

## POEM SEQUENCE



*Stephen Berg*

LOOK

*from* IN THE GREEN MORNING

White Tee-shirted torso & head, there,  
not there, hands out of sight, gone behind high  
picket fence on a rooftop—must have been  
one of those epiphanies I've yearned for  
all my life, gale of identity  
that fuses what is with what is into  
a white blinding light strips my face  
of its image of itself, nothing left to  
believe in or pity—I was watching it  
out my office window, feet up on desk,  
hundreds of unread poems in wire baskets,  
lists, letters, ballpoints open, caps lost,  
pigeon on sill, and the vapor-tailed happy  
dot of a jet crawl across

DOG SHIT

Step lightly, careful, dog turds everywhere,  
hard soft big dinky neat piles loners  
whose owners think their animals should dump  
anywhere, are gods, egos on leashes,  
found one on my stoop one day walking home  
from work (saw several on the way, light brown,  
blackish, dropped freely in the rapture  
of relief) stared at it, entreated it,  
tried to detect symbolic sacred  
meaning—for of course how could Stevie  
live without "meaning"— nothing happened, I,  
brilliant inescapable illusory  
pronoun expiring breath by breath before  
it winds up like that cold item out front

## CONFESSION

The unkillable greed for more money,  
which question to answer next, which problem  
is real or only a piteous device  
calculated habitually to blur  
the cosmic you that couldn't care less—there is  
such a one, for most of us undiscovered  
while we yield to desire, covet safety—  
I am one of those and should know, who  
goes on deceiving himself in the quiet  
ecstasy of self-protection, concocting  
pity for others, faking intuition,  
marveling at how well others live  
without me, sure they have more, the “more” I  
know some fate put in my blood like an infection

## AT THE PARTY (i)

*for Millie*

Something was whispered in a stranger's ear  
that hurt, in June, & after it occurred  
traces of a backyard party, trees,  
friends, tables of food, twilight and small talk  
and a shifting breeze but I still don't know  
what it was—I felt my spirit break  
(understand, I'm not sure how to say this)  
so nothing stood between me and her  
and him and it, so being here held us—  
innocence blew its palpable breath on us,  
the moon that night tangled like a bleak eye  
in black limbs, gossip's threadbare buzz  
drifting among us, we waved our hands, walked  
on the grass, windows lighting up through leaves

AND (2)

Shadowy people stood in the hushed air,  
noises shuddered the branches, shook me,  
flew away eerier than a blind wing  
no bird has, lips no word escapes,  
corpse-glow glistening on foreheads, hair—  
nobody can discern Being's soul  
& yet it blinds us, binds us  
to itself: I'll try to be clearer—  
at the motel after the party  
on the bed untying my shoelaces  
I pulled off my shoes, socks, unbuttoned my  
shirt, undid my belt, & the rugs'  
flat huge pink roses, real, gloriously aware,  
saw me, and I slept.

AND (3)

Your face radiant miracle when I woke,  
wife, human, ethereal, friendly,  
40 years we have slept side by side—  
some experts declare poetry should be  
images action plot or it will not  
instruct, move us, but to describe that spooky  
perceptual change is impossible:  
envision rebirth as a conversion  
of sight, feeling, so you whom I had known  
long became to me for the first time you—  
our room a cube of chaste gray light,  
I stroked your gentle face as I would a baby's,  
unknown to myself, your face touching my face,  
girl I dared not love though I always loved you

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The humane throng of books ready  
to save us, kiss us with words, so merciful

those tomes, so open to us,  
generous of them to be there, real people  
unaware of us—"In a word as my life  
was a life of sorrow in one way, so  
it was a life of mercy another;  
and I wanted nothing to make it a life  
of comfort but to be able to make  
my sense of God's goodness to me, and care  
over me in this condition, be my  
daily consolation" is one,  
trapped on an island, whose life entered me—  
like the hard light of stars

XXII

Like a kind of light-catcher the maple  
three houses away swims, sways, exhales, swoons  
in the gusty sunset, wordlessly receptive  
you could say, its gold leaves thrashing the air  
able to take whatever comes—even  
when the recent hurricane's edge hit  
it whelmed but remained intact, its wide thick  
brilliant swarmings inside you moments  
before sleep: you slump into bed, unrumple  
the comforter up to your chin,  
adjust it into a clump you tuck your chin against,  
eyes shut, thoughts, hurts, lacks, humming in your head,  
lurched down into nowhere by degrees,  
grateful to be taken back again

QUONIAM

"And also in another privee place"  
such "appetyt" such rank Chaucerian  
pussy music no one can resist  
"To lerne, what thing wommen loven most"  
and the wet slit Bathe's Wyfe congratulates  
herself on, she esteemed hers so, five husbands,  
"As help me god, I was a lusty oon"  
throbs in the minds of men—Listen  
today on a sunny modern street

such ass you wouldn't believe, young women  
clad in thong bikinis under linen  
see-through skirts, tits pouring out of blouses,  
the proud friend with me happy to ignore  
stuff my adolescent lust drooled over

#### THE MEETINGS

I

Cute, short, darkhaired woman, Gucci scarf, shoes,  
most poor, some middle class, in the damp concrete  
Baptist church basement AA meeting—pain  
in what one might call shameless grammar  
inevitable as the flesh of each speaker,  
I was afraid to speak, took notes, won't bore  
you with details but one man—postal worker  
at 19th & Broad, pot belly, pony tail,  
I always thought was a kook soliloquized  
his fury, paranoia, fat cruel sister,  
how each day he tries simply not to think  
or prays to stay alive  
and not break because he feels he will break  
if he does not kneel in himself to God

II

No stories just each one telling the truth  
twisted on armatures of self  
so fully known that language "speaks itself"  
nobody to nobody to nobody—  
I kept looking at their shoes shirts dresses  
faces of anyone and words for this  
giving in, this being in "My name is..."  
keep wondering how they live, what kind of chairs,  
tables, what pictures on the wall, what cups  
for coffee in the morning—what should I  
do, knock on a stranger's door, say I'm his  
brother, ask to come in, write words that lie  
because the soul's like a baby,  
poor innocent Godless, say love, mercy?

III

Walked out into the glare of afternoon  
with nothing but myself because of their clear  
unremitting nakedness—amazed  
I exist, maybe a purification  
of identity, maybe their unassuming speeches,  
tongues that seemed to utter not who one is,  
desperate to say it in the group,  
thankful for still being here—  
at the end of the hour we all stood in a circle  
and held hands and repeated The Lord's Prayer  
which alone I can never remember  
and the need to define "human"  
flowed through the warmth of the hands and whose hands  
were whose was not a question

BACK THEN

I

They'd step up on the stage—trumpet, drums, bass,  
clarinet, trombone—it was like fucking  
heaven to me then, it *was* heaven, I'd  
sit rapt absolutely inside every note,  
nothing else existed when Sidney de P. punched out  
those mothering phrases or Hall annealed my  
soul with his cerebral wail, the room smoky,  
narrow, a row of tables along each wall,  
the bar on the right when you came in  
easy to be at, a relief from daily life,  
they'd play like maniacs praying, completely  
enthralled, drinks tinkled throughout the numbers,  
I never could get enough of this thing  
this being out of me in a new sound

II

That still tries to take me into its high  
longing, & wept when I first heard Wild Bill  
up there dressed in a three-piece suit squeeze out  
dense guttural rushes of interior song  
and Christ knows who else, then I'd walk  
the streets hungering for myself,  
desperate for romance, any crazy glance

was me, warm lit windows, open doors, couples  
on their way to a significant moment,  
in the chilly night air youth was endless  
and safe in the tart afterfragrance of rain,  
every face a possible friend, words  
not quite born yet, weightless, unselfconscious  
ecstasies, a speech that was disappearing

#### RIVERHOUSE

I

You look back amazed to see yourself there  
as if you really are there, walking the mile-long  
hill behind the house, playing ping pong  
in the magisterial main room, fireplace  
high enough to stand in, on the 300 acre  
Roxborough farm you rented, 60 a month,  
nothing you knew then taught you to thank  
the grass, trees, dirt road, view of the expressway  
across the river, couldn't have known how you  
would feel 40 years later about being here:  
“grace beyond grace”, St John of the Cross  
calls it, “here not here nowhere”  
atheist, Christlover, unbelieving Jew  
“soul free of me of grass sky everything”

II

“... to believe is indeed to lose the understanding  
in order to gain God...” I know is true—  
the girls would romp in the cleared-out area  
out front beneath our driveway, dilapidated barn  
close by, wire towers striding the hillside, deer,  
& the future was the future was the future,  
Margot would carry GoGo our cat across  
her arms, one day Clair strayed into deep woods,  
disappeared for three hours, reappeared  
“To pray is also to breathe, and possibility  
is for the self what oxygen is for breathing”  
nights in that quiet place when I was nothing,  
clear sky deluged with stars, I'd linger outside  
my daughters' room all night to hear them breathing

VII

And under me once a dirt floor, cement now,  
file folders, broken chairs, china and silverware  
my mother left, lamps, towels, notebooks  
of meticulous lists kept when she was a jeweler—  
repair clasp, string identical pearl, solder  
gold hinge on watch, how many beads, pins, wires,  
cost of materials, prices—blue torchflame  
licking a brooch, shears, goggles, hammer—  
heartbreaking to contain those who lived once,  
bore you, fed you, inconceivable they  
knew who you were yet never actually told  
you what they knew, unsure they knew anything,  
as a piece of her life resurrects itself  
in front of you and shines like hammered silver

ALWAYS

The way light tints glass, brick, leaves or a coin  
making plain surfaces luminous, holy,  
sometimes You seem to watch me,  
not with eyes but with the tenderness  
of a serene vibrant absence, dead parent  
still able to love its wayward son,  
and death is the simple phrase “No need for home”—  
how this can be true is too obscure for me  
to understand, but one is understood by it  
as the light takes unto itself the lowliest thing  
it touches, even in darkness hallows  
our sleeping flesh, is inseparable from it—  
how could I have been here and not known this?  
do I dare to say aloud “I believe this”?