

Beneath the Trees

To My Mother

As morning singes dripping boughs of sleep
Her flames swoop down, snatch every lazy bud,
The nestled doves and all the things that creep
Along the briny floors with tepid blood

She stretches out with tousled fists of light
To test the frost, unhook these mists from dark
Encampments pitched at purple shores of night
And crest black crowns of sea with plunging bark.

When spirits surging spurn my sails, adrift
On limpid wastes of glass your ivory lap
Consoles my dizzied head—a tiny rift
Of star, you nudge my yearling legs to scrap

The clumsy oars and join the fleet of swans,
To walk across the waves to piercing dawn.

The Dead at Verdun

I

The gentle euthanasia
of machine-gun battlefields,
tucking youth into the hill.

There follow standards, names,
living fame, and living beauty—
their children, and their children's children.

II

The cause never yellowed
in their fingernails. Unhurried ruin
of innocence, bronzed at its prime,

they never knew. Would never have known
youth nor innocence but lying in memory
that never knew either.

III

Happy few! Deserters of our meager banquet
among broken stones, a meal of broken bones—
their eyes are closed in the nights disclosed of death.

And you, *geron*? You have learned
that the war is past, and into darkness
the soldier marches on.

Wet Nurse

She saves
my life, to tell

the truth, to say
it simply: breathing

taste forbidden
milk in and out

the fruit unseen.

The Artist's Room at Arles (by Vincent Van Gogh)

It might be any room: sparse
furniture, paint peeling shirts and a night

stand. And yet annex
to a museum and the study of

a poem. This is not

the tale of the perfect place

that opened on the peonies, the search
for the region of truth and a friend

to share it. But perhaps he set the scene.
Are we to believe a madman

so tidy? We must forget
gardens of French sun framed

in shutter leaks, bed ruffled waves
of rolling flesh, violent evenings

unreaped frenzy curling toes from sleep
sprung to blend dream-fruit

with the last of the paint
and candle wax—just as he did: this

is a different story. Our physics says that rest
is a creation of eyes ignorant

or inattentive to detail. But agonies
of the brush will never deny

dried scarlet tucked away
at the heart, blues

almost mute, spilled so long ago
over walls that hardly knew

his grief. His victory
was not a still life—the canvas

holds the shell that held it
all, in light upon floorboards

he no longer needs: torn
toward us

from quivering flesh, from his head
still bleeding. Do we take it?

The Harrowing of Hell

I. Labyrinth

New York City is modern
man: laid in grids,
strapped flat to streets
girt with steel and gold. He struts

from temple to temple vaulted
out of shadows shed
by these heroic waxen ascensions, shadows banished
into basements damp with stone until

darkly a knife
with wild eyes
into your ribs
dives out of the night.

II. At the Gates

Have you seen the city
dying at night—dying without hope
for redemption? When sudden darkness tumbles

over walls of two-thousand-foot-soldiers
trenched in waveless glass sheens
against the hurricane. Squads of shadow

pierce voiceless corridors
weeping heavenly blood, gallop
over empty board rooms

where citizens huddled
before flooding the tunnels
with fugitive dread. A black tide rises

laps the chins of highest brass, necrotizes
wards of bygone virtue, standing proud, to the end
unrepentant. They gasp for one last draft

of light, one final glorious glimmer
over lands soon grave
with blank stele pillars. Across the river

in pillowy yawns, the three-necked god gives up his spirit
to yellow night, drifts indifferent to shades below.

III. Exodus

If down these stairs
crystalline eyes
fixed with righteous terror
gathered in their mountainous exile
and humbling our stares

set to fire
in living blues
these desiccated caverns, shattered cardboard
plates with spit at our feet
bleeding forth shafts of wisdom

on turbulent spirits
pressing, writhing, clawing staid lapels for a seat
cross-legged and suckled under
hooves of a glittering beast
forged by their very hands—onslaught

of men drawn from the counties
witless into skyward, from gilded heaven
disbellied into drains. And knowing his madness
in oaths to close the sea
in around breasts still as desert stone

to stand athwart these tracks
take hold of this wrist
and seize absolution
in a steel kiss
of oblivion...

IV. The Boatman

Such stars cannot reach us
here. We never admit night
beneath this gem-scratched ceiling
of our own device—savvy, saving daylight
for retirement, a rainy day, occasional vacations
of the sun. So the trains run on

time determined by commerce, ceasing only to collect
his coins, his listless, muttering cargo,
eyes like hollow furnaces on fire
blaze mechanical retreats

to the farther shore. There gnashing and teeth
at hangnail oozing sky-tight canisters
Jesus wept. But yea, this sickness shall not be
unto death. Under power of the golden switch

broken with labor, we roll back the stone
with a single finger, raise up fallen
sunlight on web-corniced hallways
ex petra genetrice, that all this

persist: stemless blooms fruitless
flowering sex never-nourishing meals
mediated by plastic drunk before thirst
passion feeding by passion,
world without end and life

everlasting—each wrapped individual
in plastic disjointed faces
dried against time wandering
streets unmanned by winter
wind wandering

bloodless, pale, cured
with chemicals, unstoppable
cupidity spurning only
the final stakes
to the heart.

V. A Voice in the Wilderness

Hunched on a bench I belched in
traffic, tangled to throng
the speed of crowds of scathing
lights, fetor of fecund remains

of Saturdays piled and restless nights
restaurants, stoves, bright windows
smeared life over life
squirmed out of the asphalt

And howled

at foreign colors
smote against napes, woven in standards
menaced a glint of ivory snarling in pleasure
and patterns of feet
crooked of path
and noise there passing

*For music—a return to music of night, a
crag coldly abandoned!*

And raged

into mine heart the venom of maggots
feeding death through living tissue
animating rot,
pick bare the concrete carcass

unburied, dirged by scissor of rats
tossed from lover to lover
mocked only
by late power of her very limbs

And I pointed condemnation
at the guilty of indignity,
though I lose my head. Splayed in camel hair coat

I slept the Baptist,
awoke Quixote and skulked
squinting to his musty keep.

VI. Confession

Face against the cold, hands sewn

to hips in pockets—so we snivel the days
in winter. Burrow into stone curling lamplight
vestibules about our necks, warm
with other armless bodies. We settle into darkness
like an easy chair—slits for eyes, watch the Styx roll by.

I have breathed the sense of these streets, borne her
breath also on my sleeves. Drawing up chalk
in watery drains I lapped its clotted essence
greedily. I watched with a little amusement

my brothers slip into the muck at Bleecker banks
with silent endurance—so have I been purged.
But for what? Some day life will end
with the death of this suffering. Wrapped in glass

deaf to the warning I saw a shriveled old woman hemorrhage
in the cold, teeth seized a-chatter beat the wet wind torn loose
on a wing of filthy doves to the rooftops...I saw these leaves
dig defiant claws into the fog-net, bled down dark brown
moonbeams to gutters drowned
in a scuffle over cab-fare.

VII. The Threshing Floor

There is a moment
when the rails close the evening
behind you (they must join
behind you) and the city lays its cares

its face in trembles on the lap
of the waters. Yellows with red absolve
into blue whispered through rivers brushed out
into darkness. And all that mighty heart

is throbbing still. Cross-ties tick out the joints
massive arms flung to each direction
legs astride ocean, invincible ribs
burst from wet earth

huddled labyrinths of these streets and peaked
over splashes in torture that chase black veins
into the half-light, chained men in snowy tunnels
to the bones of their fathers. Gaunt night

sinks through steam coughed out throats
in the pavement, bearing prayers
eyes into lusters of heaven
untilled heavens

stripped from grimy fists
of the island god. There on the bank
lapped at the universal threshold, pressed mud underfoot
the threshold shivers.

VIII. The Arms of Venus

By the magniloquence of the bridge
and the city of brocaded water
indeclinable roots
of the muttering morning star

slipped anchor in pearl
under swirling fists in the harbor,
dark woven mists raucous with cackle
of disembodied spells and crystal ocean swells

fell deaf under cadence of furious wings. She picked her way
like myrrh among the dead, the wasted streets,
and slender fingers whispered the busy remains
laid still on grave shadows. A pallid morning rose

drank down the blood of that evening
violet from the channel's frothy cup
and up dawn spread these frosted petals
full-crested indigo-orange to the carious greens unfurl

and hail steep fire on the ships and tunneling cars
streak fire on necks creviced in commerce and brows buried deeply in drains
where riven red, in eastern course overhead
a raven, silent, falls into the sea...

as passed under willows
light and life-giver rise, undress
with ripples caressed of oceans in gold yet
clasp trans-candid fire

on the cry of one broken by night

at the shore, murmuring
a tortured monosyllable. The sweep of her hem
unsealed two languid eyes

with nostrils flared and barren by sky
she raised the palms road-ragged of hands
thrown over far mountains
from silicate dust

and clear white
shaken from the stain of his beard
bellowed in wide glory. To gather strength
to gather stones in the shadow

of the sleeping volcano, scattering roots
into the tumult of its soil,
planet potentiary and prodigal earth
waxing, imperfect toward the dawn—

thereto this light all things to bear
inscribed with inscrutable oath: to bury change and hope
for change to come. With lambence of such flame
shall no man pass unchanged.

IX. Corporate Salvation

Sparking a butterfly
plunged into my eye—refuge
from a hostile world
it cauterized this wound.

So the matron leaned
piteous over a broken sparrow
as rendered by Michelangelo
in 53rd street station.