A SHOUT IN THE STREET

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CONTENTS

QUESTIONS TO THE READER (2)

I.
ON LEAVING FANEUIL HALL (4)
ODYSSEUS (5)
A NEED FOR AIR ALONG THE BANKS OF THE PISCATAQUA (6)
SEPTEMBER (7)
EVANESCENT (8)
OUGHT (9)
FLUX (10)

II.
PENELOPE (12)
HAUNTING (13)
KITCHEN IMPLEMENTS (14)
MOCK BLONDE (15)
WHITE-TAILED (16)
LAST CALL (17)
SKATING IN JANUARY (18)
AN ATTEMPT AT EXPLANATION (19)

III.
THE POET (21)
COLD STEEL PEN (22)
FELINE (25)
ITALY (24)
THE FALL OF TROY (25)
LIMINAL (26)
AN AFTERNOON IN MARCH (27)
THE TENNIS COURT (28)

IV.
OTIUM (30)
THE ALLURE OF A STRANGER (31)
IN THE PRESENCE OF (32)
A CHARCOAL SKETCH OF AN UNKNOWN BEAUTY (33)
EL JALEO: OIL ON CANVAS: 1882 (34)
CRANES ARE FLYING (35)
AFTER MANHATTAN (36)
ITHACA (37)

NOTES
“The dim coolness of my room was to the full sun of the street what a shadow is to a ray of light, that is to say, it was just as luminous and offered my imagination the full spectacle of summer, which my senses, had I been out walking, could have enjoyed only piecemeal; and so it was quite in harmony with my repose, which (because of the stirring adventures narrated in my books) sustained, like the repose of an unmoving hand in the midst of a stream of water, the shock and animation of a torrent of activity.”

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*
QUESTIONS TO THE READER

Where do you go when you leave?
Are there times when you cannot?
When someone smiles, do you smile back?

Are you happy in this life you chose?
What did you give up to be here?
How often do you think of death?

What do you find yourself living for?
Do the good days outweigh the bad?
Is there a meaning in all this light?
ON LEAVING FANEUIL HALL

Friday night and suddenly you don’t know where, no who, you are. Part of you wishes you bought that letterman jacket back in high school, or learned to like the taste of fried haddock beneath Atlantic sky.
In another life, you live in exquisite diploma frames that put people at ease, you don’t need to hide behind a clever knot in your rep tie. Everyone you love is sleeping. It’s okay, they can’t hear you. Sitting on the curb, you recall ruining a set of tires because you didn’t know there was a windshield defogger. Now you summon strangers’ cars, assume the best will happen because it usually does when you’re young and because it’s late and you need a ride home.
ODYSSEUS

Conversation of the low light, and piano chime and warm bread — faint sourness nestling on the palate, he wants to speak of yesterday, remembers digging for quahogs and fighting stubborn flounder. He wants to explain where he's been, but can feel the distance as if it were right there beside him. Everything has changed. They don't have paper menus. The couple a table over scrolls their phone screens instead of talking. He scratches at his collar that's become a little too tight, thinking he should've shaved like Telemachus, hidden his grey bristles, but he keeps sipping his wine. Cold air sneaks in through the patio. Outside people are wearing jackets or at least a sweater. Winter is coming; He can only think of summer: Race Point, the whales crossing Stellwagen, horizon eyes and fish scales, evening rum, sweet rocking, slow lap of wake. He tells his son they will fish together under a July moon. The air is heavy as if fog has rolled in; they clink glasses and for a moment coexist in sound.
A NEED FOR AIR ALONG
THE BANKS OF THE PISCATAQUA

On a cloudy night just before
summer collapses in exhaustion
I walk to the end of the dock,
watch the way navigation lights
reach their red and green arcs
towards one another. The boards
beneath me are rough and damp.
They’re themselves. In the dark,
no one can see their obtruding
nails, rust-stained, the gentle
failing of their planed bodies.
From across the river, I hear
children playing hide-and-seek,
their shrill voices like a fisher cat.
I can’t make out their figures,
but the lights keep stretching
the rippling space between them
succumbing to yellow.
SEPTEMBER

Dates soaked in rain water
and a constellation of sea-shells
spread across cooling floorboards.
Evanescent

I.

That July you stepped on the blueberries we spilled onto the hardwood floor — a stained fight, the carpet purple with their crushed flesh, returned to pigment.

II.

You misplaced the watch I gave you, washed it in the pocket of your jeans, until it could no longer tick, saying it never mattered whether the hand could turn.

III.

I know you didn’t read my copy of Heart of Darkness, but kept it because you liked the look of Penguin Classics and needed a black book to stage your Polaroids.
OUGHT

My hygienist tells me I really ought

to drink my coffee with a paper straw

on account of abnormal staining

that could become detrimental

if I were to miss my routine cleaning.
I concur with her judgement,

move onto to my next appointment

where the optometrist asks if I read.

Have I considered the 20/20/20 rule, he asks, explaining how consistent

eye strain accelerates prescription.
I try to imagine myself interrupting

the world of a sentence to stare off

at a white wall, counting down

until I can return to my reading,
like a child told to take a timeout.

I think about changing my habits, convince myself how easily I could

adopt another life, as I open the door, hear the chimes of the café I come to

every Wednesday for an espresso that sits on my palate — certain to stain.
It’s mid-November in Boston
and the oak leaves catch fire
as they spiral down to earth.

On the phone, my mother asks
where I’ll go. Instead, I tell her
about what I’m having for dinner.

Soon it’ll snow; the city will turn
to salt, the blue ground trampled
by swarms of black rubber boots.

I say I have to go.

The T screeches to motion
hobbling along its iron track,
ding, ding, a woman chases
to no avail, the driver choosing
to ignore her dying call.
PENELOPE

Smell of damp oil-cloth and peat wisp in country kitchen.

Today, I counted each stone that frames the fallow pasture,

wondering if the man I knew twenty years ago will return,

stout seeping, his sandpapered cheeks reddened by wandering.

Alone, reading in green light, mildew-dotted paper between

my strong hand, housewife hand, sun spotted, fading summer.

As a girl I wanted to be alone, never imagining this absence.

I was content to hide, scratch my name into the plaster

behind my bed — a space for me to be whoever I wanted.

Tomorrow, yet another cord, to stack to burn, ash to ash.

From the window, I watch as a woodchuck deadheads my frost-covered flowerbed, each petal nibbled to nothing.

I see the birch’s brittle limbs wind-shattered, the lilacs long dead, withered brown.

I strip the shutters to unravel the threat of a bee’s nest, its oozing hum the only sound.
HAUNTING

Chet Baker haunts
the cluttered kitchen
covering the hum of an electric fan
and a candlewick flickers
gold like Eden’s lost stars.

*Is your figure less than Greek?*

Through the open window
a full moon reveals my vacant
street, the lone lamppost
cold in its concrete existence.

*But don’t change your hair for me…*

I want to forget Ovid —
the lines that lie locked
in a frail red binding, flaking
with each opening.

I’m sick of fences
and balconies and window panes,
of books and paintings
and sculptures.

*Not if you care for me…*

I want to watch a flower wilt,
to burn a poem to nothing.
KITCHEN IMPLEMENTS

Suppose the lemon peel wilting on the engineered countertop becomes wings and the coffee grinder, tired of use, begins to speak such flattering lies of how suited you are for flight. Even the knife joins in, dulled by your constant sharpening, but you can’t help but notice the popcorn crumbs pushed beneath the cabinet and soon you’re swept up in your routine — the floor immaculate again.
MOCK BLONDE

It was that night in Montréal, covered in snow and two bottles of cheap red wine I paid for with crinkled American dollars.

Earlier, in Notre-Dame, I had felt a growing pressure from words I knew, but couldn’t understand.

Then at Modavie, you ordered for me, smoothing out my broken cognates with your practiced pronunciations.

The signs were there. I began to feel like my grandmother who sat at the edge of conversations.

When we came in from the cold your cheeks flushed and beautiful, I admired you the way one does something they know can’t hold.

The room was, the walls were, white, was the floor, the mattress, an island of cotton surrounded by emptiness and artificial light.

Your teeth were wine-stained; your mock blonde highlights shining as if it were summer, the rose garden where we met.

I said none of this — awoke to makeup stains on my pillowcase and a scribbled note that said you had gone out for croissants.
WHITE-TAILED

On the shortest day of the year,
I watch as a doe devours
the base of my arborvitae.

If I yell, she won’t listen;
she is where she belongs.
LAST CALL

Despite the snow, I find myself stuck to the grimy floor of a knockoff honky-tonk,

watching accountants purport to be cowboys. Everyone else seems to believe in rhinestones.

The men pretend they used to pickup prom queens and drink cheap beer beneath a southern sky.

I’m as distant as my denim is from the field it was made for, mouthing the words to another country heartbreak that all the whiskey in Tennessee can’t find a way to drown.

I’d like to try the electric bull, smile at Boston girls who researched how to make their hair reach for heaven, but I know it’s as mechanical as a line-dance. I’d like to talk to someone about more than what I’m drinking, to stop this ringing in my ear.
SKATING IN JANUARY

They’ve installed a temporary rink on the Frog Pond, smaller than the real, but it’s still skating I suppose.

Anonymous — I glide, recall that line from *Gatsby* about the intimacy of large parties, how one can become insignificant in a good way, feel the body relieve itself from its act.

At mid-ice, a girl in a neon jumpsuit begins to spin like an Olympian, twirling faster and faster, until she’s a flamingo balanced in sleep.

Chaos erupts — people buck their curves, reach for cameras; I weave through them, trying to preserve my motion. Haven’t they seen a figure skater before?

Suddenly, I’m angry. I want to stop her. Somebody stop her. I want to skate. Doesn’t everybody want to skate?
AN ATTEMPT AT EXPLANATION

Because I often believed what I was told.
Because shall and will are very different words.
Because it’s easier to read than to write.
Because the poem wasn’t what I wanted.
Because the poem was never what I wanted.
Because I couldn’t speak French.
Because in life doors rarely stay open.
Because behind every door was a woman.
Because my favorite flannel began to fray.
Because in New England, beds are cold.
Because there was no one in the meadow.
Because there’s always time to waste.
Because I overheard my name in a crowd.
Because I’m drowning in plain words.
III
Today, an old man on the C line
interrupts my reading of Baudelaire's,
*The Flowers of Evil*, to ask if I’m a poet.
My first instinct is to renounce
the title like Peter, afraid to name
what lies too close to my heart,
but I admit that I’d like to be one.
So he wants to talk about love —
insisting poets know it best, Neruda
or Shakespeare. I say there’s more
to write about than love, that love
falls easy victim to cliché, that boys
use it to throw at bedroom windows.
He pulls down his black-rimmed
glasses that had hidden his age; I see
how the years have pooled, eroded
his profile like a cliff in the desert.
I can tell that he loves someone,
that he needs an affirmation
of happiness and not another poet
proclaiming the merits of despair.
COLD STEEL PEN

I sit before my mirror, 
stare at ripples. I’m blank 
today. There’s nowhere 
to go; no one to dress for.

If only I had the orange 
Cézanne painted, or at least 
a city to swallow me whole.
FELINE

A slender, black cat stalks time past and present with her moon eyes that purr for sun and lukewarm milk.

She grows restless; the door forgets to open. Her round, porcelain bowl lies waiting at the center of the carpet.

As if entering a corn maze, she paws the perimeter, inching closer to the bowl that holds nothing but dust.
ITALY

I lied about the girl
in the Italian hotel room.

I’m sorry, but a part of me
wanted to hurt you,
to assess the thing we called love —
our late night tapping of keys
from opposite sides of the Atlantic.

I never thought of myself
as a cruel person, but I wanted
to see how much you’d care,
to test the power of my words
that felt like rain drops falling
against a terracotta gutter.

Your voice crumbled to static.

Of course there wasn’t a Sophia;
I liked the neatness of the lie,
the lack of blood on my hands
as I watched a candlewick slip
to smoke and wisp to the ceiling.
THE FALL OF TROY

When I was young I dreamt
I could outlast the tides.

In bed at night I would study
the blueprint of ancient Troy,
imagining a trench, crenellated
walls, fortifications to prevent
an onslaught of salt and foam.

The rising sun was no match
for my conviction; my limbs
became a shovel, heaving
piles of wet sand, striking
water, but still digging
deeper and deeper, my body
disappearing from view.

A scout from the beach umbrella
would bring me lemonade
and I swore to protect everyone’s
flip-flops and sandwiches.

While the sea roared, I prepared
for siege, turning my attention
to a breakwater, before diving
into the belly of my creation,
yelling at the encroaching waves
as I imagined Aeneas would.

Within fifteen minutes,
water poured into the city gates —
I sat watching the ocean
have its way with me,
yet in my heart I believed
it could’ve been different.
LIMINAL

Eccentric, snobbish, a disheveled Brooks Brothers campaign, he enters the classroom with his train-beaten briefcase and enameled fountain pen, decrying the state of the universe, yet somehow remains endearing, charming even in his denouncements. As always, he unclasps his watch, places it face down on the table, acclimating to the room like a prisoner, but before he can be comfortable, he pulls down the shades to block out the telescopic eye of a news-camera, installed for the pre-game coverage of tomorrow’s football game.
AN AFTERNOON IN MARCH

In my dream I’m always running from an unstacked woodpile on the edge of a snow-covered meadow. I recognize the silence that comes right before the lake splits in two. Everything new, but remembered. Rain ruins. Maybe this year I’ll finally see the sunrise over Mount Cadillac, if I can convince myself to fumble around in the dark. Each year is the same. I think too much about bears. I forget which ones to run from. I think about the five-hour ride, the lack of decent coffee. At least birds know where to go, when to return. They speak in the imperative. I need a pastime that doesn’t involve watching. I should be happy — the sun is warming, flowers are sprouting from salt.
THE TENNIS COURT

I knew you were you better,  
had watched you play  
through the hole of a chainlink.

You said you would teach me.  
I didn’t listen. I pretended to know,  
glossing an article on grip.

The heat blurred all  
but the sound of your calling:  
15-love, 30-love, 40-love, why  
love? Of all the words for nothing.

It didn’t matter how many sets  
I went down, there was always  
another buried inside of me.

Before leaving,  
you had me rake the clay  
until there were no wrinkles,  
until our shadows returned  
to our bodies.
OTIUM

Stone wall, hawthorn path,
reading under shady bough,
warm stream, frozen buck.
THE ALLURE OF A STRANGER

I can’t help but look at her hands, which, as if she’s French, she always keeps on the counter. Today her nails are done — white, in contrast to a tan developed from seven days in Cannes and her Cartier Love Ring on her right hand that, though absurd, I find to be beautiful in its excess. She can’t ignore the texts from Peyton on her Apple Watch, deciding whether she’s free for drinks, while I try to make my penmanship more interesting, casually curling to script.
Because I’m alone, I notice everything. A girl has snuck away from her mother and is sitting beside me on the gallery couch. One of her sisters plays with the water fountain in the corner, another insists upon the severity of her hunger, while the fourth looks at each painting for exactly ten seconds before moving onto the next. I’ve spent weeks studying for the moment when this portrait will reveal its secrets, as if knowledge is the highest form of intimacy. I can tell the girl beside me is searching too. If she asks, I know every detail — oil on canvas: painted by John Singer Sargent in Paris during the fall of 1882, famously described by one critic as “four corners and a void,” but she could look up the information on her own, there’s no need for me — I’m not her mother, or even a museum guard.
A CHARCOAL SKETCH
OF AN UNKNOWN BEAUTY

Girl with orange peel and apple core,
wearer of phosphorescent geometrics
that fade to ruffles above your knees —
an exhibition of café hush and steam.

The sound of riff and rain,
reverbs against the window pane.

I cannot tell the color of your eyes,
though I think they cannot be blue.

I know nothing but your performance —
the rehearsed comb of hair, artless,
ensnared in an acetate tortoise shell.

The way you pretend to read, only to
ink the margins with the indifference
of those dotting eyes, fluttering focus.

How your tan legs squirm, interlock,
cross in their obligatory movement —
the white rubber of your tennis shoe,
tapping anxious seconds on marble.

With a turn of foot you leave in bells,
a hollowed chair, expresso sediment,
and now, finally, I can think of you.
In the Venetian silence of the museum
the taverna becomes audible. You enter
through the scallop of a Moorish arch —
their applause growing with rhythm, arms
slithering. Andalusian voices singing of
a girl mourning at the feet of her matador.
You’re startled by footsteps that aren’t in
the meter of the song plucked from steel,
reverberating, scratched in brushstrokes.
You wonder who else is there — what
foreign presence — this was supposed to be
between you and Sargent. A woman
opens a brown leather notebook
and stands face to face with the dancer.
She seems to know something you don’t.
Her chignon and blazer feel academic.
You want to know what she hears in
the howl of the haunted man at center.
She slips away; the ruckus returns,
swelling in darkness: emerald, ivory.
The dancer reaches out a ghostly hand,
twisting like a silkworm on a verge of
creation — feet march in, you recognize
the routine shuffling and rising jeers
as a wave of indifferent school-children.
CRANES ARE FLYING

Across the darkness, a girl swaddled in black rubs the thin gold of her signet ring to the beat of the projector’s incessant baton.

She’s not alone. The classroom is almost full, though empty at center — limp bodies pushed to the perimeter, their attention drifting to laps, notebooks, and each other.

The girl is transfixed, drowning in the illusion of black and white. There is nowhere to run. The door is locked by the clock that barely tics. She can’t move — the music accelerating to a spinning vertigo, flashes of white in darkness.

She seems to speak with her sunken, Slavic eyes, icon of Orthodoxy, but she has no sound, only the whining strings of the movie score.

On the main screen, Veronika loses Boris to a bullet in a flooded birch field in Russia.

Against their nothingness, the light returns. Like cranes, they flap their feathery wings and rush to their perpetual summer.
AFTER MANHATTAN

“Why is life worth living?
Well there are certain things,
I guess, that make it worthwhile…”

For me,
French press coffee in the morning,
Ruston Kelly’s crooning of “Poison,”
In Search of Lost Time by Proust,
the melancholy of Russian Novels,
the suspense of Hitchcock movies —
especially the ones with Cary Grant —
Vermeer, but more so Rembrandt,
those bright cutouts by Matisse,
the enforced silence of Bapst Library,
the warmth of Scandinavian interiors,
eavesdropping on T conversations,
people-watching at a baggage claim,
the chicken cemita from Street,
the Sausage Guy on Landsdowne,
that every pizza claims to be the best,
that people find ways to smile.
ITHACA

You've been good to me, held me in the warmth of your libraries, but I want to be anonymous again to feel the changing of years as a sudden fissure.

This comfort can't last forever; the waves of the bell tower will stretch to silence, as I leave this place of immaculate façades and old hymns.

Better I leave while I'm happy.

Through the dim leaded glow, I see the lindens, neat and longing.
NOTES

Reference is made to the following authors and works:


