

R E G I N A L D S H E P H E R D

Mappa Mundi

And leafwork face says, *this is want*,
approximating my desire: the field
of vision pictures interruption
and whatever calls itself "I",

keeping the world from straying
into picture, keeping world
at bay, Baffin, Bengal, or Biscay. Sun dyes
my skin a darker brown, abducts him

deeper into his history. Daylight
is a disease, silting the surfaces:
the portable wound moves
with the eye, film, scum, skin, pellicle

of appearances. Hands on my skin
would leave a print, leave me behind
a white retaining wall, cleavage
between things sexual and things

human: his whitewashed
brick, hips, hands, lips, cock
I don't get to see. My lips don't get to touch
the Egypt buried in his body, a hoard

of tarnished gold spends all
my time. Turn off the century
and leave me to the fame the stars insist
upon, Rigel, Betelgeuse, Bette Davis

and Keanu Reeves, which could go on
forever, now I've forgotten how.

Boy, Allegorically Deployed

Kiss the past until it's bitter, his
unexplored expanse of skin; cold coinage
of brass nipples kisses his chest tender
to the abrading tongue. He is what snows
in "it is snowing", precipitating indecision
and a sea of wavering white fields. Sheer
stipulation, verb, the act of being carried
out: bird water where finches drown
of thirst, a glass of axioms, half-full. (See,
we have bodies, and smell like the sea.)
Occasionally anyone.

Ghostly geology,
slag and charnel leaf, slate face
with eroding fossils, this is not
his body: a damaged would-be nobility
disturbs the surfaces of things, even dust
fails me. The most beautiful boy
thinks "beautiful" is too large
and vacant, ripped open emptiness
on the left margin of argument:
thinks he can't remember whether I
remember no one's there, what he calls
himself. Calls himself *I* at times, and lies
down in a field of broken leaves
and shattered grass.

Himself

on his way to being blazon, eyes ears
lips tongue, full catalogue of cartilage
and muscle and the saline bags
light seeps through. Lies down
and he is Atlas, hands lacking
labels for the lands his hands
land on. We have loved something
and moved on, carnage of pink balls
and buttocks, the world when looked at
properly, a game of names and places
no one's seen. Caress cold breath
until it rains (we've spoken of
the rain already), drown the day.
Then you'll be music too.

Homeric Interim

Distance is money just out of reach,
a kindness like rain-laden clouds
that never drops its coins. Epochs
of fossilised trees crawl rusting hillside
strata: they smell like somewhere else
I've never been, an Anatolia
just outside the mind. Geometries
of travel and desire (from here to want
and back again), the myths of pleasure
reinvent another ancient world: oiled boys
racing naked around the circular walls
of Troy to find out who will wear
the plaited wreath, parade painted circuits
of unburnt parapets waving
to the crowds. See, even night
adores him, dresses him in its moon
and apparition. The sheen of intention
is on him, translates his motions
into marble, alabaster. (Cassandra
wakes and says *There isn't going to be
a Trojan war*. Centuries of fossil speech
fill up the space that comes after
currently, years spent talking
to paper.) Man and moment
become one, his reliquary skin
makes white occur (by now
the sweat has faded from his garish
details). The things his hands become
act out interruption, history
is his story, held at bay. He wears time
on his body (wears it out), chases gods
from mountaintops until the myth-smoke
clears. His old world's blurred
and hard to read, misunderstanding
becomes a place: galley
run aground on shallow skin
the colour of no event.

Itinerary

for Robert Philen

Certain names have been ruined forever,
friendships snapped like dry twigs
underfoot. Whole people disappear
like little sovereign nights and aren't
missed (another useless world wavers);
he and I walk deeper into afternoon,
into the gorge. The visible and invisible
gods decree decay and change
it into duff, humus, and loam, into magnolia's
giant flowers that precede the green
wax leaves. What is that rotting
in the creek, grey-furred
and food for flies? A bird is an animal
with an inside and an outside, the green-
and purple-headed grackles
speckle the walled-in creek
bed, glisten from flat stone to round stone
searching out what. The highway says *No history
here*, a doe dozes beside the asphalt, or else
it's dead. It's dead. They line up single file
to cross the road, the first one waits
until the next one crosses. Look left,
look right, look left. The poems about nature
grow dry and brittle, crumble
like leaf-litter, rotting shale; we drop them
as we pass. The hand has held its secrets
for so long, he takes birdsong
into himself, and a grape soda smell
only in late June, another plant I can't
pin down. His skin subdues the sun
if he remembers rain, forecasting
overcast. Then he lets his sunset pierce
the hemlocks, quick pebbles tumble down
the slope's field of visual happiness.
The pines are singing water and we go
home, leave behind the cast-off instances.

Refrain

A state becomes statement, Petrarch
trips on a pile of laurel bones, severely damaged
except for two lines. The body absorbs
all kinds of things, a useless brilliant nothing
guarding the borders of witness
where the metaphors start, and the snow.
Petrarch doesn't dream of snow, except
in silver bowls with syrup
mixed into it, pomegranate or persimmon
chasing summer somewhere next to lost,
and then the brilliant birds
fly from his mouth, perhaps
just one, a bird of paradise with no
legs, no feet, a lifetime's inability to land.

Petrarch whispers leaves into my ear,
thinks "Boys smell nice", boys smell
like spring preserved in a December jar, open
the lid and it escapes me just now, haunts
the room all day: stains air, stains
nostrils, cedar-pressed seasons sweetbitter
somewhat like Eros, like crushed laurel
leaves stain fingers. He loves me nowhere
but in words (another of the several things
which I refrain from mentioning), boys' names
on trees or boys named after trees:
fixing beauty in the wind, fixing hunger
in the eye, the α of it. (I miss the men
midnighting Lakeview streets.)

Wind only visible in what it touches
leads astray, disturbing to discard;
trees shed their way toward nakedness
leaf by leaf until the bough has been broken.
A spatter of small nameable wings
takes to the wind, takes care not to wake
Petrarch, who's dreaming rain's
refrain, *fall down, fall down,*
but he's already one with grass.

And then a hero comes along
with birds flying out of his mouth:
one of the old verbs might be true,
park paths of wind-polished pebbles
lead one astray, into the snow.

Topograph

for Amy Newman

Morning fills its empty hands
with rain, in the dark I have been beautiful,
like you, obituary water and splintered
light: one of the early persons overwhelmed

with ravens. The grass is sex, stands up
and overtakes the yard; angiosperms
have made this new terrain. Did you cast a path
through ditch and brine, through Hector,

Ajax, range and circumstance, arrest
a room in suckling night adrift
with Heraclitean mistake? Stepped
into several streambeds at once

(pitted with plunge pools, potholes)
and loved a lack, always coming back
to Crete, bull dancers and partial frescoes
damp as curled hair. Demosthenes

with his mouth full of pebbles (multi-
coloured, marbled) looks on, pronounces
it good. History is what happens
after nature, gold on the branch

mutes the eye: glimpses of water rush
through the gaps. You climb into the rain
and something resembling wings
takes to polluted, blazoned air.

Bird bones evaporate you, wintrish
and quite seaworthy.