

Paul Vangelisti

A Capable Hand, or Maps for a Lost Dog

“... I would give expression to my grief and send it to this friend of mine, so that it would seem that I had written it for him.”

Dante, *Vita nuova*,

“silence is no better than lying”

Adriano Spatola, “The Stalin Poem”

“We, ghosts, lovers, and casual strangers to the poem.”

Jack Spicer, *The Heads of the Town Up to the
Aethers*

I.

Maybe it was meant to be years ago,
it's just that poetry nowadays
seems impeccable in this respect,
so blue the emptiness we call our own.

And then I said the dead prefer restaurants when they're closed. A Sunday morning after a rain, restaurants along the avenues like banks or Presbyterian churches with their parking lots empty and that postcard blue sky. They like bread almost exclusively, in fact, I've never heard of them eating anything else. This time it looked like both of them might smile. What do you think, I said, that the dead will swallow anything? Just because they listen and seem to agree with whatever we say doesn't mean they're gullible. It's just good manners. God knows nowadays the dead look impeccable in this respect. *Pure et seche*, like Cocteau said about poetry. (Maybe he meant it also about bread?) This happened a few days ago, Thanksgiving weekend 1989, just when I'd stopped thinking of you.

Listen, I say with a smile,
how is this happening again?
It's about purity, one replies, banks
and restaurants and a postcard sky.

II.

We always began carefully,
first settling on how many angels
and wine glasses in the deck,
how many stifling afternoons
before any posturing about
you, me or a household of words.

What was it Pasolini called death, “the alibi of Catholic slaves?” Writing must make you uncomfortable. So Catholic of me. And what about translation? Think of all the days and years: to fly 7,000 miles and ride several trains, to arrive at a river in a valley at the foot of mountains, to sit in a millhouse before a glass of wine and a poem and start translating. It was as if this game of metaphor and two-mindedness, played at your kitchen table or mine, continents and years apart, came before or sometimes even replaced how are you, what have you been doing, how does it feel to be living alone. Sure, Pasolini postured and exaggerated but don't we all when we are alive? Did I mention, by the way, that I had been hired to teach creative writing at Occidental College? Where your “Seduction Seducteur,” if you recall, was done as a dance. It's a private college, founded some 120 years ago, Presbyterian in intent, meant to spawn upright, successful young men and women. Robinson Jeffers attended in 1904, brought here by his father along with the rest of the family, which was settled in nearby Pasadena. The old man picked the college for moral reputation, as yet untainted by the new age of fast money and hungry multitudes. Switzerland, I read, was another possibility. Anyway, Jeffers attended though I don't think graduated before running off with a friend's wife. So we translated from a day or so after we first met, April 2, 1975, to that last stifling afternoon in Sant'Ilario, drinking Pernod and repairing someone else's translation, Thursday, July 21, 1988. Time being at the moment parenthetical, I write in English without translation. Odd how in death a word seems more than what was available in life. Animal in the dusk, is it you or me with a house and a job and the right wine glasses finally?

By the way, did I mention the need
for parentheses, like the possibility
of running off with a friend's wife,
untainted by time after time of
replacing how are you with what
are you going to do with that bottle?

III.

Navigating then without your eyes
a land erased over and over,
a risky occupation, the impeccable
signature and your name.

It wasn't hard to talk about ecstasy when you were alive. Certainly it felt easier, less risky in Italian. Now I sense that the part of me I've been learning to efface over the last couple years has gotten to be a habit with you. Why, I suppose, is just another of my Catholic preoccupations. Like navigating a distance from oneself, knowing something is there, just out of sight. So I've dedicated two poems and two readings to you in recent months, also a small book, *Los Alephs*, and things I've given magazines with special issues in your memory. What if I dedicated all my poems to you for the next five years and then began signing your name to my work? Besides, Paul isn't much—a homonym for about nine kinds of garment or draping, ecclesiastical, royal and otherwise, four verbs and a feeling of disgust. I thought about all this on the freeway today and started being very careful with my driving. There are secrets and the strict order of being and I was glad to see my exit coming up.

A special habit with you,
long, silky, black hair everywhere,
ecstatic and otherwise,
when you were alive.

IV.

Mostly those childhood dollars
grew wings and flew away
as now one's desire to order the world,
towel or machine gun or utopia
over one's shoulder washing dishes.

That Stalin was once a child, as you now insist, just isn't true. You said as much in your "Stalin Poem" in 1971, before we met and the first morning at the Mulino when the police drove up while I was in the kitchen washing dishes and you all slept. (My first full day in Italy was spent, as you'll recall, in Giulia's car, following you from police station to police station.) Shown a picture of a seven or seventeen year-old, you'd say something like that boy already has Stalin's eyes or see how determined Stalin looks even as a teenager. Growing inseparable from our words we become more like Stalin and you. That morning, April 2, 1975, the cops pounded on the door as I kept at the dishes. Dishes you closed a letter with ten years later: "Volano via intanto I soldi, e tanti miei desideri di 'cambiare il mondo'. Per questa utopia, sono ancora fermo a eneric re tu a Los Angeles chiamavi l'idea di 'aggiustare il mondo' lavando I piatti tutte le mattine." Fixing the world while washing the dishes every morning. When I opened the door for the cops, I had a towel in my hand, they machine guns. Admit it, Adriano, Stalin could never have been a child.

Already stopped at opening the door
a police station, a kitchen at your back.
The cops keep following dishes
to the words that drive you
from one picture to another.

V.

How heavily the foot is accented,
don't let the message stop you
this far into the service,
morning has been sentenced to love.

Christ, said the Italian priest, at the Chinese Mass on Christmas morning, died on the cross because he *laffed*. This happened in North Beach, at St. Peter's and Paul's, across the square from the apartment where I lived my first seven years. The entire Mass was in Chinese, except for a few minutes of the sermon in heavily accented English. I was there with my father. It had been many years since I had set foot in church. I couldn't keep the tears out of my eyes the more Chinese I heard. Only the English stopped me. God is *laff*, said the priest, repeating the Christmas message. When the service had begun, I stood in the pew glaring straight ahead, with moist eyes, a loaf of bread we had just bought under my arm. My father kept repeating something like *amon* along with the Chinese, until I asked to leave. *Amon*. Egyptian God of life and reproduction, revealed as a man with a ram's head. Christ's, concluded the priest, is the kingdom of *heaven an dearth*.

All those years at the kitchen table,
only mothers and fathers asked to leave,
there with a loaf of bread under his arm
until just now your laughter catches me.

VI.

Poetry, please, if you'll recall
one secret in particular,
with a ram's head and a sermon
choreographed to run off
with somebody's wife.

“The most important weapon in my arsenal,” said old Joe, “is the dictionary.” That makes us both, I suppose, Stalinists. I've had a flu linger and can't sleep well and worst of all been dreaming incessantly. One dream in particular about the art world was excruciating. No details, I promise. “Portrait with Dry Luck” was the name of a big painting I can't recall. I was so pissed off by the babble of the artists (mix of cowboy ingenuity and Hollywood aspiration) that I woke up still enraged, maybe more so, at the not improbable vision and that it was, after all, 4:45a.m., and I unable to fall back to sleep. Poetry is blind painting, said Leonardo, which, if you recall, makes painting dumb poetry. Please, Adriano, the secrets we have.

Free of rage and the babble
of cowboys down on their luck,
you won't soon fall back to sleep
as what is most excruciating
still lingers in the dictionary.

VII.

The difference between stupid
and stupid and silence and silence
is why mother's fond of repeating
writing has nothing to do with it.

Somewhere I read the point of poetry or pop music or any art that claims to be contemporary is to make the Stupid livable. Or maybe the critic wrote "inhabitable." In any case, given your curious position, it's a thesis I'd like to try out. A hummingbird, for the first time, just banged into the window. One of my students at the Art Institute writing about Pontormo's diary: Everything that is art is silent and has nothing to do with time. Well? Is it silence or the stupid made inhabitable? Yes, of course. Stop the bus. Let's all at least empty our shoes. You know I'm in no position to repeat your accusation—pardon me, your *question*. But there is a difference between stupid and stupid or between silence and silence. The last week or so there's been a bird around my house I've never heard, sounding like a rusty wheel. Maybe something new the mockers have gotten hold of, or just maybe. Well, as my mother's fond of repeating, it takes two to tangle. *Amon*.

The hummingbird banging
into the window just in time,
given all your questions
and rusty shoes and silences.

VIII.

Besides the time swallowed
you haven't been able to find,
there are phone calls and bookshelves
and an old man across the street
who is no longer in the mood.

If for a year or two I didn't mention a subject, would I be including by exclusion or who, besides you maybe, would even bother to notice? That from a note after trying to recall a source for the following: "While I thought I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die." Who might, besides you, consider the black cat on my front steps, staring at the roof, now slipping around the corner of the house? The last sentence feels awkward as many do recently. Years ago I used to make a point of reading over what I'd just written while I listened to a ballgame or sometimes a favorite piece of music. The results were often the same, the next morning tearing apart what I thought was carefully composed the day before. This morning I get up and walk into the next room and check the time, make phone calls I've been putting off for days, look from bookshelf to bookshelf for a journal I've not been able to find for the last year until it will be too late or I'm no longer in the mood to sit at the screen and talk to you. I just put a teaspoon of sugar in my coffee just for a change, and think I understand what you mean when you said you invented me in Italy. I watch an old man stop across the street, put his paper bag on the wall, his cap on top of that, take off his white sweater, then the cap back on, sweater over his arm, paper bag in the other hand and continue briskly up the hill. *Un bel vecc*, they'd have said in Mulino di Bazzano. Or as my students in Poland used to smile, "We are proud of our old people." Besides.

Listening to a ballgame who,
but you, might bother to notice
the music tearing apart the results
of learning how to live or die or
read over the sentence just written.

IX.

Morning, evening your time,
whereas the strict order of being
drives my finger miles past
any available exit or topic
a black cat may be slipping
around the corner where.

Relapse of the flu and a grant application has kept me from you. Five pages of forms for a grand prize of \$750, National Endowment for the Humanities "Travel to Collections." The proposed collection is in your house, so that I might this summer, with Bianca's help, establish a manuscript of your latest, etc. "The Descriptive Title of the Project (Block 8) must indicate in a direct manner the concise topic to be studied. The Description of the Project (Block 9), as an abstract of the project, must give its thesis and note its significance as a study of the humanities." All of this particularly embarrassing, especially for 750 U.S. dollars. "Translating Adriano Spatola's poetry, 1979-1988" was what I finally called it. I won't say how I demonstrated your significance. Besides, a person from Parma has been calling, already three times this week. He mentions your name. He never identifies himself, just keeps asking if I recognize him, while I say, of course, but the connection is terrible would he please speak up. He says he'll call back, which sometimes he does and other times doesn't until the next morning (evening, his time). Then he starts over again, asking if I recognized him the day before, how have I been, my children, etc. This morning he got past the usual litany to telling me he was "in crisis," when I began bellowing that I couldn't hear anymore and let my finger disconnect him.

The description lacks a bookshelf
or a cop who recognizes your name.
The project seems to speak up
without first identifying how
terribly significant the lack
of roses or a bottle of wine.

X.

Do you recall who wrote
(copping one from the Cherokee)
that ideas went west,
that is, came here to die?

The person from Parma seems to have stopped and Monday I mailed the grant application. He called once more to ask if I had anything published on dark humor in American fiction or if I might help with some sources. I said sure if he would send a note with an outline of what he needs and his address. (I read this again months later and no word yet from our caller.) Incidentally, the title of your collection—I avoid “last” or “final” (do I believe there will be another)—anyway, the title, “The Definition of the Price” doesn’t travel so well from Italian. “La definizione del prezzo” is so right and easy it’s a shame it doesn’t carry much weight in English. Also, as you’ve noticed, I haven’t come up with a title for these conversations of ours. I’m inclined toward a statement, something like “ASAP or How the Angels Discovered America.” Oh well. It’s garbage day. La señora is out in pink bathrobe to retrieve her cats and empty cans. The phone is ringing. The postman’s next door.

Not, incidentally, that Cherokee
with the long, silky black hair
on Cherokee in Hollywood.
Why come all this way to puzzle?

XI.

Both of us in a room
that's never rhymed with broom
only a window playing westward
like your favorite poem
about the little flags marching
downhill past the roses.

The White House said that General Noriega remains in strict isolation locked in a room with only a crucifix and a broken TV. You will know them by their works. It's too early to be so damned upset on a Sunday morning. The young are still in one another's arms. Nobody's rushing downhill to church. The realtors haven't begun raising their little flags and Open House signs yet. It's just you and I and the neighbor with AIDS up the street trimming his roses. Did I mention the slide of the two of us, lambrusco vines in the background, I pouring same into your devoted glass? A letter on my desk from Giovanni Fontana announces a special issue dedicated to the "figure and work of Adriano Spatola, a poet friend who played a very important role in the cultural debate of these last twenty years." I think I'll answer with a print of the slide and caption underneath. What should I say? I'm embarrassed to repeat some of the lines I've tried. (Yes, there's always that or something a little more enigmatic, less incriminating, which I'd never get away with without seeming to sneer.) More neutral statements about friendship, life, death, feel mired in banality or self-service, as maybe the whole notion of a picture of you and me. Yesterday there was a call on my machine from Giovanni in Alatri which I'll return after we finish. Maybe if I send the photo with just "August 11, 1987, Sant'Ilario d'Enza" beneath. Or maybe a line from one of your poems, like your favorite from "Il poema Stalin": *tacere non è meglio eneric re.*

You didn't mention the remains
of the young isolated and sliding
into one another's arms,
and the two of us repeating
banalities about real estate and
devotion to these last twenty years.

XII.

Sweet Betsy from Pike
only became a literate medium
after clarifying her position
and yours in the budget.

How did he get the elephant in the unfinished drawing? I asked myself, as a friend talked on the phone about a lecture she went to yesterday delivered by a colleague of hers on a drawing of a nude woman with snake by Rembrandt. Don't you think it's the sort of question to occupy the daily mind of the Assistant Curator of Pornographic Drawing at the new Getty Center for the Humanities? The position isn't as yet in their budget but it's crying out to be filled. By a capable hand. Like your own (or mine). Since such a collection is currently in the planning stages, that is, doesn't exist, the curatorial task is an arduous and limitless one. Ultimately the life of the assistant curator (or curators) is to seek the head curator, of which theoretically there may only one, though the seekers, in this case the assistants, may be many. (Incidentally, it's been drizzling all afternoon and I'm about to take a bath, giving the impression were occupying a literate medium.) The historical figure is, after all, harder than the mythological, said Anesthesia Aphrodite, adjusting her bra, and the self the hardest of all.

The girl must have had some class
to come all that way over rivers
and mountains and valleys
that didn't, in fact, ultimately exist.

XIII.

Wolves come in so many favorite colors
it's hard to tell them from the door.
Tuna is the last word in terror,
lawyers always seem to be paying
for lunches given the fact that yours
and mine are no longer the same.

You would be furious with what I've gotten myself into again. I mean, not being paid enough or at all for translating, editing, organizing festivals, readings, shows, etc., doing what you used to call other people's work for them. (Opposite of how glad my grandfather would be hearing about something terrible like moving to the suburbs or getting divorced or putting ketchup in the tomato sauce; because so-and-so had done it, he, my grandfather said, didn't have to.) I won't bore you with any details, except to mention that this poetry festival pays. (Notwithstanding the money from extra teaching jobs for Tristan's lawyer—but that's another story and another life.) It seems lately the only way to bait my fugitive self is with projects that keep something worse than a wolf from the door. Maybe a worse wolf or a farther wolf, as in a father shore. Yesterday, waiting for a tuna sandwich at the college, a textbook caught my eye: *Childhood Fear: Symptoms and Management*. The last word of the title is curious, if not downright alarming. I know it's hard for you to get worked up about small terrors but there it was just about on my tray. I envy you the fact that you no longer have to lunch on words like *management*. No, mine are not the same. In the morning my words, like yours once did, wash dishes and fill my sleep with drowning fish gasping their way into my car. Besides.

Notwithstanding the bait
my extra self is having to project
as downright eye-catching,
reading fills my sleep with envy
and worse and worse titles
and any other work that pays.

XIV.

An accident, among other things,
disguised as explanation,
a greater confidence in what
you may be sorry for tomorrow.

What other force to be controlled by than love, you insist, what better power. Woke at 6:15, confident of a whole morning with you at the screen. Visiting Uncle Z in Titusville, N.J. (near Princeton), it's been a week since I've sat here. Up to pee, then back to bed and slept until 8. During which an old German friend I've never met told me what Shalom Aleichem said about the fierceness of the heart. OK, I take my shoes off to you and am sorry for what I will accuse you of tomorrow. In any case, Uncle Z looks well, recovered from his strokes except for the hearing in his right ear. Joan and Venetia seem to be prospering in Tightsville, as Z calls it. We talked of Peter Whigham and you, among other things, but there was a subject I just couldn't broach. I tried by recalling how I found out in Rome about Peter's accident (a story Z had heard at least twice). It was Saturday, August 28, 1987, after a morning of visiting the Vatican I phoned Tanya in L.A. to see if she might rent a room to a Roman friend at Caltech for a few months. After saying that she had already rented to a student, she asked if I'd heard about the poet who just died. She couldn't remember his name but thought that he was an Englishman. Anyway, what I couldn't tell Z after repeating the story was the fateful sensation I had about Peter that evening in Rome and for days to come.

At the end of a road in Tuscany
in more ways than one, said Peter
of another Peter and then asked
if he might remove his shoes.

XV.

It was later than expected
the road still open,
more laughter and louder
than he remembered,
he found the door open, the wind, etc.

Pardon me, but it's your turn to be ashamed. What you did with my class here was inexcusable. Playing with the door that way in the middle of a critique was a gesture I never expected. Those of us who saw as well as heard it started to laugh. The class stopped. I got up and opened the door pretending to see if I'd left a window open for the wind, etc. The students began to invent explanations. I made a few silly puns and we took a break. Of course it was you. I won't accept denials. But why so blunt? It was the final class of the term, my last at that college. The students hadn't been in the house an hour. I wasn't lost yet in the hallway with her mouth telling me how much she liked the cool plaster. Besides, everyone was gone when I found her bracelet in the bathroom. You're incurable. When do I get the next installment, additional charges for the life I've forced on you? The poet lost in his work, the man without a heart up his sleeve while conscience, disguised as his dear friend's ghost, rattles the door.

Or else what was once pretense,
you know, window, puns,
bracelets, unexpected denials
that make us romantic and fierce
and most often lie.

XVI.

Waking in this house where mother,
grandfather, grandfather's grandfather,
can't help but regret quitting sometimes
on the emptiness that has me
puzzling for years at a window.

Saturday, August 28, 1987. Part of it, I'm sure, was outrage at Peter's death but there was more. As if expected when it happened, a kind of crazed necessity that became intolerable. Often it came as an emptiness, sometimes a definition: cutting whole days of classes to shoot pool or lie in the grass and read aloud in Golden Gate Park; seeing Italy the first time, waking in the house where my mother was born; quitting graduate school and driving a cab all night up and down Sunset Blvd.; laid off at the newspaper and lying the next day with Margaret and T. on the beach, December 7, Pearl Harbor Day; walking out of my house and marriage on September 4, 1978, into the stifling heat, with a fever of 101 and two boxes of clothes and books; leaving the radio station for the last time, April 1, in the middle of the night; sitting at this window at dawn, Thanksgiving Day, 1984, Nonna dead a few hours before. Notwithstanding your purity, the phone just rang and it was Rosemary Porta, Antonio's widow, calling from Milano. She said she had talked recently with your Bianca who found for her the recording you produced in 1975 of Antonio and others reading with music, *Europa cavalca un toro nero*. When you died, Bob came over and we cooked Thanksgiving dinner, turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, yams, green beans and all the trimmings. At five we set three places at table and sat to dinner and poured you a glass. By 6:30 Bob was passed out and I at the TV weeping my way through *Mary Poppins*. Caro, it was the dancing penguins divested my heart.

The moon hasn't shown yet
and it's so crowded in here up an down Sunset
the night feels about as eternal
as you and grandmother waltzing
around the table after dinner.

XVII.

Changing your name to Adriano (A.S.)
rather than the Bruno you were given.
A desperately funny notion in English,
pushing up out of the chair to announce
your solidarity with a sheet of paper.

Did I mention a poem Luigi Ballerini gave me recently? (In fact he slipped me a revision only last week, at a quasi-Italian function, high in Benedict Canyon. Folding the sheet one more time I slid it in my inside coat pocket, to the bemused smiles of several people around us.) Luigi's poem is about the Italian Communist Party trying to change its name. No, I was sure you knew. The Party's announcement came at the end of last year, around the anniversary of your death, when we began this. No, I'm not being vindictive, maybe just a little desperate. Anyway, I started to tell you Luigi's poem has an epigraph from Wallace Stevens: "A dead romantic is a falsification." A funny notion, especially this morning, as I've been recalling how excited you used to get over the Marine Corps anthem, how many times you made me sing the damn thing after we'd finished working all day and were en route to a serious drunk. You would push up out of your chair, even in front of a roomful of people, and make me stand with you, bellowing, "From the Halls of Montezuma..." On the subject of Marines, you might not have heard that the new president of Panama, the "democratically elected president," as our own Bush calls him, went on a thirteen day hunger strike to show his solidarity with the poor. His critics, however, are calling the fast a diet. Yesterday he held a press conference announcing the end of the presidential fast and his intentions to gain back the symbolic twelve pounds. His supporters, it was reported, cheered the decision, most notably his 22-year-old fiancé.

In fact it was just yesterday,
the anniversary of our last meeting,
somewhat quasi-vindictive maybe
that there's yet another Bush elected
to office along with the Marines.

XVIII.

Feeble credentials were all the speed
I could muster. Did I have a vodka
in my left hand, was it your deregulated
heart, her disarming lack of shoes
that were impossible to read?

You did it to me again, exactly seven days apart. Is it because I pretend to music without a heart? Or are you insisting I see her again, read more of your poems to her, share another bottle of vodka. This time it was the first thing in the morning on my way to work. Your choice was disarming: a woman on an overpass, above the Santa Monica Freeway, roughly your age, black, barefoot, with a badminton racket in her right hand and something she was trying to serve (probably not a shuttlecock) in her left. She recited at the sun and the traffic although it was impossible to hear. Maybe she was reminding us that in the beginning was the word against her skin and she couldn't slip into something more comfortable. Maybe she was chiding us all below for deregulating her shoes. Or maybe she was about to expose my feeble credentials when I sped by. In any case, I founder before your assault.

How to listen to such a reminder
over traffic against the skin?
Badminton on an overpass,
impossible to hear,
serving the music with her right.

XIX.

Her name is in the jeep again,
followed less than a block behind
by a young man on a motorcycle.
A stripped shirt appears to be tucking
another ambush up your sleeve.

Good morning. You and I are a new language or, should I say, we are in a new language in a new computer. Now neither of us is out-of-date and entirely compatible with most systems on the market. In fact, it was reported yesterday that a 48lb. tumor was removed from a young woman in New Delhi who, after the operation, weighed 79lbs. Not a world record though, according to the Guinness Book, which lists the largest reported tumor ever at 328lbs. A rich inner life, you'd have to admit. It's been hard all week to sit in front of this screen. Don't take it personal. Her name now curiously familiar as yours is filling my head. A young man in a jeep with a striped shirt is looking for an address on my block. In our relentless urge for abstraction some poets keep us from faking the clay feet in our shoes, says the ventriloquist tucking another heart up her sleeve. There goes the guy in the jeep again. Followed by an older man in leather on a motorcycle. I must stop. I can't sit still for this.

Her name the jeep again.
Not an entirely familiar language,
should our ventriloquist find
markets as out-of-date as you,
an older man on a motorcycle.

XX.

Opening one's eyes in the bright sun
after canceling the wind on what body.
Poverty sends his regards, most partial,
as you recall, to a missing word
and the same refusal as before.

I've changed the title four times and now back to the working title, "ASAP." I tried "ASAP or How the Angels Discovered America," "ASAP or How the Angels Discovered America and Went West," "ASAP or How the Angels Stole America with Deeds of Poverty," and finally, "ASAP or Deeds of Poverty." Bob, who, by the way, sends his regards, doesn't care much for the working title. He sides with the more commonsensical who consider things like anagrams and acrostics false wit or, in his words, "scuffling disguise." I, as you recall, have always been partial; things like Florence Nightengale ("Flit on, cheering angel") delight me plenty. As for composition, I'm not sure what moves this text or what body. Or which is left stricter and less painful, since the beat has been lost and nothing's missing except the mystery of who beat the same refusal as before. Here are no woods full of stupid victims, only a desert that on occasion allows a small word. Since the machine has been dismantled and sold to a museum. Since her hands did reason sleep, night no longer cancels my word.

The mystery changes title and now
back to destinations in your words
more painful, stricter than those woods
dismantled, full of disguises and
scuffling with the commonsensical.

XXI.

How much the cost of belief
even if you were alive.
Up in the castle above your house
a black angel comes disguised
as an emperor to kneel in the snow
for his beloved who never writes.

Tanya just called to say Tito Kasner, whose book I was editing when we last saw each other, died this morning. You will recall I mentioned how preoccupied he was that he wouldn't live to see the project finished; how he opened a special account to insure all the costs of the book even if he weren't alive. That was two years ago. He was born like you in 1941. Tanya went on to say she was sending a review from the *Times* of a book called *In the Company of Angels*, about a woman's belief in them after seeing a black angel in the snow when she was near death from a ski accident. Tanya read the opening of the review: "Do angels have feet? Teeth? Tears?" Before hanging up Tanya wondered what I was doing. I said writing and she said to give you her regards. I ask you, what thesaurus is this, that for *mystery* lists three synonyms, *art*, *trade*, *association*?

A list is no insurance against mystery,
nor a review in the *Times* of that book,
When We Saw Each Other Last.
You will recall the opening something like,
"When I woke up your ghost was still there
and nobody around to edit the results."

XXII.

Stars haven't changed much.
They swim in hundreds of destinations
chasing pronouns from their nests.
Harder if they hadn't been born
to eavesdrop on strangers.

If, like an English gentlewoman, you had gone to the stars, it would be a lot different. Especially if either of our families had had a motto, like "Sic itur ad astra." But, as you once said, born petty bourgeois, lived petty bourgeois and will die so. Jug jug, twit twit. Mockers are chasing a crow from their nests. In 1973 you first wrote to me asking, "What is your program?" You'll recall I wrote back saying something to the effect that much of what you might call art here was mostly an accident and it was hard to afford a program or destination. Jug jug, twit twit. A lot has changed in seventeen years. Three more museums, one hundred more galleries and many less bookstores. Bob, who has been here about fifty years, has been talking about the necessity for stasis. This is where he sees poetry sit, eavesdropping on strangers, good friends in conversation. And sit. Inventing stasis, he says, to get on with it. The pronoun is what troubles me. Jug jug, twit twit. Troubled me these last seventeen years.

Sic itur ad astra, neither of us
could afford such a vocation.
Our motto was mostly an accident
falling somewhere between trouble
and the necessity for good conversation.

XXIII.

One thing I forgot. Commenting on some early pages of ours, Bob noted that the author's Catholic background makes him too timid to address the finality of death. I get up and notice a message on my machine. I guess I didn't turn the ring back on. It's the person from Parma. He's calling to say I never responded to his letter about dark humor in American fiction. He wishes me a good day of work and says he will call again. As I come back with my coffee, the phone chirps and I risk answering. It's just a computer wanting to sell life insurance. The other evening, I found myself at the screen with her reading lines I wrote for a dance some years before:

And at Cumae, hanging
in a jar, Sybilla
sang:

“Do you not wish
to look in my eyes.
The fish-legged man
the dog-faced man
the goat-footed
the swan-necked
the bull-shouldered
have all looked on me.
The monkey-tailed one
tried even to eat my eyes.
Do you not wish to see them?
Suffering and pain are there
and the dying you call love.”

That was May 1990. In the glassed-in room above the street, both of us, or should I say, the three of us ought to have known better. The phone rings again and this time I don't answer. Yes, a lot has changed and nothing.

XXIV.

Do you recall an artist's video
"Lost Dogs?" I don't.
History is the hardest figure,
repeats Aphrodite Anesthesia,
adjusting her bra, casting a smile
now and then on the errant hummer.

Yes, it's Monday and I was in San Francisco with her over the weekend. Back here it's a fine breezy day behind the glass. I have been up a while. They're shooting a movie down the street, trailers, dressing rooms and trucks everywhere. The person from Parma called again about a half hour ago and unfortunately I picked up the phone. When I heard the crackle on the line, I demanded to know who it was. He paused, and then said, it's me. He asked if I'd gotten his message last week and his earlier letter, which I told him never arrived. He would be sure, he said, to send the article on black humor when it was published. I said that it would be a pleasure. He asked if I were going to be in Italy this summer and when could I be expected and would I be alone? I said probably sometime in August and that I would be traveling with my daughter. He said, oh, you mean Simone. I almost hung up then and there. I stayed on the phone long enough to say my plans were still a little vague and he might try calling Corrado Costa's office in late July to have a better idea of my whereabouts. We expressed mutual pleasure in the conversation and some goodbyes.

After a morning in my hotel room
thinking it was night,
I read this again truly glad
we aren't discouraged
by each other's lack of. OK,
"Lost Dogs" is an excellent title.

XXV.

Of the nine possible reasons
for winter or spring,
most of them quite awful,
you confiscate the shape
and application of sleeping
in those long arms.

A judge yesterday ruled that the U.S. government, that is, the prosecution, has to pay for General Noriega's lawyers because the same government confiscated his assets. Also, in the mail, was a form letter from the National Endowment for the Humanities denying the grant for \$750 to go to your house and put together a manuscript of your poems of the last ten years. The form letter began: "Because the Travel to Collections grant is small, it is necessary that the Endowment maintain it with low administrative costs. We regret, therefore, that we cannot indicate to you personally why your application was not successful." Toward the bottom of the page were listed nine possible reasons for turning down an application, starting with: "Neither the topic nor the research methodology proposed is central to the humanities." Given your position, this last statement does resound. Incidentally, in San Francisco last week, she dreamt that we went to a poetry reading by the model Paulina. Apparently P. was quite awful, though I kept insisting that she was the best of the model poets. Paulina read a piece called "Progression." It was, she said, a kind of performance poem in which P. would say something like, "Morning/Evening," then put her long, shapely arms together, or "Winter/Spring," then push them apart. I think she never forgave me for reading Pasolini to her when she was sleepy. Are you pleased?

The judge was not pleased
with the size of your assets
as there was so little personally
to regret. He dreamt, the letter began,
that yesterday was in the mail,
and never forgave me.

XXVI.

There are exercises and there are exercises,
Caligula was fond of saying
to his beloved sister, Drusilla,
and there are myths and there are myths.
The rest appear to be penances
and are mostly unappealing.

A friend called to tell me two things: that my poems are depressing and that I am a hedonist. Or vice versa. Anyway, I'm collapsing about a ten or fifteen minute conversation. I thought you might be interested. I've tried to be. Sorry, that wasn't necessary. Speaking of sorry or pardon me, someone at a reading asked me why I say so when I misread and start a line or stanza over. He said I was asking pardon of myself, since it was my own text I was reading. Does this too make me a hedonist? What if I were dead, might the work be less depressing? Or maybe it's just another of my evangelical occupations, wanting to loose myself in death or love. A man is walking up the hill for exercise and reading a book. Yesterday a different man was doing the same thing with a newspaper. What does one read walking? OK, but that's a little unkind. I mean, if one really wanted to. Biographies, maybe, or prayers and meditations. And histories or lyric poems or Greek and Latin epigrams. It's not the same as what you might read on a bus, or in a café or even sitting on the toilet. I know, you've already said that. The whole idea, I suppose, is unappealing. Lately, she has been reading me children's stories. (No, it's not penance for having subjected her to Pasolini.) *Sono incantevoli*, more like a form of exercise.

Collapsing conversation is
what one has in love or death.
This too must make me not unlike
the children's story of the hedonist
who every morning walks downhill
reading and writing a different book.

XXVII.

The head, the letter went on to say,
is well-fed, erect, eyes full of rime,
early Sunday morning stamped on its face.

The president of Liberia, Samuel Doe (a descendent of John), has asked the U.S. for political asylum and safe conduct from his besieged capitol of Monrovia. Also, our own Bush told a group of 4th graders in Chicago that one of the best things about the White House was the good food you got there. The implication seeming, for both Doe and Bush, that anyone who tries hard enough can be president and well-fed. The older man who walks up the hill for exercise has stopped reading. His head is erect and determination is stamped on his face. It's Sunday morning. She had to be off early to pack and my eyes are full of rime. (I'm not sure how it is in Italian, not *rime* certainly.) Rime being better than rage, I suppose, even if on Sunday mornings I'm used to the latter. Or ladder. Depending on your education. Or form of exercise.

Rime and rage, our President told a group
of older men who have stopped reading,
are certainly the best forms of education.

Yes, you're right, Sunday mornings feel different, much of the anxiety and expectation gone with the passing years. Now it's more a question of the weather and watering the garden and trying to make something of those lines scribbled on a bag driving home from work on Friday. And, of course, a phone call from her a few months back at 10:30 at night, dozing, with a book on my lap. After not a word for almost fifteen years, she wanted me to know that she had a most wonderful nine-year-old daughter, was still living in Manhattan, and had married her cousin after all. I recall feeling very glad and then being wide awake as I went back to reading the book that had tumbled onto my lap. And after all, I had to admit, tomorrow was Sunday.

XXVIII.

A memory at last to tame
the vanishing pronoun.
Rhymes with Italy and blunder
as there's a whole world of tundra
out there fresh off the farm.

Today is Flag Day. Mine was getting exceedingly ephemeral until I met her. This last phrase like that in a pop song which suits you always disfavored. Now my flag has vanished altogether and what's left flying feels delicious as thought. Or talk. The kind there is waking in the middle of the night in the rain. If only you might taste the colors or at least have a peek. I suppose there are things you don't notice anymore, as there is a whole world of sentences that escapes me. For example, in a student essay on third generation welfare mothers: "Cecillie was 17 years old when she had Asia." I think someone in your position might be better able to find a handle. (Cecillie, in this case, pronounced like the island at the foot of Italy.) Or, for that matter, what Arthur Miller said on TV the other night, in an interview from his farm in Connecticut. I'm not evoking tundra here. You know, the kind the North American writer often finds herself in the unenviable position of being required to give a voice to. Rhymes in Brooklyn with blunder. And thunder. And wonder.

Our song, given voices like these,
has become exceedingly ephemeral.
Remember you might taste the colors,
whether or not you find them delicious
as rain in the middle of the night.

XXIX.

He opened the door, the report noted,
and emptied ice from a plastic cup.
With agonizing slowness we reread
the statement, wondering out loud why
we are having trouble with the camera.

Second night in a row I had an idea driving home I wished to ask you about in the morning and failed to write it down. All I can recall is what Arthur Miller said to the camera in Connecticut. By the way, there's something I never thought to ask, and recently it's been obtruding. Just what did inspiration mean to you as a poet? I might have had trouble framing the question when you were alive. Last week I was at a restaurant with friends and on our menus was a statement from the artist whose work hung on the walls. Something about still considering himself a "studio artist" but approaching the paint "only when driven by inspiration." I wondered out loud about the last phrase. A friend pointed out that the artist wanted to emphasize that, unlike me, he doesn't sit down to write or paint every morning. Tundra. I might start a litany of what's going on around my glass walls this morning but, in fact, very little. With the exception of a man in a madras shirt sitting in a car across the street reading the paper. When he pulled up some twenty minutes ago, he opened his door and emptied the ice out of a plastic cup. Remarkably quiet for a Friday morning, June 15. "There are no more bluebirds here," said Arthur Miller to the TV camera. "But with agonizing slowness we are rising to the challenge."

Just what did it mean to that man
pulling up some twenty minutes ago?
All I can recall is that last week
I was at a restaurant and the menu
couldn't handle your questions.

XXX.

A smaller secret than embarrassment
and a child that, as they say,
has been all but transformed.
All of it (our democratic pronoun)
distressed by their presences.

I had meant to start with driving home the other night at 2a.m. on a deserted boulevard watching three attractive women lounging in chairs in front of a restaurant exercising their rights as citizens of beauty. As well as they ought in these dangerous days. But then a friend told me about the gerbil (*gerbillo* in Italian), a small rodent and ubiquitous pet of the 60s now become the focus of erotic achievement. His shrink's brother, a surgeon, was called upon to remove a gerbil from a well-known actor's alimentary canal. *Enter Rumor, painted with tongues*. In any case, seems a current form of exercise not limited to celebrities. (My friend even offered a synopsis, which I'll spare you, of how the rodent is introduced into the body politic.) In the book *Nemo*, I considered Eros the only true democrat. Seems I hadn't accounted for his pantheistic leanings. All of it (the pronoun again) seems covert and rather Masonic to me but then I was one who, as a child, was rather embarrassed by secrets. I used to be put off, even distressed by their presence. I suppose that my discomfort has been transformed, as they say in Las Vegas, if not eased entirely.

Citizens of beauty (originally
in French) seem better suited.
A surgeon, recently called upon
to limit celebrity, offered to outline
our choices in Las Vegas.

XXXI.

Who has the least idea of
what shore or upon which side
we have been gathering?
Lest we finally turn our backs
on these heartless waters.

I wish finally to consider people, although there isn't much here. Myself half a man learning or maybe just leaning. And you certainly other. And she is away and maybe gone. (I've denied this last sentence twice. Why do you insist on it?) Of course, I'm not dragging people of the definite article into this. I was thinking more of how it's used in American speech, like "All your daddy's people were from Kansas and Oklahoma." Or even more specifically, in rural African-American speech: "They was 100 people on this land before the war." Implying, I guess, something less than kin and more than kind. Proclamation (found by John McBride in a volume of Blake's poetry in Moe's Bookstore): "The floating population begging food will be fed night and morning with instructions that if they repeat their visit in town, they will be arrested for vagrancy and their fine worked out on the riverbank." Signed by one I.G. Langum, mayor of St. Charles, Illinois. (No date.) Or in Italian-American: "Hey, they got alotta people in here." Implying people like us, *noialtri*, or a bunch of swell people we don't know at the dance. "Families out of employment, in need of coal, will receive same through the welfare, which is a separate organization, but will be requested to work the cost of the coal out on the riverbank at 30 cents per hour." The mayor brings new meaning to the old spiritual, "Shall We Gather at the River." Which is maybe where we've been gathering all this time, on either side of the river. Please, I've said it, turning my back on these heartless waters.

In American speech
the people are often arrested
for begging, they be at war or not.
The mayor, the article goes on to say,
is working out the cost of night.

XXXII.

Nor are rabbits exactly
elegiac or spiritual
though decent enough pets,
especially after the sun goes down
and us in that remote condition.

Yesterday the first day of summer, in spite of my not pronouncing the first *r*. Nor the one in Saturday. "The dead hear everything," wrote Bob in a note. "That is why, at certain station in life, it is not necessary to speak." No, I will not embarrass either of us with the question. A couple of years ago a poet friend responded to an episode in *Nemo* that began, "Do I consider life a sentence?" She wrote: "stupid, Paul, way too stupid, the youth is gonna laugh at you, they are gonna guffaw & trip & continue to put needles in their arms from a.m. despair. Can you talk to them?" I am not passing the question on to you, only noting one more time our curious position. Being a poet, she went on to say: "I don't believe that poetry is made of language anymore than a living body is made of organs." There we are, tickled to death by the only adjective in the sentence. The shore ever more remote and delicious. "Rabbits make wonderful pets," said Bob last night about that crazy idea.

And speaking of summer,
won't be long before we are sentenced
to another just tickled to death
by those missing *r*'s and all
who don't necessarily speak.

XXXIII.

I woke rather suddenly after staring at page after page of maps of where souls wandered. Most of them were sections of San Francisco, detailed and festive, full of parks and monuments, and I think I recognized a few like George Sterling's grove and the Haskell House. A friend and poet, to whom I was showing these as a kind of preface to a larger manuscript, asked where, in all of this, mine resided. I told her I wasn't sure, it all seemed so long ago, though probably only this summer or last. She asked why then was I including the maps and I said something about how haunting and nostalgic they looked, not wanting actually to admit their purpose: that here, as in life, we simply wandered, unconvinced of where we belong.

Right out of bed and write,
refreshed if a little dazed,
recalling the pages of hills
and parks and avenues,
the ink slightly faded
though the paper still fresh
between my fingers.

There is a breeze this morning for the first time in days. It just flipped over a page of the unread newspaper on the other side of the table. Why don't I dream of the city in which I've lived almost forty years? The air is cool around my bare legs and ankles as I head for the porch, hoping for a glimpse of what's making such a loud squawk flying by.

XXXIV

Her name the jeep again.
Despite our parentheses,
pronouns and their thirsty shadows
keep hovering all gussied-up
for their city of beauty.
Who in the previous sentence
revolves closer to a kiss?

Which brings me to two license plates I will see later this afternoon. After I finish a draft of your poem, "Assassins in Love," for Luigi's anthology. One reads: *Aprill. I do hair*. A Chaucerian, I gather, via a rather slippery T.S. Eliot. The other of a more elegiac mind: *Lisa. Nails, Makeup & Music*. In an earlier draft I had parentheses everywhere, unable to offer a given word. I just did it again—(earlier) (you) (given)—to the three in the (last, previous) sentence. But the parentheses don't hold enough. They don't (restrain) (delay) what I can't say to you. The hummingbirds have fresh sugar water hanging from the bough. It came out this morning (very) close to the color of their throats. Other than that there is you, and my apology notwithstanding. Otherwise I revolve around our intersection, as the shades around the pit Odysseus dug with his sword for you to drink from. It is he (I, me) who drinks last. Neither (of us) has much time left to kiss. So, we get all gussied-up for it. Or for *me*. Other than that, caro, I've been here it seems for months and I am still nine hours and eighteen years behind.

The water's beginning to darken,
trees growing solemn
in the late afternoon.
O animal in the dusk,
it isn't you or me
but a stranger passing this way.
How will she know
if not for the shushing breeze
up and down the arroyo.
It's a glum assassin who is not in love.
I turn the porch light on and sit.

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