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Fragments of a Previous, Grander, Project

Adam Lock

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 2000

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ABSTRACT

Fragments of a Previous, Grander, Project

Adam Lock

Formally, this poem is constructed to discover what sorts of apparent meanings and resonances may be engendered by assembling fragmented and disjunctive units as parts of a whole, and also, if possible, to discover what's lost in the same process. The poem is assembled in one hundred and eight discrete units, some titled, others left untitled. Some names, ideas, and voices carry over from one unit to another, providing, however tenuous, connective tissue. In large part, however, this is *not* the case, and where it is not, the reader is left to his or her own devices to derive sense from one unit to the next. There is no coherent internal structure; rather, the poem depends on discord and fracture between sections for effect. Reflected in the title is the idea that a work which was previously whole, and perhaps the better for it, has somehow been shattered, and we are left to do what we can with the remnants. In terms of its content, it is a poem concerned with the quotidian, human dilemmas of day to day living: of love, friendship, and the struggle to find one's way in a world mediated in part through newspaper articles. Among the conflict of competing voices and visions, in a poem characterized to a great extent by the anxiety of its expression, several intimate and (I think) humorous perspectives emerge as well.

1.

Light broke
but I couldn't see my way forward.

Ocular difficulties. I was coaxed
into this with sugary promises

& the threat of irredeemable failure
from other quarters. Nothing

about it was voluntary, any more than being
is voluntary. Which is not to say

there is anything *natural* about it either.
I trouble, as you can see. You (punster that you are)

might say Clay suffers
from a detached reticence.

2.

I've read a few books it's true,
though I'm not accused often.

You'd think I'd have something to say,
if, indeed, one thing follows the other. Though perhaps

wisdom increaseth sorrow,
and it might be that sorrow keeps

to sorrow's self.

All this to say

I read such and such, when I was very young, eight
or maybe twenty-eight years old. I remember

nothing of it, naturally, except
ever so faintly, the cover: a broken black ring

on a dark green ground.

It was a huge book, the print minuscule.

I was confused utterly
in the apparently formless whole

but found pleasure anyway in the act,
slinging sense from one line

to the next.

3.

Pleasure too, of another order,
in the simultaneous

intermittent examination of my self
in the act. I sat in the passenger seat

of my parents' parked and empty car
while we camped, tent pitched nearby,

in a wood, by a lake. I was destitute,
yearning, and already learning

to read as a means of excluding myself
from company. A way to pass the time,

and fill in the space, having been excluded.
Almost certainly this is all wrong.

4.

Not long
after that I discovered my station,

calculating possibility, by striking
analogue, in the passenger seat

of my parents' car, parked
this time in a swimming pool parking lot.

Strawberry Canyon.

What for a while

had been only feeling, mere suggestion,
finally found form, much to my delight

and immediately following, dismay,
because here come the folks...

5.

I thought, this is it, this is what you get.
You're alone in a car,

windows rolled up, suffocating
heat, near-total silence.

Encapsulated
in vinyl, windshield glass, autobody.

Rubber, concrete.
Adrift in a sea

of abandoned automobiles,
swimming in the guilt of fruitless effort,

company on the way.

6.

Excerpt from an Interview with a Former Champion

If, sometime, I write my memoirs
— which is very possible—

people will realize that love
has been a minor factor in my life.

It gave me the opportunity to further an ambition
and at the same time convince me

of the futility of that ambition. Today,
I continue to love

because it occupies my mind,
and keeps me from brooding

and remembering.

7.

It's often difficult to understand,
exactly, precisely, with clarity, and certainty,

what is said. For example,
on the radio just now

a reporter reported

that in some *war-ravaged zone*

four people—two children—had been
“shot apart.” It wasn’t clear if the four

were family, nor whether they’d been shot
separately, or actually shot to pieces.

You see the problem; it’s difficult to understand
what is said.

8.

Once the war is over
(I’m speaking metaphorically, now)

I’ll finish work
on a little chateau I’m building.

(I’m speaking fantastically, now)
It’s on the Indian ocean, Réunion,

to be precise, in a tranquil bay.
There fruit falls off the trees

(mango, breadfruit, soursap)
and fish jump

(snapper, bluefish, tarpon)
into your nets of their own accord.

The first people I'm moving in are the virgin
Mary (not her real name)

a Ukrainian-born doctor, anthropologist,
and single mother of an adopted child.

The daughter of severe and pitiless parents,
she's hyper-competent, driven,

and ludicrously lonely. Naturally, I love her.
Her daughter Willow

is three years old, Ethiopian-born Somali,
birth mother dead.

An orphan-child
plucked from extinction

by a stranger's hand. Love begins with pity.
She's coming too.

9.

I'm going to a land where milk and honey flow.
I'm travelling by desire; my soul's desire to reach home.

Also coming is Pierrette, my one true love,
a Belgian-born painter and engraver

who's renounced all her work.
She's a single mother (but three times a lady)

and fatherless daughter of a Belgian judge
who drinks and sits in judgement. She *loves* Daumier.

She's self-reliant and radiant, but that's not enough.
She's heart-stoppingly lonely. That's too much, too much.

Her son Gaufre will come, of course.
He's not quite two. He's also her life.

Also miraculously fatherless.
It'll be nice when we get there.

10.

This is it, this is what you get:
Pause. Thinking stops. That's the crux

(and there's the rub). Some kind of
blank. Neutrality. Redressed quick as poss

in nonsense and packs of lies stacked
like books on shelves, sky-high. Flimsy

structures; ridiculous, it goes (almost)
without saying. But in the final analysis

of great impractical value.

At least that.

11.

And this should have been how it happened,
in theory it was easy: hypothesis, experimentation, inference.

But in truth.... All Clay had done this weekend was feel
tired, uninspired, and dull. The moment

he opened a book all sense flew out of it.
If he did manage to follow a story, an idea,

or an argument for a page or two, the minute
he stopped what he had read would vanish

like smoke. For the duration of a reading,
the words might be involving, even compelling.

But once he lifted his eyes from the page
and readmitted the world,

the clear, hard, undeniable world,
whatever he'd been reading would dissolve

into so much blather. No objective correlative.
Reading was like holding the string

of a helium balloon which wasn't tied
to anything. You closed the book

and turned away, and whoops! off it went,
crowded out by furniture, windows, spatio-temporality.

And writing! To put one word together with another one
so that it didn't cause the most horrible effect.

Even a single word alone on a page,
without the grating discordance caused by

its proximate relation to another word, seemed,
when he put it down, invariably to have only

a truly ugly quality.

In theory it was easy; and this should have been

how it happened.

12.

What are the elements that words protect us from?
You might as well ask,

When did you start eating glass?

Well, I eat light bulbs. It's... I mean I eat glass,

not on a regular basis. Not on a regular basis
at all. But if the work comes in, then

I'll do it. It's paid work, you see.
It'll be paid work.

And what's it like to eat glass?
What's it like eating glass? Awful,

yeah, really awful.

Does it have any ill effects?

No. Not really. It doesn't cut you,
cause you grind it up very thoroughly

with your teeth. As long as you grind it up
for long enough, you're all right.

13.

I'm losing my taste for this, fast—or
not so fast. Maybe it's been going

for millenia. The whole endeavor, undertaking,
enterprise, is lost: this much you

can be sure of. Here is a certain position

from which to proceed. Certain as the sediment

beneath your feet. But now where's the spur?
Pleasure? Maybe formerly (says Hamm). Compulsion.

(Biological?) Necessity. (Economical?)
Duty. (Sociopolitical?) Love. (Love?)

14.

Arnie calls. His mother, estranged,
wheelchair-ridden, died just

last year, age forty-five, from complications
due to an error made during a hysterectomy

performed nearly twenty years ago.
This is not why he calls. Or maybe it is,

I don't know. His father, born deaf,
grown aggressive and violent, dj'd (!)

at a club for single parents, and moved in with a new
woman every few weeks. So goes the sad story.

Arnie was instructed to call a succession
of women "Mom", and claims to have seen

his father's leopard-print see-thru

vinyl-crotch underpants hanging off

the back of a number of different
door handles. We laugh ourselves to tears

(*this* is the purpose of his call)
over the junk language of junk

culture: telebanking, infomercials, edutainment,
and a question asked Arnie by an indignant

bank rep that morning: why wasn't he interested
in hearing about telebanking?

There's much I'm not telling you.

15.

I was dreaming, I was bored.
I'm so sorry, so sorry.

I was dreaming, I was bored.
I couldn't help myself.

16.

Arnie wants to smoke pot and listen to Blind Blake,

Charlie Patton, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey.

The radio played a parody of black music,
while we shopped for a parody of dinner.

He said, "Haven't black people suffered enough?
First slavery, and now this." We laughed ourselves

to tears. (White men's tears, admittedly.)

This is why we're friends.

But while we're on the subject of suffering, hasn't
language suffered enough? This is why

we laughed of course. The horror, the horror.
Heart of Marketing: telebanking, infomercials,

edutainment. Win, free, more, bonus, savings,
extra, super, new, gains, improvement.

To fill the emptiness.

Freedom, progress, future.

17.

Junk Sculpture

I wouldn't build with new material,
from blueprints, according to a plan,

if you paid me (though while
we're on the subject of greenbacks,

just out of curiosity, how much?)
but much prefer to simply pile

scrap. There's so much of it. The world needs
nothing new; every addition is a burdensome weight.

Better to begin to recoup our losses.
Stack scrap sky-high, as high as it goes—

learn to weld, maybe. Hammer,
cement, glue.... Brute means

for making brute monuments
to waste.

18.

Social Critique

Look at them: huge, fleshy
insects.

Unselfconscious. Shameless.

Buzz buzz buzz,

dreadful, Apoidean discourse,

Alien, nightmarish
music.

19.

They're okay, Clay's family. They're fine.
Better not to inquire.

Father, mother, sister. Look at the picture of them
standing on the front porch. It's simple,

they're fine. Fine fine fine.
(To the extent they're not fine—it's none of your business.)

Everyone is okay. Father, mother, sister.
Look again: they're all smiling.

Clay takes no responsibility for anyone else.
But Mama, thinks Clay, alone, at night,

your children are unhappy.

20.

When I've squeezed the life out of my life,

pushed it out the corners of the frame

in disdain, sneering at possibility
 what I hope to achieve, what I hope

to have accomplished (why do I falter? Why so irresolute?)
 when I've squeezed the life out of my life—

and I mean this not as in, *to the lees*,
 but as in, how shall I say it? *a great displacement*,

the exchange of blood for embalming fluid,
 water for concrete—

when this is done, what will remain
 will be easy to bear:

perfectly clean, perfectly empty.

21.

Dream no.1

Beginning before you were born. Or not
 beginning, just was. Reaching up, a subway

rider taking hold. Nothing to it, just
 jump on the bandwagon, no special skills

necessary: get on, maintain your balance,
comport yourself with some decorum, get

off again. Your only real concern your
self. Look around! This is normal. Let's

draw this out a little, come on in, stay
awhile. Though I have nothing to recommend

me but slowness, and, forgive me,
my ignorance is appalling, I can say

one thing: the trick, in the middle of this mess
is to stay calm, stay calm, stay calm.

22.

Stolen Goods

Y'know those days when you don't feel
good and everything looks so sad? When

you get up from your bed, it's in your left
foot not knowing what to do with your life.

So you turn on the radio, looking for music,
but you can only hear waste, waste. Only

waste.

23.

Adulthood

Clay lay on his bed, in the dark.

He didn't even have a voice of his own, speech

of his own, he realized. He was suddenly gripped
by the thought that if he had at that moment

needed to speak, call out to his roommate
in the next room, say, or talk to the dog,

or answer the telephone, he would be unable to.
He sat up suddenly, wide awake. He would dispel

this crazy notion, he thought, by speaking
a word out loud, breaking the paralysis

he feared gripped him. But in the following scramble
no word would come.

24.

His voice wakes us via the baby monitor,
a device which allows one to care

for one's child remotely. He calls her, *Maman*,
and is silent, still sleeping. He's dreamed, perhaps,

she's flown to him, a winged entertainer
singing and tapping baby's blues away.

About this time (getting back to the subject, perhaps,) my accusers pay me a visit,

and, cry though I might for my mother,
she won't come. (She was always a reluctant performer,

stage fright and what-have-you.) Dogsboddy!
they cry. Interloper!

I'm helpless to defend myself
—Miserable wretch! Sod!—

and lie there guilty
as any unconcious soldier. My conscience?

That's not what bothers me.
What a cheap lie. Bunkum. Baby's quiet,

mother's quiet. Come to think of it,
my accusers can't touch me. I'll sleep

them into nothing and wake in the voiceless
present...

25.

I've secured one candidate for my island
fantasy getaway with castle, fresh fruit, etc.

The other won't come, though; she can't
drag her child, her work, her conflicting

weltbild, up the long ladder, scaling
castle walls... Who am I kidding? I was

pouring hot oil from the parapets long
before she might've cried Usurper!

The story disappears in confusion,
much like the lady did.

Imprecision plagues me. What I'd like
to say precisely is...

May I begin again?

26.

Circuit

He simply had to think of a word, any word, say it

aloud, and have done with it. It was utterly
ridiculous—he couldn't do it. He was incapable
of forming a single word in his head. He heard
himself breathing stertorously through his nose.
His tongue rolled up and unrolled in his mouth.

Clay regarded himself in the mirror over the dresser.
He saw a man standing, uncomprehending,

in the middle of a bare room.
Was he going crazy, truly crazy? *Hello?*

Hello? Then again to be certain he'd spoken
the word and not simply imagined it. *Hello?*

Now he heard the word clearly
in the room around him. Inside and outside. From inside out

his mouth outside, and back in his ears inside
again. Then to make sure he could speak

more than a single word: *Hello? Is anybody there?*
Hello? Anybody there?

27.

Concentration shifts, slips

from one line to the larger mass.

I become dizzy, drunk. I can't focus
on one thing at the expense of *all things*;

all things at the expense of *the one*.
There's no remedy for this,

but you might spend a year
trying to see how much you can do

with how little.

28.

Lately my dreams have been of *uprootedness*,
separation from some source,

whirling and confusion. I wake
to read of a southern disaster,

the photo a black, debris-spangled cone—
an inverted volcano—preparing to lay waste a toy town,

model train, plastic cows.

The story is not clear.

There is some mention of weather patterns,
air mass, high and low pressure systems.

But what it means that a person is swallowed
out of, say, Kansas,

and spat out somewhere else
(Oz, if they're very, very lucky;

more likely some blasted heath
a stone's throw from where they were picked up

and with a broken head into the bargain)
remains a mystery.

I no longer know where I am.
Every time my dreams drop me

back on solid ground I know only that
everything's been left behind.

29.

It seems I've lost Arnie, or Arnie's lost me.
I'll have to choose my friends more carefully

now, from among those who don't ask
too many questions (having eviscerated themselves)

concerning the gross internal
organs: the brain (what do you cogitate?)

the heart (why do you pump blood pump blood?
Is that a question—pump blood pump blood?)

The kidneys, the liver, the spleen.
O Arnie! What heedless randomness

drove us together, only later to misplace us
apart? However it happened, we're lost

to each other now, and I'll have to find other companions,
mute, cold to the touch, and true.

30.

Here I am in the basement. Metaphorical and not.
Back in the basement—

as though I'd never left. As though I'd never travelled
far from here, to sun-drenched isles

and sandy shores; rode swelling seas,
traversed vast plains. As though I'd never left

this room.. There are voices upstairs.
Not now but earlier I heard voices. Distinctly.

It is here I've come to work. I crawled in
through the window, now I can't get out.

It was open a crack. It's the right setting
for the sort of work I'm doing.

I'm engaged in trying to build a—
To construct a— Something.

I will then present it to whoever
deals with that part of it at the— At—

At the institution where I conduct my affairs,
in order to qualify for— In order to demonstrate—

To show them I— So that I may proceed
to the next stage. This remains my fondest hope.

31.

I could sit here and wait all day, y'know,
for something to happen, for someone to come,

for some kind of pattern to play itself out,
undramatic, faultlessly. Ordained, as it were.

I don't have to wait long: a buzzer
does its little number, (the phone rings, I mean.)

It's Pierrette. She wants off my imaginary island
paradise (I can't say I ever believed in it

myself), has gathered some things in a bag
and would I please come and collect them soon?

But not now, not now, not just yet...

32.

It seems I've become slightly disgusting
to myself, as well as others. More so

to others, I think, though what is the true
measure of disgust? Perhaps the extent

to which the outside impinges continually
on our happy insularity. The cell membrane is

too thin here, almost nothing is closed
out: the polluting effects of all those

stimuli—so many poisonous particles
per hundred thousand—it makes your

nervous system nervous.

33.

Dialogue no.1

Clay: Here we are, back in this place, this space.

I: Outside it's sunny and clear.

Clay: Outside, a dog barks, a lawnmower hums, the wind rustles leaves on trees up and down the street.

I: Inside it's cool and quiet. A little damp.

Clay: Did we ever leave? Have we ever left?

I: It feels as though not. But memory tells us otherwise.

Clay: What do we remember of last night, for instance?

I: Oh, this and that. This. Yes, certainly this. (*Suddenly remembering*) Oh, ha ha! And that, too.

Clay: Did it happen, was it *real*?

I: Of course. Do you doubt it?

Clay: No, not really, and yet...

I: What is it? Was it... Insignificant?

Clay: I wouldn't say that.

I: Significant? A significant evening?

Clay: I wouldn't say that either. An evening like any other.

I: But different too.

Clay: More closely resembling the evenings immediately preceding, and (we assume) immediately following, than comparable to evenings of yesteryear, say, or (we propose) the far distant future. Something to do with entropy.

I: Where will we be in the far distant future?

Clay: Here, or nowhere.

34.

Dialogue no.2

I: For now we are here. This place, this space.

Clay: Outside the wind whistles, an automobile rumbles past. In the silence following, birds chirp. Another automobile. Birds.

I: What good now is the memory of last night? We're here now. What do we do with the memory of last night? Savour it?

Clay: Oh no. I mean, that's not the right word.

I: We could make the effort of recalling more and reflect on what is recalled (to no avail).

Clay: Or, more simply, consider it as it comes (to no avail).

I: Either way.

Clay: Either way.

35.

Memo to Self

When, finally, there's nothing else to do,
you begin to write. You've exhausted

all other avenues (staring out the window
at the people passing below, philosophical speculation,

telephone dating lines, speech, one more
cup of coffee, even tightening the legs

of the very table you're writing on—
satisfying you must admit.) And so

it's come to this. You've been avoiding it like
the current epidemic, but at the same time, cunningly

luring yourself into the aforementioned situation—
this situation—the situation being that there's nothing

else to do. You have no choice. (Finally. Phew.)
You're a weasel caught in a trap (of your own

devising, granted) and you must chew
your leg off if you want to get free. (You've got

to write, I mean.) Now that you've reached
this point, two questions, each wearing a guise

of harmless, naive curiosity and perplexity
but actually representing terror

beyond all terror, ultimate, absolute terror,
spring to mind, or, put another way, invade &

hold prisoner your brain like a fascistic mental
police squad. The questions are: What are you

going to write? And what is the point?

36.

Responding to Art 1.1

Two arms. They throw a man in a suit

straight up into the air:

the man stays rigid, his glasses intact, his tie straight. How does he do it? What do those

disembodied arms signify? It's been suggested (only by association—the mind struggles

to form links, forges meaning, even between disparate words and images, yoked together

by some hapless fool's chutzpah) that it was here the tale of fantasy, obsession

and rejection began.

37.

Picture, if you will, a pale figure in black stockings, a hole in one thigh,

garter-belt, black bodice, lace, fishnet, rump outthrust, invisible breasts pressed

to the wall, lips parted slightly, face turned toward the camera, and, lo and behold, it's

A) a man, and B) someone you knew in high school. Surprised? No, me

neither.

38.

The tone of this poem,
one commentator suggests,

is boisterous but respectful.
It is unquestionably a religious event,

she adds.

The commentator's tone,

in turn,
is uninflected with irony.

We remain unswayed.

39.

Not quite from nowhere, but almost,
comes the suggestion that we think

in terms of Systems and Pressure. As examples
of these we are shown two diagrams.

One, which looks like eight baseball diamonds
competing for the same field,

with accompanying directions in Hebrew,
clearly has mystical implications. The other

has a more obviously poetical use:
incisions of mathematical symmetry separate

the semantic from the syntactic, and the metaphoric
from the metonym. This allows for a glimpse

into the organs of something-we-don't-know-what,
but it is dead, and we can't seem to close

it up again. There's no going back now,
and the diagrams are all we have to go on.

We refer to them often.

40.

Innocence Lost

The boy, in goggles, twelve to fourteen, dark-haired,
dripping wet from the pool, freezes, gasps:

How does it all fit together? he wonders.

What's my place in the grand scheme of things?

He comes to the realization that he could face life imprisonment if found guilty. But guilty of what?

It's *insane* (my italics). Perhaps he's thinking of someone else, not himself, a parent or near relative. It has something

to do with a luxury automobile—was someone run over? Stuffed in the trunk? Making false claims

on their insurance? All he sees (and so all we can see) in a series of flashbacks, are the grill

and headlights. It's a Mercedes, I think. He's too young for this. What a thing

to know at twelve (to fourteen). Life imprisonment!

41.

Responding to Art 1.2

There are the arms again, outlined in ink, throwing the man eternally up.

He's stiff as wood, not a hair ruffles, his coat's frozen, arms rigid

by his side.

42.

Another diagram, this one rudimentary,
bone-simple. In fact, he's drawn it himself.

Self, it says. An arrow points in both
directions, to Others. Though compelling

in and of itself, its overt meaning is not
immediately apparent, until, just below

this, we read the echo of some earlier
words: "It seems I've become disgusting

to myself, as well as others." Referring
back to the diagram, its deeper significance

becomes painfully clear.

The rest of the page is blank.

43.

Chorus 1.1

Further on, things become a little more chaotic.

One commentator claims

that the pope, too, is expected
to raise the subject. Also, someone

is found guilty, and there is an
accompanying photograph. Could this

degenerate be the subject of the boy's thoughts
and subsequent astonishment at the harshness

of a life sentence? Or is it the boy himself
years later? Has the pope been requisitioned

to comment on the subject of guilt? Or
on the inferred religiosity of the text?

A second commentator unleashes
a torrent of faded, overlapping, and simply

broken language, as if he's having trouble
with his printer. Barely discernible

are the words, "The first is the fulfillment..."
"...one single human being to demand testimony..."

"Authoritarian society..." "...speak with
my voice..." "...certainly for these two reasons..."

and "...oneself..." Yet another voice chimes
in: A commendable message, but an excruciating

read. We no longer know where
this comment is directed.

44.

Someone else says they're bored.
It's a young girl.

She has two friends with her
(they're not old enough to start distinguishing),

one with big glasses—which render her
instantly sympathetic, if you have a soft heart,

like I do—and filthy hair.

The other, a boy, bald, or even pre-haired,

is bored also. In fact, they are all bored,
and they are all ashamed.

They needn't be. Life, friends, is boring.
[Though] We must not say so. Help arrives

in the form of a newspaper advertisement.
See your future in a new light, it opines.

Clay pictures a healthy and beautiful
woman (that's just what's expected of him) but

virtuous and unsex, doing just that: opening
the paper, seeing her future. But he can't

get away from the notion that future,
present, and past are one.

So where's the new light in that?

45.

Methodology

In a blind, how do you proceed?
In the pitch dark, how do you proceed?

What's the way forward? When
you can't see a thing? I mean a mile down

a nickel mine dark. Lose your sense
of balance dark. How, then, do you

proceed? You know you're not falling
only because you're on the ground

in a heap. So you know where
the ground is. Under you, the heap.

Proceed.

46.

Forgetting

The freedom it allows me
is the most important thing,

otherwise I'd be lost,
I'd never be able to begin,

never.

It's crucial to be able,

while fingers fly over violin strings,
snow falls seemingly without end,

the mind is burnished copper at the edges,
and you are once again on the verge of tears,

choking, in this strange, new and unfamiliar place,
it is crucial to have that freedom:

a jumping-off point,
an opening,

an opportunity where otherwise
there is none.

And one can only hope
it will lead to further freedom,

other possibilities,
provide momentum, impetus...

47.

Here, look at this: picking up
Where we left off, preaching

to the converted,
converting the assembled

fragments of a previous project
into fragments of the present

project, we find the quotation
from the genius who protests

that as an old man he loves because
“it occupies [his] mind and keeps [him]

from brooding and remembering.”
In an attack on the old man’s earnest despair,

some wiseguy has cut a phrase
out of a newspaper and stuck it

over the *alter kaker's* remarks:

“sounding upbeat on a day of dashed hope.”

And further down the page:

“That’s the problem isn’t it—real life.”

These platitudes, ironically out-of-context,
do not provide levity, as they are ostensibly supposed to,

but are merely verbal shrugs
of the shoulders, gestures of helplessness

and defeat.

48.

There was an accident, see,
which unfolded due to both mechanical

and human failure, as the diagram
clearly illustrates. An elderly man,

bespectacled, bald, sits in an abject
posture on the family couch, hunched,

smoking, TV remote and ashtray
on the coffee table in front of him.

His mouth is turned down, and he’s obviously

brooding or remembering some
 past event. A young boy—his grandson,
 perhaps—sits away from him, facing
 away, back turned, chairback separating
 them, watching, involved
 in the immediate present.

49.

More irony: Don't walk away,
 you are warned, don't get in too deep.

It's deadly, this half-way stance.
 You feel only half-used, half-wrecked,

and would complain
 but are distracted by a pretty picture

of a tropical island, and then a plea
 for lenient judgment from someone who

asserts that the "equilibrium"
 is not "easy to achieve."

Eyes framed by the letter-mail slot
 in a door stare in fear.

“I think there’s a couple of levels where it’s just bizarre.”
Of course, there are no levels.

Who said this anyway?
But then, what does it matter

who’s speaking? All that matters is finding
a way to proceed.

50.

There’s already so much. In the world,
I mean, in the world. Far beyond

sufficiency, way past surfeit.
Imagine what’s been lost. Imagine

What we have, now imagine
What’s been lost. It all adds up

to glut, enough to block rain gutters
and sink drains, sewer pipes

and wind pipes, and all manner of passageway,
small or tall. Imagine what we have.

Now imagine what’s been lost.

51.

Drusky vs. God

A picture of a clown. Clay don't know
who it is, but you might. Juxtaposed

with his comic grimace, a quotation:
"For me life has no more meaning."

The effect is confusing, unclear.
Not disjunctive, exactly,

but not junctive, either. It doesn't matter
if ours is an empire of signs, an empire

of the senses, or an empire of the senseless
(though the last comes savagely, sadly closest),

bad feeling predominates,
and you can call it what you like.

Still, there is no reason
why you should feel responsible,

the policy-makers argue,
Sympathetic—Yes! Guilty—No!

Is that what the good doctor feels

wheeling that blurry woman into Emergency?

She looks capable— Yes! Feeling— No!
But it's hard to tell from a photograph

in a newspaper. If we follow the story
to its conclusion, however, we learn

that in the matter of Drusky versus God,
God has won.

Don't fuck with the Lord,
I guess, is the moral of that story.

Despite the good doctor's training,
the woman (Drusky) became increasingly blurry,

until disintegrating into tiny dots of light
and shade. If it's any comfort,

she'll be recycled.
The doctor feels no guilt.

52.

This should be a headline:
Love supply narrow/ Love supply narrow/
repeated like that, twice,

as an Emergency Message.

Almost everyone would smile knowingly,
in complete agreement, even those

in charge of nations,
recognizing a truly universal dilemma.

No one's got enough.

"Sure is, pal," we could sigh collectively,

"tell me about it." Then we'd go back to eating
glass, grinding it fine before swallowing,

not because it's pleasant, but because
it's paid work.

53.

I've been told there are only two ways:
but this strikes me as a really narrow

view, especially as my bright friends
inform me our problem is that we're overwhelmed

with choices. Therein lies the real dilemma:
the multitude of really appealing *lifestyle*

options. Create the situation, I was told

& this suggestion, planted like a seed

in my hitherto barren mind, seemed
about to germinate, when it was rather severely

qualified: and this is love, I was told
(in brackets). I was already thrown

for a loop, but the next two lines
nearly ruined me. See, all I'd ever understood

about love was that like, well, like anything
else, it takes *planning* and *commitment*.

(I can show you a pie chart which demonstrates
really sensibly how to go about it. You want

7.6% consumer products, 18.3% financial
services, hell, I'd just send you a copy, but)

getting back to what I was told: the problem
with creating the situation, or avoiding it,

like the man said, is that
both options have drawbacks.

54.

“We’re all sad,” she added,

referring to the steering-committee members.

I agreed, though I had no idea who she was,
nor even what a steering-committee was.

She spoke the truth, regardless,
an astonishing gift.

55.

Newspaper picture no.1

If you find yourself possessed by moral ambiguities,
you're probably not alone.

Look at the man with the bandana around
his head. He's got a track suit top on,

and carries a rifle.

Behind him everything's burning.

Now, we don't know if he's responsible
for the fire,

nor if he's shot anybody
who didn't deserve it.

But to be in those circumstances at all,
taking sides,

as he's so clearly doing— well
if that don't speak volumes.

56.

Chorus 1.2

If you're beginning to yawn
(covering your mouth I'm sure)

shift in your seat, and wonder
how long this might go on,

I have two comments put aside,
just for you, and I'll let you have both of 'em

right now. The first is from an official:
“I don't have a clear idea how long it will take.”

The other is by way of an apology:
This is not how it was supposed to be.

The source here remains anonymous
for fear of reprisals.

57.

Newspaper picture no.2

*We value our clients so highly, we surround them
with a spaceframe cage.*

I'm not making this up. They do.
The clients are supposed to be thankful,

and I expect they are. I guess
they want to be in a cage. They don't understand

(more likely, don't care) they're not being protected,
but imprisoned; more precisely, banked.

The picture really tells the story: A uniformed
guard stands watch over thousands

of people penned in like animals, the invisible
cage encircling them. They are highly valued.

Apparently there was some kind of insurrection,
but happily the government countered

by declaring a state of emergency,
deploying troops to keep the peace

(they're giving it a chance) and guard
power generators and oil installations.

So power will continue to be generated,

thank God, and we'll continue to be oiled.

A familiar image comes to mind. A masked man
in camouflage holding an automatic rifle,

escorts a woman in hijab out of the frame.
Someone's shouting annoyingly out in

the street: The conspiracy 'is not as complicated
as you think.' But I don't think about it

at all, I just go on reading incoming reports.
Three human heads were later seen

on the road with two bodies nearby, their
hearts and livers cut out. I first think,

"We'll let them handle everything," not wanting
to interfere in what is obviously very difficult

work. Though I can't help but wonder:
where's the other body?

58.

Newspaper picture no.3

One of the men is white, balding, wearing
a t-shirt. He has his hand on the chest

of a pygmy, and seems to be smiling.
He's won some kind of moral victory.

The pygmy, black, shirtless, leans his head
on the shoulder of another man; looks

gratefully up at him. The man is also black,
and wears a shirt and tie. He's smiling brightly,

but he's looking somewhere else. He holds
his arm up, unable to bring it down around

the other men. The pygmy, in the middle,
embraces both men firmly. The white man,

as I've said, has his hand on the pygmy's chest.
This gesture remains enigmatic. Scientists

are called in to give their indisputable opinions.
We're informed there is a medical explanation

for their problem. For the moment, the whole
episode remains mysterious.

59.

You may think you've had enough
of bad news. Well, sorry for you, my friend,

I have more bad news for you.
They've cut off his ears.

This is their idea of fun,
an attempt at truly savage irony.

The man they held hostage for months,
the great musician and composer, is free,

but earless. Admittedly,
we don't know all the details, and feel

it would be important to get the facts.
There's a good deal of piffle here, and pelf,

and cant. The fear is that in the face
of this, truly important messages are lost,

but I doubt it.
I don't believe in important messages.

There are no important messages,
just more of the same.

What's important is fundamental
& it isn't messaged.

This idea applies when you want to look at art:
a button-activated motor rolls out the family's collection

of European masterpieces on rods.
 This could cause you to lose your footing,

miss your chair, or cry conspiracy. Ask your source.
 “The FBI is heavily involved,” said the source.

What’s important is fundamental.
 The great musician is free.

60.

Clay perches in a deck chair, book open,
 terrycloth hat shielding his eyes.

He looks like an insect, but huge,
 fleshy. Earlier he read the paper,

but it makes no difference.
 Even the story about Fran Abel,

a farmer who lives across the river
 from the plant, who said she tasted

“that metallic taste”, and had a poodle
 born with no eyes.

61.

Most of this would only be said
on the condition of anonymity or occlusion.

In the case of occlusion, however,
some bafflement resulted. “What do we do then?”

one Pentagon official asked yesterday.
His advisers quickly showed him pictures

of laptop computers and lawn mowers
which they’d extracted from their briefcases.

He understood the overt significance of the images
and was instantly pacified.

“I feel safe here,” he said. “Now that we understand
what happened. They test all the time

and keep us informed.” Though he looked
a bit glazed, the official’s official line was accepted.

At this point, the performance was more than
an hour old.

62.

If the onlookers’ attention is wandering
we divert them by displaying art.

The man in the photo is not holding his nose,
Though he appears to be.

He's trying not to breathe
all over the very valuable statue he's examining.

We've provided him pictures of the statue
In its original form.

This will keep him occupied
while we, in turn, study him.

63.

This acrobat's not interested in existential questions.
He's balanced on his hands,

ankles behind his head, relaxed smile on,
doing his work.

Someone has asked of the heart,
why do you pump blood, pump blood?

What a question! says the acrobat, laughing.
He knows

he has to twist for peanuts.
Everything else

is conjecture, bullhonk, theory.

64.

View from a Basement 1.2

I'm in the boiler room, to be precise.
A single light bulb burns above me.

It gives of plenty of light for my purposes.
The floor is concrete, chipped and pocked.

Next to me are not one, but two, cat boxes.
Boxes of sand for the cats, four of them,

to do their business in. Also keeping me company
down here are heaps of old shoes and boots,

cardboard boxes, disused skis, discarded wood
scraps and refuse of all sorts. I've yet to see

an actual cat, but no doubt one will be along
anytime now. Unless my presence here

disturbs them. They'll have to shit somewhere
else while I do my dirty business here instead.

I can hear a samba playing in the other room.

It's sweet and lively, and of another world.

65.

In the boardroom, a respectable, and appropriately threatening-looking bunch of cannibals

are airing doubts about the advisability of investing in a project like this one. "This is pretty

lightweight compared to the things we usually have to deal with," says one. You won't get

any protest out of me, though I suspect they don't know their assets from their elbows.

I feel obliged to enter a plea of guilty, of course, but... May I begin again?

One of the members, a snake-eyed blonde with silicone amendments, leans forward

to highlight her investment. But it doesn't fit in with our mandate, she coos, and beats

her eyelashes. I get Death. Or, put another way, a life sentence, abridged version.

66.

I've complained before that imprecision
plagues me, and nothing's changed.

Allow me to demonstrate.
Picture a tree. Arbor, I say.

Picture a horse. Equos, I say. Picture etc.
Etc., I say. It's the last part that kills me,

But not before I'm rescued from obscurity
by a final breakthrough.

It's a diagram I've been working on:
three sheets of paper with two strips

of metal foil interleaved between them
and rolled into a cylinder.

Figure 26.12a I call it,
and it goes quite a way toward

justifying my work thus far.
So thanks. I guess I'll stop here.

(Light fades)

67.

It's dark again, but I'm unable to stop
seeing with my eyes, tasting salt, mucking around

with fingerprint. Any thoughts I have slip away,
find smooth passage into the ether, from nothing

to near-formulation, to nothing,
like black watersnakes upstream in darkness—

No, nothing like that.

Trumpets and bells

and hammered strings; this body wracked, dry.

If only! If only!

Once more the space in me closed and—

The space in me closed and— Light

until the end.

68.

The theme of the past few years

has been retreat—maybe more

than a few years. But not retreat,

exactly. More like recoil. (I grope for words.)

It's an involuntary action, reflexive.
More like collapse. A collapse inward.

But still you do your work: you're helped
into the jacket which buckles up the back,

slung upside-down from the ceiling,
and have three minutes,

give-or-take, in which to free yourself.
This part is easy.

What happens after?

69.

One fear is that you will not rise
from the ashes transformed

into something glorious, but will crawl
from the wreckage a toad or a beetle.

Or will not crawl at all, but stay
for good where you are, tasting ashes,

the candle gone out,

the crowd gone home.

70.

Memo to Self 1.2

You don't want to do any of it.
It doesn't just happen, it's not easy,

none of it. You have to force it
every time, make it happen. So what

is the motivation? It's hardly desire, though
there may be a faint echo of desire

left somewhere in there;
more likely it's just a grim parody.

It's not satisfying: at best
it's only momentarily distracting,

if at all.

It's a relief sometimes, that's more like it;

letting off steam, not just sitting,
watching the clock.

A break between rests, really.
You haven't convinced yourself

that it means something, or anything like that.
You don't have any choice, either,

that's the bottom line.

The really crazy part

is that sometimes all the weight vanishes,
and you forget for a moment.

But you'll catch yourself
before long and remember

that it can't last, that this is not really you,
not really how you, y'know, feel.

Just that for a moment
you got a little ahead of yourself.

71.

The defeated gather in small groups
at the foot of the mountain.

In company they find comfort,
but they do not recognize one another.

Each one takes solace in the fact
that no one knows what they know.

72.

Dream no.2

Beginning before you were born, or not
beginning, just wait and see. The fossil

record shows what's possible. That is,
what was possible but has become

improbable, if not impossible. The fossil
record shows what's impossible, then.

There are other records. If you can find
consolation in this, please do so, feel free.

Be my guest. The important thing
is to arrange for some way of going

forward, of hitching a latch
to the next second, word, breath.

Can you hear me
hyperventilating in my eagerness?

Or maybe it's fear:
what happens if you can't

latch on to the next second?

Look, it's like this:

there was an accident,
or an incident, perhaps I misheard.

In any event something
has to account for the constraints

under which I labour
in my eagerness

(or, rather, fear)—
But it's not me alone,

I don't flatter myself
as much as that.

It must be a collective—
what did I say?—coming apart

at the seams—was that it? No.
But it'll do, it's fresh nonetheless.

Before coming apart at the seams.
Collectively. That's approaching it.

So, an accounting for the urgency.
An accounting based on reasonable grounds.

Can such be had?

Well, there are the dead and wounded
to care for. Let's try that again.

There are the dead, and then
there are the wounded to care for.

But that's not my job. I'm still trying
to care for the living.

For the unwounded, I mean.
No. The opposite. It is my job,

I care for the wounded. Full time.
Which makes time a consideration,

hours in the day and all that.
Hours in the day.

73.

Whatever gets you from here to there,
or there to here, it's all the same

in the end. Point A to point B.
Earlier I employed a metaphor—

a subway rider, I wrote, taking hold.
It seemed useful at the time,

or at the very least, served its purpose.
But all in all, if things go according to plan,

I'm done with that. Metaphors and such.
They never really work. For me, I mean.

I speak for no one else, except the collective,
who've chosen me to represent them,

naturally. I remember nothing of it,
naturally, but there you are.

I've assembled one or two little machines,
so to speak, expressly for the purpose,

tinkering away in the basement;
squirt of oil, a little fine tuning,

flip the switch and it lurches and sputters
and—it's too painful to describe.

Better to just leave that be.

74.

One foot in front of the other
is what I'm trying to say. I guess

what I mean is that everything you need
is here; it's just waiting for you baby.

I know you know, deep down
in the sunken, roiling pit, that quagmire,

the impossible geometry that describes
your heart, seat of all true knowledge

(by which I mean: as if—insensate, blind
juice-pumping muscle, more like—)

I know you know it's true.
Milk and honey I'm talking. Heaven

on earth.

75.

I may have given up on Clay, too.
Twice. Once in the normal way,

which is to say, abandoned him,
and once in a novel form—I simply let him

disintegrate. The second way is easier
and more fun to watch.

76.

All this not knowing; you can't let it stop
you. It begins to work its magic

in strange places, brilliant corners,
increasingly—until you might wonder

if it's not the blank patches,
the great blankness, that's holding things together,

and not the available sensual evidence.
If that is the case, then we should stop

talking, stop looking, stop trying
to pronounce it just so.

77.

The defeated played basketball in the afternoon,
until the weather changed.

The air pressure dropped, one of them
left (the one who'd been most entertaining,

trying to score while wearing
a plastic bag over his face)

and the ones left behind agreed
they felt oppressed by something

in the air, or in the spiritlessness
of the age. That night they watched TV.

One fell sick, one complained of loneliness,
one went home without so much

as a by-your-leave.

78.

Boredom

In the front yard there are stones;
there are stones in the front yard.

In the back yard there are stones;
there are stones in the back yard.

79.

Gut-wrenching misery seems to be the norm,
part of the decor, like background music

or wallpaper. But you don't want to speak

to this point directly; if you did
you'd risk losing sight of your subject,
your food, your paper, your assembling
and dissembling self.

80.

Softly now, slowly now, go on.
Stop scratching, stop twitching,
face front and pay attention.
We cannot do this without your help.
You beautiful creature: you beautiful,
clear-eyed, far-seeing, friend.

81.

What do you know about suffering?
This has got to be a favorite phrase
down here on earth
amongst the kings and queens
of hard luck. If only you knew

how good you had it.

82.

It's astonishing, really, the high speed
at which it all takes place. Or

it's not astonishing—it comes
to the same thing. This is equally true

for the enormous length of time
it seems to take. An eternity, really.

It takes forever to pass, or as close as we'll get
to forever, which is as close as anyone gets:

A glimpse.

In the meantime there are convictions,
or the lack of them; the capacity for pleasure,

or failing that, suffering, or failing that,
pleasure. What else? Entropy, I guess,

a certain sense of disintegration.

There were intimations, as far back

as twenty years ago, maybe more.

And this is interesting: the more you add

toward completing the picture,
the more clearly it becomes

a picture of

the more clearly it becomes

the more

83.

Modern Life (List no.1)

There are some great things,
and there are some not-so-great things,

though context accounts for a lot of it,
as do subjectivity, judgement calls,

taste, cultural relativity, time
and spatial relativity, weather,

biochemistry (esp. neurochemistry),
factors, vectors and proectors,

the media, family, musical influences,
power, social stability, proximity

to toxic waste dumps, halitosis, green spaces,
disaster shows, graft and kickbacks,

attitudes towards art, performance,
prescriptive philosophy, the medical establishment,

test scores, favorite foods, deep time,
a sense of place, nationalism,

adultery, allergies, tendencies,
habits, sleep patterns, smoking

vs. non-smoking, histories of mental illness,
social acclimatization, future-shock,

the stock market, the bond market,
flea markets, available parking space,

infant mortality rates, phases of the moon,
drug use, literacy, exposure to other cultures,

fashion, time spent in prison, sex drive,
gasoline prices, computer literacy, delusion,

floods, cults, history,
intimacy issues, number of journal & magazine subscriptions,

immigrant/non-immigrant status,
friction, sun-spots, body-image,

activism, fighting, gender,
marital status, the War on Drugs,

helplessness, spices, keys,
turning points, watersheds, the spectrum,

opinions, the spectrum of opinions,
folksongs, idleness, wangling,

DIY, interjections, father-figures,
lava, aging, adjectives, socialism,

astringency, timing, power-lunches,
ephemera, heartbreak, clock radios,

accuracy, shinsplints, maize,
modern design, escapism, toreadors,

the big picture, artifacts, clay,
global warming, puppy love, distance,

outlooks, orthodontics, formal wear,
the ghetto, inventions, steam,

alienation, cooperation, gel,
skin, sprouts, warmth,

confluence, hot springs, aerodynamics,
puppetry, ritual, silence,

skittishness, eyewear, containers,

cursing, light, ambiance,

rhumba, chocolate, plainclothes policemen,
cutlery, warfare, emptiness,

prayer, boardgames, perfume,
bread, cogency, herbalists,

bloodclots, law, thorns,
amphitheatres, seeds, manuals,

porphyry, tide pools, smoke,
stroking, ornamentation, uncertainty,

development, mitigating factors, size,
porcelain, excuses, the body,

bodies, antibodies, human rights,
braces, junk mail, peevishness,

features, affectlessness, perversity,
ethnocentrism, biodegradable substances,

the tundra, expiration dates, fascination,
substances, strata, oil,

limits, form & function, multimillionaires,
the great unwashed, the sea of love,

non-partisan politics, fur, throwing,
stability, Argonauts, ratiocination,

advocacy, group sex, watermarks,
clean sheets, grit, vocalists,

phantoms, showtunes, particles,
stylistics, rope bridges, mistaken identities,

ochre, gene therapy, supermarkets,
collusion, by-products, idiocy,

headgear, tribal war, ease,
crayfish, smelling salts, personality,

acquisitiveness, population growth, master classes,
snakeoil, herpes, gratuitous violence,

a glimmer of hope, self-service, aimlessness,
continents, articles, sharps & flats,

tin whistles, canned goods, twins,
papermills, waterwheels, pyrotechnics,

apoplexy, derivations, kites,
windswept piers, microphones, ganja,

sentimentality, stalking, penance,
closure, antihistamines, cyberpunk,

coherence, second cousins, getting down,
nylon, credit, forensic science,

paramilitaries, humour, occidentals,
the service industry, canteens, overdrive,

dams, horseracing, pianos,
lost treasure, toffuti, calculus,

charm, ignorance, voyeurism,
perpendiculars, the way home, forced retirement,

valves, evensong, mitochondria,
somnambulism, case histories, area codes,

porters, entertainment, degree zero,
Norsemen, psoriasis, pipsqueaks,

haze, entourages, body doubles,
vetiver, couscous, divorce,

Halloween, reflection, arrears,
whiplash, pale riders, sobriquets,

Personalism, quotas, disinformation,
altitude sickness, horse-sense, shockwaves,

mammals, tire-swings, photogravure,
blatant lies, cataclysms, the green, green, grass,

filth, papier maché, maps,
interlocuters, fiddling, plexiglass,

dilettantism, hypersensitivity, gravity,

noise, harmony, whiteness,

gravitas, pricks, the stations of the cross,
high rollers, parables, civilization,

doorways, cowls, frustration,
bone, shelter, anorexia nervosa,

parsnips, anhedonia, the driven snow,
rattlebags, a stone's throw, Xanadu,

nectar, parabolas, the decathalon,
fast women, joysticks, family time,

corpulence, transgenders, wind-tunnels,
death or glory, plenti-paks, jacks of all trades,

wine, long-horned sheep, Africa,
bifocals, might, aid,

clusterbombs, herds, diffidence,
arcane knowledge, the way out, happiness,

breaded cutlets, do-right men, pleonasm,
pelf, geriatrics, the ER,

pleasure zones, paint, matriculation,
fecundity, team sports, still lifes,

pandemonium, waiting, excellence,
strength in numbers, geeks, plaster casts,

mold, eschatology, anal fixations,
brass, details, fever,

the journey of a lifetime, sales, extinction,
perseverance, Ritalin, understanding,

faith, paint-by-numbers, sapsuckers,
mansions, zoetrope, squaws,

contrast, origins, names,
bile, scorched-earth policy, happenstance,

margueritas, substitutions, ape-shit,
gargoyles, bread, the French,

rarity, stoicism, minutiae,
harbourmasters, elves, Burkina Fasso,

intentions, scale, suicide bombers,
the jungle, impertinence, gross misconduct,

wheat, chaff, hypotheses,
the frame of things, particularity, softball,

bacteria, a bird in the hand, telos,
more, hingedness, rugburns,

going steady, do-hickeys, intransigence,
plaintiveness, that high lonesome sound,

the unknown, records, samurai,
transparency, high-wire acts, aspartame,

old-time music, panels, concomittance,
Ephesus, telescopes, backwardness,

italics, pundits, free goods,
levees, notariety, inclusiveness,

free-range chicken, shock, ice,
shame, palpitations, epilepsy,

playtime, cannibalism, my enemy's enemy,
obfuscation, subfusc, bipolar disorder,

all-you-can-eat, descendants, desire,
morbidity, fame, estrogen,

news anchors, the Okeefenokee swamp, hardship,
house-nigger, bifurcation, red,

crinoline, territory, patent laws,
rank, foolishness, definitions,

karma, Sagittarius, focal length,
in utero, stones in my passway, hi-fidelity,

candied yams, in vitro, dishwater,
soft soap, spectroscopy, wordplay,

tesseract, Michaelmas, shortsightedness,

voodoo, love-dolls, range,

scope, resilience, growth,
townhouses, the love of God, memento mori,

sharp pains, card tricks, elephantitis,
bereavement, blood alcohol levels, growing up fast,

the life of Reilly, snafu, gentlemen,
candlelight, coincidence, doilies,

motors, work, wrong-headedness,
temptation, how long you can hold your breath, storyboards,

affectations, laments, time past,
polio, the naked eye, paddocks,

grease, tinfoil, bitterness,
justice, the procurement of organs, sweetmeats,

grandeur, delusions of grandeur, Seville,
rictuses, borrowing, ankle bracelets,

brackets, soldering iron, flesh-coloured stockings,
the breaking point, percentages, strings,

change, dodecahedrons, polyvalence,
musicology, ether, ore,

banks, tickets, a flourish,
masks, passwords, ladders,

needlepoint, evisceration, ridicule,
toys, sobriety, untold millions,

verisimilitude, parks, love-seats,
ferns, ennui, my condition,

photographic memory, perfect pitch, feebleness,
largesse, venus envy, manga,

okra, turtlenecks, deck chairs,
lust, triads, overseers,

pirates, diet, art (high and low),
beltways, commercials, bankruptcy,

bread and circuses, circuitousness,
abject despair, formaldehyde, response time,

defenestration, bandages.

84.

Public Speaking

Modern life is tiring and boring and sad,
but also fun, if you approach it correctly.

This is an indisputable truth, as evidenced

or “brought home” by the colossal waste

of public love in all the wrong places.

So it is, and so it shall be, Selah.

Keeping my strong opinions to my chest,

I’ll say only EASE AND SEKKLE!

CEASE AND SEKKLE! NOW COME AGAIN!

(music begins) I’ll say only through

the proliferation of a system of thought

based solely and exclusively upon the strictures

of obvious reasonableness,

which all may recognize without too much effort,

and begin to prosper from immediately,

can we begin to find our way forward.

85.

Freight (List no.2)

Also: candlesticks, gratitude,

pestles, reverse, quotidian,

nail, juncture, acetaminophen,

Mylar, proportion, schisms,

height, junkbonds, garbage,
paint thinner, apathy, eggshells,

salt, fresh air, fluid,
consciousness, *pets de putain*, shelter,

Bahrain, birdcalls, crying,
flux, dry ice, cutting boards,

sense, discernment, stickiness,
chopsticks, tentacles, print,

mulch, gore, insulation,
fluff, sheetmetal, mines,

give-and-take, schizophrenia, compass,
help, chance, phyla,

stamens, cheesecloth, hammocks,
choppers, risk, difference,

deference, outcasts, castaways,
strays, confetti, interest,

social diseases, *la littérature lu avec une main*,
pork, festivities, bonsai,

Pac-man, cheating, overdrafts,
sexual jealousy, hammerhead sharks, anemia,

chowder, second thoughts, mailmen,
rust, rape, hindsight, moss,

drywall, omnipresence, contiguity,
scaffolding, folding, scarves,

scrapes, plates, percussion,
tin roofs, heatwaves, gastrointestinal trouble,

discomfort, cushions, cedar,
études, spanking, crusts,

welfare, starkness, flippancy,
hospitals, shortbread, costumes,

costume drama, liturgy, the ace of spades,
bandaleros, hollyhock, buckles,

hair, pliancy, Bullwinkle,
ascendency, short shrift, piledrivers,

screwdrivers, backseat drivers, woods,
the deep end, interiors, house plants,

bicycles, mobility, putrefaction,
short-lived moments of joy, crap, fire fighters,

solubility, makeup, hardware,
ovens, shyness, static,

lifelines, EEG's, head games,

average weight, affirmatives, place,

poetics, negatives, connectedness,
restitution, rest assured, the right wing,

docks, mentalism, silver spoons,
ague, haplessness, rutting,

cowards, squeezing, faces,
ambivalence, seasonal work, mainlining,

USMC, interface, purpose,
whirling dervishes, ecstasy, pleas,

cardinals, gold, squirming,
bionics, cantankerousness, evasion,

playmates, surreptitiousness, paleontology,
Greece, arrowheads, asylum,

perpendicularity, acetate, gorgeousness,
paper, foreign lands, the truth,

high spirits, botulism, maniacs,
cunnilingus, taps, improvements,

cables, forward, spigots,
wicca, tone, repetition,

you, halfway, colour,
binding, grasp, acres,

bends, gases, poppycock,
belfries, rope-chains, salami,

walking, silliness, buoancy,
capibara, milk, felt,

burning, seizures, hold,
others, savagery, proof,

advantages, healing, gimcrack,
wiseguys, prime, real estate,

falsehoods, aches, sharing,
washing, watches, failure,

gigantisaurus, abundance, crowding,
instability, fervour, trips,

balconies, impotence, gasping,
the straw that broke the camel's back, surfing,

jazz messengers, accountability, twelve-tone music,
flour, industry, comportment,

statuesque, suspension, flesh,
runts, palpating, Jell-O,

realization, countenance, zephyr,
undulation, wavelengths, operatives,

erstwhile, needfulness, the liver,
Xenophon, blackface, soma,

manna, the Rock of Gibraltar, handiwork,
genocide, blanching, process,

diagrams, wolf's bane, saxifrage,
archeopterix, nobility, parasitic idleness,

tumors, redundancy, awe,
gefiltafish, screwtops, lace,

black pepper, boxes, interstices,
dwarves, change, Zion,

collaboration, precedents, flans,
precautionary measures, conviviality, distrust,

game, tea, buckets of rain,
seaweed, sushi, supernovas,

revision, insurrection, mechanical engineering,
bondage, hotplates, glove-saves,

hotpants, blather, asceticism,
getting it wrong, Oppenheimer, weissenheimer,

dude ranches, beveled edges, switchbacks,
Shinto, family trees, yoghurt,

Leviticus, Angkor Wat, no man's land,

counters, traffic, stabilizers,

emulsifiers, creosote, sadness,
terminals, eyesores, button-down collars,

Ephesians, gambling, tit for tat,
crepes, glycerine, efflorescence,

shamans, eggs, playing along,
inbreeding, fountains, cider,

triumvirates, bales, coke,
etcetera, plastic bags, mendacity,

toolsheds, gems, savvy,
hearths, butterflies, rambunctiousness,

certitude, estimates, concubines,
rascals, oceans, April,

whisper, etiquette, Orfeo,
idealism, breakdancing, copulation,

boredom, kingdom, haste,
departures, custard, fools,

gooseberrys, delight, sanguinity,
vents, duration, arrangements,

interrelatedness, quality, time travel,
as the crow flies, housebound, carjacking,

freight, Plantagenet, self-control,
respiration, umpire, occult lucidity,

logic, redolence, chiefs,
opium, Nantucket, mail,

bowling pins, clothespins, ask me,
dominoes, bull whips, the tooth fairy,

crimes of passion, alienation, keyboards,
black, foliage, odour, darts,

settlers, lighting towers, headphones,
window wipers, fuselage, up escalators,

stupid questions, so be it, fender bender,
basically, passageway, golf,

hyperbole, paste, Babylon,
the cliffs of Dover, wrought iron, gift wrapping,

the twelve articles, night vision, a desert rose,
arachnids, shoo-fly pie, porcine,

twaddle, such-and-such, screwface,
injustice, Smokey the Bear, bag of bones,

heatwave, drama, fusili,
breakfast, entertainers, reflex,

dopamine, allusion, bent,

cobblestones, refuge, upside-down,

butcher, short, meticulous,
clubwear, sh-pants, burger,

cupcake, density, fabulation,
dreamtime, BC, woe is me,

fatty acids, tubularity, frankincense,
glory, deprivation, birch,

llamas, Copernicus, disconsolateness,
cloaking devices, lees, sojourn,

right this way, cancer, hors d'oeuvres,
semolina, the right to bear arms, quixotic,

affirmation, lucidity, quiddity,
serendipity, all for one and one for all,

one fell swoop, snowboards, fey,
donkeys, Walkmans, toothpaste,

revulsion, fuck, republic,
castigate, chairs, Shakers,

poplin, muezzin, replies,
liquidation, antiphony, bounce back,

sweatshops, behind-the-scenes, sorbet,
pell-mell, a dog's age, hot potato,

summa cum laude, burping, first and foremost,
precision, casualties, suede,

malls, dents, gladiolas,
effigies, shorthand, switchblades,

skywriting, dip, rote,
antithesis, in a dark wood, Plato to NATO,

hopscotch, turbines, *c'est magnifique*,
assertiveness, pulchritude, onus,

bills, squeegees, telecommunications,
ottomans, inventory, direction,

travel plans, mercury, divorce,
consequence, mandates, on the town,

on the rise, on the up and up, blessing,
knockers, sunup, hasps,

coagulation, yearning, snails,
keepsakes, shackles, yobs,

dubiousness, fairplay, hemlines,
the rings of Saturn, boiling, teak,

burrs, flapping, justification,
guilt, Urdu, gonhorrea,

plasma, do re mi, blind man's buff,
skinny bones, kelp, vaseline,

mollification, killing, antiquation,
insurance, blemishes, fire hazards,

pool, slamming, into the great unknown,
yore, Schubert, Ipswich,

runniness, pauses, setting right,
imposition, interpolation, pollination,

dancing, dancing, dancing,
vacant lots, jam, multiplying,

sons of bitches, meantime, the black market,
looks which are deceiving, what you see is what you get,

heaps, condors, evenness,
barley, blame, Shadrach,

wind, memory, houses,
flight.

86.

I'm off today. Yesterday
was so different. I mean

no different. Life is a thing of beauty
and a joy forever. Is there an echo

in here? Resulting in astonishment.
Neither true nor untrue; at its heart

blank. But for these misgivings.
And a strange sense of entitlement

which dogs me. For what, for which;
which persists, what for?

Clay is plagued by these selfsame
questions; his bafflement is profound,

as is his joylessness which remains
unpunctured.

87.

Keeping it all in your head isn't easy,
but it's the trick. There's bound to be leakage,

spillage, crossover, crosspollination.
You can't count on the Laws of Nature

to see you through. Or is that Loss
of Nature. I get mixed up. Clay too.

He says it's something to do with intake
and outflow mechanisms,

and flux.

88.

It's time to stop lying. All the lying
has got to stop. You know exactly

what I mean, don't look at me like that,
with those baleful eyes, all blinking

incomprehension. It's as clear as day
what I mean.

What I mean?

That's utterly beside the point.

The point being that you have to be here,
like it or not; you have to do this—

though if you follow that line of thinking,
you're finished. If you pick up the thread,

you're finished. If you start
by unpacking everything, you're through.

If you expect the royal treatment, ditto.

If you think you can tough it out,

you're finished also. Frightened
because you're alone? Finished.

Inferiority complex? You're done for.
Thinking of moving? You're finished.

But if you stay put, you're finished too.
If you're a renegade, you're done.

Doubling back? You're done. Living off
beans and rice? You're finished.

Taking kickbacks? You're finished.
Changing your look? You're through.

Waiting for that call? You're finished.
If you let the cat out of the bag, bet against the odds,

or have any secrets at all,
you're finished.

You can sit up and pay attention,
change your mind about everything,

or just keep rolling along.

I guess I miscalculated. Grossly.
It's going to take all the time I have,

and then some. The basic information
is still coming in; I mean the *raw data*.

We've only just begun to scratch the surface,
and already... but you see what I mean.

We're in this together, after all.
It couldn't be any other way. And then

there's all the unravelling
of the completed product.

There were always the doubters, the skeptics.
But increasingly it becomes evident to everyone

that much of the original work, the groundwork,
the *foundational stuff*, simply doesn't hold up.

This can't be ignored, now
that we've come this far.

And there's so much at stake.
Then there are the usual problems

with the new material, naturally.
But this is expected. In unguarded moments

some of us are liable to go out
on a limb. And there are times

when this results in *really major breakthroughs*.
All kinds of new discoveries

have occurred due to this sort of *galloping*
enthusiasm. But these are, of course, the exceptions.

More often than not, everything goes
kaput, and then we're forced to play

catch-up, for a time.

Accidents happen. This simple truth

notwithstanding, I take full responsibility
for my actions, and any inconvenience caused

to you or your families.

90.

Dissatisfaction dictates proceeding
in a certain vein. That vein turns out

invariably to be dissatisfying.

This is no surprise, and doesn't preclude the obvious

next step of starting anew, in yet

another vein. An auspicious beginning

deteriorates (so it seems)
very rapidly

into some vaguely dissatisfying formulation.
We turn elsewhere for comfort, not easy

to come by. Find some, don't find some,
it doesn't matter: a short time later,

circumstances have reverted to what they were
previously.

91.

The defeated sat down to dinner
together. Introductions were performed
for the benefit of new arrivals.

92.

We never thought we'd make it.
Of course, we haven't, so it would still
be a surprise.

93.

Let the record show:

Winding paths without order

Contentious claims to truth

The heavy-hearted gathering posies

An outthrust hand

Ascencion

94.

Reveal nothing. Share nothing.

Keep a second self

indoors, in dim light, at room temperature.

Send the first out to do the rounds,

take your place at table,

fill in the blanks.

Don't give

the game away.

95.

Everything's changed—that's for sure,
but whether for better or for worse,

you're in no position to tell.

The smell of smoke assails you:

What's burned down? Where's the fire?

96.

Conflicting information, conflicting disinformation,
seem to characterize the proceedings.

Say one thing and invariably something else
will come along and take its place.

Supplant it. You're forced to revise, correct,
addend, qualify and otherwise undo

what you've done. What can be undone.

What's funny is that you begin with everything,

all the answers, nothing's subject

to doubt. (But is this really true?)

If you're lucky you finish the same way.
It's all there before you, there's no denying,

no explaining, nothing complicated.
This is true.

So then what happens?

What can be undone. This is another problem.
Leave a thing long enough, any one way,

and its parts seem to fuse together
so that it becomes immobile,

utterly familiar, utterly alien.

97.

I've lost it, lost the thread. If ever
there was a thread to begin with.

(You could see that coming, I'll bet).
If you stop and look around,

what do you see? Probably something
familiar; familiar surroundings. Impenetrable,

opaque. But not mysterious.
What happens then? The usual

questions begin to pile up,
one after the other, so fast

you can't follow and lose track
quickly, let them evaporate. Smile,

take a deep breath, relax
that pained expression. Do not

allow yourself to be overcome.
Order must be restored.

Straighten the papers in your hands,
wipe the tabletop, sit straight.

Does this help?

98.

After stopping and stopping and stopping
I think I've finally found some way to start,

today. A combination of things
have brought me here. Nostalgia

allows me to fit comfortably into

a place I've been before, and not feel
like I'm trespassing. And then
there's the pull toward the possibility
that something will be elucidated,
captured before it flies, slipped under
the microscope for closer inspection.
And of course the chance to turn away.

99.

It was just one of those days. There was a fire
at the bottom of my street,
and walking back from spectating
with dozens of others, I saw
out of the corner of my eye
a light fixture, by someone's front door,
drop off and dangle from its wires.
Just like that. No explanation,
no reaction other than my witnessing
the incident. And with the air full of smoke
I wondered if maybe this was really it,

if light fixtures would begin dropping
off houses one by one, then bricks begin
to crumble...

100.

What is it that feeds us? Something must.
We're still here, and couldn't have survived
on need alone.

101.

When thinking stops! What was I thinking?
I guess I meant when the babble quietens
and your position clarifies like a day dawning;
it dawns upon you, you are pulled taut,
distended, resonating.
That's what you get, you can almost
you can almost

102.

I want I want I want I want I want
I want I want I want I want I want

For want for want for want for want for want
for want for want for want for want for want

103.

Can we start with a question? Can we?
It's just— There's so much that's been forgotten,
so much missing.

104.

If only there didn't have to be any art
or method in it; we could just go about
our brutal, bloody business without heed,
clubbing each other to death, or nursing our wounds
if we survived; dozing in the sun, shivering
in the cold. Not a thought for what happens

next, just ACTION or rest, ACTION or rest.

But this, what we do, this is craziness.

105.

I've read little, understood less, and remember
almost nothing.

106.

You can try to fill your days with books,
with music, with money,

*but if you have not love, you are as sounding brass
or chiming cymbal,*

you are nothing.

107.

My love, who asked, if I was a real writer,
did I compile lists of words

For the sheer pleasure of it?

108.

If you listen long enough,
everything becomes harmony.

Notes on Plundered Material

Some outside material found its way into the body of this poem, one way or another, in whole or in part, mangled or reprinted *word for word*. Noteworthy instances of this peculiar phenomenon are as follows:

Section 6, entitled 'Excerpt from an Interview with a Former Champion', incorporates part of an interview with Alexander Alekhine, a former chess grandmaster, but replacing the word "chess" with the word "love". The interview may be found in a piece by Alfred Lawrie, called Eating Glass, in *Granta* magazine, issue 62, Summer '98.

Section 12 copies verbatim, from the line "When did you start eating glass?" an interview with Terry Cole, world champion glass eater, from the same *Granta* piece.

Section 22, entitled 'Stolen Goods', consists, in its entirety, of a portion of the lyrics of the song *What Is This?* by Sergio Mendes. The gorgeous vocal (a rap, actually, in English, with a strong Brazilian accent) is by Carmen Alice, and the whole thing may be found on the compilation *Beleza Tropical 2* (1998)

Section 44 borrows the first line of John Berryman's 'Dream Song XIV' (from the *77 Dream Songs*) because it seemed to fit nicely.

Section 53 interpolates Charles Olson's poem 'The Architect of Mourning' (from *The Maximus Poems*) doing it a great disservice by shamelessly vandalizing it for cheap effect.

Section 86 borrows a line from Beckett's *Molloy* (p. 226), which is itself a borrowing (and misquotation) of the first line of Keats' poem *Endymion*.

The italicized lines in Section 2, as well as those in Section 106, are biblical.