
rhythmic uncertainty of "tarantula rattling" solidifying in the final blunt "foot": it's an opening both creepy and glorious.

The entire first stanza, a single unconventional sentence, is an example of disruptive mastery. As in some demented, self-interfering, Germanic construction, the main verb is delayed until the end of the passage, almost past the point when you've given up hope of pulling the images together into one cohesive, grammatical whole.

Two other details in the opening stanza fascinate me. One occurs in this passage: "nor zigzag fiddle crabs / Side-stilting from the path (that shift, subvert / And anagrammatize your name)." "Side-stilting" is a participle that only Crane could create, exact and a little bizarre. It describes not only the movement of the crabs but also the irregular advance of that entire sentence. And the three parenthetical verbs say roughly the same thing, though in a subtle progression. As I take it, crab is a near anagram of Carib, the creature becoming a mysterious, living script of Grand Cayman island, synecdoche on ten scribbly legs.

The other phrase that especially interests me is "wrinkled shadows." Crane, in a characteristic "logic of metaphor," describes the movement of the medicinal leaves by the effect they make on the ground. Nothing beneath that "palsy" mourns the dead. Tarantula, crab, eucalyptus—Crane places these restless elements of no consolation against the stillness of the graves.

In the presence of nature's indifference to the dead, the speaker feels the need to offer some tribute to them, even if hypothetically ("And yet suppose"). The human acts of counting and naming would bring some order to this savage scene, and with order dignity becomes possible. There's already evidence of attentive honor, in the "necklaces of shells around each grave / Squared off so carefully," though "Brutal" undermines the grace of the shell necklaces.

Naming seems even more effective than counting, "fertile" in a landscape nervously on the crawl. The speaker's tongue may be "stranger" because it's English rather than Spanish, or because it's poetry. But it's also strange because this naming of trees and flowers can "gainsay death's brittle crypt" and somehow put that
snaky death-wind on the run. His "syllables want breath," as speech is his way of countering the barren morbidity of the scene. Of course, for Crane, breath also wants syllables, especially the brilliance of extravagant language. Crane was never one to hold back when he could indulge himself, whether in words, wine, or sex.

The next stanza rather feverishly raises the question of a prime mover or elemental force—who, or what, is behind this plot of tropical death? "Captain of this doubloon isle" may be a feebler phrase than "Commissioner of mildew," but both designations seem rather desperate. I suspect Crane's main interest is in developing some of his earlier images: "catchword crabs" picks up on the "fiddle crabs" that make anagrams, and "Carib mathematics" tries to extend the image of counting shells, and "web the eyes' baked lenses" looks back to the spider that began the poem. It all seems to make some kind of sense, though I don't believe that advancing an argument was Crane's real concern. Crane's lust was for vibrant, semidetachable word clusters like "dry groins of the underbrush" and "the ambushed senses," and he didn't mind juryrigging a poem to get them in.

Things calm down in stanza five, a transitional pause before the violent scene that will follow. The rhetoric is less inquisitorial and more prayerlike. The most compelling clause is "Let fiery blossoms clot the light." With that "clot," Crane again shows his genius for the odd, right word. Something of an escape wish seems to be at work, as the speaker longs for his spirit to be filtered upwards through the red flowers of the poinciana tree, "Until it meets the blue's comedian host." I have no idea what that thin phrase "the blue's comedian host" refers to. The God who was absent in the previous stanza? Some ethereal peace above the sandy angst of the island? A kinder, gentler extinction than the one depicted in the next stanza? I'm not so much bothered by the puzzle of that dubious trope as by the deflation of linguistic intensity.

Crane recovers his touch again in stanza six, the most straightforward in the poem, where the terrapin embody the life force, so powerful as almost to overcome the death force on that
island. The fact of "slow evisceration" seems weak, if horrible, beside the closing lines of the stanza: "such thunder in their strain! / And clenched beaks coughing for the surge again!" Double exclamation points and a couplet to reinforce the drama (stanzas three and four also seal themselves with rhymes: "death/breath" and "senses/lenses"). The verve of the last line enacts itself with a spondee in the second foot, putting the hammer down on three stressed syllables in a row: "clenched beaks cough-.

The pilgrim prays again, this time not to see himself in those slaughtered terrapin, but the verse evinces his admiration for their noble struggle against death. With "their brine-caked eyes," the image returns us to the blindness of eyes webbed over with "Carib mathematics," from stanza four, but Crane may also be evoking one of his earlier poems of the sea, "Voyages II," that ends with this thrilling and optimistic vision: "The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise." There does seem something splendid and hopeful in this anecdote of the terrapin, despite the brutality of their demise.

The last stanza of "O Carib Isle!" begins with a dash of loose construction. But in Crane, ecstasy always takes precedence over the niceties of form. No charming Mozartean flourishes for him, but the abrupt clamor of Beethoven (though, in Crane's earlier years, he liked to write late at night while drinking himself into a liberated state on cheap Italian red as he listened over and over to Ravel's Bolero).

The poem comes to a curious but powerful conclusion, volcanic in its unfolding. As a native of New Orleans, I understand "Slagged of the hurricane" all too well. In a single phrase, Crane combines the effects of two natural phenomena, the hurricane and the volcano. The speaker describes himself as someone who's been poured out like lava and then cooled into a glassy slag, "satin and vacant." At the same time, the images turn him into the wreckage left behind by a fierce tropical storm. The emotional turmoil is so great that it has to be expressed by not one, but two eruptive and transformative forces.

In the final sentence, the volcanic imagery is carried forward in "carbonic," "sere," and "exploded." Satan is another figure
associated with fiery torments. Strangely, though, Satan is addressed here as a benevolent gift-giver, providing the speaker with a charm to ward off evil. As has happened before, Crane's rapid imagination makes me feel slow and tentative. This shell has a magical power, perhaps like those "nacreous frames of tropic death" in stanza two: if the speaker counted them, he could speak a fertile name that might "gainsay death's brittle crypt." The shell, itself a "brittle crypt," scorched by the destructive sun, somehow now becomes a protective ornament. If this all seems too tangled to unravel convincingly, that's probably because it is. Crane's urgency is to put immense pressure on the language until it concentrates into the hard shine of a diamond—and sometimes collapses into itself. He's willing to risk obscurity for rapture, and who wouldn't prefer the blur of wild pleasure over clear meaning? As Marianne Moore, Crane's temperamentally opposite, once wrote: "Expanded explanation tends to spoil the lion's leap."

I usually trust that Hart Crane knew what he was doing, even if I don't. His famous letter to Harriet Monroe about "At Melville's Tomb," a poem that puzzled her to rejection, shows that Crane could offer an elaborate, detailed, and sometimes preposterous interpretation of his own work. But however much he claimed to be writing from design, I don't go to his poetry for architectural ingenuity or strict lines of reasoning. I read him for the gorgeous collision of syllables, for the sensual, intuitive linkage of his imagery, for his "New thresholds, new anatomies!" I don't feel that Crane is deliberately evasive or willfully impervious to paraphrase. He just has higher priorities than most poets. He's a true believer, and what he believes is that "In the beginning was the Word." And in the end, too. And I say amen to that.
THE AIR PLANT

Grand Cayman

This tuft that thrives on saline nothingness,
Inverted octopus with heavenward arms
Thrust parching from a palm-bole hard by the cove—
A bird almost—of almost bird alarms,

Is pulmonary to the wind that jars
Its tentacles, horrific in their lurch.
The lizard’s throat, held bloated for a fly,
Balloons but warily from this throbbing perch.

The needles and hack-saws of cactus bleed
A milk of earth when stricken off the stalk;
But this,—defenseless, thornless, sheds no blood,
Almost no shadow—but the air’s thin talk.

Angelic Dynamo! Ventriloquist of the Blue!
While beachward creeps the shark-swept Spanish Main
By what conjunctions do the winds appoint
Its apotheosis, at last—the hurricane!
I have always loved this lesser-known and more accessible poem of Hart Crane’s. He wrote it during the summer of 1926 on the Isle of Pines, an island off Cuba where his family owned property. It was a time of turmoil in Crane’s life—he was quarreling with many of his friends, particularly with Allen and Caroline Tate, with whom he had shared a house in Patterson, New York. The effects of his alcoholism were beginning to escalate. He was also having some luck. He had secured a “loan” from the millionaire and philanthropist Otto Kahn, and the plan was to spend a whole year on the island. He didn’t stay that long, but while he was there he wrote, over a six-week period, about two-thirds of The Bridge, his great long poem. This has to stand with Rilke’s writing The Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus (in a similar avalanche of genius) as one of the great literary (in poetry, anyway) hot streaks of all time. He designated about 15 poems, also from this period, Key West: An Island Sheaf, to which this poem belongs.

The poem is, obviously, in iambic pentameter ABAB quatrains, with a few missing rhymes and its share of what Emerson called “meter-making arguments,” i.e. places where the meter is varied for a reason, to make something happen. These metrical variations, Crane’s inimitable ear—particularly when it comes, in this poem, in the form of that tasty poetic tool, onomatopoeia—and his unique diction, make this poem and its subject, the air plant, into a wonderful metaphor driven by a perfectly pitched and tuned sound machine.

His noise-play starts in the first line with the “uh” sounds in “tuft” and “nothingness.” Those sounds suggest effort, pushing, wind. “Tuft” is a perfect word denotatively as well as connotatively. I believe he’s even punning on it: tuft = tough. Another common name for the air plant is “life plant.” The second line evokes both sea and sky—across and upon which the hurricane is riding. The third line starts his meter-play, opening with a trochee (also the place where an iambic poem traditionally makes its first variation) and then later the three stressed syllables in a
row, "palm-bole hard." The heavier, darker b’s and d’s there too are no accident: something ominous is going on. Then the rest of the third line, "by the cove," and the whole last line of the stanza lull the reader (the calm before the storm?), using open, evocative o sounds and warming them even more with that most musical of all consonants, l.

That’s a lot of action, music, sensory info, etc. for one qua-train! The syntax of this sentence (there are two more lines to it yet) is pulmonary—it breathes, it sways in and out. "Pul-mon-ary," a lovely word, humanizing this spare, can-take-whatever-you-got plant. Someone told me that air plants are studied now by those who calculate the many ways in which we pollute our planet. The air plant knows, and in its cells, records.

When Crane gets to the first line of the third stanza we’re attacked by a barrage of sounds and tactile imagery—like swords coming down on a shield barely protecting our heads, ack ack ack right in the middle of the line bracketed by the sharp ee sounds of "needles" and "bleed." If you didn’t know a word of English you’d be pierced and torn by that line!

I haven’t mentioned the verbs yet: all active, fresh, sharp. Nor have I mentioned the nouns. Keats praised what he called "the dense thing-ness" of Shakespeare’s poetry. Crane’s verbs and nouns are filled with reverberation, the world and its things, connotation, life!

This thing, this air plant—"defenseless, thornless, sheds no blood, / Almost no shadow—but the air’s thin talk"—picks up the news, the danger, of what’s coming and sets its bony shoulders against it and lets it blow right through it rather than blow it down. Of course it’s an "Angelic Dynamo! Ventriloquist of the Blue!"

The next line contains my favorite spondee (depending on how you scan the line) in American poetry: "shark-swept."

And then two unexpected and polysyllabic (but still rich, particularly "apotheosis") words with several connotations (one, "conjunctions," having partly to do with language) connected by the wonderful verb "appoint" with all its connotations. It’s coming "at last—the hurricane!"
For a few years in my twenties I kept alive a fantasy that Hart Crane was alive, that when he jumped off the *SS Orizaba* on April 27, 1932, he was picked up by a tramp steamer and went off somewhere in the West Indies. And that somewhere there is a trunk of his poems—30, 40, 50 years of unread Hart Crane poems! I gave up—he was food for fish, is the truth—that fantasy. But we have *White Buildings* and we have *The Bridge* and *The Complete Poems*. We have the letters, many of them. We have the poems.
THE HURRICANE

Lo, Lord, Thou ridest!
Lord, Lord, Thy swifting heart

Nought stayeth, nought now bideth
But's smithereened apart!

Ay! Scripture flee'th stone!
Milk-bright, Thy chisel wind

Rescindeth flesh from bone
To quivering whittlings thinned —

Swept, whistling straw! Battered,
Lord, e'en boulders now outleap

Rock sockets, levin-lathered!
Nor, Lord, may worm outdeep

Thy drum's gambade, its plunge abscond!
Lord God, while summits crashing

Whip sea-kelp screaming on blond
Sky-seethe, dense heaven dashing —

Thou ridest to the door, Lord!
Thou bidest wall nor floor, Lord!
Eighty years ago, through much of 1926—May through October, to be precise—Hart Crane was living and working on an old plantation that belonged to his family on the Isle of Pines, near Cuba. His only companion, Mrs. Simpson, the caretaker of the place, soon became a good friend and confidante. Financial necessity had sent him there, and while he was sometimes miserably lonely and bored, that six-month stint was highly productive for him as a writer: much of *The Bridge* was written during that period, as were a large number of the poems he had tentatively assembled under the title *Key West: An Island Sheaf*. Those poems were the beginning of his third book and, given both the promise and the problems of the first two, they naturally attract interest and speculation about Crane’s direction, had he lived. One aspect of them that feels new is their strong sense of place and their response to environment. If much of Crane’s work now feels overly sweeping and mythic, too grandiose and unanchored for its own good (surely a major problem with *The Bridge*), these poems, intense responses to the Caribbean world in which he was spending so much time, offer an attractive alternative.

The island stay ended in a spectacular fashion, with a hurricane that devastated the island and nearly destroyed the plantation. It happened in mid-October, and it may serve to remind us that devastating hurricanes are not a recent phenomenon in that part of the world, though their frequency and severity have increased as a result of global warming.

Crane in fact wrote two poetic responses to the event, and they illustrate the experimentation associated with his emerging poetic style. They seem to come from opposite ends of a spectrum of poetic possibility. Neither one has much in common with the poetry of *The Bridge*. The first one, titled “Eternity,” is interesting enough to quote here in its entirety:
ETERNITY

September—remember!
October—all over.

BARBADIAN ADAGE

After it was over, though still gusting balefully,
The old woman and I foraged some drier clothes
And left the house, or what was left of it;
Parts of the roof reached Yucatan, I suppose.
She almost—even then—got blown across lots
At the base of the mountain. But the town, the town!

Wires in the streets and Chinamen up and down
With arms in slings, plaster strewn dense with tiles,
And Cuban doctors, troopers, trucks, loose hens . . .
The only building not sagging on its knees,
Fernandez’ Hotel, was requisitioned into pens
For cotted negroes, bandaged to be taken
To Havana on the first boat through. They groaned.

But was there a boat? By the wharf’s old site you saw
Two decks unsandwiched, split sixty feet apart
And a funnel high and dry up near the park
Where a frantic peacock rummaged amid heaped cans.
No one seemed to be able to get a spark
From the world outside, but some rumor blew
That Havana, not to mention poor Batabanó,
Was halfway under water with fires
For some hours since—all wireless down
Of course, there too.

Back at the erstwhile house
We shoveled and sweated; watched the ogre sun
Blister the mountain, stripped now, bare of palm,
Everything—and lick the grass, as black as patent
Leather, which the rimed white wind had glazed.
Everything gone—or strewn in riddled grace—
Long tropic roots high in the air, like lace.
And somebody’s mule steamed, swaying right by the pump,
Good God! as though his sinking carcass there
Were death predestined! You held your nose already
Along the roads, begging for buzzards, vultures . . .
The mule stumbled, staggered. I somehow couldn’t budge
To lift a stick for pity of his stupor.

I pause here to remark on the matter-of-fact, journalistic tone and manner of this account. The hurricane, Crane recognizes, needs very little in the way of figurative language or poetic intensity to register its meaning and force. He can rhyme casually, write a loosened iambic pentameter, manage verbal music that feels quite natural (the second stanza is a good example) and content himself with straight description. A peacock rummaging a heap of cans near a detached steamship funnel is a striking enough detail not to need adornment or comment. So for once—and I know of no other poem like this in Crane’s oeuvre—the poet is content to emulate the prosaic and photographic side of William Carlos Williams (whose work he did not admire) and just report on what he noticed and, often with understatement, what he felt.

As he moves into the last phase of the poem he arranges to show us one striking apparition that explains his title—a horse that can’t be accounted for and that seems to personify the hurricane—but, as if sensing that too climactic a detail would betray the poem’s journalistic integrity, he goes on to close with the more mundane details of the mule and the American battleship:

For I
Remember still that strange gratuity of horses
—One ours, and one, a stranger, creeping up with dawn
Out of the bamboo brake through howling sheeted light
When the storm was dying. And Sarah saw them, too—
Sobbed. Yes, now—it’s almost over. For they know;
The weather’s in their noses. There’s Don—but that one, white
—I can’t account for him! And true, he stood
Like a vast phantom maned by all that memoried night
Of screaming rain—Eternity!

Yet water, water!
I beat the dazed mule toward the road. He got that far
And fell dead or dying, but it didn’t so much matter.
The morrow’s dawn was dense with carrion hazes
Sliding everywhere. Bodies were rushed into graves
Without ceremony, while hammers pattered in town.
The roads were being cleared, injured brought in
And treated, it seemed. In due time
The President sent down a battleship that baked
Something like two thousand loaves on the way.
Doctors shot ahead from a deck in planes.
The fever was checked. I stood a long time in Mack’s talking
New York with the gobs, Guantanamo, Norfolk,—
Drinking Bacardi and talking U.S.A.

It’s a wry and candid account, and it’s handled with the authority of an eyewitness who has an alert, attentive imagination. Even when reining himself in from his usual extravagances of diction and syntax, Crane is a potent writer, vibrant with awareness. He has not fully realized or finished this poem, but its combination of natural fatality and responsive vitality in a bewildering world makes a strong impression.

But Crane did not leave it at that. He also wrote “The Hurricane,” a poem in which he summons all his considerable capabilities of language and vision to fashion a second response to the hurricane, one that is no less than the utterance of a prophet, a shaman, a seer. And it may be that the two poems achieve their separate success by coexisting: the first one descriptive and reportorial, the other aspiring to biblical status, a poem to keep company with Blake and the Psalms.

How do you talk to God? You can pray, of course, taking the posture of a suppliant and pleading for mercy and forgiveness. But Crane does not feel guilty, as though he had brought the hurricane’s wrath down on himself. He is awed by the mystery of its force and he seems to want to meet it, and its Creator, on their own terms, matching their vehemence with a language of his own, one compounded of biblical speech, highly compressed images and metaphors, and a pounding rhythm that presses back at the pounding force of weather.
I think I would characterize this poem as beautifully organized confusion. The couplets look orderly but do not, as one might expect, rhyme as pairs until the very end; instead they turn out to be quatrains, visually presented to look like couplets. There are four such "quatrains" and then the closing couplet, as if the poem were an overextended eighteen-line sonnet.

The syntax, for Crane, is unusually clear, mostly because it consists of short, sharp ejaculations, bursts of address to the deity whose identity has been unleashed by the storm. The couplets seem to spill across their own boundaries as they enjamb past the possibility of matching rhyme to complete their statements, and their rhymes, in the next couplet. The sense of divine power on an absolute rampage is reinforced by the urgent, overlapping, sometimes repetitive use of exclamation. Archaic language is everywhere—not only in forms like "ridest," "stayeth," and "flee'th"—but in the old Irish noun "smithereen," here conscripted to service as a verb, and in "levin-lathered," where an obsolete word for lightning joins with another old word that, related as it is to "ladder" and "leather," as well as to conditions of foaming and beating, makes for a brilliant moment in a brilliantly compressed account.

Other compounds—"milk-bright," "sea-kelp" and "sky-seethe"—show that Crane, even before he had discovered Hopkins (which was to happen just a few months later, when he was visiting Yvor Winters in California), had pondered the Germanic resources available to poets in our language: the economies of imagery and analogy, not to mention musicality, that newly coined compounds can provide.

The poem's music is especially difficult to characterize. Tongue and teeth, along with breath, must proceed with great care and precision when the poem is read aloud, almost as if the poet was stringing together a series of tongue-twisters. The sound patterns are, at least to this reader, a constant series of surprises. It's impossible not to pause over a line like "Milk-bright, Thy chisel wind," and admire its string of "i" sounds, three short and two long, holding the diverse consonants together. Try saying the line out loud while noting your mouth's activity at the m and b and t and th and w and d, and you begin to get a feel for
Crane’s mastery. He makes your mouth sing and stutter, as your lips purse and smack, and your tongue turns acrobat.

The next-to-last couplet—"Whip sea-kelp screaming on blond / Sky-seethe, dense heaven dashing" (which stands independent visually but is of course syntactically tied to what precedes and follows it), illustrates how sound and image can cluster and fuse unforgettably in poetry, forming a language that does seem, at least for a moment, to be speech that could match or address the utterance of gods, or God.

Unusual diction was Crane’s vice, at times, but it was also his way of defying “plain American” speech, as he rummaged through histories and cultures to broaden our horizons and spruce up our eloquence. Thus “gambade,” an Anglicizing of gambado, a caper or the spring of a horse, gets to characterize a drum and find itself joined in its line with the phrase “its plunge abscond,” for me an example of Crane pushing his luck, since it involves the activity of a worm that is presumably trying to escape the hurricane’s force. Here, as all too often in Crane, the risk-taking becomes a pratfall, but a forgivable one, surely, in the midst of all this energy, this gallant overreaching. Rimbaud would forgive it, even applaud it.

The poem’s closing couplet, with the resort to full rhyme, not only in the end words but four times if you count the repetitions of “Thou” and “Lord,” is probably satisfying in part because its imagery returns us from the world of chisel wind and rock sockets, of sea-kelp and sky-seethe, to the human spaces where walls and doors and floors surround, or used to surround, us. It’s true, of course, that the speaker is acknowledging the hurricane’s destruction of such features of our world, but the rhyming and imagery still somehow ground us in the close of a poem that has ranged widely and been relentless in its evocation of the non-human world’s sheer otherness. Even “ridest,” which returns to the poem from the first line, characterizes the awful deity in terms of horseback and galloping, connecting this poem to “Eternity” in an interesting way, as if that mysterious white horse were the Lord’s own mount, and giving us a more comprehensible image of godhead—horseman, pass by!—than we have had for most of the poem.
Crane didn't know quite what he thought of his two hurricane poems, and he got mixed messages from his readers. Winters, if I recall correctly, disliked "The Hurricane" when he read it but changed his mind when he heard Crane recite it. I think time has proved the pair of them to be a success, especially the second. They seem to augur poetic possibilities that his untimely death unfortunately took from us, just as that hurricane took so much from the battered islands and people and animals in its destructive path.
MOMENT FUGUE

The syphilitic selling violets calmly
   and daisies
By the subway news-stand knows
   how hyacinths

This April morning offers
   hurriedly
In bunches sorted freshy—
   and bestows
On every purchaser
   (of heaven perhaps)

His eyes—
   like crutches hurtled against glass
Fall mute and sudden (dealing change
   for lilies)
Beyond the roses that no flesh can pass.
Marianne Boruch

SOME MOMENTS IN "MOMENT FUGUE"

A confession: I have no business writing about Hart Crane. I have a bad history with the guy, once very happily dropping a course in which I was assigned to lead a discussion of The Bridge. The truth is I had another reason for bailing out, wanting desperately to get my hands on clay, lose myself in that turning wheel—in short, to take Ceramics, a class which met the same hour. Still, to be released from trying to make sense, in public, of this very puzzling poet was a definite perk and made my decision a wildly thrilling—if irresponsible—act. This was graduate school, after all. Though we were writers, not scholars, this sort of thing wasn’t done. Poets had to read, and certainly they read poets. One stayed in such a class and diligently absorbed what smoked and burned on the page. One made the presentation.

I haven’t completely avoided The Bridge in the many years since then; its ambition alone overwhelms and astonishes. The great Whitman—Crane, his devout defender—lurks there. And I love the near mythic coincidence surrounding its making, that Crane lived overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge some of that time, in the same room as Washington Roebling, son of its chief engineer and the one who oversaw its construction for his father from a distance, by telescope, because he was paralyzed by caisson disease. I think about this sometimes, how Crane’s friend, Waldo Frank, claimed the poet discovered this rather enormous detail later, after the fact. Good thing, I always think. Crane was haunted enough. But perhaps he would have relished knowing this at the time he lived and wrote there—yet another layer to his vision: the vast idea of the bridge; then its day-to-day rise and complication, Roebling’s quiet, damaged body far off, behind windows as he watched so closely nevertheless, the lens of that; the counter lens of the poet who records and figures and assigns weight; the even larger notion, the history of the country drawn in, all of it together, barely—some would say never—melded into a coherent shape for the epic Crane himself called heroic.

Because complexity, expansion, density. These qualities are so characteristic of this poet’s work, it seems ham-handedly

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obvious to mention them. Add romantic. Add rhetorical. And then add the troubling bits, forever—or it only seems forever—with us: his sentimentality, his predictable cadence and mannered language, his boosterism for America, for the “Machine Age,” his fondness for bombast and excess and prophecy. One begins to give up and close the book all over again, thinking of certain contemporaries, how fresh Williams seems in comparison, how acute Marianne Moore. The perfect gravity in Stevens, or Frost. Of course, Frost. Then, no—here and here and over here in White Buildings and The Bridge and among the pieces he didn’t live to gather into another book, this poet can surprise, be inventive and irresistibly strange. Even subtle. Sweet, without too much mist involved. Fierce. Convincing. Sudden. So the jury’s out on the tarmac somewhere and there’s a lot of traffic; one can have at least two minds—maybe more—about Hart Crane. Enter the smaller lyric pieces, some of which add far more than they subtract.

"Moment Fugue" is a late work, published in the journal transition early in 1929, a year before The Bridge appeared. At his death three years later, it was found in the sheaf marked for his next and third book. The Depression hit after the poem’s making, but it’s definitely a city piece, weighted with the growing despair of that period. In a way it fits Crane’s own requirement for “poetry in the Machine Age,” not so much that it “absorbs” the machine or “climatizes it as ... casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles,” but in how it underscores what the poet thought crucial for any serious writing in the new century, “an extraordinary capacity for surrender [italics his], at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life.” Hart Crane loved cities, especially New York. But to surrender to its particulars, by way of “Moment Fugue,” must have been an unusually selfless act, the focus of attention out there and elsewhere, several steps away from the more typical lyric poem which honors the first person speaker’s very private orbit in and out of what—often for Crane, at least—can be a calculated and considerable heat. Of course he cautions that such surrender be to "sensations." So we’re still in the realm of the interior, how to attend to these outward things and the ricochet action they create inside us.
I need to follow that action in “Moment Fugue,” as swift and tangled and maddening as anything in his larger works, really a kind of microcosm of his anxious, deliberately ballasted style. Crane calls this piece a fugue. Fair enough, given the open-ended definitions musicologists offer. Not exactly a form, many say; the fugue is more a process, a practice, even a texture. This poet’s sentences merge and give up and steal from each other and procrastinate; a lot goes on, often rather quickly. A fugue—why not? The word is from the Latin *fuga*, meaning flight, and from *fugere*, to flee. There are “episodes” involved, the initial one and those that race after with little or very large shifts, “developmental” layers and the world widens or deepens. A key to Crane’s poem might be the in stretto effect of so many fugues, a voice which appears before the one ahead of it has finished, the small resulting cacophony and overlay—as in logjam, as in how-in-the-hell-do-I-get-back-to-the-trailhead?—entirely prized. But texture. I like the every-which-way woven notion of that. It fits this poet’s density of movement which seems at times without reason, bypassing clear syntax, that old guardian of sense, particularly in Crane’s generation. Which is to say, there are rules but the urgent weight—or multiplicity—of the cargo can break them.

Still, it’s visual art that helps me most with “Moment Fugue.” A highly figurative piece, its pressure points are images pure and simple—flowers, a flower seller, the subway news stand, gestures of buying and selling. One rather violent simile in the otherwise most daily of scenes suggests a narrative briefly, shot down many layers, a seething and a shock. But intense, nearly surreal camera work is required; one sees with the care and distance of that quick lens. Little wonder that one of Crane’s long-term friends was Walker Evans who shared his passion for the Brooklyn Bridge, that they actually met on site, the 24-year-old Evans armed with a six dollar camera, his first, aiming up at the massive structure when the poet noticed him and called out. Evans was surprised, in all those conversations that followed, at how astutely the poet could keep “raving on” about photography. But it was earlier, in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, that Crane wrote his most revealing comment on that art: “The eerie speed
of the shutter is more adequate than the human eye to remember.

... Speed is at the bottom of it all—the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture indefinitely: the moment made eternal.”

Speed—and its curious connection to things eternal, beyond time. This may be at the center of Crane’s work, a reason for both its life and confusion. In “Moment Fugue,” that balance is tricky and unsettling but absolutely visible. The poem is built of two stills and a final lunge, its three stanzas quieted by so much white space via the varied line lengths, the start of those lines flush to the margin, then delayed and then flush and then delayed again, not to mention the small parenthetical dips that suspend what they carry, a kind of thought-bubble, a whisper, a thing barely heard. These stills start in darkness, the flower seller diseased but seemingly accepting of his lot at this point, to sell the harmless, beautiful things he sells, the fury of the subway close, vaguely threatening but just far enough away. So the poet sets up tension within this first still, two elements at odds, and his authority is established as well, a bare omniscient sweep right into the head of that flower seller.

The syphilitic selling violets calmly
and daisies
By the subway news-stand knows
how hyacinths

How hyacinths—what? In a first easy read of this piece, one naturally, almost without thinking, drops down into the next stanza, correcting Crane’s grammar to realign subject (hyacinths) with verb (offer, not “offers”) and thus fill in what the flower seller must be sure of: “how hyacinths / This April morning offer”—well, something, yes? whatever the poem might throw out next. Because this small fix works with most everything that follows. But I must trust the actual words here. In fact, this poet does not continue the sentence into the second stanza, has not chosen the verb form to take those hyacinths anywhere. They’re toast now, cut off, that first sentence incomplete, lost to fragmenthood and its breathless effect.
Which is a way to register speed, of course. Here. Now. No, not now—what was I thinking? Hold back, start again. And Crane’s omniscience? That’s pretty much lost too. We’ll never know what the syphilitic knows. He’s a locked box. It’s a moment of great humility really, a backing off that grants dignity to the flower seller—and reveals a grace and vulnerability in the speaker. Nothing to do after hitting such a nerve but start up again in a bright get-on-with-it fashion, apparently with a brand new sentence though the poet’s refusal to add periods makes this, at best, an assumption. Or it’s only the fugue’s in stretto second voice cutting in and over to wipe out—though not quite—that first not so certain sentence. Its phrasing still half-ghosts everything to come. In the meantime, here on the surface where most of us live, ”April morning” graduates from mere time marker to the subject of Crane’s focus as a new stanza begins.

This April morning offers
hurriedly
In bunches sorted freshly—
and bestows
On every purchaser
(of heaven perhaps)

Here the sentence does jump stanzas to continue—at least I think it does. Poised on the edge of all that white space (so wonderfully following an honest-to-god parenthetical ”heaven” and that best of all words, ”perhaps”), we enter the third and last stanza and there’s the great lunge ahead, a violent turn that deeply rattles and estranges. To recap: a pleasant April morning then, ”... bestows / On every purchaser” (who just wanted a few flowers, thank you)

His eyes—
like crutches hurtled against glass
Fall mute and sudden (dealing change for lilies)
Beyond the roses that no flesh can pass.
His eyes. Every buyer—every reader—is hit with them, after the nervous pause of the stanza break. We see him now, the flower seller, a full history and future there. He’s sick and furious and doomed, close up, a zoom-lens trick. After that genteel bestowing and talk of heaven, those violets and daisies and hyacinths to lighten the day, this just wanting to have a nice dinner party—all’s abruptly ruined. Whatever knowledge the poet began to claim in that first stanza, this is the genuine stuff, a truth intense and riveting and almost unbearable, every bit of it released by the brilliant and terrible simile: His eyes—like crutches hurtled against glass.... We stop, shattered too, rearing back, not caring anymore or knowing now it’s absolutely on target how the syntax’s screwed up again, a new sentence slipped in on the back of the previous one, a frantic kind of in stretto layering even as those eyes “fall mute” and go “sudden,” the flower seller turning diligent, presumably calm again, “dealing change / for lilies,” doing his job. How many worlds in this blink of an eye? And we just witnessed—my god—what? Such steely recognition must be compassion in its purest sense. And of those changes throughout, of voice and key, of press and release—how many camera clicks, the shutter’s “hundredth of a second caught so precisely” one after another, over and over again, to see and remember—as Crane added, amazed, in his note to Stieglitz—“even the transition of the mist-mote into the cloud....”

And those roses. They’ve grown huge, hardly possible. But the flower seller is safe behind them, out of reach from our pity—we lesser, too privileged beings.
The American commanded me in gestures, dig a hole.

He tossed me a shovel but the blade had dulled and the haft was splaying so I had to rein in that strange wild energy as I opened the earth to my shins, then my knees.

At thigh-depth I found a layer of black loam and a tiny blue snail that seemed to give off light.

The agent called my name. High above, he mimed a man kneeling, hands clasped in prayer.

He must have knelt himself because I felt the muzzle pressed against the shallow furrow behind my left earlobe—a part of my body I never knew existed. He pulled the trigger.

But I know it is just a technique to soften my resistance—
perhaps in a moment
he will lift me up
and hold me trembling,
more scared than I
and more relieved.
Carrie Bennett

WE UNDERSTOOD THAT CLARIFICATION WAS NECESSARY

We had all the memory we could buy.  
We were able to see our hands.  
How they caught themselves before departure.  
How communication is a form of wreckage.  
But the machine felt sad, was a thing of flight.  
And the messages were sent through an opened throat.  
You see, the sky held its position.  
It was something that lasted all night.
Humidity like gauze tape on the skin.
Butterflies have come to the butterfly bush.
I like the way that sentence walks,
foot-testing the rocks for a solid way across.
Cicadas torque their gear boxes,
and North Carolina is coming about,
its troll motors chuffing and dropping rainbow splatters
on the gray waters upon which we slide.
Always a royal formality stands up
when we try to utter the unutterable.
It was ever thus, those lice-ridden Lords
translating the altar blood of fatted calves.
A cold front is bringing the Pentecost
to the pine tops. There’s a shiver in that herd,
ozone sharp as a whiff of hot tin.
You can see the rain coming, cowled,
head down, hiking steady with its crystal
prayer beads worried in wordless prayer.
CROWS AS THE FIGURE OF DISEASE

They are perched on the pewter winter branches of the poplar. Periodically, they caw.
They recoil from their song like pistols firing.
We say small arms. Gunmetal, blue-black.
They would feed on a body, given the opportunity.
They sail to the ground and walk like priests in their cassocks.
Clever, they can’t be gotten rid of.
Lifting, back to the tree,
They are for an instance an eighth note, then a quarter.
To sing them would require only a sip of air.
THREE DOGS AS THE FIGURE OF DEATH

I.
They have found the sunny spot in the yard.
They are in relation, triangulate.
They are like loaves rising, their warm bodies in ferment.

II.
Here Here and Here
The truth is
Say what you will

III.
I see the one most forward as the prayer of the other two.
Fur is its own reward.
They can smell me thinking.
The island sun is a traffic light. Yellow, red—and just before dinner, everyone moves outside to look for the green flash. Everything sweats as we wait: spoons, glasses rimmed with lime and sugar, the inside of our elbows. And there—the green in the sky becomes a smile pulled across a stream for a salamander to cross. A ribbon of banana leaf set full of steamy sweet rice. A luggage tag that names our temporary address as this island, no further details. The cheek of a crocodile, thin and stretchy for mice. Even the bananaquit, resting from a day’s worth of flying from fat fruit to fat fruit, glows a light green—each feather frosted in this wild heat.
RAIN

Fruits ripen in the rain
Horses neigh in the barnyard
One-armed Paco runs up to say
that the buzz of the bees
will scrape the sky
Every mule going by
is splattered to its neck in mud

Hens shit in the cornfield
One-armed Paco brings us
a fresh bundle of cane

Brother we are sweating
dying singing
while we plunge down these roots
see the pitirre bird in the top of the palm
If tonight someone invites us
to hear stories of witchcraft
what shall we say?
—That the night will be green
   by the light of the coconut palms.

Paris 1956

translated by Kathleen Weaver
J. W. Marshall

OCCUPATION

Every place there was made of stone.
Stone street and plaza.
Stone sky.

They'd come to me one by one asking
what sounded like calm hushing questions.
Questions for a baby.

Delightful music they'd ask me over and over.
But I was a soldier.
What happened to threatening?

One brought a steaming cup of lavender tea.
One brushed my shoulders three times.
I was without back-up.

When do I fire?
This was ease for which I had no training.
Lovingly taunted. Tickled.

I think they were asking little boy
what do you do with your gun?
And laughing. Even I was laughing.

Surrender.
I kept saying I
surrender.
GRAVITY

My center of gravity
is the gut and gape of me
is the swallow's pendulous
flight: empty, full, sips and gusts.

Sometimes I'm too full with words
to balance the wires and birds.

My mouth opens to catch air;
my body flags and fills with stars,
too heavy now, then too bright
to do anything but fly.

The south wind pulls my song out,
my arms spread to steady the sound;
I float down lightly, evening
humming—the world rises: coming.
DIVINATION

History pauses, begins,
writes down the first word again,
creates a story, stringing
divination through the wings
and rafters of an old room
humbled, sealed with mud and loam.

Feathers dervish in corners,
nests cling to the eaves like burrs.

This could be anyone's home
forgotten by all its roads.
In a thick fog, history
expands the air, coloring,
drawing lead through dim windows,
lifting roofs high as gallows.
Catherine Sasanov

HIS PERSONAL PROPERTY:
INVENTORY AND APPRAISAL SHEET, 1860

Henry, Henderson; Flora, Eliza, Easter; Ben, Alex, George, Edmund

At the tail end of beasts of burden. Just before the household goods. Group shot of what $6000 looks like: Two children. Three women. Four grown men. The holiday not quite right in the head. Three-year-old willed to a ten-year-old boy. A man who gets to be mulatto once but never will again. The information comes down white (so a four-year-old is clearing land, raising up the master’s house). The information comes down white (so my cousin rides the holy day mistaken for a horse).

Did Emancipation swallow you?

Did you walk out into a choice of surnames never to be found?

Dug out of a probate file, buried in a drawer—
My family stands around your paper grave, pretending that it’s dirt—

Owned by the blood that owned you once, what right do I have to track you down?
It is a holy fire, this budding body pricked & tingling. I set it going with a single egg, henhouse-hot, balanced atop my drinking glass: a clutch in the belly

& I fall, convulsing, spine pressed to unmade bed. Early snows tangle tree & swampy meadow like a sheet. I desire to lie in its dust, & earnestly beg, a mongrel bewitched by cake of rye & urine. Through the kitchen, doctors come & go, muttering that I’m delusional. I pestle summer’s sun-baked kernels of rye to a meal.

This is the devil I have loosed, its feet black & spurred as a cock’s, Rev. Parris claims, my vision a mere blood-red globe of polished fruit. I rock the grindstone back

& forth, either instrument of evil or its victim. Back & forth, its rhythm is the rhythm of a woman’s skirted body, tolling Gallows Hill like a church bell clapper.
SNOWFALL IN G MINOR

Overnight, it’s pow! The held note keeps falling. And only seems slow. Because it’s just frozen rain, what’s the big deal? the checker in Stop and Shop told me.

Save warmth like stamps. The fade of their color in the 1920s. Airmail. The pilot with his skin-tight goggle helmet on his miniature head could be snow-blind.

All heads are small. Mine’s lost as a thimble in this weather. Where a finger should be and be sewing, every thought I ever thunk.

Hardly even a word thunk. Never used. It lands, noisy metal in a bucket. That’s the last of it. No echo for miles of this snowfall—as in grace, fallen from, as in a great height, released from its promise.
HALF MORNING SONG

I’m sorry for the men who shovel the new layer of street out of trucks, for my distrust of their certainty, their get-on-with-it cheer. I’m sorry for my hands in my pockets, for such solace I need, easy and cheap. I’m sorry the day begins rotely, that I can’t hear the smallest trumpet. Sorry my grandmother came alive again at the end of my mother’s life, my mother so frantic then: what is she eating? we have to get groceries, untangling herself, trying to bolt out of bed. I’m sorry for the thin lip of light this morning under the shade. Sorry for the dark left behind. I’m sorry about my brother’s back: may it go straight and be healed. May its flashing red turn violet then blue. I’m sorry already for my next complaint, my next tiny panic not even a thought, not even a seed or a twig though its tree might be the elm doomed since my childhood. Now I’m sorry for any prophecy come true, this whole sorry litany so close to complaint. Sorry sorry for the trellis leaning sideways in the yard, the gate too hard to latch, the bird house stuffed, three summers of nests abandoned and used and used to the third power, however blessed that might be. I’m sorry the sky is weeping this morning, though it’s raining. I’m told over and over, it’s raining.

— for Susan Neville
That sparrow on the trash again, one leg missing, he
alights and drops down, alights
in this cold, and crooked,
drops down again though he could
fly. He has to, most
of the day, I imagine,
into its exhaustion, those moments he
finds a window sill or a patch
of old leaves under some
overhang, his one leg, good wire,
pulled under him, feathers
puffed out—swollen thing, ridiculous—
for warmth. All the lives I
might have had: this one,
oh, this one.
Paul Legault

IDITAROD

Dog, watch your ghost in the milk bowl;
I saw that it was like mine when it bent over
To the high wind.
You smell through its cold dress;
The hem is a whore’s hem.
Feed no ghost.
Show me where
You found the stunt flag of its dream.

The wheatdog
Hid his bone in an oven.
We learned to make bread.

The whiskeydog
Made us cry, he crawled into a barrel
To close his sweet life like a book
Or a good drink
On the house, for the thirsty ghost.

Tell me about your wants like a woman;
They are the justification of sound.
Do not shrug
Or claim you are not the Lady Macbeth
Who follows me out late to pee in the snow.
You are the lead dog
Of rush, the king of our wood and our stone.
Love can mean speed.
We began a new race.
Feed the road your good intentions, it will demand not sandal or boot but blistered foot. Feed time a thank you, it will dice your life into hours and hang them on a calendar. Feed awe to the sky, the only check it will cash is cerulean blue. This craving never stops. The creek rolls stones, stones beg audience of the moon, moon blesses smoldering fire, fire wants nothing but to lick nearby grass, grass writes a contract, green on top, fine print underneath, blank for your name, which ants rearrange as dusk and carry off to keep the dead alive, the unborn hungry.
WITH THE WORLD AS MY BODY

What sort of lover would I make as this field pasturing the winters of a lame draft horse named Ulysses? As the wild apple tree unclenching its one good limb in a riot of white blossoms? Or as this puddle on a dirt road holding the world chastely in its wet mirrors?

Make a green dance of me, lattice of trees. Drop from your bedroom of sky, lost wren, to beak at the blue pageantry I reflect then carry my stillness over three mountains.
Sarah Maclay

GRATITUDE

It would have to be a kind of walking on the ceiling. And outside, a loon. No marshland. Still, four calls. The footsteps, though, too close to be occurring on a floor. Too audible.


The calls so measured. Then the sounds of dishes being done.

The water running. Spatulas, maybe. But as though outside—just outside the bedroom window. Someone doing dishes in the yard.

Or maybe not a loon.

Or someone walking up the stairs, perhaps, if stairs were level.
Maybe night had fallen across the field like a hail storm and stayed, maybe it can be sucked on now, maybe it’s sweet—maybe a layer of fog coats each small plumpness, beckoning, like a promise of relief: tiny pods of ripe cool, as he stands surrounded by the navy-dark scalloping of wild growth—over and over as if a child had repeated a word until it became a sound: he crouches by the fruit, examines it.

Day hangs out of its pocket, limp as a rag, water on the verge of bursting from the sky. And in the bright heat, everywhere, the berries. He has never stood in a field of berries before. He has never stood above two hundred thousand bodies, buried twenty feet below. And his standing is not tall.

The others have scattered, the boom man, the cinematographer. Ovens. Ovens were near, then buried. It’s hot. He leans close to the fruit. He cannot pick it.
ALLIGATOR REGRETS THE ANHINGA

Cold days sleep longer than the languorous days of September. Not everything about owning a lake requires one to be above board.

Oh, quick, quick see how the snake bird dives! Equality appears to dwell in the air.

Anhinga. Adult male: black with greenish gloss...legs short, feet webbed. Stabs fish in the side, flips it up to swallow headfirst.

Known for habit of swimming with just neck and head above water. Could have been my father.

ALLIGATOR REASONS A WORLD VIEW

My lake grows its own soft shoes
where land nurses water. Muck—
half silt, half rotted algae—
smiles round the shore.
Subdue.
My lake thins, the bank lifts warm.
O, hushed robe. Black
home on my belly: dozing, waiting.

Once, I dreamed the sunlight
changed,
shifted. Something slopped. Slid
near. Something pale blinked
a blue eye. Slid nearer alligator-like,
yawned its infinite-toothed grin.

When I awoke,
I dreamed
Jose Blanco, the white alligator,
was black like me.
I knew
all crows are black.
All shadows are dark.
THAT

We sit with a cat and nanny
on the bus of the photo album.

Rain with sepia outside the window.

We are overrun by a river.
Aching rapids.

Pale Jesus in a painting.
A sled leans against a wall.

I am the confessor of a coniferous time
and nanny is prayed for
by a pious owl.
LOVE AFTER ALL

We are growing old,
my car and I.

Deaf stars expire in the eyes.
The sun’s deceit rises
as I try to start the engine.

An empty park bench
stares at us.

The moment giggles.
Rusty little girl.

The copyrights to real time
grow ever more dim.

Finally we drive,
the happy couple.
Speeding at 25 miles an hour.

Love starts to drizzle.
A sense shower.
AFTERNOON

We discuss the war.
Bayonets of irises in the garden.

We sit on the swing.
A trumpet disappears around the corner.

The wind pushes us.

Upwards life.
Downwards death.
Upwards life.

Nothing warns us.
Oil fields burn out at sunset.
A barber trims the hedge.

You look at me as if you knew something more.

translated by Margret Grebowicz
FOR EXTRA CREDIT

When loud music or the nakedness
does not break him, set the tape going

in the next cell. Each scuffle and thud
convinces, chair leg screeching across

the floor. Each final scream, each gun shot.

Wrap your partner’s head in bloodied gauze
and lay him on a cart. Let the man

see guards cut the IV, small tremor
under blankets as he’s wheeled away.

In the morning, be friendly. Offer
matches, a cigarette rolled from dung.

He will or will not get the message.
These gifts flare in the face, even burn

a little. Harmlessly. Harmlessly.
LYING DOWN IN THE IDAHO DESERT

Black road I might come back on, break the wild pony's leg. Reach down, tame the magma leaking up through ties and rails, their crumbling Chinese bones, to light. Turn away wind. Stall the spare tree at its root.

Only then will I read the trails jets made, doing my country's work. I'll kneel along the gravel shoulder, each signal dead, earth come to a stop in the blacktop heart of noon, shining like new oil.
L. S. Klatt

THE SOMNAMBULIST

When it happens, you’re glad it’s not you
but then you wake up hammered

in the lost orchard—woozy
from Bloodgood & Spitzenbergs

& quinces from Persia

As you veer unpiloted through space
you realize the plum is unattainable—

though each germ a jet of flame, your prize
has expired from saturnalia

Elliptic, the slugs on the pear leaves
broil in their own fat

& flickers drill asterisks into cherry

Yes, you say, lead me to the happy violence
by which I am imparadised
BLUNDERS

1 And Darwin said: let the plesiosaur advance even as the swordfish saws his neck in two

2 let sequined reptiles smile & the whole seafloor erupt

3 Today a metaphor, tomorrow a porpoise

4 & left hand writes like a fin upon lagoon

5 Heretofore lies a doubtful form

6 And the Lord complained, via the loggerhead, How then do we prophesy?
Jeannette Allée

CRIMBLE OF STAINES

You’re back in motherbickered
England dumb with brick
& viper typists.
Such organized fear: rigidity as fetish
Sphincter sphunct filthiness in wainscoted ways.

Jolly ol’ brims with againstness
“Anti-clockwise”—“ante-natal” if you will—
The “crumbling masonry” of
Your “anti-relationship structure” you once called it before
You went away. Such negativity in names:
Wormwood Scrubs as prison, animal park Whipsnade
The motorshop Crimble of Staines
Kidney pie tastes like potty
Cheat never equals cheated upon.

After you left me, I brought a barrister
Besotted—blotto—up to my rooms
Is this how they do it I kept wondering,
Dull as cotton batting, without love?
In his garden variety serpentry he left
On our bodgy bed—a wrunkled skin—still crawling, crawling.
Joshua Kryah

from CLOSEN

1 [call: Clare]

Day begins just now arriving.

Dare I mention those figures in the field, those birds gathering around an empty cathedral?

*This field, says the crow, was never your home.*

So many sticks and bits of paper, the ribbon fluttering somewhere where her hair had used to be, where Mary had wandered on her way.

*She will not come back, says the starling building its nest of balks and bents among the swallowed up trees.*

*She was never here.*
 Mostly, I have forgotten you.

Do not send letters,
do not write. The words

were green, once. Now like water during a drought,
dirt and sand and dust.

In this new place (call it the afternow, the afterthen)

we are no longer together.

Can you hear me? I am
so far ahead of you, a column of swirling dust
and sand and dirt.
3 [call: Clare]

To address the absent body.

Forced to it.

A bit of dark cloth over a mirror, a water bird skidding across the pond’s surface.

Some see nothing in it but Heaven blushing in sickness, in horror, without regret but wondering when it will end and how.

Your figure at the door crankles and dithers.

The time it takes, o such detail,

    to bid her welcome over and over again.
We are as familiar as beasts are with each other.

The strangeness of language, its feral touch, the words and what they have to say circling one another. We sniff the air before arriving, cast it from us when we depart. We were married but now that is over. At least for me.

I have rehearsed this song for you, know it by heart:

Once there was always, always, always.

Now, only a little remains.
Dzvinia Orlowsky

BALLET ON CHEMO

1.

an usher touched my elbow, whispered

I was all of that, pointing to the lit stage, only standing still.

2.

I’ve watched young dancers on break in the theatre’s back alley,

bitter, hungry snowflakes huddled in December rain smoking Marlboros.

3.

My oncologist says sure, why not

bend back to a time when I could bend,

my neck and shoulders like tree boughs.

The scarf wrapped low on my forehead translates into high cheekbones, eyes dark-circled by Russian winters.

4.

The ballet mistress smiles at me, then, after that, pretends not to see what’s too much to correct.
Each week I re-write my blood,
white cells like young swans with sliver crowns
rushing out of black backdrops,
rushing in.
IN THE RECOVERY ROOM

1 Breaststroke

Grandpa swims out with me
in his striped one-piece
thirties bathing suit
both of us
ease out palms together
in cautious prayer

before our hands sweep
backward
under the surface

his white beard
flows
with the water

we kick like frogs
and soft
as a girl’s
his white arms

pull me
to shore

2 You

Your face trembles
out of a cloud
the light
around it like a wreath of
nasturtiums I sucked the honey from
when I was a child
everything's white and orange
on the stage at Epidaurus
we're playing against the gods
in white togas

your lips swim into focus
smiling
I can't hear the good news

you brush my mouth
too lightly as if you're afraid
to touch me

suddenly
one of us is gone

3 Flight

After takeoff I look back
at the shoreline
waves unroll their shrouds
layer by layer over the edge

after the shoreline
sunlit icecaps drift
without will or direction
away from the graves

after the icecaps
strapped in my capsule
there's nothing to see
but a vagueness of clouds

after I left you
stood there watching
as if you were also waiting
for somewhere to land

4 Lemon Tree

Sam waves from the sidewalk
over the plumbagos
little mercies of blue
where I’m weeding the garden

I straighten my back
and he gives me advice
about our ailing lemon

two people scream
on the other side of the room
a nurse
    hovers between them
with needles

    and I can’t hear
what to do with the lemon
or even the buzzing of summer

only the groundwater
rising
    over my body
where I cannot move

5 Absence

My soul’s on the ceiling
and it won’t come down
6 Uncertainties

When you’ve been given a second chance you need to care more (less) about what you live for not so much staying alive as the old skin you wear the everyday sloughing
Anna Journey

MY GREAT-GRANDPARENTS RETURN TO THE WORLD AS CLOSED MAGNOLIA BUDS

They’re not quite buried in this cemetery, though they follow the afternoon noise of bulldozers like tip after tip

of white tailed deer disappearing. They’re back by the soybeans edging the delta from the dead,

keeping their clammy petals pulled shut like Klan hoods. A language they labored to forget—Swedish was Natchez silt,

loam in the throat their children never spoke.

I know the spicebush swallowtails flutter like angels over the wood ducks’ pond,

that the scum’s slow ripple is the alligator case of my grandfather’s harmonica and its chromatic shift

back and forth to sharp.

Though magnolia buds are too awkward and pungent for angels, I know

they could hold the blood of a woman or a man like the gauze pads

she used in Germany to patch shrapneled eyes of soldiers before knowing the right place. Because this is the right place,
the wrong time,
the lapse of decades a salt brine between us—
four generations

of women linking arms. In the photograph—with me, unborn, the bark hardening on a sycamore, dry wind over the bayou,

the palsied cotton just about to fall.
A CRAWDAD’LL HOLD UNTIL IT HEARS THUNDER

SLAUGHTER answers in all caps on a tombstone as I croon
knock, knock in the graveyard.

Don’t speak
rudely to the dead, you whisper,
as if humor goes with the soul. Say soul is a crawdad scared
backwards into the sawed half of a beer can
caught by drunk teenagers across the river. Say I’m a reckless
carp for it,
colorblind to its particular spectrum of red:
blood orange, bike rust, the derelict
cemetery rose. You know walking past the plot named Slaughter
is a kind of peasant’s armor. Who could afford
such crypts?

And God bless the poetry on such epitaphs:
a giving person, a kitten in each arm. In medieval times poor
archers
stitched lengths of crawdad carapace into breastplates
that were surprisingly effective at stopping arrows
shot past fifteen yards. What did they do, then,

when death knows each scurrying
crustacean as a mask. Conqueror, ten foot
money-shot. I’m an amazing,
fishboned motherfucker for it. We’ll walk past,
laughing. We’ll return.
CALENDRCAL

When making movies, actors start and stop, mustering the nonexistent, and on cue.

But of course they don’t have to worry about what comes next.

In 1582 Sosigenes erased ten days in October to master the unruly calendar. A holiday of absence through which we travel every year.

Yes, even before he killed himself I knew something was wrong. But it hadn’t yet happened.

And then there was snow and my children had never seen it.
ON RETURNING TO THE MIDWEST
AFTER A SEVEN-YEAR ABSENCE

Driving home, the kids asleep.
The speedometer’s green light on your chin.
We are more than an hour away from home
and quiet so we will not wake them.
The night we met you drove me home late after a party
and held my hand even as you shifted gears.
You pointed down a small street of handsome houses.
This one will be ours, you said. We’ll live here.
Our early lives are fantasy, and still we love those selves.
The young woman hurries across the grass in the park
to angrily scatter her stale bread. The stillborn produces an
image
that only the mirror can give. What we uncover, later, were, in
fact, footprints.
Yes, Mongolia’s wild horses were saved—and by chance—
then bred back to strength. Their vanishing would have changed
that world,
but would it have really been felt? All boundaries are arbitrary,
as is the way we love them, as the horses grew to love their
release sites
and refused their native land.
Melissa Ginsburg

IN THE COAT CLOSET

I like brown with mink collar. I like gum in the pockets. Someone will come when the party is over but the party chatters on, the guests don’t go to their coaches. I am wearing the pink one, I sleep on the sealskin. Snowdrifts pile, maybe, keeping them in. Or spring came outside or everyone died. I hold extra buttons under my tongue. I stand inside the big ones and keep the gloves tight in my hands. Stone made the mansion as a kind of invitation. The mansion made the party and the party made the guests. The guests were cold so they made the coats. The coats made the closet, buttons, scarves, friends, gum, a bed—they thickened the dark. I owe the stone.
ESCAPES

You create an image
as your body is being
entered against its will,

beach house only you
can enter, an image

only you can control

that somehow speaks
to pain inside the real

body you can’t control

while being entered
against your will, surf

that surges not far off

the house you imagine
your body will suffer

being entered without

consent—an image
imposed over a body

in pain as you continue

to escape to an oasis
fashioned entirely out

of your mind’s distress.
Zanni Schauffler

THE DOCTOR’S POSTER OF TWENTY DANGEROUS MOLES

Eat a peanut butter sandwich.
Watch some television for god’s sake.
Hello? Hello?

My father is old and clatters his metal knees.
He is not much longer here and the sky is falling,
so let’s you and me put on jumpsuits, flee to a remote Canadian province
and make pancakes.

*Take a bat to a tree, the frozen ground—anything and it doesn’t matter. Just hit it hard.*

The growth on my sister’s face, I want to scrape it from her skin
and locate its shape among the bloated little islands.
Please, the sky is falling so let’s get out from under it.

Beware the biohazard.
Beware the headache that never ends.

Beware the seizure, the aneurism, the aortic rupture.
Beware the colonoscopy and hysterectomy. Beware the spinal tap.

Beware the take-off. Beware landing.

Beware cancer of the knee
and hair follicle and beware. Go home. Get over yourself.

Your father is almost gone.
Your sister’s body has irregularities you’ll never know.

Be nice to trees. Be nice to fathers.
The Chinese restaurant of your youth is shut and empty.
Don’t worry so much.
Go home. Get over yourself.
If something is discolored, photograph it.
ALONG WITH YOUR APPLICATION, PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Though I was a girl, my sister called me Ronald. We examined things in miniature: the inner workings of ears, watches. We wondered about the sexual anatomy of flowers. We shit ourselves on purpose, and sure it was about control, now we all know that.

Our noses were not small, and the thing is, and I remember this most vividly, our obsession with the Romanovs that winter in school. Everything was hemophilia, The Winter Palace. Girls gone missing.

We skated out the river, looked beneath the ice for a little O mouth or a little plick, plick with a fingernail from below. We would have saved her. We wanted to know where she was and to save her.

The point of all of this is that it wasn’t just me. It was me and my sister trying to love things. So you cannot ask the question. The question offends me. And if you asked her, she probably would have noted: There was the time we got so scared in the house we ran out in the wet, nightgowns dragging in the mud and they had to drive around all night in order to find us.
Because I want the blooms to last,  
I scald the stems  
of roses, hold an orange poppy to a match  
until the milk burns in the flame.  
It's an art they call *conditioning*.  
I crush the base of a chrysanthemum—  
the heads keep blooming, rootless,  
like the flower heads that float  
on Chinese screens.

I add sugar to the vase, a tablespoon  
to ease the shock.  
Who knows how a cut stem enters water?  
Seen through glass, this green stalk  
seems to shift as it hits  
the line between one element  
and the next: it's a trick of light, sometimes  
I'll walk into a windowed room  
and can't remember why.
Again, the warrior died. His body was rinsed with seawater, a coin placed in the mouth for travel, his chin strapped with linen to keep the jaws from opening.

The funeral fire was a tight bud that flared to full bloom, and when his corpse burst back to life, even the orbs of his eyes were burning. Beside him, a donkey rolled its head, the pig was a window of ash. The lizard flamed out like a twig.

As if they were strangers arriving at the gates of a city, an arch defined the proscenium. The traveler was lost, or he was not—omnia mutantur: all is transfigured.

Orpheus took the shape of a swan, each cob and pen mated for life, his fate no longer mythic, just a nest over the muskrat’s den.

On the sarcophagus, mourners lift their hands as if to tear their hair, but in tomb-light, it looks like they’re waving.

Odysseus wished to be ordinary: in this revival of the story, a man pumps gas while his wife pours coffee from a thermos, passes the lid. The radio plays La Vie en Rose. (Somewhere it’s noon, a four-legged wind is watching.)

If a midwife marks the newborn’s face with spit, quick-fingered, a soul sits down in the body. The urge to flesh is skeletal and sly: Ajax chose a lion’s teeth, Agamemnon, an eagle’s claws—even now, someone’s hatching into feather and beak.
HINGED EARTH

Although this is not a photograph, the frame has stopped all motion. There’s plenty of time to consider the view: oak leaves, apples. We must be in the garden, on earth as it is.

Hinged earth—the snake’s jaw as a music box, opens then shuts. Birds shift in flight, acorns fall; the sky, the ground, make their small adjustments. On earth as if at an altar: knees bend, a gill flaps for air. The wooded canopy over it all is thought to represent justice. Elsewhere, a dragonfly spreads its wings on the live pin of its body—a verb between fluttering nouns. To the left is a cliff: there’s a question of scale. You once put your hand on the small of my back; we moved like a chord below an ascending melody, a rare Te Deum in a minor key.
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