

Night Baseball

*[I] retrace by moonlight the roads where
I used to play in the sun.*

—Marcel Proust

At night, when I go out to the field
to listen to the birds sleep, the stars
hover like old umpires over the diamond,
and I think back upon the convergences
of bats and balls, of cowhide and the whacked
thumping of cork into its oiled pockets,
and I realize again that our lives pass
like the phased signals of that old coach,
the moon, passing over the pitcher's mound,
like the slowed stride of an aging shortstop
as he lopes over the infield or the stilled echo
of crowds in a wintered stadium. I see again
how all the old heroes have passed on to their
ranches and dealerships, that each new season
ushers in its crop of the promised and promising,
the highly touted and the sudden phenoms of the
unexpected, as if the hailed dispensation of gifts
had realigned itself into a new constellation,
as if the old passages of decrepitude and promise
had been altered into a new seeming. I remember
how once, sliding into second during a steal,
I watched the sun rest like a diadem against the
head of some spectator, and thought to myself
in the neat preutterance of all true feeling,
how even our thieveries, well-done, are blessed
with a certain luminousness, how a man rising
from a pilfered sanctity might still upright himself
and return, like Odysseus, to some plenitude
of feast and fidelity. It is why, even then, I loved
baseball: the fierce legitimacy of the neatly stolen,
the calm and illicit recklessness of the coaches
with their wet palms and arcane tongues of mimicry
and motion. It is why, even now, I steal away
from my wife's warm arms to watch the moon sail
like a well-hit fly over the stadium, then hump
my back high over the pitcher's mound and throw

that old curve of memory toward the plate
where I run for a swing at it—the moon
and the stars approving my middle-aged bravado,
that boy still rising from his theft to find the light.

In a Helicopter over Parachute, Colorado

I am not sure what the gods would have thought of this or what, if they are still with us, they are thinking now, but here above the rocked and ribbed and lovely planet, I look down over the bruised elegy of mountains, over the hacked landscape and mesmerized pastures of the elk who once lived here, and I feel the strange restlessness of my sad kind and their passion for dominion over the trees and the birds and the relentless flowers. I feel the wide aura of some otherworldly eye that looks down on this and wonders what possible embellishment the torn and ravaged mesas could bring to our lives, whether the blue columbine and the magpie and the song of the meadowlark can survive the good intentions of enlightened men and their lust for improvement. Yesterday, walking beside a mountain stream, I watched a single, speckled trout leap from the water, flap its gills against the air, and pucker its mouth like a child blowing kisses at an uncle he will never see again. Alone there, I watched him slither again into the glistening stream, then disappear like song among the aspens and wildflowers. A huge quiet came over the world then, as if the gods themselves were holding their breaths in reverence and wonder. And now I, no more or less a god than any man, am flying over these streams and flattened peaks, my breath held and my lips pressed like a child's face against the sky. I see the vast carnage against the trees and the earth by those I would like to call: *brother*. I see, or imagine I see, that very trout fleeing like a wounded deer over the peaks, glistening in the late afternoon light, and wondering if its smooth course over the stones and silt and the penumbras of flower will be swept to a cold end among the currents of desire and progress. It must be wondering, I think, how the soft underbelly of the earth can long survive the metaled thrusts and pillages of cold steel we call future, and why the sun and the earth and the clean undulations of water do not suffice for our kind, and whether the greatest kindness is not reverence, and whether men can long continue to move mountains, or mountains men.

Looking for Wildflowers in Bernheim Forest

Louisville, Kentucky

The dogtooth violet, the chickweed
and the toothwort are all out,
the trees so neatly labeled
for the poets and forgetful.
We walk among these woods
(silent, fretful, full of doubt)
looking for loveliness others have named.

The horned owl undulates
its eyes within its cage;
the turkey vulture spreads
its wings but cannot fly.
The ring-necked pheasant's
mottled feathers mask its age;
the turtle bangs its head
against the glass and wonders why.

*What's love? we ask ourselves
among these trees. Whose
strange invention? What flowering
of shame? As we continue walking
through the woods, calling out
such words as only love can name.*

**Mushroom Hunting in Late August,
Peterborough, N.H.**

The drosophila wing of the morning moon
is still in the heavens
when, looking for the lesson in nature
we are always looking for, I walk,
basket in hand, through the damp woods,
parting the secretive ferns, twisting
my thin body among the asters and loosestrife,
checking beneath the stones and stumps
as I plunder the pine-needed floor
for the chanterelles and puffballs.

It is so much like life, which is why
I love it: the delectable and the deadly
so resembling each other, the sexual rise
of the false morel a mere flirtation,
and the sweet viscosity we'd like to swim in
an elegy to movement. Holding a knife
in my right hand, I work from the base,
cutting beneath the stipe, recording
in my small book the particulars
that separate delicacy from demise, hallucination
from the smaller contentments of mere vision.

Finally, placing each in its own small bag
and into my basket, I wend my way back
through the mossy woods to my soft chair,
to the embering fire where, with my book
and my magnifying glass, I start to separate,
because separating is, in the end, what this
is about: the doubtful from the certain,
the brief scintillations of beauty

from the urge for survival. Some, in fact,
are so beautiful I would like, this very moment,
to taste them: to feel the pale, red flesh
and feathery gills take on their sexual softness
beneath my tongue, but I am thinking again
of what a friend's psychiatrist said about women:
*"Just because they're beautiful and you're hungry,
doesn't mean you have to eat all of them."*

Until at last, what began as a large harvest
is merely a small bundle of certainty and safety.
And I sit there with my three piles of caps
and stems, of torn gills and the bruised flesh
of holiness and nature. Loving what little
I know for certain. I gather
the smallest pile toward me. *Oh, life,*
I say to myself, *so this is what you are.*
I stumble out into the sunlight.
I pucker my lips at the morning moon.

And I eat.

Before a Storm, in September

Air inhales water and light so hard
it grows thick as placenta, and it seems

We are watching this life from another life,
embryos ourselves, and when the church bell

Strikes six, it is as if the heart of the world,
our mother, were beating a new rhythm,

As if all we had gathered together in times
of peace (beech, clover, song, dandelion)

Were breaking away from us, and our lives
were the fingers of a clenched fist, perfectly

Formed but inexperienced, a premonition
of what we are, ovarian form of a life we

Have not yet known, but are about to experience:
the opening of sky, then a quick flash of light,

The air surrendering its secret, and we
wet with the mere thought of it.

October Sestina: The Shadows

The maple that was amber this time
last night is now a ghostly shadow.
In fact, all that was beautiful
then is shadow, as if gods who once sang
were now whispering the names of the dead
and the world re-arranging itself beneath

the moonlight. The streets pass beneath
me, gold leaves fluttering one at a time
from the ginkgos like letters the dead
might send to a friend whose shadow
is passing above them, someone who sang
to them in times of loneliness. Beautiful

is not the word to describe the beauty
of this moment: sky and all that's beneath
it merging like smoke into smoke, a song
that's not just another homage to time,
but a fading of substance to shadow,
all that's alive mimicking all that's dead.

And yet—not discouraged by the deaths
that surround them—magnolias stay beautiful,
severe as eagles hovering in the shadows.
Leaves flutter like spawned salmon beneath
them. Who could believe that, time after time,
year after year, it continues, this song

of loneliness, repetition, a sanguine turning
and resurrection in which the live and the dead
are etched—each in his personal time—
like the irascible carvings of lovers beneath
the branches, and the light that was beautiful
only yesterday is darkness and widening shadow.

And yet the mockingbird sings in the shadows,
still the chrysanthemums hold to their unsung
resilience. And if nothing survives beneath
this winter's ice, if only the dead and their dead-
ening music are what's left of this beautiful
season, then who will remember this time, who

will remember these beautiful fallings, sing-
singing the quiet of this restless time, as the dead
spread their fingers beneath the widening shadows.

The Earth Was Tepid and the Moon Was Dark

The earth was tepid and the moon was dark.
The children slept naked in their rooms
and feared the light. In the windy park
the leaves fell, and the crying of the loons
over the lake was all that foretold
the coming of winter and the brutal cold.

The night was quiet and the stars were bright.
The mollusks floated in the sea and paved the shore.
In the valley, within the gently misted light,
the cattle dreamt, and who could ask for more?
And in the pre-dawn hours of quiet sleep,
the dew lay glistening and the air was sweet.

Then the day dawned darkly and the birds awoke.
The church bells tolled. No one spoke
of love or death beneath the dimly lit trees,
amid the humming cars and the droning bees
that hovered and died against the brisk afternoon,
And then it was over, the day. And again the moon.

Christmas Eclogue: Washington, D.C.

The homeless have all gone home
and the streets—quiet, abandoned—
belong again to those who find home
in the small movements of a day:
the whistling of kettles, the last fallings
of the ginkgo, the iambic drip-drop of rain
against windows. Not even ice has found
its way to our town this Christmas, and we
pause, suspended between seasons, the way
an old hiker pauses for breath before climbing.

And in this pause between things—
merriment and doom, the seventies and the eighties,
winter and the suggestion of winter,
things we pause between grow clear: ice,
loneliness, the meetings of glass and air
at windows. The whole world becomes a town
in which all leavings add to a vague clarity,
like the peacefulness of chessboards at checkmate
or the testimony of an empty stadium, all resonance.

Even this capital town—where lust and power
climb the trellises of the spirit like ivy—
knows, for a day, the peace of an empty room
in which all things have their place, but nothing
moves. Old couples rock at their windows
with the mute patience of monuments. Bluejays
welcome the morning without distinction.
Even the passage of ice eastward stops
in the Midwest for a day of prayer. Everything
that is not homeless pauses, looks around,
gives thanks, remains.

Learning by Doing

And now the day is mine and it is sweet,
I take this message from the light and make it real:
The loss we do not claim we must repeat.

Who knows if it is possible to cheat our fate?
In our denials, our wanting we reveal,
And the day is sometimes lost, and not so sweet.

A man can get through life—it's no great feat
To walk along the earth, or else to kneel.
But the loss he doesn't claim he must repeat.

Who lives alone, another doesn't cheat—
To wake alone at night and not to feel;
To call the day your own and make it sweet.

I've nothing more than words to seal my fate.
There's little that I want, still less I need.
So the loss I do not name I must repeat.

Who doesn't hate the unrelenting seed?
Who doesn't think his life's often unreal?
This day could be yours too, and could be sweet.
Just claim your loss tonight. And don't repeat.

The Litraiture of Everyday Life

—for Anthony and Helen Hecht

Nothing derivative here:
just the breezed pancake
of afternoon, the wafted entrails

Of the scarves blowing in iced air
and the girls, Ah the girls, not a single one
out of an Ingres painting, not a single one

Brushing her hair as in Renoir,
but lovely still among the splotched
particulars of an ordinary afternoon,

Among the dark and dandy and fanciful
trees, so ravenous to be leafed
and still stippled in their shading.

What a day! The sweet frottage of afternoon,
not really as in a Max Ernst painting,
but still chalked and textured and

Chiaroscuro-like in its deep vintage
of blue-gray, the high strut
of the terribly busy, and the pursed lips

Of girls in the library, bookish
only to seem reticent, but eager still
to indenture the evening

Between the high lubricants of lust
and tenderness, the straggled juices
that flow all over this horny world

Like the Three-in-One Oil of some
creaked Divinity, the so-glad-to-
know-you-but-let's-get-on-with-it

Of easy access, and now already
the bagels are plopping like galoshes
from their back-room ovens, the pizzas

Are sizzling beneath their cheeses
and the world is a pretty place, mixed
in media and nonreferential, a patchwork

Of intent and coincidence, a sweet *res ipsa*
of things found and stumbled upon, as this
was stumbled upon, bright and ordinary

And unmediated from within the sweet
potpourri of its ribbed compendium;
nowhere indexed, nowhere to be found in books.

Freudian Slip

Though she coaxes the embroidered silk
over her head with the care of someone
attending a ball, the slip is transparent,
and in the moonlight filtering through
the bedroom window, her body is even
more real for its inspired accidents:
her breasts brazen and shy both at once,
mangos and the ordinary flesh.

It is how mistrust begins: this
and the second voice that whispers
beside you while she sleeps, the thrush
with a bluejay's cadence, archipelago
with its islands strung together so tightly
it mimics the mainland. And when she says
night, love, night frightens me, you know
she does not mean darkness.

And when she says *I love you*,
she means *watch your step*,
the rest of your life.

The Music of Whatever

The way Goethe counted out hexameters
on his Roman lady's back, I count

the unkissed syllables the wind wafts over
the grasses and horse farms of Kentucky,

I count the dark pentameters of fallen leaves
that the soft rains of April will transform

to the mulch of a new season. O love, this
is what we are here for—to make music

of both presence and absence, to sing
whatever song first comes to us over the dark

parapets of decay and distance, to emulate
the greased happiness of the mallards floating

among the pond scum and incipient flowers.
It is why I count out the beat of whatever song

first comes to me amid our half-ruined lives,
and why what I count, in whatever form

the angels find for it, becomes the measure
of some new and intoxicated holiness: the buds

on these barren trees yearning to flower,
your voice in the unchilled wind making music

of even this even now even here.

Wishes That Could Last a Lifetime

Now it is once again the cold morning
and I rise from my bed,
knowing it cannot go on like this,
but that it will go on like this, always:
Terrible, terrible beauty,
terrible beauty that endures
in the still air of night and slips
time and again between our fingers.
And in the harbor the boats sway,
they sway and they turn at their moorings,
restless children who are constantly leaving
and returning, only to leave again.
They slip in and out of the narrow channels,
as hope and the thousand wishes slip
between this and the next life, scurrying
like ants up hills whose end they'll never
live to see. Yet we hold to hope,
we hold to hope and the pale confusion
as the blind hold to their sticks and dogs
and the good words of their neighbors,
eloquent and purposeful. We hold to hope
like the old rip-cord we count to five
and pull time and time again, the sewage
we refine and drink from until our gills flap
in the mad wind and we fall to earth,
grateful and hyperventilating.
It can last forever: We can jump,
time after half-crazed time,
from the flames, we can dive
from the sinking ship and swim for shore.
It lasts and lasts. It goes on,
ephemeral as breath, wishful as all thinking.
Enough to last an entire lifetime.

What I Believe

I believe there is no justice,
but that cottongrass and bunchberry
grow on the mountain.

I believe that a scorpion's sting
will kill a man,
but that his wife will remarry.

I believe that, the older we get,
the weaker the body,
but the stronger the soul.

I believe that if you roll over at night
in an empty bed,
the air consoles you.

I believe that no one is spared
the darkness,
and no one gets all of it.

I believe we all drown eventually
in a sea of our making,
but that the land belongs to someone else.

I believe in destiny.
And I believe in free will.

I believe that, when all
the clocks break,
time goes on without them.

And I believe that whatever
pulls us under,
will do so gently,

so as not to disturb anyone,
so as not to interfere
with what we believe in.

Young Birds Crying Late at Night

—for Jane Cooper

At night you can hear them,
the small birds, as if they were calling
the names of their sisters and brothers
up at the moonlight, as if,
in the still, vintage air of night,
they had found their voices among the maples
and were crying their theories of the world
into the vast hypothesis of silence and darkness.

Wishes, Auden said, *are not horses*,
and I know it, as I watch the pulsating sky
devour the darkening fields, *wishes*
are not horses, but maybe wishes are birds:
the slim night-graffiti of their cries
above the vanishing earth, the hybrid harmonies
of their throats opening and closing
in the delicate nests, the flapping
of their impotent wings as the stars
ember and rise up
to light this palpitating world.

Praise

I roll from the bed mornings
knowing things fade
and renew as they will—

the persistence of mangroves
clinging for soil
to bits of driftwood,
the deliberate trek of mosses
from the Pleistocene
over stone.

Though I remember nothing
from past lives,
they convince me
of something so eternal
if defies memory,
a quiet so deep
even the murmur of thrushes
intrudes on it,
even love
usurps its tranquillity.

I am no longer a small boy:
I bear loss
with an epiphytic ease—
the air sustains me,
the dust,
the well-intentional residues
of decay.

If I woke tonight
screaming,
remain still—
when morning comes,
all I will remember
are last night's stars . . .

what they disturb,
and what they rectify.

This Is it

—for John McNally

Ah, John, the world is cold
and we are in it. But
there is a place of no ice,
and sometimes I wake, look
through the windows of all my neighbors,
and they are rising from their beds
and drinking their coffee, and they
are leaving their houses to catch a bus
that will take them somewhere they have
no use for. But John, this is the world:
the street, the bus, the garbage,
and all the imperfect lovers who are
willing to love us despite our imperfections.
Not the heaven we dreamt of, but
the sweet sewage of something better
and worse that flows in the streets
and we have no choice but to call: home.
This is it. And if we say it, again
and again, we may yet believe it:
This is it. This is it. This is it.
The fragile envelope we call body,
the huge ambivalence of love, and the
dust we clean from our shelves and will
eventually turn to. *This is it*, friend:
the oak and the empty cup; the starling
and the half-burnt candle; the women
we are always leaving, and the wise women
who leave us before we turn to them in anger.
Let's say it again: *This is it.* This is
the white sky of November and the bird shit
that plops on our shoulders without warning
or reverence. This is the rain
and the old garments we have no use for,
the cruelty and wild wonder of not knowing
what we want. *This is it*, friend,
this is it. On this incalculable Thursday.
On the day of your birth. Happy Birthday.
This is it.

Light, at Thirty-two

It is the first thing God speaks of
when we meet Him, in the good book
of Genesis. And now, I think
I see it all in terms of light:

How, the other day at dusk
on Ossabaw Island, the marsh grass
was the color of the most beautiful hair
I had ever seen, or how—years ago
in the early-dawn light of Montrose Park—
I saw the most ravishing woman
in the world, only to find, hours later
over drinks in a dark bar, that is
wasn't she who was ravishing,
but the light: how it filtered
through the leaves of the magnolia
onto her cheeks, how it turned
her cotton dress to silk, her walk
to a *tour-jeté*.

And I understood, finally,
what my friend John meant,
twenty years ago, when he said: *Love
is keeping the lights on.* And I understood
why Matisse and Bonnard and Gauguin
and Cézanne all followed the light:
Because they knew all lovers are equal
in the dark, that light defines beauty
the way longing defines desire, that
everything depends on how light falls
on a seashell, a mouth . . . a broken bottle.

And now, I'd like to learn
to follow light wherever it leads me,
never again to say to a woman, *YOU
are beautiful*, but rather to whisper:
*Darling, the way light fell on your hair
this morning when we woke—God,
it was beautiful.* Because, if the light is right,
then the day and the body and the faint pleasures
waiting at the window . . . they too are right,

All things lovely there. As that first poet wrote,
in his first book of poems: *Let there be light.*

And there is.

Wishful Thinking

—for *Cynthia*

I like to think that ours will be more than just another story of failed love and the penumbras of desire. I like to think that the moon that day was in whatever house the astrologists would have it in for a kind of quiet, a trellis lust could climb easily and then subside, resting against the sills and ledges, giving way like shore to an occasional tenderness, coddling the cold idiosyncrasies of impulse and weather that pound it as it holds to its shape against the winds and duststorms of temptation and longing. I like to think that some small canister of hope and tranquility washed ashore that day and we, in the right place, found it. These are the things I imagine all lovers wish for amid the hot commencements of love and promises, their histories and failures washing ashore like flotsam, their innards girthed against those architects of misery, desire and restlessness, their hopes rising against the air as it fondles the waves and frolics them skywards, I like to think that, if the heart pauses awhile in a single place, it finds a home somewhere, like a vagabond lured by fatigue to an unlikely town and, with a sudden peacefulness, deciding to stay there. I like to think these things because, whether or not they reach fruition, they provide the heart with a kind of solace, the way poetry does, or all forms of tenderness that issue out amid the deserts of failed love and petulant desire, I like to think them because, meditated on amid this pattern of off-white and darkness, they lend themselves to a kind of music, not unlike the music a dove makes as it circles the trees, not unlike the sun and the earth and their orbital brothers, the planets, as they chant to the heavens their longing for hope and repetition amid orderly movement, not unlike the music these humble wishes make with their cantata of willfullness and good intentions, looking for some pleasant abstractions amid our concretized lives, something tender and lovely to defy the times with, quiet and palpable amid the flickers of flux and the flames of longing: a bird rising over the ashes, a dream.

The Puzzle

—for my father

In the old family photograph, they are all dust now, except for you. Your last sister, Erna, the one with the birthmark on her cheek and the necklaces of sapphire, just this month gone dustward. And Aunt Tina, the seamstress with the smile as thick as a thread: *dust*. All the smiling ones—even Clemmy, the one with the incarnadined cheeks and sweet eyes of burnt sienna, even Uncle Fred, the stamp collector from Vienna with the meerschaum pipes—all dust now. They are all ambassadors from that other country, just as I, whose blood still runs hot through the throbbing capillaries, who love the birds and the air and the fragrant skin of my lovely wife, would be an ambassador from this one. How strange it must be for you, who are always telling me: *now I am the last one*, to see them gathered here, all image and memory. How it must make you think, constantly now, of your own dying, that last piece in death's long puzzle of jigsaw and reunion. Nights now, the persistence of breath your one desire, the slowed transistor of your heart pumping the blood toward memory and terror, you must hear them calling to you: *Come here. Come here, sweet brother. Come sleep with us again*. How cruel, to have been saved for last, like the body's last spared cell against the ravages of cancer, like the last resident of Minsk during the pogroms. And yet *life* is what we want, above everything—Just one more sighting of the chestnut-collared longspur, just one more night of listening to the feathers make love inside the pillow, just one more afternoon of *La Forza del Destino* on the radio. O Father, clutched piece of the puzzle, all is forgiven! And I, who am still blood and desire and the wild laughter of afternoon, I hold this piece of you in my hand, wanting to hide it from whoever is playing, wanting to abort this long puzzle of dyings, running through the woods, loving you, urging the gods to speak your name quietly into their strange completeness.

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from

AGAINST ROMANCE

Michael Blumenthal

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