

Proximities

by

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norton

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note on the text

*What I am making is
A place for language in my life
Which I want to be a real place
Seeing I have to put up with it
Anyhow.*

—W.S. Graham

*my
tongue drifts lightly into
the gobi desert of yr
ear*

—Ted Berrigan

this mountain country

it is afternoon and the sun
won't stop talking

down to us. birds
tessellate south.

this mountain country
demands my choice

of affect, each of your ten
component textures.

buffing the word into speech,
we have no memory of leaves

outside of their dying.
I raze the field.

you are autographed onto
the far hills,

a helpful small fact, human-
shaped. in what vista is left

I am a sketch, performing,
palm-lifted, laughing myself out.

in the distance, your glacial
sitting-down. after years,

sound's cautious resettlement
of the area.

i) recto
&
verso

pastorals

I

in cooperation with the sun's
decline, leaves
paw the wind down.

roots whine. the scene sets
itself and a corridor
for you to enter it.

light pans flat

into acreage, I arrive
with the memory that you
requested, I spread it out.

II

drawing our scene tight
to its chest, the hour

disciplines our trees, shamelessly

mothers the bricked heights.
small tempos

wriggle at our rooted

feet, bicker for scraps. we
agree: the sun is

none other than the hour

it wraps itself in.
we coo at resemblance, recline

in the light brought

suddenly against
our suddenly elaborate shapes.

III

you have troubled the wood
dropping stones, stones

through its one window. out
over the knuckled horizon

a huckster grins through
the sun, selling his existence

to us. I've stenciled in your
eyes: you may now speak

of seeing and of having seen.

ferryman's refrain

what you find here, on reaching a cupped
hand in: a man, a self-regard and the
pretense of toil towards. a sun, rotten
and exempt. a typical refrain. a girl
you knew. the unbodied words of survival
experts. *on a cold night, fashion the
shadow as friend.* alone the pretense
leaks, and lacks right angles. this is a
typical dry poetry, a ruptured boat among
pastures. *even dumb talk marks out its
acre.* a laugh you lifted from a girl
you knew. a girl you knew one
cold night. this is a typical dry poem
fashioned of the shadow-fashioned
friend. an exercise in surviving, a
stroking of dusk. what you have here:
the useless vessel, the admonitions
of sporting men, the unbodied splash.

portrait with parkinson's disease

*there is no use trying to escape
and it is all here anyway*
—John Ashbery

your *tabula*, your rocking frame
that rocks a face within it.

you planted begonias and pearls
on the sill to your vision.
you carry about a name,

heavy enough to footprint
those many books.
it bucks, bucks but cannot break

as it would like. these low white walls
invite depth to play about,
enable the epic. your implement

soars, weakly held. you are beautiful
and then you testify, and witness folds under
the low angle of the afternoon

light as it roars across your voice,
some cataract that cannot listen.

at rebecca's window, 11/23/07

of course, a vase of flowers, leaves
leathered. the sung lack of you

behind me like twigs
broken honestly, piled

against the wall. the ocean
voyage I still intend. buildings

practicing, just over there.
the tedium of that old idea,

the easy importance I grant
to this morning light.

the way land doesn't fit
the maps.

this morning light a metaphor
"for everything." each couplet

the newest chance to break
a world. my easy surprise.

attitudes of the first imago

we woke to a pageantry
unwisely spent, in
evidence across the surface
of your room.
it didn't occur to me
to fictionalize
the strewn dresses, your three
mason jars. *Cleveland*
is where you live.
your two sisters will soon
have names.
I'm getting good
at killing chickens
and wear plaid well
in your imagination.
sometimes this damn place
seems bleached of all
color, all colored
by an original tactic.
I'll chance you in italics.
the kindness of strangers.
enter a punchline, not worth
relying on. I might be
confessional, spectacled,
but as it is I'm *cute*,
five-ten, slightly in awe
of myself. as it is, it is
just dawn. you might mean
something else

by passing me the last drag
of water. *I've already seen*
this movie, I've seen this era
play out in a hand of cards.
I recall the print
of your best dress.

fixing song

I have placed you on a river
you will remember, in a season
between tenses. I have walked
you up. I think that Havel,
who you remember,
spun the scene nearly
as I have. I smile to remember Havel
stop to wrap the small tree
around the large tree, and
the large tree around the wind,
and the grass around your ankle,
there: I laugh outright. I laugh,
too, at the round contempt
my finger showed, and met
in rolling this way, that
way: for you, for you.

attempts at waking

my dream/ a white tree
—Ted Berrigan

I

a white harder
than stone. a jewel
that is a bird.
the authority that your shoulders
describe.

II

lit, the house becomes
our house.
a birdcry designates
our fleshes.

III

a birdcry pries open the morning.
the wood beams have begun
taking weight again.

IV

you woke early,
harvested those words
that the night had let rise

V

the metal pieces of poetry
are already out
mowing the acre. you turn over.

VI

a white
risk, another

VII

your hand that is a pile
of intent.
your hand rehearsing
the small pieces of growing old.

the generative gesture

goeth before the fall.
here we suddenly are, because

I said so. the air is sharp
but lacking in things

to throw. an instantaneous century
bubbles. *eat what you must, sleep*

where you must, but leave no trace,
the math would say, if it had

voices. we have the tools
to leave. we have deaf thumbs.

the generative gesture goeth and
there we fall. *approach*

with caution.
the air is sharp

and shouldered, but lacking starlings.
vigor jumpstarts the sky.

ii) spaghetti
western

high noon

Autumn's name is taken
in vain. a man becomes
his hand in the eye
of the other. reader
and beholder rub clavicle
in a small impossible town.
genders forfeit all claims
to calm faces. impossibly
a hand smokes two packs
a day, votes democratic.
Autumn talks a good fight
with regards to, any day now,
burning Arcadia down.

the lost forty

the bird presenting
itself, a bird, before
us gives courage to our words

themselves and those
that draw near them.
the fact of the flower the bird

batters with song
drags one logic
across the knuckles of real

roots. that your
name is Alec Lomax,
that mine is lost—the thickest

irrelevance—that my
palm beats a wing-
rhyme is a way to begin.

disaster cinema

this prostration is loud enough
to read from outer space. a private biplane
leaves in an hour.
proximity to self is the newest way
to live, think critically, and lose weight.
biting on the insult
is how humans got anywhere,
is why the robots will win.
a crowd looking up in concert
will better see the shuttle, bursting,
half-reflected in the delta.
as the city floods, sky
gets all over everything,
our brains matt like wool.
the first amendment does not entitle me
to strip and yell, disaster! disaster
in such an open unreal
wheatfield

lynch riddle

the dog wakes.
the country paces itself. she rolls improbably

in silk.
she pays her attention to a three-quarter moon.

candles agitate
the architecture of a room, soon to be made

important.
a voice seems to sound, far off. the gaze

advances.
she rolls lewd in probable blood. silhouettes

regard the moon
their maker. the dog is embarrassed for us.

a voice looks
evenly on. attention is paid the sky's currency.

she rolls, in
good humor. our necks are fixed to the rafter.

audition tape

“discretion not valor
is valor,” Alec,
leave your deft right
jab, your *puissance*,
out of it. in this time
of high hackles,
no room for your
abstract aesthetics.
the country is
sidling at us.
take this, a moment
to load both barrels.
in this time
of live rounds, look
to indigenous
knowledge-brokers:
smoke signals,
sun signals,
technologies for one
day later. Alec,
the flare gun,
the flare gun, lo
a white sail billows
in the cornfield
three over—

children at play

the ship leaves
our ideas of it
definitively
on the last shoal
“three paces east,”
just below the waterline

\

you practiced phrases
on your terrycloth
dummies I wrote you
from Europe

\

the night is flat
tonight the stars
bullets in one wall

the best way to die
is not to asphyxiate
is not to be impaled
or to drink what is offered
is not to not get up

\

when I met you
I was seven and British
you were turning
nine

\

the bones of the last argument
properly arranged
the gymnasium
the shawl your mother made
held
our particulate
the bones of that famous
flying man
the last shoal

you practiced phrases
on your terrycloth dummies
“a beard—”
“a fine thing—”
“if only the time
we spent—” I wrote you
from Europe I returned west

\

I rounded
the horizon
like a street corner
caught you counting
cash by bare bulb light

\

we spilt some
cheap alcohol
for your mother
for her memory
her salted speech
her embroidery

if this is a homosexual poem
you know what that makes you
you are such
a fine gymnast

\

the sky is bruised
by the time it arrives
at eye-level "hell"
has the most beautiful sunsets

\

phosphorescence chastises us
reminds us of what we are not
the ship will be less
than our idea

starlings hung low over
the wave water

\

the best way to die
it has been determined
is to pretend to die
and then believe it

iii) occasions
for
cartography

you the mother I figured you to be

*bend your font at me
when you write for home.*

I don't need you, I braid the crowd
to unearth you. I stitch the line full
of myself. you shrug in
and out of my address. were you
ridden here by the weather?
leave the trees in the yard. leave
the heavy lifting. take your feet
off the stage, that braille
you punch the ground with.
I left my physics written
on the beaches, a war story.
in our trauma, a sorcery
that shuts the world out.
sacking the oral tradition, my hand
was built to unwrap, detach,
and apply to cheek. within
thirty minutes, magic. within
one long day, the jaw should insist
on remembering. if necessary,
break cleanly to draw marrow out.
that nephew, always climbing:
let's save his life. turn out
those brooms, that idiomatic arsenal,
give me a word I can pretend
was yours once. I can offer
the heavy cloud, I have
thought balloons immune
to puncture: if any of that helps.

**you absent other you breath of offer you
footed gardener**

I put you there in a loud house, roughing the flooring you wish were more like loam. that point of sharper light, is it broken glass or just the peculiar stab of this morning? I ride roads elsewhere as you smile hard. thinking *so much for your aversion to "the proprietary,"* thinking your wrists mine in an important sense. an aphorism sits heavy on the blue-green sphere. *out past the prairie, into the soft grass,* you are reported to have gasped. other words for west, anywhere, anyway, but to be gone and from there continuing, your wrists in my pocket. you, safe, in a sense, in my ear.

**you festive dope you rogue progenitor you
piece of shit**

you crunched the numbers, called
for another drink. I coached
the termites in their business.
Natalie was accused of micromanaging
the kitchen, and boy, did she
give her sister hell. this is no place
for a child, this is no place for you
to raise your poetry, not yet
pubescent. tequila and steak
photograph well, spell trouble
in this flirtatious light. the moon
could use a good washing-up.
is it night already? are we old
yet? I have a case of the Mondays:
this is a house too full
of ashtrays, too full of proper nouns.
the termites are quiet, industrious,
and on the whole, coming along well.
the night of the big game cometh.
Natalie's boy was to have fixed the banister.
Natalie's boy is photogenic.
this is no place to raise
a good pair of eyes. I don't acknowledge
the moon, as such. the termites,
of whom I am proud, transacted,
transacted, and brought the house down.

you thief you my pedestrian one

have you just
feathered the planks?
I thought you
undone, I roiled
in retreat in air.
after air brought
the law, you.
after you, I
insist and insist.
riotous turning over
of bedsheets.
I hear you
are *out there*,
dating again;
I bring around
another tense.
a rustle, and
a quizzical emblem
in your lip. I
remembered that
for years. later
in a relative's kitchen
I undid without
your weight

you

I'll oscillate the vista
if you'll ride shotgun
the robbery project
acquires its ski-mask
we depend on friends,
fools, strategically
placed in the audience
the man to your left
is reading our lines
the man behind you
is deep in our pocket
the man in your ear
is already in your ear

you hardened friend you edge of air

I wrote the green
into the grass, yes,
but I swear that was
the extent of it. I've
warned the floorboards
about you, your way
of weighing suddenly
more. a plea I have
nothing to do with
pesters the air. the air
as it tries to sit
still. I want you out
of the neighborhood,
in my room right now,
holding power
to the candle's wick.
the grass sheds
my attempt at naming.
it is suddenly winter.
the winter is suddenly
insincere. wood bawls
because it is dead
and knows about death.
you pretend to listen, I
imagine we are similar
of mind and odor. some
birds collapse, one
into the other.

iv) cartography
by
night

**you beautiful debauched spartan you tall
poem of a man you christian journalist**

you are the sort to usher dogs out. you are the sort to tilt
the pitch. handle your words heavily, usher me out, I'll
retrieve them from whatever air. I'll tortoise for you this
deadly river.

I'll affix your biles, black and yellow,
alkaline. keep your veins well-guarded as you attitude me
closely. you are the sort to attitude me closely. it is twelve
midnight.

I urge you to ignore the spectered former lovers.
your sense of sort still spot-on, I trust to your remembered
adjective for our bungalow and the sun. "keep your head in
it, friend, keep your whole heart in it,

plow down and on."
keep it together and tillered, repair the curl to my rash-rash,
to my hair. please take the classical tropes as read. please
adhere the classical tropes to your one good divot, a
prosthesis, to my speech.

**you manikin you ghost of an object you bad
key**

on that grey evening you volunteer
your body. I begin a catalogue

of injury, a taxonomy of bad
sticks right then in the dim lamp light.

“in the scientific a range of emotion,”
in the veins a thick quickening. the body

a bag of analogue special effects.
watching you orient yourself

in relation to wind, I remember
quaking aspen manifesting its adjective

even in this, the toughest rain. I write
the page into five districts.

“how your feet have grown you up.”
admiring the volunteered body,

now the neck, now its five acts.
how your feet have grown you up,

how your leaf stem structure
allows this chance to flop about.

please turn forty-five degrees
into the light, turn in your first thought.

in the scientific a whole range of emotion.
in the body's lines a way to build

bridges. a case to be made
for the power of suggestion

in the dim lamp light. you volunteer
your body. in the catalogue

of small currents, of blood growing
shy, I graph a line so straight it disappears.

hobo you want mechanic you real live piston

the mind's one wood won't shut up. the sympathy of two bodies ought to be left in the "ten years ago." in the mind's one wood, I can only move to reconstitute your face. we ought to work a world up by shaving one sound down. how we board the discussion, how we boarded a freight car for Santa Fe. o how we gnash for Santa Fe. the conversation today touches on faith, how it jumped cars at the crossover. some of the terrible people have fled, some have just reported back. we continue: accruing refugees, shouldering our scant bindles. how we gnash through the mind's one wood, o. I'll open up want's engine. your smile scribbles away. you say you like me in stripes. I could say I like you lost. our first person plural keeps quiet, having lost the others to the lure of real rain. a phantom pain in the syntax, a thirst for sex. prepositions have scattered, sharp, end-up across the tracks. our iron loses its air. in falling to the side, neither pushing the other clear. brought against a bad day, dying, we let the graffiti talk for a while.

v) nostoi

so long

what seems true, an inventory
before rain: your bedroom

shapes, that our history here is endless.
somewhere a caged bear roars

at the erectness of it all. your portico,
owned and sound. a man's man,

a momma's man, confused
in wool. a meat hen bearing

my middle name was
slaughtered last Easter,

continents away. your lease
is up in a month. I've built us

a return home for two, structurally
proud. these days

you have extensive opinions
about glass, natural

and unnatural light,
the ameliorative properties

of the social realist novel.
I have a shelf of faces

to identify and sign.
rehearsing sleep, Saturday

begets a color we could never
dream. this is not the first time

the classifieds have left us
asking just how viscous we are.

in the sea-level air

leaves register gravity. I lean
in, you talk on if we share the room.
a Maine property is up for auction

in my latest dream. leaves
register gravity, point north, if only
a little. a block of text grows

wide at the base, as glass
does, during the century. in an attempted
act of sympathy. I close distance.

you make an offer
on my latest dream. in Maine,
even water obeys, will sit.

we remember that mountains rise, go
to the pertinent windows,
punch them out. I walk

off. leaves register a gravity
in this last unpurchased hour
indistinguishable from old age.

for cee

I can see you riding
obsolete species of furniture
on into night
the sympathy genre goes by
many names in wild blue

I can see you
reproducing the sound
you made falling
that dry morning

blue is wild only
under an unfolded unsurrisable sky
our latitudes, our latenesses
are now irrelevant

the secret we secured
throws itself open
at the right latitude
in the right light
under a certain constellation of names

I can see you throw
your last tenderness
a rope

your name goes by
many names in wild blue
I watch you ride
adjectives of acuter angle
on into night

the sad story

a damn shame to discard
such light, perfectly
gestated. Claire has walked the ghosts
daily and with great care
all these years. we all know
of leashes, tied off
nowhere. the fictional nature
of Tad's cancer—what is
a pancreas—didn't prevent it
from taking his hair
and his life. empty glasses
spark at this hour, underappreciated
in the grieving kitchen.

notes

the pavement ends
before we are through with it.
the buttered sky, the burnt sky,

your burnt hair. put your eyes
down, carefully. as a rule
I like my languages

too close for focus, my legs
too strict to give an inch.
lets talk about

what the air does
when we're not around to watch it.
the burnt sky, your burnt hair,

both conspicuous. as a rule,
I favor proximity.
as a rule the Russian language is more

expressive, though I can't possibly
know this. you are neatly dressed.
imagine if the air were to

start making demands.
as a rule I am an egoist, but I like
that shirt you wear.

the burnt sky, your burnt hair,
your flush tone. a hemisphere.
your Russian scolds the pavement.

harvest

the weathervane, that dark eye
framed. “momma comes home Sunday
not today.” the nauseate grass hours
browning out before us: *husk*
say it once, again *and husk*
some words coughed up correctly, even
after the rain. the roof is leaking
in twos and fours. the land’s
age darkens like an eye.
in seventy three, fate will bear down
inexperienced, determined
and demand the death of our oldest oak.
the weathervane will have little new to say.
our energy will be spent, will go up
like supplication and once-yearly flame.

love in the high hills

your stance records the hour
in a distinct violation

of the terms of our contract.
there is nothing more mine

than your morning rally.
the Colorado snow

is exhausted by now, panting
its way into the Atlantic.

our shorthand is going
blue in the face.

the world exists
in a house.

our metaphors reach
at recalibration.

the town approaches
maximum occupancy.

personification works
a double shift, eagerly

counts souls.
there is nothing more ours

than the yearlong catalogue
of acid-jointed words.

after the renters

a long reach of pillowed air,
a league across which sound
wanders.

the kitchen, its back stair,
that no envelope was ever
recovered.

I move parallel to sentiment,
I watch it climb your scaffold-
distance.

this is a house on the Maine coast,
this house windows
easterly.

the angle of the lamp,
an angle of memory the lamp
blisters.

a room that recriminates,
a room that could
shut up.

his brutal and red voice,
the one hand which made
mending.

we sound the floor for names.
over the water a cloud
advanced.

her succinct roster of voice,
a parade of similar
pauses.

taking weight

in the moment before weight
the body that arcs at me
builds its house
I come a fraction off earth
the tilted face
sings a meeting song
the oak floor sounds wetly
a separate kind of brushstroke
I fill out with proud infinitive
a separate kind of brushstroke
I fill out with oil
I dress in *to remember*
this hand blots ink
this hand has readied a humidity
has stifled a gasp
this hand flattens
the page in the moment
before weight we assemble
we recall the word
to repair and all it means

poem your sorcery embarrasses me

“forth!”

piled upon the act of walking away, the verb
“to essay,” we are rendered by some

frisking eye. against the rarest reaches
of lift-bridge, an argument for process,

a graffiti not ours. a damn bell in the distance, always
the water-weight of someone watching.

under cover of night, we agree towards
a new exact country. the threads we fish out for use

spool, spool, and are finally endstopped
in earth. we will accumulate detail until we are actually alive

vi) coda

bound west

I

despite your insistence, the music
is all I hear and ratify.

II

so you swung the icepick like a hunger
through the self-sized window.
so you followed the same stranger
to work for days.

III

I watch you and am watched watching.
I count up the number
of shapes that had my hand
make them.

IV

donnez-moi votre main
the language says, oddly
formal. we leave and continue
to leave jointly. the street issues
an indifferent bulletin.

V

*the dead land is
catching the light,
you might say. also,
your name is
catching the light.*

VI

I've heard stories told of a country
far west where even the youngest
trees are called ponderous,
where even the water tastes of salt.

VII

there is a desert that we laugh at.
it answers, sounding
more like me.

VIII

I have said the music
is all I hear, have said it

is all I ratify

IX

*weather fails to attack the poem
as it passes through part nine.*

X

no strength left us now.
the sea is the rest and last
of what we see.

XI

I still used to have a sister, a father.
I will always have had
a sister, a father, a mother, a *once*
broken as immediately as glass.

note on the text

Experience the forest of old at the Chippewa National Forest's "Lost Forty." The original Government Land Survey in 1882 described the land of the Lost Forty as part of Coddington Lake. This mapping error caused the virgin pine of the area to be left behind by loggers at the turn of the century. The Lost Forty is actually 144 acres.

—www.visitbemidji.com, "Historic Locales"

*an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein
that is a made place, created by light*

—Robert Duncan, "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow"

My conception of this volume as an 'essay on intervals' stems from my August 2007 visit to the Lost Forty, a small pine forest near my home in northern Minnesota. Its 144 acres were incorrectly mapped by cartographers in the late 19th century, and as a result contain some unlogged pine up to 350 years old. Given its unique situation *vis-à-vis* the ways in which humans inscribe physical space, it struck me as an apt correlative to Duncan's "pasture folded" or W.S. Graham's "telephoneless, blue/Green crevasse"—an extra-dimensional locale at once impossible and real. The poem derives some significance from a privileged relation to the surrounding linguistic terrain, outside of, and at the same time in dialogue with, conventional modes. The poem insists on itself, though its "self" is necessarily in flux. Its power is absolute, but practiced in a different kind of space. If "sparrows drown," they will find the water in which to do it; if not with water, then with "the firmament": they'll tease it from the reader's brain. The poem is a network of proximities, situating its elements—the lyric pronoun, the trope, the mode of address—to render meaning. It contains in this semantic topography a cohesive internal logic, its own Newtonian physics. Simultaneously, it accommodates the possibility of its own destabilization; each line break or tactical shift carries with it the threat of seismic rupture. I see my poetry engaging in these concurrent practices, the formation-disruption of just such proximities. Common words set loose in rarefied air: in the end, even if the Lost Forty pines were no bigger than some I'd seen elsewhere, an involvement in the semantic matrix of their own "made place" endowed them with a quintessentially poetic weight.