

in places where quiet is too much

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dissonance

i guess it's the dissonance between tenses,
a sound that waits for the end of day;
i guess it's the wrong you never write,
i can hear Thelonious play;
past the avant-garde light
in a glass of blue cabernet,
somewhere in the desperate night,
there has to be another way.

planet

i guess it looks like venus,
your eyes can't tell for sure they say –
i guess it charms like starlit champagne,
i can hear Coleman Hawkins play;
just in to escape the evening rain
at a time stopped french cafe
and hopefully, to miss a plane,
let's go to that planet and stay.

form was meant to be broken

down the crystal white flashing neon avenue
together jazz and midnight play
and the things that no longer matter to you
are confined to the blue
that others call the day.

there's abstract expressionism in the air
quantum mechanics will never let it die
there's chaos on 52nd street –
it's everywhere –
i can hear Charlie Parker fly.

now let the evening's mood swing
between the melancholy and the dream;
let the uncertainty in every thing
play its way into the theme –
let the fiction that tried to write you
dance the Stravinsky extreme:
because the voice only breaks
if the silence eventually takes
the will to shatter form with a scream.

descent

glasses hang noose free
from a rack attached to the ceiling
with a wine selection intended
for those that have no feeling;
another six ounce glass of number fifteen please
flickers in the dim illumination of a candle holder with a disease –
cracked on purpose by a second rate designer,
and sold for one more moment than it will ever create –
at the cafe across the street,
chairs are propped up now on tables,
and it is starting to get late.

outside
the homeless beat on plastic bucket drums
in an attempt to summon the dead.

outside
makeshift memorials mark the places where they bled.

outside
the rusted oil drum fire lights the way ahead.

outside
every poem i ever wrote
turns off of a dime bag street and drops down on all fours;
into the ripped stocking lubrication of a broken heel alleyway
that knows the dry fuck sting of two-bit politicians that never pay;
that gives off the scent of latex perfume in place of a shower
'cause no bus can make it to a hotel that rents by the hour
and back in time to meet the tourniquet that holds your hand
so that it's easier to break
the next time you make
an out of pocket demand.

down by the rusted oil drum fire
there's an open spot tonight
for one more makeshift bed.

in the gentrified congo
you have to keep reminding yourself
that some of it's only in your head.

poems about poems

quick before this mood swing runs out
let's jump on it and drive to nowhere
along a metaphor about the meaninglessness of existence
without thinking, just going, no guessing, just knowing
our way to a place where poems are banned –
no wait, i meant poems about poems –
sorry, let me start again
and i'll tell you about the time
we put when in the closet
and left it there until spring
at which point we decided to move
and didn't even bring
our palettes or our brushes
since you can't force colors anyway
you'd think people would know that by now
but i see them try it every day.

quick before someone calls us manic instead of interesting
let me tell you about the time
they started selling imagination at the store
and how it turned the planet into something worth dying for
because people like things better when they can buy them
so the department of words legalized poems about poems
and then everybody wanted to try them.
and before too long,
no one was ever afraid of winter in the fall;
and they completely forgot,
that life's not really worth living at all.

a metro ride

ten minutes from now
this place right here
could be nothing but there
after a ride to the end of the line;
the edge of the escalator steps
flash caution stop sign yellow
and still nobody sees a sign.

corporate women don't procreate –
they duplicate,
and they talk sophisticated;
about pretty little towns that wipe out marriages
and the romantic college boys they dated.

and corporate men – they're uninspired.
they'd sell the night to buy the day that gets them hired.
they talk about going to work
and how soon it's gonna get better;
they talk about this weekend's game,
or some dear john letter.

but nobody on the train talks about looking for a place to hide,
or making it through the rest of this half spent winter,
without committing suicide.

most times when the metro arrives at the station,
it's difficult to know where to stand;
and yet everybody's trying to position themselves,
at the spot where that roulette wheel will land.

and if you watch from the distance as it pulls away,
you might just swear that it was pulling in;
but don't miss your chance to ride on that train,
because nobody knows when it'll be back again.

candy apple suicide

over a glass or two of minor revisions,
we passed through customs with nothing to declare;
the streets were littered with shallow incisions,
there was candy apple suicide in the air.

she threw a nine millimeter kiss
and asked if i could tell
that the surest path to bliss
is the one that leads to hell.

we slashed our wrists with daylight,
we bled the poetry of descent;
we knew the art of midnight,
and everything it meant.

why i don't go on dates in the northeastern united states

my first two years in college
i probably slept with twenty guys or so,
i'm not really sure,
maybe a couple more,
i was drunk most of the time,
but it's not like i was some kind of whore;
plenty of girls did worse,
and what was i supposed to say,
"i've never done this before?"

anyway, you can't go around telling rich guys no,
because there's always another girl waiting in line,
and my mother always said
it was better to be rich and dead
than happy alive and broke;
and seeing as how
she was usually passed out,
we were careful to listen when she spoke.

the sound of light

the jewel thief stood on trial
with amnesia in between
a jury of sapphires heard the denial
so the truth could reconvene.

the senior director of such and such
was the emerald of lies and awkward to the touch
but he was the way up
and he was the way out
from a life with no diamonds
to a future with no doubt.

in the cold sweat spasm
of an echo off a scream
the sound of light escaped
from the violence of a dream.

the ricochet was mine, unable to forget,
the infidelity like wine, not ready to open yet.

a kiss is nothing

do you think i could write something that you would remember?

something you might read to your daughter one day,
or perhaps even to her children,
when all of yours have moved away?

something about room twenty-three of the guest house
and the ducks and squirrels that inhabit the park;
something about the light that fell on gibson hall,
when it was too late to be outside,
but nothing like the dark.

something that might have brought me to mind
at the moment that he kissed you,
when you were on the verge of going blind
to the voice on the phone that missed you?

something that could breathe in st. malo's magenta and blue
and keep alive places that are made of me and you,
or even interrupt a gaze toward the horizon:
along a new beau
that you better keep your eyes on –
because sincerity is nothing
that anyone relies on.

could i write paris,
until we were back there today?
a kiss is nothing,
but a thing that gets thrown away.

strangers

i thought i saw you on the street
and unsure of what to do
i walked up closer for a better look
until i realized it was you.

i thought i saw you on a street
that kept running through my head
desperately trying to kill a dream
the light refused to declare as dead;

i thought i saw you on the street,
our eyes finally met
and at once i knew the fall;
i thought i saw you on the street,
but what i saw
was not you at all.

transience

paradise is broken,
it's quiet at the bar:
transience is permanent nearness from afar.

the palm reader was lying
but everything she said seemed true
the palm reader was lying
we believed because we wanted to.

these are not words. this is not verse.
this is not a Magritte reference.
this is something much worse.

the palm reader was lying
but now i know what she meant
the palm reader was lying
to make sense of the time we spent.

in a tight spot

once you hit that spot,
they never let you go –
even if you aren't right for them,
they're always the last to know.
even if they aren't right for you,
and your life together is all wrong –
there's something about that spot
that makes things last too long.

you and us

you like the flame for its warmth, we like it because it burns;
you're on a road that joins here to there,
but we're on the one that turns.

you call the razor cosmetic, but we know it really cuts;
you like the curtain because it opens,
we like it because it shuts.

you call it suicidal, we call it heart;
you call it self-destructive, we call it art.

you call it staring into space, we call it imagination;
you'll be dead in the next earthquake,
but we will always be Haitian.

you think about you, we think about we;
you look the other way,
but we prefer to see.

you like to speak, but we have a voice;
you have tradition, but we have a choice.

you believe in one and one, we believe in two;
you talk a lot about living,
but we are the ones that do.

twenty one

she keeps throwing sevens on my pulse between her scream,
will she deal an eight or should i sit tight on thirteen?
the strangest game of black jack that i have ever seen.
twenty one –
and fuck everything else.

why the snow in russia melts

anna smiles and says hello,
to people outside that come and go;
then anya glares, and at once you know:
it's not the sun that burns russian snow.

juxtaposition

the twilight's drunken haze lingered into the morning,
and without asking for permission,
lifted up the sunrise's dress,
with the caffeinated intent
of a voice that lets you listen,
from a lustful phone booth in the parisian night,
to the trembling pulse of juxtaposition.

anesthesia

when your favorite place to resist
is the razor against my wrist –
and the victim inside you is swelling
like the lips you violently kissed;
when a demeaning word aloud
is something you're desperate to taste –
and every drop of blood is a cloud
like the hands that bruised your waist;
when you're wondering about the anarchist
that promised he'd be true –
open your fucking legs,
and let some life in you.

the break of day

the violet drinks itself into night,
as it looks around the room for more,
in the shadow of some sorostitute
that the moonlight forced to the floor;
until the closing time aurora
goes stumbling out the door
down the early mourning cobblestone
like a destitute white chapel whore;
and in the truth that goes unspoken,
another wasted day breaks –
but we already knew it was broken,
like the predisposition it wakes:
it writes the poetry of the night and lays it down upon a beat,
it plays the axe alone to moonlight on a long forgotten street,
it's the paint that rips the canvas when its melancholy aches,
and the thing that brings you back,
like a gift that gives and takes.

graffiti

everything was being interrupted by side rails,
there was nowhere to go at all –
the prohibition of air and light had been noted,
~~by Banksy~~ in protest,
on a nearby wall,
where the pornography of color
escaped from a mirror
imprisoned in a legislative hall.

the state reserves the right to keep this canvas blank –
so that it never says anything
so that it never provokes thought
so that you never bother to question
any of the things that you were taught.

the perversion of space stood on public display
until the graffiti of law tried to wash it away.

but the insolence of form
like the obscenity of sound
brings art back to life
when no one is around.

murder

i wrote a poem for a girl that said she loved me,
it was in her pocket the night she let another release;
the next morning she called home to tell her mother about it –
not the poem, i mean, but the man she met in greece.

of course she covered it up at the time,
there was some reason she wanted to see us married;
then one day i guess she changed her mind
and decided to tell me the secret she carried.

she was predictably apologetic,
and said it was nothing but a moment that thrilled;
but as far as i was concerned, it changed everything –
not the fling, i mean, but the poem that she killed.

never trust a writer that doesn't drink

never trust a writer that doesn't drink
or one that spends too much time with his lover –
the one you want to read
has a shot glass in one hand
and a shotgun in the other.

never trust a writer that says it isn't about you
or one who pens the truth before he's had a few –
the one you want to read
knows that fact is fiction
and that fiction is always true.

never trust a writer that looks for inspiration
or one preoccupied with changing what you think –
the one you want to read
is a poem's throw from expiration –
never trust a writer that doesn't drink.

dylan hopped a train last night[†]

shakespeare's gone y'all
he hopped a train last night
took his guitar and voice with him
and disappeared into the light.

when i heard the news
at first i couldn't breathe
but then i thought a little on it
and understood why he had to leave:
there's a place for honest men
but lord knows that it ain't here
unless honest men keep their eyes closed
unless honest men are insincere.

all those reporters saying he died
don't understand any more today
than they didn't understand back then:
Bob Dylan hopped a train last night y'all,
he didn't die,
he simply reinvented himself again.

[†]For an occasion I hope I never live to see.

hurry up

dey foun ya little sista in a bathtub fulla ice water, over dere in kenna brah,
dead.

she'd been partyin wit a older couple she met dat mornin after work.

police dont know if dey slipped her sumtin

or she just got a hold of some bad shit

or if all dem late nights just finally jumpt up and caughter.

ain't no need in stirring things up though man,

you know how it is,

a junkie's a junkie.

...

he could feel his entire view of the world and of humanity changing each time someone told him that she was better off dead. for the first time ever, he was going to acknowledge the worst in everyone; humanity's shallow, its vengeful; its unforgiving and its remorseless. he was going to admit that some of these people were willfully evil. that they made the decision to be evil because they were afraid to live. that they were afraid to live because they were afraid to love something completely and unconditionally.

they had no use for freedom –

they didn't know what to do with it, so they had decided long ago that no one else should either. this they termed maturity. they filled their days with meaningless activities; they went to the store, they paid bills, they worked from nine until five, monday through friday. these were things that were necessary, and when one does that which is necessary, they are termed responsible.

a responsible and mature adult understands that it is impossible to help those who refuse to help themselves.

the failure of the responsible, mature and rational “human” is that they refuse to try the impossible. that in order to try something, they must first believe there is a plausible chance at success. their failure is that they dare estimate the potential of another human being. their failure is that they believe passion and risk and hope and irrationality are things for the young, as though being young were some kind of fault. and they carry on such a ridiculous charade because they fear the pain that follows failure. their victories are only the sort that do not surprise, the kind that do not inspire. their lives are the same: they go the way of the everyday.

...

Renee came outside and looked around, “What are you doing?”

“I'm building a clubhouse; I'm going to take those two pieces of wood and use the tree and the fence to form a triangle.”

“Oh, my teacher showed us triangles, I like them! But what about the roof, what if it rains? What do we do then?”

“We can get a cardboard box and use it to make a roof.”

“But what if the rain breaks it?”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be okay. It can’t rain *that* much! Why don’t you look around for one?”

“Can I be in the club?”

“Of course. But first you have to try and figure out what to do about the roof.”

She walked away and returned with a sheet.

“Can we use this?” she asked.

“But Renee the rain will definitely get through then.”

“I didn’t see any boxes, but it’s okay, because if it starts raining too much, we’ll just go home and have a tea party instead.”

When it was finally finished, they sat in the club talking.

“Why did mommy leave?”

“She had to go live somewhere else because she wasn’t feeling well.”

“Can we go find her and help her so she can come home?”

“We can’t help her.”

“Why?”

“Everybody says that you can’t help someone who won’t help themselves.”

“But maybe if we try to help her, then she’ll try too.”

“They say she has to try first.”

“But if you want to help someone, why does it matter who tries first?”

“I think it’s because if they don’t go first, you’re sure to fail at it.”

“I bet you could do it anyway,” she smiled and grabbed hold of him,

“You’re my big brother, you could do anything in the whole wide world.”

They left the clubhouse later that day and began walking home.

“Look, grandma’s waving, I think it’s dinner time,” she said.

There was just enough light left to notice the sky turning overcast.

“You get inside before it storms. Tell grandma I’ll be there in just a minute, I have to bring Mr. Bill’s hammer back to him.”

The rumbling of thunder sounded in the distance.

Renee pointed upward as she skipped away laughing,

“You better hurry, it’s going to rain!”

A late summer gale began; the thunder moved even closer. She reached the house and motioned one last time for him to hurry, “Here comes the wind!”

Renee made it inside just as it began to drizzle; he watched, as the door closed behind her.

For Tanya, my sister (1975–1997).

let me put a few things together[†]

if you have to leave early
let me put a few things together
that you can take home.

the first one is poetry
about the rare gift you were born with
and how the planet rests on people like you living.

the second one is music
about how your disease is really a myth
and how the planet rests on people like you giving.

the third one is most important,
because you might get in a situation
where you don't know what to do –
so if you have to leave early,
let me put a few things together,
because i'm going too.

[†]For Tanya, my sister (1975–1997).

a nocturne on decatur street

somewhere in the flatted fifth of evening,
in a thing we saved for later,
my lover's suicide is the night
that goes echoing down decatur
past the point of interruption
and the lure of razor sharp bliss
into nervous breakdown verse
and the memory of a nocturne's kiss
that shaped the constellations
and grabbed the bedpost as she cursed –
the stars are perfect now,
she always finished first.

august

when it lasted longer than we did
we even prayed for rain
and when we realized god wasn't coming
we tried to pray again:
for water that we could drink,
for shade from the august heat,
for a semblance of civilization,
for something that we could eat.

we saw that water rise –
 over cardboard levees
 that were conning us all along;
 over dehydrated cries
 that drowned the sound of jazz and song;
 over the bureaucratic lies
 of bastards destined for hell;
 over the displaced goodbyes
 we never had the chance to tell.

we listened on battery operated radios
as a mother called from an attic
as the water continued to rise
as the line went quiet with static.

we drowned in the ninth ward
we swam the best we could
we tried to flag down helicopters
when we knew they never would.

we begged for food and water
we always said amen
we looted for it too
and we'd fucking do it again.

we carried old women to the quarter
we were beaten shot and raped
we made phone calls that never went through
we stole busses and escaped.

we drove past those who needed us
because we had no other choice
and made our way to foreign towns
but would always hear their voice.

we stayed the hell away from television
and kept an ocean of bottled water on hand
we made sure the damned air conditioning worked
and knew a trauma they will never understand.

from their comfortable yankee houses,
we saw silver spoon university students
use knick-knacks left over summer break
to file government claims that they knew were fake;
their checks arrived before ours ever did
and they spent that money gutlessly in europe as they hid,
lazily waiting for the restoration without guilt
as their rich parents said we should never be rebuilt.
we saw them called survivors
and awarded degrees when they finally traipsed on home –
in a commencement ceremony,
that was held,
just a short walk from the dome.

they waited for us to drown
like some color forced to white –
but we are New Orleanians
born from the spectrum of light.

there's cayenne in our blood,
humidity in the pores of our skin,
there's jazz at all our funerals
and morality in our sin.

they waited for us to drown,
to leave, surrender and bow –
but we are New Orleanians
sworn to a sacred vow.

we believe in comeuppance,
we believe in standing pat –
and we believe that Marie Laveau
knows where dem devils is at:

the devils that bought up our houses,
the invaders that came to rebuild,
the hipsters that poison our culture,
the wicked that wanted us killed.

they waited for us to drown,
with no hope of when or how –
they were not here in august,
they do not belong here now.

For Charmaine – friend, artist, musician and New Orleanian.

going away balloons

sometimes it's white picket fences with a paris in the twenties edge.
sometimes an hourglass figure appears and talks me off the ledge.
sometimes steel drums play to the flickering of caribbean torches.
sometimes the streetcar passes by houses with blue ceilinged porches.

sometimes i remember
the satin sheet hotels along the thoroughfare,
the empty unkept lots on the outskirts over there,
the upscale society joints that had us seeing stars,
the shattered glass ghetto and the overturned cars,
the drunks on the corner that sang with pawned guitars.

sometimes i write the evening in reverse until it doesn't exist.
sometimes i see an X on the doorway of a shotgun that they missed.
sometimes i hear the swell beneath a minor chord.
sometimes i take extended walks around the ninth ward.

sometimes
on cherry blossom afternoons
the starless sky is lit
with going away balloons.

sometimes i wish anyway.