

2003

## Caller ID

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CALLER ID

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of English

by

Plamen Arnaudov

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## ABSTRACT

As one might expect from a young poet writing at the turn of a millennium, recurrent in "Caller ID" is the theme of struggle with literary tradition and of seeing it as both necessary and constricting to the project of forging one's own creative identity. The collision between history and the self is visible in the often conflicted references to great philosophers and poets of the past as well as in the call for renewal of the body poetic after an envisioned 'end of history' marked by creative sterility and exhaustion. The proposed renewal does not entail destruction of tradition but rather a replenishment of poetic curiosity, a newfound thirst for restructuring and linguistic play with and within the tropes distilled through the ages.

Among the super-objectives of "Caller ID" is the desire to marry the unbridled vigor of post-modernism with the higher stakes of Stevensian poetic inquiry. In attempting this uneasy fusion, the voice slips on a series of masks in order to take on subjects ranging from the mundane to the sublime. What remains consistent throughout this collection of poetry, however, is the voice's unrelenting interest in observing and commenting upon its own creative proceedings.

## KARMACOMA

as for the hand of god I've seen it  
many times when I was a child my  
father had it he usually kept it  
out of sight swaying just beyond  
the terminator of his planetary bulk  
he conserved it so that its power  
to dispense fate would not wane but  
in time it did as my teacher took  
the hand from him and rested it  
on a book I should read and only  
understand a decade later what she  
really did to me, yes, the hand  
was a woman's then and it scared me  
that I couldn't read its motions  
any more I ended up a totally different  
person from what it had planned it  
isn't magical it's embarrassing  
knowing that I've hardly ever  
counted all the hands in wait

## MILK & MACKEREL

Fishermen go where the fish is –  
past the sprawling slaughterhouse  
  
over the sandy railroad tracks  
between two giant concrete mixers  
  
at the mouth of a secretive pipe  
where the milk spewed by the dairy plant  
  
casts its slow elongated sea shadow  
stretching from here to the slanted pier  
  
where two ships are not being unloaded  
by the ogreish strong-arms of rusted cranes  
  
and before this industrial altar  
the privy fishermen arrive in ones  
  
and twos to gape at the sparkling backs  
of mackerel mullet and scad packed

into the bottleneck of this minuscule milky  
way gulping like a flock of pilgrims

trapped inside the horn of plenty  
being fattened by their ravenous gods.

But this fish is not good to eat.

The fishermen just like to watch

smoking silently on the oval rocks.

Only now and then a wanting hand will

sink indiscreetly into the melee

and fondle its curvaceous chaoses.

## LAPTOP COMMUTER

I'm walking home after seeing a movie  
at a friends' place, two beer bottles  
clanking softly in the plastic bag, what I got  
to take home with me. That and the moral  
that some names age just as badly as people do.  
Johnny is still alright, but Frankie is def. passé.  
I must remember this; if I ever have a kid  
the least I can do is give her an eternal name.  
Like, let me think, Helen, I suppose. But only  
because of the poem. I guess the other way  
to go about it is call her anything and then  
parachute her name on top of mount Parnassus  
but I don't know if I have the back for it.  
Must be because I was around younger folks  
that I get these mature thoughts steeped in  
post-traumatic resolve. It was painful for  
all of us to sit there and try to watch the movie  
while the would-be couple was busy courting  
in the couch corner. Even Pacino couldn't  
steal that show. Finally, they took it to

the bedroom and normal circulation was  
restored at least until I felt too bloated  
to take it any more and they came outside to  
see me off and we were all surprised by fog.  
It was solid, yet shifty, a low-flying cloud.  
And so “I’m off, muchas gracias and I’ll see ya  
(next time when there’s no real need for a  
medic.)” Once afoot into the fog it’s not so bad,  
it even works if you’re into magical realism.  
A murky van passes slowly and I know it’s  
the kind that the serial killer in *Silence  
of the Lambs* used but I stopped being paranoid  
in the third grade when I got my first harmonica.  
Instead, I busy myself watching lamplight  
pierce through tree coronas and dissipate  
quite effectively because of the mist particles  
and I realize that this is the answer my friend  
who is into 3D animation was looking for  
this summer when he asked me how the fuck  
does one make light dissipate effectively.  
So obvious I feel like I’ve forgotten it  
many times already. Nature is a great teacher,

although its timing can be greatly improved.

Like, what's the use of knowing what I know about her now that she's pissed and wouldn't even let me brush the outskirts of her aura?

## MAZURKA FOR MY LOVELY

The sun is early again stealing over the poplars  
with crimson cheek a full hour ahead of schedule  
and the postal workers adjust their gait in midstride.

It curves its furtive eyeball across  
the nacreous dance-floor, a coquette,  
a match to every fox-trotting charmer.

Whatever game is brought to it, it pins on its lapel,  
a dancing card blanche fringed with tsunami protuberances  
as seen on television, curlicued inward  
like floral patterns impressed on the hilt  
by the green thumbs of cumbersome murderers.

Yes, the sun's up and running now  
and hammering my sap to a slow sugary syrup  
so why not prune my weeds a little?  
It's enough that I kill, I know nothing of being killed  
It's the same with love, the same with eating a fresh pear  
downwind from the sea garden.

I came, I ate, etc. No apologies. I have consumed  
all in my path, I am its worm and maker.

I lined up my guilts on a fig-leaf trireme and bid them row.

They did that for me. The wind helped, I was lucky.

But that was years ago in a broader mountain

with ridges crowded like rippling muscles

in the tight t-shirt of a black-eyed sky

and the memory of it brings no particular odor

to this, today's, sun so crude and flirtatious in its seeming,

so full of itself, of light, and everything.

## POSTCARD FROM HOME

after Marques

this is us posing for a picture  
in front of our new house which  
corresponds to all we ever asked  
for we are looking forward to its  
soothing curves settling inside  
our memories like armor soiled  
by our own bodies first and then  
by the little army born in  
the fun-fairs of our solitude

and as we each travel at the tip  
of our lives we are the vine stems  
that wind and rub themselves against  
the walls and become a film, a living  
plaster, the house's muscle tissue,  
and one day years from now  
when our tendrils devour every  
particle of brick & mortar  
we will become one imperishable beast  
and it's this – death – that makes us smile

## IF IT'S A CRIME WHY DO THE DOGS DO IT?

Although I've made my fortune on tricycles  
I've never ridden one myself. It seemed  
my clientele was mostly hopeless romantics  
who had set out to change the world in the 70's  
but ended up just as unshaved and terrified  
as any convict on death row with the calendar  
staring back at him through the sultry eyes of a stripper.

Sonny & Cher had each other. All I ever  
had was too many drinks on a collapsible sofa  
while the world whored after crew-cut politicians  
and let itself be dug into a rabbit hole,  
a fitting end to this galaxy's most unlikely planet.

I was impressed at first by the sheer size of it,  
stretching from conundrum to conundrum.  
My short-skirted astronomy teacher said  
it was parallax that made all the difference.  
Funny, for me it was always vodka that did it.  
Not like Superman changing in the phone booth

but not unlike him, either. I had little interest  
in flying against the clock. No lost loves there,  
no uncashed winnings. The kind spirit  
in the see-through bottle only empowered me  
to become a different actor new to this part  
with each word burning foreign on my tongue  
and dropping weightlessly as if from a clear sky  
unthought and unthinking as the tinkling sound  
water makes when it changes vessels.

Tonight the air is pleasant to the skin  
yet nothing like the touch of a gipsy woman.  
Dangers and temptations lurk with equal ease  
behind the corner, past the blinking street light.  
I'm waiting for the gun-toting burglar who  
will threaten to change my life forever.

This love for the crying game, well, it's mutual.  
We are bound to want to tell and end up entertaining.

This time the chorus chanting on the front lawn  
stands for 'renewal.' There is only enough light  
to evince that a couple of decades ago births

were successful in perpetuating the circle  
of mouths around the broken cup from which flows  
nothing but fluidity, suave conversation &  
wit on tap, the kind that promises fireworks  
and delivers such a comic little fizzle that we are  
moved to forgive ourselves for hoping. After all,  
it's only Friday and nothing has died just yet.

## SURVIVING WELL

The night my roommate returned  
from his first strip club  
and said he had tried to pay them all  
equal attention was when  
I got my common cold,  
the beach I had to storm  
armed with only a skyline  
of smelly pillboxes  
5 dollars worth of lemons  
and of course the kindness  
of a blue-eyed compatriot  
who was filling in for  
both mother and lover.

Alas, that these days should only be lived once,  
the white haze and the sharp haze were both lovely –  
riding a high fever in the back of a car,  
pinballed from mall to mall like some sordid fleur  
water-skiing up and down crowded isles  
with my eyes hooked onto her jean pockets,

many sneaky kisses folded into one sneaky kiss,  
and always the possibility of fainting  
victoriously, like Aretha on a broken Victrola,  
what more is there to be had?  
Knowing it was the vessel that caved in  
and not the cave, I begin to look forward  
to scratching this year's gilded trophies  
and wrapping around her heels at the Ides of Xmas.

## SIDE B

in New Zealand where people walk  
on their heads a woman won  
custody over her lastborn son  
precisely because she was a hooker  
and the magistrate who knew  
better trusted her experience  
in navigating between boos  
and taboos you see he wanted  
the boy to grow strong  
like an actor with the right part  
who takes things to a next  
level which is even more remote  
than reality and what if that  
cherub face so guiltless and calm  
witnesses our bedtime comings  
in such a way that makes us all  
content then even God might stay  
his hand and rest it on the breast  
of the virgin mother

## MADE IN HEAVEN

a woman lost her poodle in  
the topography of chaos  
in vain she would call it by name  
but as soon as it got dark  
the poodle came back as a burly man  
who rumbled mirthfully about  
the shape of skies and women's  
feet and she gave him hers  
to rub and to hold  
because he had the air  
of a vet who had just returned  
home from the latest war  
and they lived happily for half  
a century except for the times when  
it poured steel butterflies and  
the heavens were too much to bear

“CYCLOPS”: A SCUPTURE BY IVAN POPOV

Out of the raw rock – nature’s demonic marvel  
maimed in a billion mindless crunch times –  
a crafted monolith emerges  
chequered into a 3D chessboard  
with a single black square. The odds  
are stacked against the black eye  
which alone sees all and has to sing  
it to the blind body  
with lament or praise – doing all the work  
right there – upon seeing a dust cloud  
briefly hurricaned by the feeble breeze

OZZY

behind the scenes

behind a pair of eyes

he sits on a cushion

in a hotel room

unwrapping presents

with such ennui

that each breath

clings to his teeth

and circles them

wondering which way

from here within

or without

I've never

seen a tower so

thin at the base

so abandoned by

its builders.

It's not because of

age that inertia

is his last muse.

It is the dream  
infecting each cell  
with its glamour

They say “Guru is a mirror.”  
and “Ozzy does it.”  
He needs only to keep  
calm and babble his  
comforting curses  
standing tall and dim-witted  
for all the underdressed

## ON THE HANGING BENCH

night peppered with mosquito spray  
and illuminated by swirling octane figures  
  
conversations in the paper-thin air about  
fresh paintings of things that resemble things  
  
and three people who swung on a hanging bench  
letting it all catch fire and burn out  
  
before it even happened – we were that heavy then  
the three of us swollen like bees returning  
  
to the sunken river and the white house standing  
on its last rotten legs, our eyes flaring in near-darkness  
  
like ferries waiting to take us beyond  
familiar geographies and into each other  
  
deeper upriver than even Charon would dare  
to an island with a watchless moon

and magical vending machines where we could  
retire from our search for the famous source

and dip toes in the muddy running waters  
until we were made clearer to ourselves

at least clear enough to split apart

MUST MOVE

talking to Dali's *The Divine Comedy Inferno Canto #1*

My friend the painter knows my illness  
without knowing me. It's there in the books  
like a bubonic rat squatting on a reef  
waiting to infect shipless hypochondriacs.

"You can have two furies but not two fates.

The map of things has been set in stone  
and a glass of quicksilver poured over it  
will momentarily know every shape."

What does he know about it that I don't?

What about the woman with the bleeding  
smile, pregnant yet casting such a pencil-thin  
fracture across my line of reasoning?

She steals away from the scepter's aim  
into a flowery foothill. She will make it!  
Nature becomes her. Those flowers are hers  
but they are no company, no father to any child.

And the trees lined up like captured bishops  
leaping out of the canvas, who are they?  
I pity them, trading their little hilltop  
for a ticket to absolute spectatorship.

Meanwhile the horseman gallops between  
two suns until his bulging forehead is pressed  
against the ice mountain just as all movement  
is directed to the point at which it ceases  
and thought becomes a picaresque fossil.

## MIND-TO-EYE COORDINATION

“Here. Take this to your master.

Not this. This.”

The boy bends in confusion.

Under the shifty light

of a thousand candles

the scrolls all look the same.

He strains to read the signs

but his eye is too slow

and the inkworms wriggle away.

The boy is disheartened.

He has entered like the dragon

who expects a room of mirrors

furnished with his own beauty

and plagued by the lurking

deformities of a doomed enemy

but the script has thrown him

into a library instead.

His fists able to draw

milk from stone, his feet  
able to out-dance a spider, his  
gleaming torso that slides  
through bed sheets with  
the ease of wind –  
these swords are dull  
and useless now.

“Not these. These,”  
the enemy taunts  
far from doomed  
mastering him.

## CELLULOID PUBERTY

a hundred years  
into a dream  
the cake-faced moon  
plops into a lake  
of faded rose petals  
and I suddenly remember  
my body and how to  
walk out in the middle of  
this torn crescendo eden  
before the final credits  
administer names  
to all the stars

## BOOKCASE TO THE HEAVENS

This is the age after all foregoing ages.

It's now cheaper to recycle.

Revolution torched the libraries

but I have my Keats backed up on digital.

There are 365 bones in the human body.

So far we know the names of only seven.

The new Buddha is meditative inside a pagoda

and oblivious inside a skyscraper.

A student of history savors his *Vogue*.

It's ready to wear and sexy at last.

“Of course you'll take another drink!

The night is young and has your name on it.

– I am a photographer. I paint what I see.

Occasionally I get paid just to look...”

“Welcome, but you can’t come in.

(No more vacancies in the aquarium.)”

Another genius sweeps the bookstores.

She discovered a new way to talk about it.

“What we need now is a good long war.

I got laid a whole lot during the last one.”

The planets make us what we are:

He is sandy like Mars. She is noxious like Venus.

Up the stairs and into our first attic.

At this juncture, it is paramount that we weep.

Everything has been said, very little heard.

The tin-hearted crowd marches in its footsteps.

## SHADOW BOXING

Today was spent like any other,  
small sleep and the Internet  
coughing wet dreams from porn sites  
and satellite photos of the tropical  
she-storm I've been waiting for ever  
since I heard it killed a bunch of people down in Cuba.  
Her rapid curves can do that, she's a wound-dresser  
without the sympathy, a foghorn-  
tooting bitch.

I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't "take it personally"  
because "that's just the way it is"  
and besides "there's really nothing I can do"  
but what if "I can't help it"  
because "I'm in love"?

I keep missing her. I'm beginning to think  
I'm too tiny for my age. Or maybe it's the haircut  
that does nothing to set me apart  
from other green-eyed giants with haircuts.

Maybe I should shave it all,  
expose the bumps for her reading pleasure.  
Maybe she's a phrenologist and her eye  
will be irresistibly drawn to the text  
scrawled on my cranium by God and DNA  
and Significant Accident with a Razor.  
Maybe she'll be so startled  
by what they have all co-written there  
that she will read it out loud for me to hear.

It will be just like Abraham  
eavesdropping on a subconscious  
run so much amuck that it got  
a holy book rolling.

I am the religious bureaucrat –  
I always put my prayers in writing,  
in duplicate and triplicate,  
stamped all over with disclaimers  
like "I was drunk then"  
or "I was too sober," or  
"It was pouring too much shit."

Sometimes just the date is enough.  
For me at least. October 3rd, 2002.  
What little faith I've saved  
I wish to squander it all now  
on a phone-call that will answer it.  
But the rest of what I am –  
these cumbersome arms and legs –  
all they do is rub themselves  
and leer at the soul-stripping  
peep show until my skeptical loins  
catch fire from the crash site  
and plunge into a pair of  
eyes like petroleum lakes.

No dice today and no raging storm.  
The bedroom is indestructible and empty.  
I lie face-down on the green felt  
and fall asleep by trying not to think.

## PYRRHUS TRIUMPHANT

What perversion rules that a bloody axe  
can sink deeper than a judge's gavel  
and cut the Gordian guts of the living?  
Does it originate with men or beasts  
this diaphanous aphorism of war as answer?

I never counted the bodies on either side  
and I never built any monument for them.  
Those I knew and those I imagine all  
of them different even where names overlap,  
fast asleep in the same long olive grove.  
As for the next ones, I'd rather they'd be born  
to a clean slate and light beginnings.

If anything, my monument is a story  
which I tell to my sons while the hawks  
are out hunting and I let them scour  
the shady fissures in my mind for  
small game that will grow in their talons.

## ATLANTIC EXPLORERS

I.

The woman in the red wineglass wants to have it now  
but 'now' is another concoction I have yet to experience.  
I pour myself another and instead end up talking  
about it – this moment – bulging out of  
the frame like an elephant stampeding towards the camera.  
Again I am introduced to my own madness  
and little wonder that I cannot recall her name already.  
What I do remember is the lisp and her bandaged index finger  
pointing at make-believe now's and zen's, filling in the between  
with a fugue of expirational vowels.  
Were I a glider I would catch that draft.  
But I'm a talker and this is the only ground I fly on  
in a borrowed black suit with a coffee sheen.  
I need to be poked with a more brutal stick  
for my strap-on head to come off. I am round  
and reserved for her yet she can't take me home.  
Not for the world as down-payment. Not even for the word.  
Not now. It's never now with me in it.

## II.

I've been to civilization briefly once in the late 1940's.

Not its proudest moment. They said, "Come back some other time.

We are closed for repairs." They shut me out but I managed

to glimpse books dismantled like clocks on long oaken tables

and timid men with magnified eyes zipping up body-bags

full of the Last Magician's orphaned rabbits. It was

unqualified labor but making up for it in quantity.

I backed off into a crowd, was washed out in a brothel

where the men went to let their Zeitgeists loose. I guess

you can call it a corrida except no one dodged the incoming.

Except me. It's not agility that saved me then, that saves me now.

It's not a gift, it's a given. I was never there to begin with.

## III.

"My next goal is the pole. Either one will do." The extreme man

spiels right into the hands of his teenage female fans.

The letters start pouring in because his semen was tempered  
in every frigid wasteland from here to Backthere.  
When asked about it he denies,  
thus adding ten centimeters to his fabled modesty.  
Such stellar growth can surpass even Christ's  
but only insofar as there are more women now than ever before.

Again, the object of this exercise is to look at each thing  
with each eye and to not confuse a simile for divine indigo.  
I know I do, every time I'm reminded, of home, of the taste of  
a petroleum sea, I am tempted to say it tasted precisely like  
the small of her back in the shower, but that's pushing it.

While she's out I tune into a cartoon lion  
planted by TV Network Intelligence to assist  
in the hopeful birth of heroes.

Wait a minute. This is my heart we are talking about.  
How can I follow it? That's absurd. If anything at all,  
it's a sponge for my brain sweat.

But I agree in principle. We need heroes these days.  
Doughnut-dunking heroes, heroes at the workplace.  
We need every single hero we can get.

Ah, but not so fast, you poet!

Even a gentle wind blows harder than your stormy verse;

it's real enough to stir a girl's sailing hair and slip

a breath under the light fabric of her dress.

Compare your dark lady with the sizzling geishas

on Hallmark Television, all dressed up in SGI

and Dolby-Digital. I rest my case.

Then I act upon it.

I am now stripped of all life that is text.

I pack only weapons of the lethal kind.

This is great and it works

because you always know when you've been killed

unlike when you've just been enlightened

by a quick read on a safari somewhere in Kenya

en route to see all the elephants Hemingway

was survived by. Not many left now. Soon no one will

remember this war. Just a dent in the tidal wave.

## ASPIRE

a girl reaches  
the lower parts  
of the emerald tower  
she's been over  
the rainbow and  
now she wants  
back under the  
bed sheets  
of the farm-boy  
where magic sparks  
unbidden and real  
each time when it's  
almost dark enough  
not to see

## COMING OF AGE AGAIN

I'm crossing the Rubicon now for the last time, the time  
to pick sides and stake a chunk of land to call my own  
before the continents split so far apart that it becomes  
impossible to visit all of one's blood spread too thick  
over too many graveyards, sperm banks, and boardinghouses.

I've exhausted seventy horses and still arrive last  
but it's not a true race if it lacks a glossy finish –  
this globe has traded in its old-fashioned rim for slippery  
new horizons. (I have felt

at odd times like spilling out into the cosmos  
just for the sake of taking this protoplasm to another star  
but my lover, Newton's big-boned apple-picker,  
wouldn't let me. I'm grateful to the bearded Cerberi  
for guarding the doors I'm not ready to open.

I know I can't handle the truth  
about people's hearts and the big bad Universe.

But every time I enter the map room in the alpine  
house of all nations I wince, it numbs me.

All those color patches aligned so perfectly. No room

to squeeze in a country. Even the islands, ah, the roundest  
ones taken up first and already dented by nuclear craters.

\* \* \*

We are hostages at the public  
library watching the terrorist flip  
his magical pencil and erase our grandmothers  
from the pages of history. Our cries grow fainter and  
the cowardly pronouns desert me.

I'm alone in this goddamn' Siphon City  
where every word is copyrighted by someone long dead  
and inherited by his great-great-grand-carrion eaters.  
I love the economy but we don't talk anymore. She's a slut  
and I am an earthworm with a purity complex,  
rolling over in the puddles  
until I'm drowned enough to fall asleep.

The heat is always on but I've never met the Irresistible Cat  
and although I am open to suggestions, this one thing

remains firm through thick and thin, this no-satisfaction thing  
which has so many names but the funniest by far is 'malady.'  
As if the dead could return any minute now  
with a vaccine for it. As if performing some voodoo surgery  
and successfully amputating it would make a good musical  
ending on a high note with petticoats flying and couples  
and triples kissing absently through smeared makeup.

\* \* \*

Such travesty this time around, such ill-disguised beauty  
beneath every definite article of clothing.  
She was not a leaf, much sturdier when  
she shifted her weight away from my touch.  
I was almost run over by her stuttering elegance.  
I think ahead and extrapolate myself waking up into love –  
the right side of the bed – the free ride –  
the intelligent morning.

## RETURN OF THE LIVING BODY

“What rhetorical teeth grappling unto the notion of food?!”

The wolf rolled his whites, bloody and fat with derision.

Here’s that meaty Mediterranean slap again, sling-shot from below  
with simian prowess. One can never outgrow her own mother.

To put it edgewise, off and on, and out of the blue, this brain  
needs to x-ray itself with something sharper than language.

Think of it as the avatar, the bull-headed bully you’d rather  
not think about, deftly swinging his uninterpretable love bat.

I was stargazing that day until I almost thought I saw  
the eyes of a wench on a bicycle run over my face.

Oh, excruciating anchor dropped onto the marble bottom of my back-  
yard pool, crushing the tiles I’ve spent so many breaths arranging!

I, Mr. Cerebral Cortex, the renowned architect. What book is so great  
that it cannot be whisked away by the mere promise of sex?

Cavafy, I suspect, beat it off in the library. He was truly great  
for knowing how to make love to the classics. I only managed

a few bruises today flying home on the shot wings of a poem.

The sudden slope and the thistles were not there to be sung.

## THING

An ancient thing caught in the minutes  
of our conversation like a giant squid,  
now elongated, now vulval and withdrawn.  
Not time, time's just its cellophane,  
the placenta that separates us from each  
other even when we are twins, sometimes.

But then, so much instantly lost in translation  
from water to hot air that the thing shrinks  
in its shell until it's not enough to feed us.

The shell is hollow now and ribbed where  
the tender meat used to be. It likes living here  
scattered among these lovely echoes.

ANOTHER POEM ABOUT THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF LIFE

When the second gunshot was fired

I was still remembering my first  
fourteen years ago, under a red crescent  
when I knew the word for each kind of cloud  
and believed in the gay science of signs.

I have crossed many looks since then

but very few paths, never caught by no catcher,  
freefalling into the abominable abyss  
each night when I forgot my parents' faces  
and my palms were too sweaty to hold on to myself.

On the table there are three objects

that have been injected with significance,  
a knife, a rose, and a shiny copper coin.

The man-child wraps his puffy hand around the knife  
and wields it against a heedless world.

It has little to do with gift or courage

and something to do with tiny sub-atomic

particles called muons that bombard us  
until it becomes impossible to discern  
the smile on your face from the painting itself.

It doesn't matter now, past the mirror  
there are no more enemies to fight,  
just a room without a view  
furnished with one of each:  
one bed, one chair, one lover  
and finally time  
to make up my mind about everything  
but one time only.

## SERIAL BRAINKILLER

Today's fix of Nietzsche was particularly nasty.

I tripped all the way to the playground

and beyond, where he said I would find him

I met only Confucius with two bamboo sticks

for arms, weeping for a hug, what fame got him.

Why this compulsion in the great dead to vivisect

every instance of a limb in the living mind?

Such cruel entomology befits only children.

Yet, if you brush childishness aside

then there is no play, no little engine.

According to Buddha's tape for winding down

there's Pure Being (P.B.) lodged between the frames

like a steel splinter or the eternal silence

before the body crushes against sharp rocks.

I doubt it. I have a mind as sick as God's  
and I will pedal it until I get there.

I am possessed by English.  
It's a mall-rat, shopping obsessively.

Nothing is too real or too fake.  
All I want is a watch that tells the time.

Plato's pitch circles like a boomerang.  
The Germans fall from their capital letters.

Fuck fair play. It's a war out there –  
each word a stuttering Gilgamesh.

I slam the print. Freud doesn't love me.  
But I want more than love. To be seen.

## ULU DAG SETTING

They say it's a short reprieve but I beg to differ.

I mean this beaten sun crawling through the muck  
bleeding light from every pore; I keep hoping  
that the record would skip straight to the part  
where the big bad wolf gets to consummate.

I'm tired of waiting for the next best war  
in which everyone will fight on the right side  
and no-one will be left to blame, tired of waiting  
for the moral embryo to chew its way  
through the heart of the mammoth  
with its toothless grin, tired of time and the weather.

Dawn on the day of reckoning floods the horizon  
with nuanced static, ghost trails where radio channels  
used to sprinkle their generous droplets of data  
into outer space like urine marking human territory.  
Now the scent clears and it's all up for grabs again.

Left to the poets and philosophers, the city

dreads its metal bones crushed under so many memory dumps  
and chants like a wounded bat, its ribcage at once  
torn and supported by the vibes of its self-devoured song.

“What, are we done here, then?” The mastermind injects  
his last hormone booster into a vanishing bloodstream  
and it conjures up images of tribeswomen and men  
with animal bodies dancing around the bonfire  
on which the millennium turtle roasts in its shell.

## GLUTTONOUS DOG GOES SOLO

for Semiramis

This week's love interest picks up my sentence  
from where I left it in a suggestive tremolo  
and drives it unceremoniously under my nails  
“with such a punishment, that if any other is greater  
none is so displeasing.”

Let's pretend it was the nightingale singing  
of necessary voodoo and the pillow book.

After all, how many times in history  
have two bodies thwarted disaster?

Zero, to be sure – a domesticated python  
stoned by additives insidiously slipped  
in its chicken coup of coagulated estrogen  
and mock adrenalin. We all need a clue sometimes,  
a prescription as to how to behave.

I found mine in the dictionary, it's 'palimpsest.'

She thinks it's unsanitary and she isn't sure  
if ideas are such a good idea, after all.

As if small talk were ever good clean fun.

I mean, come on, not even in the empyreal days!

Fortunately there is music there  
to absolve me of my criminal acidity –  
the other hydra's head slipping  
out of the tenebrous classroom  
begging to be followed outdoors  
and enjoyed as a shrewd playmate  
into the tall grasses of the abandoned soccer field.  
Borne in her ancient tone without intonation  
I begin to strangle her in my saxophone grip.

CALLER ID

for Smi, who is pure

On a good day, I believe in beer and the movies

and the mock concern of waitresses

when I tell them I'm (only) doing fine.

Truth is, I'm down to one phone number now

but this could be it; she might even pick up

and invite me over for that dress rehearsal

we talked about in the library foyer, the one

that was supposed to prepare us for heaven.

I could be anyone from Leonidas to Jet Li

as long as she gets to be Ophelia. It's tough,

I know. Such hot demand for good female parts.

I can't agree more without losing my head;

flattery and flowers can't be questioned

and I'm all out of flowers, they cost money.

What I'm asking for is fairly cheap.

We like to watch, this pervert and I.

No, he likes it. He, the morbid Ventriloquist.

I'm just his talking dummy, although maybe

not dumb enough. I mean, on the whole,

I know about things especially when it comes to  
simple logistics like how to fit seven girls  
in a sports car without any conflicts of interest.  
I get ideas then. So far none has gotten off the ground  
or written a blank check but that's not the point.  
The point is I like it. It's a poor man's point, I know  
but I'll press it until I get a better contract.  
In the meantime, my other brain taps the dial.  
I love all mind-crafted objects but above all  
the blowjob. Although it's certainly great  
when it just happens, it's even better  
if you have to work for it like a Richelieu.  
I should have majored in graphic design,  
I do so much of it for free. But I'm in  
the wrong medium now – the phone.  
I'm ringing. Pick up. Pick up, my dear  
and let's ram each other's scripts.

## PARTY LEFTOVERS

What fire? What emotional garbage?  
If Conrad had to write those books  
could I do any less, or more? I'm not  
a circus animal yet I do aim to please  
and the audience is always there;  
it applauds the obvious but is never too  
sure about 'art,' the winged buzzword  
which helps the concupiscent sell photos  
of themselves necking on lagoon beaches  
with ants crawling out of their palms  
(or any other palms so long as it sells).

Tonight's surf was flat but there were  
undertones that splashed huge orange  
protuberances on my orgasmonitor.  
Fie! Fie! Fluttering around the tip of a conservative pen  
were things blasphemous and collibri-like,  
itching to unfold like a thousand  
paper cranes made of crumpled newspaper,  
as if yesterday's death of a million people

is commensurate to today's life of Ms. Femme Banal.

But this is not a poem about periodical tragedy.

Rather, it's about vodka with a slice of bliss.

I have no idea whether any of them will call me

when Pan taps his crosier for his satyrs

and dryads to return to the foliage terrified

by the voluptuous body of working hours

but it doesn't matter because I'm filled

with that musky old sap again.

## MIDNIGHT MADNESS

Everything turns to language when fatigue  
and the small hours nibble on the day's crumbs  
colored like bonbons in the latest post-electric fad  
and the claw-shaped devices of the mind begin  
to measure their progress by dents and scratches  
on the insurmountable wall of a lake.

I'm reminded of that P.O.W. who wrote a book  
on a single grain of rice. It was a list of all  
the insects he'd been collecting while surviving.

It's never enough to just live without  
compass and calendar. I shut my eyes  
but the room and the slow light linger.

Little trumpet stabs echo in the stalls  
and the horses begin to prance. Their muscles  
misinterpret the sound of outdoors. What it is  
is just bruised vinyl spun in the background  
of a phone conversation with Lolita  
and the slutty velvetness of her literary porn.

Now all is made sense of. The strings  
running loosely up into the hovering dark

get tangled and the puppet dangles free.

Muffled drums beat the coming of age

of the backward eye.

## SOLOMON STAYS HOME

that morning I woke  
with a sore throat  
and a waking fever  
so I called in sick  
took a steam bath  
with the wives  
they talked about  
dyes and textiles  
and I watched them  
dress in the vapors  
woven and painted  
by their chatter  
swift silken shrouds  
with golden lining  
brushed against  
my wetted skin  
as I lay terrified  
on the icy marble  
among titans who  
gave each other birth

and the only sentence

I passed that day

I passed on myself

## ALL ABOUT ME

Looking at the little hole I've dug for myself  
I recall today's words of advice from a sitcom,  
"Don't make your world too small." I wonder how  
I'm supposed to measure it when it is never  
all it can be all at once. I mean, it's like  
Batman's mansion/cave, (only he's a much  
flatter character than I) or that novella by Poe  
about the spooky double who was hiding  
in a nook in the guy's cranny and so  
one couldn't tell his exact size, if any.  
But I must try and measure it nonetheless  
because it's a milestone in my identity quest  
and because I have nothing better to do  
now that all my friends are alive and abroad  
and the bars are already closed.  
Just this once, I wish to talk about myself  
and what I mean by being here and owning  
the things I own. It amuses me to play the part  
of that subtle FBI profiler who would have  
lit candles for Freud if he wasn't afraid

of being misinterpreted. He observes  
my synthesizer with its high octave smashed  
and deduces a violent personality, perhaps  
a woman-hater, or at least someone who  
dislikes high-pitched voices, surely not  
a family man, way too messy for it.

The only thing that's clean is his computer,  
a substitute for love, says Madonna.

Maybe it was the Internet that warped  
his social organ or maybe the fact of  
deformity made him turn to the Internet  
as the only canister for demented genies –  
causality is such a tricky little river.

He may not even think he is capable  
of murder but if pressed by someone  
like a cock-teaser or the Third Reich  
he can turn into a veritable killing machine  
for the thing he hates most is pressure  
applied to any of his sensitive areas –  
it upsets his rituals, the day-to-day  
flashing of laser beams at the opposite wall  
and sleeping through the ages  
they take to return.

## FALSE SPRING

pollen ejects into the morning air and panics  
when the icy tongues of a serpentine wind  
lick it wet and heavy with wintry doom  
but as it plummets toward the barren pavement  
of a lively campus it's caught in the quick  
feet of eager college girls and swirls back up  
up and around their goose-bumped tendons  
like a cloud of moons trapped in a tornado  
it rises above knee-level and further up  
around the dancing steeples of their thighs  
then the wind finally sees through to the ruse  
and howls like a great white father slams  
the pollen against flesh where instantly  
it blooms into a field of frost-bitten roses

## FUSION CUISINE

between now and then  
the limbs of the living scatter  
    across untold distances  
and sink like the vengeful  
    cartilage of a sturgeon  
into the galaxy's ravenous cheek

death-driven they draw  
blood from stone, fire from  
    wood and language  
from the rhythms of drawing

the bones triumph  
and peep behind the canvas  
    where stark Galaxy  
roars on to another meal

## ON THE MUTABILITY OF MUSIC

What if I have said 'yes' to life,  
as I think I did that night at the hilltop motel  
when we got drunk and lay in the dark  
each in his own exaggerated little coffin  
bellowing pop songs at the bare ceiling until  
the girls shut us up and we fainted to sleep.  
We did that and I was there. Yet, today at 11:46  
the eggshell cracked and I was again in shambles.  
You may call it the razor of a demon's wing  
or anomie or caustic depression, a diagnose  
by any name is just as bitter. It means  
I have to start, from now till necessary,  
turning about the stones of this lopsided tower  
until I'm once more content with its edges. But  
it's bound to happen again, you know.  
Unlike a kaleidoscope's, this beauty is not merely  
color and symmetry, it's anything but that.  
It's a glass ball of twine, so disheveled and fragile  
that a sharper gaze will crush it into jittery quarks  
that'll scurry away into the dark corners

and sulk at the stern parent for spoiling their orgy.  
The Saturnalia will end as inevitably as Monday  
and there'll be quiet cleaners in blue uniforms  
sweeping the shards of *amphoras* and *euphorias*  
into their calloused palms and absently grinding them  
back to stardust. I can see you groan and roll your eyes.  
That's not the ending you have in mind, I know,  
but let's be realistic about the humanity of it.  
In elementary school they taught us one's arm span  
corresponded almost exactly to one's height.  
It's a useful way of learning the limits of one's body.  
As for the mind, although it oscillates wildly  
I've never seen one implode under its own quivering mass  
so I'm tempted to say it's going nowhere but here,  
in this belfry, subservient to this urethral schedule.  
Don't give me that look of scorn. You would have agreed  
if you could speak without moving your pen.  
If it were really you and not that flagrant persona  
appropriately and obscenely called 'philosopher,'  
you would have nodded now and asked for a beer.  
And perhaps we would have ended up wailing  
our complaints to another heedless ceiling

from the shallows of our understated coffins.

This is the Slavic way to fight –

my battle song and the echoes of yours.

## THE ORDINARY BUSINESS OF LIFE

### I.

“I see more interest in long-range planning  
instead of love and ‘will I live happily ever after?’“

### II.

“Honey, we’re living on borrowed time but don’t worry,  
the Wizard will consolidate our loans.”

### IV.

People die for specific reasons. Like starvation,  
napalm, lung cancer, etc. To each discrete death  
there’s a florid story waiting to be attached  
which explains why it just had to happen.

And if a sci-fi writer with a deep enough vision  
takes it to his head, it can all be traced back

to this one genocidal butterfly in the Pleistocene  
that went for the jonquil instead of the daffodil.  
Stupid bird, now look what you dun did!

V.

“I am thinking of the perfect prom dress.  
It’s fancy and bold and has very little  
to do with the rest of my life.”

XIX.

IIIIV.

We are forced to stare  
as the old couple in the  
mirror undresses.

## PARTY PLANS

I'm thinking plush and marble.

I'm thinking atomic submarines  
bumping noses against the glass.

I'm thinking casual conversation  
with a curly brunette who can  
diss Shakespeare while appearing  
totally drunk and naked to the eye.

I'm thinking low red dresses  
and hopping Adam's apples,  
tall spies with *noms de guerre*  
and relatives with empty scabbards.

I'm thinking beware of the six  
senses, they are too readily pleased.

I'm thinking hippie like a CEO –  
my world collapsed into a condo,  
with strips of data for wallpaper  
and shady replicas of horned gods.

I'm thinking a lithe blue robot  
playing Chopin on the harmonium.

I'm thinking all my friends on a sofa.

Will they eat each other's hearts out  
or add up to a gestalt? I'm thinking  
drapes rather than curtains, red neon  
rather than candles, triangles rather than  
squares, pens rather than pencils,  
morsels rather than bits, and actors,  
definitely actors. I'm thinking a mock  
battle – the Cupids vs. the Toreadors –  
with lots of gory lines but no real ending.  
It'll be like history. Some get asthma,  
some die and graduate, some are  
briefly applauded by the woman  
with the glossy pitch-black tresses  
and believe for a second there  
that it all means more than it did.  
I'm thinking ships set sail in a bottle.

## PREMATURE HALLOWEEN OF THE MIND

As the evening demands answers from its idiot sun  
I'm awakened to the distinct possibility of laughter in fate  
and the dreaded carrot becomes a tuning fork,  
not miraculously but with the after-scent of sulfur.

Truth is now a pin dropped in the chorus,  
now a stuffed scarecrow thrashed by invertebrate winds.  
The singers snap its scrawny neck on any given Sunday  
as the dogs yelp at their fettered ankles bent under cartloads  
of fossilized fairytales like heedless children  
at play in volcano weather.

It used to be that the only way to cure sight  
was through barbaric practices of vision  
but we've come a long way since Pompeii  
and so our final solution is properly scientific.  
Here's a pill to help you tug your ship upriver,  
it heals your muscles' wear and tear.

In no time at all, the patient begins to weep  
and run for it, instead of from it, the giant pumkin-

shaped nimbus, the transport to infinity's succulent shore.

These are prickly times. All things are pointed and radiant  
and scratching the glaze of this lunar habitat while the hedgehog  
sways its haunches along a dreamed green tunnel.

Its beady eyes see very little but the very little they see  
that isn't really there is supposed to make all the difference.

Is there an Alien napping aboard the womb?

Is it the one that causes things to resonate like seven feline  
guitar licks sealed inside a crystal vase,  
the one that wallows in such puddles as these?

## BORN AND RISEN

I don't mean to break anyone's cold sweat here

but I must insist that this is all there is

and no amount of books can fix it.

It's a note to self, mostly; I'm too tired

to address humanity today. Besides,

it's no news. We all know this already.

What really concerns me is how I fit into it.

The answer can be found in any movie, of course.

"Just do whatever the others do."

That's the only stage direction I've got so far

and a rotten one at that. I know some people

other than myself who are pretty pissed

about the way this farce keeps trying to typecast them,

woman-mother, man-provider, child-innocent,

and the rest of 'em horrendous hyphens,

but I think at 1:32 the other night when I stepped

on stage, I neither chose nor was chosen.

It was more of a fluke, as with a cumbersome

lumberjack delivering a much-needed Cesarean.

OK, so it was a rotten piece of luck,

but after the fact someone has to take  
all the blame, and all the credit, too,  
and I call that person Bob. It's like 'God'  
but more down-to-earth and easier to remember.  
Bob the Lumberjack. A shabby religion, you say.  
No love here. Just wood at twenty cents  
per cubic meter. Maybe it comes  
from the same woods Frost talked about,  
maybe not. I mean, who gives a damn,  
it's just wood, right? Whether it comes from the banks  
of the Amazon or the heights of imagination  
is irrelevant. Wood is all it is and there's only  
so much a child can do with a piece of wood  
before it grows frustrated and bored. It doesn't  
spring to life and dance around telling tales  
of other places where there isn't any war  
and TV reception is much better. It doesn't lie.  
I mean, lie around is all it does. Until something  
happens to it and it becomes a plank, then a gazebo  
for languorous goddesses to take cover  
from the rain and twist their soaked skirts  
until their nectar tingles on my parched wooden lips.

## FALL WHERE THERE'S MAY

That untimely picnic when time was running out  
on us with the waters draining from the artificial lake  
back into the quick river already pushed to frenzy  
by melting snow and last week's rains, it had  
too many moments for the few words we spoke.

I blame it all on the sly hand touching the small  
of my back and on the ingenious hangover  
smearing sunlight all over their faces, so much so  
that now I can barely lift them from the landscape,  
from the nimbus clouds and birches in white stockings.

We were five, any five, mounting a single blanket  
permeated with the smell of confused lovemaking  
and the easy, singular silence had its roots  
not in some mysterious kind of understanding  
but in the shock of our imminent birth to other worlds

and other friends, other hands, perhaps not as sly  
but with time enough to achieve their touchdowns

on other blankets with unknowing tiger eyes  
until spring tolls and we saddle up again  
to be delivered further by the same quick waters.

LOOK OUT, IT'S WEDNESDAY!

I was awakened by the repairman.

He said, "We'll get to you in no time,"

then he left. Now it seems to me

that spaghetti is the only way to go.

A spider crosses my monitor, asking for it.

Forgiveness. I take it outside and I see

two African men hanging their doormats

to dry on the barbwire fence.

Who said I wasn't welcome?

I can have it all right here and now,

but I chicken out and go back inside

to surf the web and chat with

my friend in the digs of Manchester

who tells me about this 10-year-old

with an amplifier in his brain,

hardwired by the Americans to think

with deadly precision. A poet, then?

That's quite a stretch, even for anime,

but last night's hacker attack on

the Internet's backbone was real. Apparently,

they were this close to snapping it  
in thirteen places. Imagine the gore  
and the glory if the mammoth had toppled.  
Enough megabytes for twelve winters,  
all the friggin' respect you can eat!  
“My god, he’s becoming the red dragon!”  
No, I’m just trying to get love  
without anyone else being hurt.

## WICKED MEMOIR

“Walk,” the streetlight commands and I obey  
like Picasso did (according to Woody Allen),  
by placing one foot before the other.

Now that I’m aware of it, though,  
it becomes hard, if not impossible,  
to keep it up so I stumble sideways into a bar.

If I ever want to get home, I’d better wipe that  
poststructuralist gait off with a few beers  
and just wing it like normal people do.

The bar has the same bartender and jukebox  
and smell of rabid upholstery that it had two years ago  
when I was last here, and the same trivia question  
frozen on the TV screen, something about  
penguins and the NFL. I hate American pop trivia  
because it makes me feel stupid  
and I hate that because I’m really quite smart  
and anything else is a fucking lie. I’m pissed and a little  
afraid I might stumble upon someone I know  
and I’d have to entertain them with jokes translated  
from Bulgarian and they won’t be funny

and I'd end up looking stupid again. I feel trapped.

What started out as a fairly simple going-home exercise is rapidly turning into bloody paranoynance.

Wait a minute, now I remember! This whole thing about feeling stupid and insecure didn't happen to me but to a friend of mine. No, really. It couldn't have been me because I often forget things and that includes other people's opinion of me.

Like, once I forgot to eat for about three days and this other time I forgot that I was supposed to be at some award ceremony which would have involved some folks announcing how utterly great I was, imagine forgetting that!

I regret it now, of course, but back then it seemed quite the thing to do. But don't give up on me yet, stay with me.

There really was a walking home, and a bar, the same bar from two years ago. But I didn't go in – the sameness damned near killed me! I was spooked, so to speak, because I knew for sure that my friends from two years ago were not in there but what if they all somehow happened to be in there?

Then it would have been mighty weird, and I have a weak heart so I wasn't ready to take that risk for just a few beers.

I decided I'd be able to make it home sober

even though I was so aware of my walking that  
the idea of it made my head plummet like the Hindenburg.  
But I'm too much of a man to be broken by a measly theory.  
I grin and bear it, and I even come back to class next week for more.  
I can walk away from anything! And that includes  
a run-on sentence from the likes of Deleuze and Derrida.  
I end up home alone, guzzling beer before the dumb  
computer monitor, hoping for better company.

## DAMSEL ON A CAMEL

I don't suppose there's any sense in asking this  
from the rain, how it brings out what I need in people  
like a favorite painter or a hi-fi tuner with my brain for remote,  
not even my brain but its robust fairy godmother,  
the one who knows best when to plant what seeds  
and has the balls to drill deep, not letting the ruptured cries  
of habit stop her from taking me there, the state fair  
this amorous hippo careening through paper plains,  
the nomadic center of things at once great and alive,  
where I've always wanted to end up but had honestly no idea.

## A MILLIGRAM OF SILVER

the screen watches

the subject's response

laser beams shot into

diluted camera lens

the pupil swells

with a pride of colors

the brain sends a ping

then a pong

the autopsy is recorded

in the infinite memory

the forceps targets

an unsuspecting audience

we are found once again

to be breathless

POETRY 2002

What to make of it?

Is it the heart of matter that I'm speaking to  
or just the faucet flowing without consequence  
in a tub never full enough to satiate a single jaybird?  
I'm afraid that, no matter what, this girl will  
never know what I mean; she thinks  
I'm awkwardly foreign, with a twist maybe,  
so how can I tell her about the green dim moon  
crushed between the apartment buildings  
of my gaseous hometown?

I've been hungry without choosing it  
but I must make an effort to remember the worse  
and as for the worst, I simply can't.

I'm too tall perhaps, or not religious enough  
to be ennobled by suffering.

The point is that even the laughter of  
five blonde girls on a rain-drenched parking lot  
can't atone for a damned thing, neither

my own memories nor anyone else's,  
of the shame when my writing  
couldn't follow the party line and swerved  
too often into the kind of crystal bullshit  
that implied something rotten under the sink  
and teachers and parents gulped as if  
asked to grow wings and a flaming sword  
but how could they? How could anyone,  
be moved out of their orbit because of words?  
I know nothing about it, all I know is this:  
If I hadn't believed what the fair-eyed stranger  
told me that day between the cinder blocks,  
I would now be dead. It's that important.

## THE SUN KING

my eyes hurt  
from looking out  
into the sea where  
ships collide as  
mistresses to  
the sovereign sun  
who stings them  
with his bastard rays  
into tranquil acceptance  
and becomes once more  
a divider and lover  
of the whiteness  
of their sails  
as any whiteness  
is only possible  
when he lodges  
his arrogant sabers  
into the seams of  
their impregnable  
cargo bays

## JEDI VIAGRA

In this episode the free world  
is threatened by a medieval-looking terrorist  
who commands an army of droids  
all with a very bad aim which the Jedi  
dismantle with light sabers of different hues  
a full crayon set backed by an army of clones  
that all have very good aim  
and the action takes place on a wide screen  
because there's such a lot of it  
yet the mildew Queen and Anakin Skywalker  
manage to squeeze in an eternal love  
which never seems to include fucking  
or even the promise thereof  
because the Jedi religion is for weaklings  
who dream of countering school bullies  
with their mind powers alone  
not ever seeing the more vital  
applications of telekinesis like making  
love to a thousand planets all at once.  
No, the Jedi who are, I'm sorry

to say, just a backwater cult made up of  
frigid eunuchs, will simply not do in my galaxy,  
this bone-crunching galaxy far  
far away from Disney's tepid morality  
and they will all get it in the next episode  
when the dark emperor will arise  
to ravish us all with his  
cloaked electroerotic potency

## ANGST RELOADED

The monster roars from its primal source, tongue drawn  
far into the throbbing rainforests of the soft palate,  
so far, yet so close, to mind that the blond sentry  
shivers in his boots and his litany fleets  
from the loosened grip of his lips.

The order is now an empty string of words  
descended downstairs, a wobbling drunk  
who won't remember the ass he made  
of himself that night at the celestial banquet,  
how he felt up Venus and threw up on Jupiter  
while Saturn and Pluto were bouncing him out.

What we have here is not a graceful feather fall  
dampened by tender-tendriled abstractions  
but a rough soldierly tumble off the teeth of matter  
timed by cuckoo-clocks with oscillating barbs for hands  
and none of the tiny solaces normally applied to the skin.

At times like these the jungle stiffens

like a dog-faced buccaneer poised to climb aboard  
and turn this truant vessel around while the captain  
cowers in the ship's belly, his cabin door  
barricaded by thick volumes about navigation.

As long as the sail is full of wind, the seamen are happy  
and the monster becomes their sepia-eyed mascot,  
a tiger lying limp and sickly in its own feces.

I am every wind that blows me  
but only some of them I call friends.

The others, nature's failed prototypes, curled in big jars  
like centipedes drowned in September's orange deluges,  
they're all just a hair away from life, this at once  
sorry and unapologetic life. All they need to  
crush the cage and turn the blood of their captor  
is a given mood and the guts to speak.

## DUST IN A TALL GLASS

I live on the edge  
of the desert  
where the trees are  
half-dry and withered  
but their other half  
is mossy and moist.  
Their one side  
casts grey shadows  
which pile up  
into thicker twilight  
and bury the grass's  
darkest green  
while the other spreads  
a soulless shade  
soaked in a dazzle  
of golden quartzes.  
And so my house  
has one side  
that is fortified  
but stands naked

and corroded  
on the other,  
riddled by a million  
desert snipers.

## FRANKENSTEIN ON THE BANJO

I smile as the distant lightning photographs me, a star,  
a hooded figure on a bike on the glistening night's road.

I feel like I've made a dent already, like I don't need to explain  
any further because I saw someone get it. Yes, the way  
her finger bent and her eyes bent inward like a soldier's  
proved that she got it, all of it in a single sitting.

Have I become such a dainty little cupcake?

And if yes, dare I question the tides of happiness  
when one such drop is enough to keep me going full throttle  
till the horizon caves in and the clouds vandalize the earth?

A lunatic knows everything about calling and nothing about  
being heard, he's the unconquerable bell and whistle  
and his orchestra battles on with swarms of intermezzos,  
barbarians threatening to extract his one tongue.

That was me the moment before it struck, the gavel  
ruling that there is a listener, and a good one  
although often fast asleep in the cotton wagon,  
traveling west under so many bales that it takes Jericho  
or the shepherd's flute I thought I heard as a child

in an afternoon nap under grandmother's brilliant cobwebs.

I don't flatter myself that it's me she heard.

Nothing I can say can prickle a dolphin's ear.

Even if I could pour rocks on a maiden's dulcimer

she'd turn to love the rainer, not the rain.

## APHRODITE INSTEAD

Now silence, in building blocks,  
forming a pillar. Now  
the boot sinks and instead of shattering  
comes the twang of bilabial guitars.

Is heard is what I mean.

It's what we always mean when we say 'mirror,'  
this mirror,  
or that one on the wall there,  
the bare one with the singed edges  
the one that likes to pose as a tunnel.

And now a pair of eyes is begun  
by the knitting circle.

We need those eyes to look at the circle knitting  
pullovers for eleven stiffs.

This is pure drama.

Pure drama is when you look.

Is heard when you look. Like the flashing  
heavens in a slap  
before it is begun to burn.

Instant bliss! – if it weren't for the eyes.

The representation of a horse  
on stage is a horse,  
it's how we remember that wisdom smells  
of formaldehyde and that gravity  
has a widow's sharp elbow.  
In this rivulet we are refreshed  
and we trudge ahead, seven fears behind  
the blue-eyed belle mounting  
whose face we never saw,  
always turned to where we assume is forward.

Towers topple, but the show does go on  
despite the nakedness  
around the aging stripper  
and the first row is bent to agree  
that age is all about smoke and lighting.  
A communal feeling arises as the good doctor  
who drops a tear in each eye, and writes  
in the margins of his blue notebook:  
“We tend to smile. We are tended to weep.  
We are (ding-dong!) blessed.”

## I WON'T BE EVERYTHING

nil

Nil

Nile, the

tree holds the banks together.

Root structure. Root system.

Born amazed in a splintered cradle,

and terrified every time the drapes

hung freely. It took two millennia

to glue this whole damned thing apart.

Ex-

ex,

x –

The cocoon mantles the imagination.

A cold shivers, aglow in twilight.

In their well-lit headquarters

police are looking for the doer.

Whatever happened has been diagramed.

The crayons at least are crystal-clear.

I

I sat once

I on a lake

in the wake of a holocaust.

It struck me like a blind bat crashing

into a keypad. It wrote 'z;ogrsp'

which means nothing

can be had for the duration.

Zip this brain up,

we're going home, where the heart is.

The three parents have two children between them,

like a camel, then Kodak mornings

begin to jelly-roll but the whole thing still

amounts to kissing Angst on the plush sofa.

He is foreign, he must know

every star's expiration date.

And she is locally pretty. A curve

here and there, a shapely sentence.

It comes third, prodigiously,

and makes an anvil out of everything

until the last thing standing is the first thing.

## BLOOD LETTERING

I believe in “god”  
because I like the sound of it –  
solid as a brick, and with a hole in it  
to stick your finger in  
like a brick or a bowling ball  
only it doesn’t go that far when you throw it.  
Or maybe I’m just not the proper athlete.  
These muscles can’t be wished into shape, they come to you  
like allergies, from the gene pool and the infested  
pool near where we often used to play as kids,  
where mosquitoes went to whirl  
before our faces at night  
as if it wasn’t already dark enough  
and unforeseeable, where we ran out of new  
stories so fast that everything since  
has seemed vaguely familiar as if one  
can’t ever top that first building block. Yes,  
everything seems, even fashion.  
I see bits of it hanging from my grandmother’s  
slumped shoulders, not enough body

for it to cover, probably how loose garbs were  
invented in the First Place. Ah, dear reader,  
don't be afraid! You won't be taken in  
by the vain draft of a poet's young maple bow,  
for you are beastly and magnificent  
and your clothes shall fit, *tous les jours*.

## ANDROID MILK

Now counting backwards from one:  
the pages become an infinite burnt yellow corridor  
and collapse back into the front cover,  
into the sea storm suspended like a poodle  
over saw teeth of gurgling froth.  
It's time to don the skates again, oh, mirror,  
mirror, on the floor! You're mine for now  
and I can stuff your cavernous mouth  
with anything I please, even roses  
or gravel. If I am naked, then so are you  
and so is everyone else, and that's not so bad  
then nakedness ceases to mean  
and we can move on to better means,  
like trying to hug the bus driver. "Let go,  
let go of that rudder!" we implore the baffled guy  
dressed in the uniform of our desires.  
"But how can I let go," he admonishes,  
"without using the proper verb for it?"  
and we laugh, gnashing our shiny vocabularies.  
No, wait, don't change the subject again!

Not before it changes itself, and it hasn't, not yet.

It is as steady as the eye of a gun sight, it says:

“We have to go Zen without the ‘going’

and then we have to get around the ‘doing nothing’

because we can't, we don't have the capacity for it,

for this no-verb. Therefore, it sits under no rock

waiting to be gathered in the adroit palms

of generations of meticulous monks

and prepared into a proud herbarium

as something to steer by and be blessed;

it's not a graveyard in a still place,

it is cumulative in neither space nor time.

It is ours, yet we don't have it, like dust.

But dust is immaterial unless it's limestone

or salt on the puckered lips of a desert child –

its worth only measured by turns of the stomach.

## CALL THE LOCKSMITH

'Don't tickle my ego,' I told her, 'I have better parts.'

She still liked me after saying this, I could tell  
by the way light slid off her as it would in glisters  
from a submarine surfacing rapidly. In my more chemical  
moods, I think of myself as a catalyst, as platinum,  
causing nothing to happen, only quickening  
what's already becoming. She is free, then,  
bracketed in my embrace, free like the sky-gliding  
contexts of children's chatter, and more ravenous  
than the indigo king reigning behind their eyes  
stuffing his chest drawers with two kinds of each.

I don't collect people the way she does, unapologetically  
as the cheerful bureaucrat who runs things  
but crumbly herself, cannot be held. Yet she does  
stick around for another pronged kiss. She thaws.

No, she's melting, gone. So much the better.

More beer for me, and less having to split  
my sentences into two equal parts, both true and false  
to my sluggish inner ear, one part unsaid,

it doesn't matter which. What matters is, I'm afraid  
this is too much unrequited fiesta and not enough work,  
none of the soothing mahogany monotony  
under frozen clocks and the glares of pencil sharpeners  
where you don't have to fake being bored to get sex  
or at least a gesture of good will, like, e.g.  
*I'd shag you if it wasn't only Tuesday.*

## REVERSE GARDENING

Once the tenable parasite is recognized for solder,  
for the glue that keeps the urn in its semblance of a whole,  
  
for the water that spans and smoothes its fractures  
and makes them seem like the natural curve of a woman's calf  
  
or an inscription that tells of what lies in the coffin,  
then it's no longer possible for pearl divers  
  
to keep diving for just a living, there's more to it  
than timing breaths, and less – there's love after the fact  
  
like a lucky weed that shoots quick and strong  
with airborne roots and a stem driven into the earth,  
  
a fluke not of nature  
but of nature's loneliest loveliest violinist.

## THE FULLNESS OF THINGS: A HISTORY

### XI.

The buck sharpened his stick and immediately  
it became his mannerism, his mega-trope  
for learning (while the antelope bled)  
and for knowing (after he ate its meat)  
and even when the sun fell on its back  
behind the vanished mangroves  
he was at least sure he had always been  
exactly a hundred stick's lengths from home,  
his cold and empty cistern  
as he willed it, without a touch or terror  
or any other totems of the animal he had surpassed,  
only a reverberating quietude  
inside a tree's rotting hull  
where the sharpening of his tools  
was the most accomplished act in town,  
his proud gnomish dictionary.

IXI.

Oh, how he suffered by his own hand  
while the three worlds were at each other's throats  
and there never seemed to be  
enough oxygen, not even  
for the rotting to go on indefinitely  
and so he gave them Math as a calculator  
for diminishing grain, as a gift, as he thought,  
because inside she had been pure  
and now, outside, she seemed endearing,  
an Athena-Palada, an immaculate hunter-seeker.  
We all know what happened next. What always happens.  
Someone died over and over again until  
the chalk repossessed the formulas it had written.

III.

A sore loser revisited the past once  
but couldn't even scratch the surface of the monolith.  
His knives broke one after the other

until all that was left was the bare body, sexless,  
covered with synonymous bruises and bleeding artifice.  
From inside, the petrified fly with the beady eyes saw  
hundreds of bodies slump and lose their difference  
and in this compost heap, at last – a silhouette!

## CLOCKWORM

Forget the adagio, play it by ear.

But the ear yields, it's no metronome to go by,  
and not even the mind can tick with such precision  
that each slice of time would be born entire.

OK, so I'm imagining tragedy of it, the odor of  
crisp ozone and singed impossibilities rising  
like Viking ships to the smoked ceiling, having taken  
taken place only in the stylized cinematic sequences  
of a girl's erotic chessboard, the sacred stone circle  
where she is allowed to move every piece but the queen.

But this is not an essay, and so I'm allowed to say I'm sorry,  
not for not loving, but for wanting to reap tigers  
where I've sown only question marks, my own riddled riddles,  
grey semaphores spun in a cumbersome tango.

I'm sorry that the blue butterfly had to be arrested  
in my immobility and I'm doubly sorry  
that she escaped so easily, shaking off my traps  
as if they were sawdust, as perhaps they are  
to a creature of few words.

And just like that day on the scaffold  
of a soft-spoken executioner,  
it becomes at once too much to bear, and too little,  
while somewhere in my guts the clockworm rises again  
to overthrow its flustered master.

## UGLY LOVE

Now that I've crossed out all the dates  
on this year's calendar, the refrigerator stands  
starker than ever in its nook and whiteness  
begins to descend upon the camera's eye  
until I am awakened to a dream, a ruddy desert  
with mangled dunes whose tops are  
penciled carelessly in shadowy strokes  
like stretch marks or thin-lipped smiles  
on a patchwork of faces, and then a voice slithers in:  
'Watch love,' it says, like that, without the comma  
and without the preliminaries, as if a spirit  
is possible without the bottle that contains it,  
as if 'bottle' is a possible spirit. I'm watching  
as the dunes dance in and out of themselves,  
their bellies reduced to sharp sines  
squirring on a baby's star-spotted ceiling.  
I have been invited to attend an earlier past,  
a crossing between theater and museum,  
with actors almost alive and nearly dead  
each gallantly scrubbing his or her own floor,

the same vast ballroom floor, already clear enough  
to reflect diluted silhouettes snatching at  
themselves and others in the laboring crowd.  
The sight is familiar – an orgy without consummation,  
without an end, even in itself.  
Fingers clasp fingers across the dividing line  
between flesh and glaze and refuse to let go,  
dead fingers worn in the hair like shining trinkets,  
like milky shadows only visible under red light.  
Such is the supreme beauty of Thanatos entwined  
in the olive chromes of Nissan's latest model.  
She is silky and untouched, an unlikely muse  
for lack of grit and grease. Yet, I will watch her  
past the edge of the screen, in the bathroom  
where she washes her underwear and swears with spite  
wiping sweat from her forehead which spreads  
into a cosmos of droplets as it lands and melts  
the floor like sulphuric acid, and the shadows connect.

## HELLO HOMEOWNER

I'd love it if I had to go on waking  
up from myself like Alice or  
a sentient tower built from  
the ground up and leaning inward  
from the winds twirling in my hollow cellars.  
I'm talking about stories, of course,  
stacked one on top of the other, and always  
the topmost inhabited by jolly fire dancers  
whose stomping flamingoes keep the beat  
and whose steps echo more and more  
as one descends the stairs to older floors  
where there isn't enough flesh to  
dampen the naked rustle  
of brick layers compressing into place.

I watch my younger selves get it on  
on the cigarette-burnt carpet rubbing heads  
like the two hammers of a glockenspiel  
resting together in a clown's glossy pocket.  
It must be full of tarred & feathered stars in there,  
it must be a celestial orgy. They lick

newly-found unease from each other's fingers –  
theirs is the hunger that comes after hunger  
to occupy a familiar closet space.

It has a dazzling egg for brains  
and each of its raindrops is rain.

## DRESS REHEARSAL IN THE PYRENEES

I get on with it, it's like damp clothes,  
like having to change after  
a field trip to the museum,  
after having seen the fossilized tablets  
and wished to forge them  
so they'd read closer to home:  
'Thou shall kill, and love it!'

Today is laundry day and by that I mean  
it's been altogether too long. I have  
no decent pair of socks left, and I welcome this  
opportunity to be indecent, the trick is  
to find someone to do it with, barefoot or not,  
ties optional. It really doesn't matter what  
I get messed up in, so long as the cradle rocks  
and fat guitars twang by the fire.

I'm a fan of my own band, I support it by  
singing along. And here's to all the tall women  
stiffening their seasoned hips behind me.

I know I'm no Jim Morrison.

I'm only the sum of my hearts.

## MOVING PICTURES

When the beacon shifted to an altogether different rhythm  
and dolphins began to invade the blue wound opening on screen  
some of my bareback riders were thrown off phase,  
their chatter broke into hiccups, they couldn't get with it,  
the slow, mindful thing, not tonight when there's still plenty of marrow  
fermenting in the tall glasses and matador eyes gleam  
with bull-fire.

I suppose each of us learns against his or her  
better judgment the way kites soar always leaning  
on sloping winds, or maybe not that way at all.  
Whatever gusto ripples through our faces is just that, the rumble  
of things colliding in thick moonshine in the atmosphere,  
sore elbows rubbed against the possibility of love.

The lesson is a quick cat tiptoeing across canvas, its own  
egg and Columbus, its own cavernous cleverness.  
We see it move about, never quite between the rock  
and the hard place where we lie in wait. And again we  
smite each other instead and laughter springs like confetti  
soaked in the blood of a likeable henchman, coloring each of us

differently, or maybe just me, the I that watches  
with such ravenous intent that it's becoming  
queasy with so much becoming.

## FIRST ONE'S FREE

Since I can't paint worth a damn

here's an idea for a painting

for those of you who can paint

but can't think of anything

worth a damn:

A dirt road divides a sallow savanna landscape

into two uneven parts, say, left and right.

A man staggers off into the distance

doubled over under the weight of

an angel's shadow, so much so

that his spine seems reptilian, while

a woman in a blue bonnet and a flower-

printed dress picnics just off the road with her

back to the man, nibbling at a horseshoe.

The two are somehow related

but we don't know how exactly.

Maybe through cause and effect

or maybe through their names

bumping L's in the phone book.

On the horizon there are two towers,

one is big, the other one bigger,  
almost obnoxious, and a bit crooked like  
an index finger. Above the towers the sun  
is nothing more than a sloppy circle,  
more of an ellipse, as quick and negligible  
as a wren's iris. A hovering pulse.

## VITA

Plamen Arnaudov was born on April 8, 1978, in Sofia, Bulgaria. He grew up in Bourgas, Bulgaria, where he attended “Geo Milev” English Language Medium School. In the spring of 2000 he got his bachelor’s degree from the American University in Bulgaria and was accepted to the graduate program in creative writing at Louisiana State University that same fall.