
DARKEN'D-SCREEN WRITING

*Shadow single is of body only;
Double, body alive;
Triple, body orphaned with touch,
Tended now by word*

A flea bites my ankle as I step toward the porch morning. I pinch it and drop it in the small tray of soap-slickened water there. It struggles and sinks the half-inch to the dozen or so others drowned, avid for our calico now put down. I watch, make myself. Again.

Dig out these lines about the calico:

*She lets me cup
her tumored breast
Perhaps she trusts
She has one eye*

*She licks herself
incessantly the pain
then looks off far
the question mine*

Lisa surprises me, asserting my “good looks” in a photo from our early forties (me with sun-hot padlock in hand).

Our 17th anniversary. Ducks swimming near Bayshore Boulevard:

*One goes under . . .
comes up, finally—
the same one?
You point Us I say.*

Written in bewilderment and anguish, and for fun.

“This is no life” Barry says in an email, home at last after his stroke. Later, “I’m your preview.” Dark, sweet brother, copying us all. At the hospital, when he couldn’t move, flies landed on him.

*A wing in flight once brushed my hand
on Canal Street in the French Quarter*

*I mean the pine tree spirals into stars
in memory I want to climb but can’t*

*I mean our bitter foistings are provincial
our griefs lurk in amazement*

*It was only briefly a pigeon’s wing
for you were dead just then again*

That *you* is my mother, another resourcefully, indefatigably gone, into and far past these years, a constant surprise. More than a decade ago, Barry and his wife Sharon lost a twin son, thirteen years old, to cancer. See Barry’s beautiful poems, for instance “Annabel”:

The kitten whose mother you loved purrs
and settles on my hand. She was born and
named in the house that kept her
while we watched the Mediterranean,
drank wine, and drove through history
spread on the other side of the ocean:
a castle Phoenicians built; a village
behind walls; the mountains
that held back armies. They’re all
you left us, and nothing
we could imagine; as the ancient curse
about getting one’s wish expands into

the one life I’ve become. Today,
the friend who lay with you once in
the hospital bed left a flower
at your grave, reminding me of all we are
as the city waits under snow you
never saw. All night it fell. Once
I would have shoveled it, or set
you and your brother to the job.
Still, it’s beautiful, and white
against the ball of fur humming

on the sill. And there's other work.
Already it's starting to melt.

Breath flowing back
and forth over the teeth and the microbial life thereon: centuries of wind
raking the same peaks.

To secure the darkness, an attendant stabbed Henry VIII's bed
twenty times each night before the liege retired.

Another old friend, Pierce, says you can walk from the Gulf Coast
to New England at about the same rate each day that spring advances.
He wants to do this—perhaps next year, if his prognosis improves and
his wife agrees—and he will call the book *A Walk into Spring*.

Coroico, Bolivia, fifteen years ago, as the voices of schoolchildren pass
beneath our window, Lisa's and mine, above the clouds.

*Mist in the bottom of the violet valley:
the throat of a morning glory.*
*Whose hand
copies out these words? The perfect moment
in an imperfect hand.*

A stout, amber woman, perhaps forty, crosses International Mall
parking lot, vast and empty, to her place for the next eight hours at a soft-
serve counter.

All but one of the search committee looks away when the
candidate stops in mid-sentence and appears to be breaking down. The
one who does not turn sees the terrible hurt in the candidate's eyes then
a vast fury, a melodrama, garish as the mien of a Beijing Opera villain.
Surely something true there—a wrong heroically suppressed again? No
one can trust the possibilities, since this is to be our leader.

Walking together for the first time in week, on a Sunday morning
near Bayshore, Lisa and I encounter Troy, his light blue striped
seersucker sports jacket. He carries Styrofoam plates with fresh fruit and
an omelet and a small stack of frozen sausage patties. He says Tera, his
wife, is rowing. And we believe it. His three boys, how are they? You
look great, he says. Lisa just out of her back brace. He says he's not
traveling just now, no big feature story on India, no Russia pending. He
says he's delivering this breakfast to someone in the neighborhood.

Are we going to repeat our promise? I ask—that is, to see each other soon.

*It was pointed out to you in the distances
You happened to be looking that way
You marched toward it as yours ripe for a destiny
believed it would come if only you sought it
killed yourself once and almost again
met smoke others thirst wrote to nothing gave
loved you thought pressed on staggered on years
and passed it without knowing until
it was not yours you said it had never been
and met a young man no a woman perhaps yes
grown from the horizon and pointed back there
to where it lay ahead*

Ephesus passes through East 75th & Lex, plastered on the side of a bus. The “articulate wadding” (curator’s note) of John Chamberlain’s foam sculptures at the Guggenheim.

A century of comedians mocking the same accent . . .

Several summers ago, up early at Helen and Peter’s mountain place near Maggie Valley:

*Alight the ridge the browsing roan beholds me
then gallops down the green steep
Queen Anne’s lace and dew
thrilled that here’s appeared a stranger at the split-rail fence
city in me far away unthinkable
resembling carrot stick and sugar cube*

*Till now could I have been cheap air connection weekend
hung over from the kind who put their ends together
out of consolation Out of solitude no brush contents
no saddle masters it charges past the known
ankle-snapping gopher holes and intimate stones
drawing the ultimate joy angle*

*that will never be though I step back now
and then once more toward the former world no longer there
This mad uncomplying unity
hurtling down will never will it never in all time*

*crash itself to bloody splinters
or leap at last into this helpless breast*

“Dated” says Hunt, one of our writing group, especially the opening “beholds” and the final line, and other parts are confusing and unclear. I believe him. And it’s not as good as “Annabel,” which I deleted several times here (still not having got permission for it), feeling in that way we later erroneously report as “thinking”: You must put yourself forward, everyone else does, that’s the way of things.

At the fundraiser, the chairman has the virtuoso play blindfolded because his wife wants to see if he can. The dinner guests delight. White keys and black.

*The snake in the egret’s bill
stretches to bite its captor*

*But the egret is patient its skill
nearly the likeness of fortune*

*It shakes its head slowly as though
damning a just plea with regret*

*works up the spine writhing
on principle then snaps it*

Tova’s little one, Leo, stopped eating . . . would not even take the breast again (Do I recall this right? They moved away so long ago) . . . until at last she found the shard of leaf on the back of his tongue.

*We must believe there’s such a thing as giving,
then deserving, gratitude without resentment
and stratagem, a tomorrow purged of further reckoning.
We’re getting even with the nothing just beside us,
a stranger even if we came partly from its body.
We’re surpassing even less. We try that out,
our besting moments in reverse, leaving victory alone —
as simple as sleeping with another very near but wide awake.*

Uncle Zeitgeist used to call bait slipping from the hand, swallowed by the surf, “Yielding dream.”

Old man on the street in Harbin 1985. We dubbed him “The Snow King.”
A human wreck. Gathered around him: white cardboard, a tent of debris.
He could sit down in it, his head on the top of the cone of it, there amid
the blue-eye grandsons and daughters of exiles from the Russian
Revolution, who served the only cheese in China then, in that cold.

*No place to be
Is where I be*

*No thing to see
Is what I see*

*Is what puts me
At once with thee*

*Is what keeps thee
Aside of me*

The landlord smile: buttered gravel.

Herodotus reports that certain Babylonians, when a cat died, shaved their
eyebrows in grief.

Quite by accident, the pest control man tells me that Tova and her
husband Stan, now a lawyer, live not far from here and have termites, too.
Shouldn't one be larger of soul?

Indian Rocks Beach, dawn, a crow caws into a litter bin.

Lisa's niece Rachel, on the small boy throwing himself around the
dance floor at the wedding reception, a wild dancer, oddly sexual,
demanding attention he's clearly always gotten, casting on her a keen eye:
“Unfortunately, that's the kind of guy I attract.”

The crow looks up, as though pleading.

*A peak within,
the only fitting place —
part of the view
unnoticed, most days.*

In storms,

*I try to fly over it —
crash
closer to dead.*

*Among hidden abysses
I'm crawling
down shame —
stricken with ice.*

Did I mention I've been passed over by my new boss? I overreached in my courting. All my "good" work . . . and my seniority (strengths for so long) now held against me! . . . even as I seem to glimpse my ambition, this late in my career, only in the folly of others.

Loser

*One becomes impressed,
enamored of being shut out
(as with being shut in)
so convenient one knows
for a change, though it's not
but the same again and again —
fulfillment, that is.*

*Blame? Some bygones ago
we learned that
wouldn't work — for us,
for me . . . because
that's the cause:
me, no? Withhold
and you'll know less for sure*

*but not how much. Silence
and you'll reign
briefly but intensely. One
becomes engrossed,
disappointed with being dreamed
(as in being found out)
and living on despite.*

Susan Lilly, from her poem, read aloud this spring: "Her scent is the honey of loyalty."

Caroline Smith, from a workshop poem decades ago, perhaps later published: "Wheeling big in the sun of summer."

Quotation, silhouette.

At the Sidetrack Café in Redfield, Iowa, my pal Pale Ramon pretends to snap a picture of a little girl on the sidewalk, who's put her face to the glass at him.

Her father appears, scowls (afraid for her?), considers confronting us, barks at her to get in the car.

*Hibiscus —
the number one red flower
in sight!*

*All the dreadful things
said of us
we'll never know!*

Edna breaks her hip on her doorstep one noon, clinging to the purse a teenager on a bicycle tries to snatch. She falls, the handle snaps, the thief flees with twelve dollars inside his prize. She's hospitalized, gets well enough for her children to put her into Assisted Living. The little white house on the wide wooded lot across the street, where the banker widow allowed her to live nearly rent free, is pulled down in ten minutes. Pink quadraplex erected.

Robert Dana, from the opening of "Los Descamisados:"

You who have everything!
Speak to those of us who
have nothing. Neither
land nor landscape we can
call home. Nothing from
which to make myth truth.
Speak to us of plenty.
Tell us you sad stories.

A doctor sues his assistant to avoid paying child support. During their affair she fellated him and manually impregnated herself. The judge rules his spunk a gift with which she could do as she pleased.

How will your mother explain the world to you, child?

Gibbon on Ventrano before the wrath of Constantius: “Instead of embracing the last refuge of a generous despair, he tamely submitted to his fate . . .”

On his first day in Mike’s house, the rat terrier Otis—named after our Grandfather, dead more than forty years—barks and snarls at the claw feet of a draped chair in the living room.

*From delicate evening rain,
earth rises as a fragrance.
I sort bills and write checks.
It’s kinder than writing poems
thriving for others’ judgment.
First a tree in Africa, then dunnage,
this mahogany tabletop
bears the joiner’s blade-burns
spaced like empty staves
(deep-grained music).
So again why complain.*

Twelve Hasselblads remain abandoned on the moon, looking up and outward.

The woman seated beside me on a flight home: “I was in DC for a funeral. It was so cold at Arlington, they couldn’t bring the horses out—the bits would freeze in their mouths.”

On my shelf, the “Baby Book” of a senior colleague, Collins. Rawhide cover, furry in places. Inside, ads from stores in Olympia, Washington, that specialize in caring for Baby in 1923. And snapshots, black and white. Collins’ widow gave it to the university library with all his other books. The librarians didn’t know where to keep it.

Rumor said he was once married to a princess. He spoke with a vaguely British accent. He waved his irony away like smoke.

At the farewell party the university gave, I tried to thank him. He in the wheelchair, ill. I was young and sounded patronizing, or was so without knowing it yet. He waved me away.

*You went to a bar with a view of the park
To drink in time with falling snow,

To watch the mind whiten and thicken,
Appeased by a quiet too soon to melt.*

*The bar was closed that early in the day.
People still worked at their obligations.*

*And you were sober, had always been so —
Berry-bright as your particular poison.*

*So you walked beside the ice-swagged ledges —
A child haunted by standard measures,*

*Sure footed, falling, upward falling,
Ten million years in an inch of granite*

*Becoming change in each fleck of light:
Cruelty, beauty, illusion, fact.*

Janet Sylvester from "The Unbinding:" "Each of their wrecked senses had been blessed."

Copied into a mostly blank travel journal: Not the circumcision party in Selchuk, one Turkish afternoon, nor the ancient German couple renting white-washed rooms there to packers dusted off the glossier economies. Not the expatriate Englishman behind his picket fence strewn with red rags, nor the tepid cola served beneath shack thatch that day. Especially not the silted up history of nearby Ephesus, pieced together, bathrooms and all, by experts, the sun now dropping behind its restored stage. Like an end-of-the-day dog, memory will only follow that man on the peg leg, down the evening road toward what village, the uniform trees lining the pavement, branches entwined and the bottoms of their trunks painted white. That man part tree, part summer, his back to dim headlights, who does not call but goes on.

The scar of the ephemeral.

An exhibit sign at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, near Prairie City, Iowa: "Needlegrass seed has a sharp point and a tail that changes with the weather. When it's dry, the tail twists. When it's wet, the tail untwists. This twisting and untwisting screws the seed into the ground."

*Older than my father
as he came to me
last night, how greedily
I clung to dolor
cold in my gut, a blaze
that roused my eyes
still closed but woken up —
my father in the dark
in me lying in the dark!
My tried and clumsy
father, as I never knew
him, as he never was,
silent having given
all he could long ago.*

Lisa sets out
brunch, and her ancient mother, forgetting again that it's we who are
visiting her, not the other way around, sighs happily "I wish I could live
here!"

An anonymous Sijo poet, in Korea of the 16th or 17th centuries, in Richard
Rutt's translation:

Do we have two or three lives?
 Do we have four or five bodies?
In this span of borrowed life,
 we bear but a body of dreams.
All life long we are busy with living;
 when shall we have time to play?

"Further heavy clashes." "Renewed talks today." "Investigation into the
stage collapse." "Gives a global take on the situation." "Many groups
would not have the reach for this." "The state promotes that kind of
hatred and division." "After years of attacks, more moved to enclaves but
there are risks in that." "We try to turn the children back at the border."
"To protect the most vulnerable." "One last question, ambassador, then
we'll let you go."

*Along the morning road,
inmates gather litter —*

*the guards' shotguns lowered,
necks of grazing horses.*

The muse leaps from the tongue of argument.

Orgasms:

You trip and fall and catch yourself, arms out . . . and as you begin to stand up, the floor collapses;

gently, wind fills the shirt on the clothesline, a huge round back now, and snaps it once;

running from the waves, talking to them, playing with them as though they were beings . . . ;

you lie at first, perhaps to yourself (out loud to the other) . . . then tell so much in so little it seems all.

The mad emperor Commodus decapitated an ostrich in the Coliseum. He shook the head at a senator, who bit down hard on his crown of laurel to hold back laughter and thus save his life.

Jules Verne launched his first men to the moon in 1865 from "Tampa Town," just a few blocks down Bayshore from those anniversary ducks, at Ballast Point Park.

A nickname is a kiss blown from the immortals. The feeling that your soul is tracing paper . . .

*In the swirling darkness
of the dryer's windows,
the shirts make gestures
no one has made,
and some regrettably common,
regrettably fleeting
and incoherent. More lives
than anyone could live
in the supple jeans
twisting, falling.
A universal white
for the hopeful sheets.
And for the underthings —
the first to dry,
wear out, forgotten —
wondrous stains.*

Lisa's sister Debbie spotted an egret with a rabbit in its beak in the swale near the shell museum parking lot on Sanibel. The egret tried to swallow the rabbit whole, but the rabbit fought back. The egret drowned its quarry. Still unable to eat the carcass, the bird abandoned it.

"The point-in-time count." "No say on the ground." "They are burnt cards. (If you only invite burnt cards.)" "Opposition talks." "I have a comment on the drone issue." "We will hear more stories like this about the predicament we are in."

An autobiographical poem from Beijing in the mid-1980's. The protagonist had been a presence for some time at a barracks-style guest house, not far from the Temple of Heaven:

*Hassan born in Cairo without that broken nose,
Politeness, broken English and contempt for fat statesmen.
Hassan in the Romanian topcoat, the tee shirt
Emblazoned with the Amsterdam divorcee
Gone when he stepped from their bathroom in Madrid,
Gone with his pesetas.*

*Hassan showing his affidavits
From the "elector-shook" hospital: Complains of uncontrollable anger.*

..

*Hassan in the Beijing Hotel coffee shop, offering Spam;
Haggling on the street with the black market moneychangers,
Getting a good deal for the seven-foot Swede.
On the Bund, on the Eiffel Tower, at Lenin's tomb,
Hassan with friends made this very morning.*

*Lights out in the hostel. And Hassan
Of the jails, of the "secret mission,"
Asleep in his track suit,
Just beginning to moan.*

*Dawn. His monologue,
And the smiles behind his back and eyes rolling, mocking,
Meeting other eyes, some intent on debating him.
Hassan living on two dollars a day now and expiring visa.
"To me they did this, fucking Imperialists!"
And "Good-bye! Health to your family! Health to your God!"*

In her thesis, my middle-aged student writes: “But in this life I’m happy to be a woman . . . I can’t imagine how annoying it must be to have a penis stuck there, swinging outside my body.”

Fresh to The City, 36 years-old and searching for a job in publishing, Tom receives his resume and personal statement back from the *Village Voice*. On the front page someone has jotted, “What a bore.”

In an old notebook: The memoirist sprays the nest, and the wasp bodies fall with the drip of the poison tat-tat-tat, a kind of clockwork for securing his kind. He cringes as he aims, afraid they know, but tells himself *They shouldn't have desired my blue-backed porch; they shouldn't have lodged in my time, clinging night-long to their brittle hexagons, their wasp-ish reason, familial, at peace.*

RP says his illness, “though a death sentence,” is not, for him, a literary subject. And he didn’t write about it. Not directly. An indescribable sadness lines his face, beside the maple flaring orange, as we say goodbye in his driveway, though it was not the final farewell. Earlier that weekend, he suddenly says: “Don’t run from me . . . I’m only dying.”

I read a somewhat longer version of “In Memory of the Poet Robert Dana” at a publisher party, and everyone, it seemed, bravo-ed and clapped. They knew him, too. And my tone surely begged for their indulgence. One of his much more longtime friends — with whom he’d had a falling out in the last years, a breach never mended — told me afterward the sports coat he was wearing had been RP’s. At the writing group, some years later, Hunt observed, quite rightly, that the poem is as much about “the speaker’s bitterness and frustration” as the ostensible subject. Too much so.

“ . . . demolishing themselves by neglect. . . ” says one Historic Preservation Commission member.

*Who’d leave this moment
To the rose arbor’s memory:
Friends arguing poetry, between them
An iced pitcher . . . and Buster
Veering beneath a white butterfly,
Nose down after its shadow.
He’s content, one says, with what he can catch,*

*Meaning the sciamachy,
But also the verse in question,
And joy overleaping black wings.*

Long ago, my colleague Jessica's mother was a young high school Latin teacher. One day in the classroom, she stepped up on a stool to adjust a window or curtain, something of the kind, and all could see far up her skirt. It so impressed one of her students that he wrote to her this year about that moment. Now a grandfather, retired, dying of cancer, he wanted her to know that he had loved her all his life.

Nguyen Trai in the 14th century, through Nguyen Do and Paul Hoover: "Honor and pride are the last to fall into leisure."

At the family lake house:

*A boy I mixed cement hauled block
sat beside our father on the dock
at dusk He looked out I remembered him
there wry to my grin in the gin at fifty
relieved to return to that shore again
Where are they I know within
which is nothing I know without
something green the hills green still
that will not soothe I would not have it
otherwise all of us under this roof still
dripping leaf-glint owl boom shadow grunt
our mother's wry witness silent
doubled to the sleep and the moon
alighting on faces unforsaken*

In her dream, Lisa asks Deirdre why after she and Ralph married, they cut us off. Deirdre picks a brightly veined blossom from the orchid on our dinner table, where she has not been in more than a decade. She crushes it slowly in her hand. Lisa says, "You're not going to tell me, are you?" Deirdre shakes her head.

In another old notebook: The train stopped here and let the painters out. They set their easels on that hill. And the engine pulled its cars out onto the viaduct and stopped for two hours, for them.

The perfect scene of 19th-century harmony: the engine and cars atop a trestle of hewn Romanesque arches. On their canvases, many mingled the plumes

of steam with wisps of cloud, so industry and nature appeared sweetly compatible. And they made sure plenty of sheep milled serenely along the creek.

It seems economically harmonic as well, for the railroad had sold the painters tickets for this special trip to render the light of Pennsylvania in progress. Some were Sunday artists, some genuinely talented and serious. The lowered fare included almost anyone. Just look at any of the works from that journey when they turn up in estate sales, in county museums and attics.

For instance, I saw one that depicts the usual scene, including the village by the creek where that highway runs now. But most prominent in it stands the hillside flecked with easels, white smocks, picnic baskets—the amiable collaboration of franchise and pigments. And—since it is America—the hunger of one painter to go off, look back, be the outsider.

*Reach into the cloud and zone of wish,
Reach into meaning wide;
To be gold is chipped; ivory, stained;
Instilled, a break in mind.*

*Lie down in the woods, with your love and sigh,
To test if the world still is;
The vulture passes with the avid eye,
The shadow for your kiss.*

Lisa's mother, about the lover she abandoned to his wife and children nearly seventy years ago: "I'm at the end of my memory of him and I'm holding my face close to his and I'm saying why did you marry her!"

Another year. Perhaps a walk into spring. But where will spring go now that seasons have begun again to wander? The RN puts the homeless veteran's feet in the whirlpool, to loosen his shoes, then cuts the leather away.

*My candle can be lit
and will go out, this I know.*

*Its halo sways against the ceiling
as in a wagon down a rutted road—*

*foundling, founder, foundering,
this I say.*