

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 (1)

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 outloud “I believe this”?