

JESSE MOUNTJOY

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**Parched Corn Creek**

Early morning rain.  
Dew from leaves  
Years above the ground.  
In the trees, with its light  
Thrusts, the sun washes itself.  
The creek makes my beard ripe.

A poplar leaf rests  
In mid-air, then  
Drops one space  
On the spider's rope.

The snake's skin,  
A dried magnolia leaf.  
Boot print in the trail,  
The fern's shadow.

The creek trades its water  
For sound,  
Its rocks for leaves,  
Its flow for glisten.  
The bargain reaches to the hills.

### Vernon's Morning Haikus

I.

July morning. Grey  
Clouds hold the heat in soft breasts.  
Day yet unexpressed.

II.

In the gap between  
Two thoughts, the morning's rainbow  
Orange, red, grey, light.

III.

Slide the bolt, open  
The door and release your youth  
Into the morning.

## Hammocks

In late afternoon I finish  
The last mowing of grass this year.  
I lie in my hammock in the copse  
Of confused trees in the middle  
Of the cemetery behind my house.

Years ago before he died the old farmer  
Across the road told me stories  
Of the twenty-four or so graves there.  
All but one of the markers and headstones  
Are gone. Some lost, some stolen.

One marks the northeast corner  
Of my property. Others may have sunk  
Below the tangle of vines, leaves and roots,  
Into large holes burrowed beneath them  
By the ancestors of my groundhogs.

The only dead I know are my sons' dogs  
And cats long buried, and Timothy O'Flynn,  
A lost epic to his family. His gravestone,  
Settled low in more than a century of grass  
Can still be rubbed and read—

TIMOTHY SON OF T & F O'FLYNN  
BORN FEB. 17, 1850 DIED JULY 28, 1860  
AGED 10 YRS, 5 MS 11 DS

I am not dressed for this time of year—  
Shorts, sandals, sweatshirt, Polartec.  
Late winds in November  
Have cut me in half, the lower part cold,  
The upper part warm.

I rest my two bodies in the hammock,  
Both humming a jazz melody—'Naima,'  
And think of John Coltrane's tenor saxophone  
And Eric Dolphy's bass clarinet  
As limbs twisting from the trees above me

Along far harmonic songlines,  
Certain that in November 1961,  
At their concert in Stockholm, the two of them  
Imagined the two of us, Timothy and me,  
Carelessly dressed, lying in our hammocks.

## Vernon's Pond

—a story in haiku

The pond has its own  
Colors. Except for them, he  
Can know this world if

All things come to it  
Twice. Light and shadow, even  
Sounds, are reflected.

A pin oak visits  
Nearby. Its twisted, knobby  
Roots wade in the pond.

His wife is outside  
With a rake beating the pond  
To keep the frogs quiet.

Next morning's dream light  
Dredges up mud emeralds.  
Turtles float. Sunrise,

Pond in the field. Bright  
As fresh paint. Gilt-framed looking  
Glass over the mantel.

East side of waking,  
He stirs the vowels of his name  
Into the coffee.

[He knows the name he  
Was given. He does not know  
The name that he has.]

He walks to the pond,  
Its face and his the color  
Of polished chestnuts,

A voyeur of weeds  
Under the water swaying  
To the pond's music.

One finger pointing  
Will frighten his dreamcreatures  
In the silt and reeds.

In autumn they sit  
On reeds and willows before  
Their season's dive. Now

Above the pond's bottom  
Float clusters of barn swallows  
From winter to spring.

The wind's indistinct  
Tapestries. The reeds crippled  
By rimmed refraction.

The wind across it  
Draws from the pond the hush of  
Most delicate vowels.

Sparrows veer and skirt  
From the pond's surface, much like  
Vernon from his chores.

While he reads scripture,  
Crickets sing. The pond adapts  
To incoherence.

Words swim off the page  
Into the dimpled water.  
Waterspiders skate.

Vernon's Bible floats  
On the pond. Wet words and leaves  
Gathered and baptised.

Dragonflies' water  
Rings. Cabals of life's dreams,  
Among the algae,

Vernon's pond. Perfect  
Forms (fog lifting, snarls of gnats)  
Defined by absence.

Attentive and still.  
It is false to imagine  
Vernon's pond as real.

### Plants and Cats

First frost last night. Home from work  
With darkness outrunning the clocks,  
I carry them from the porches—  
The rubber and palm plants,  
The fig and dwarf umbrella trees.  
The cats watch and follow me  
As I deliver the plants to various rooms  
Throughout the house like a postman.  
Their eyes are bright, enhanced by things  
That have not yet really happened.  
Nerves ripple their fur. In short, my hours'  
Deliveries throw the cats slightly off  
Balance. They have a sudden passion  
For the minutiae of leaves.  
The cats circle and sniff the pots  
And dig in the dirt like crazed despots.  
Ideas of their worlds hang like ornaments  
From the foliage. They have wakeful,  
Catnipped dreams of transformation—  
Into Egyptian cats with henna-painted claws,  
Cats on hot tin roofs,  
Cats with names of opera heroines,  
Black cats of Vincent Price, and those  
Rarely observed in Frida Kahlo's self-portraits.  
They stare between the stalks and leaves,  
Confused by the seasons which pass  
Through the doors, and exhausted  
By their lineages and dreams, and with  
Weary scratches (with paint flecked claws)  
Beg to go outside for awhile  
To collect their thoughts.

### Among the Perennials

Each time I water the hostas, the astilbes, the ferns,  
I think of the old lawyers of the past,  
Like Davis Williams of Hart County,  
Who carried a fresh cut onion half tucked  
In a pocket of his waistcoat, for tears for the juries,  
Or Uncle Harry Ward of Bourbon County,  
Thumping his long hickory cane on the courtroom  
Floor for each point of law or equity,  
Or my cousin the judge, with a voice like a cello,  
Or smiling, blind Ed Prichard, with his single, stiff nods  
Behind leaded-glass as he fondles law books  
Like a spinster browsing through love letters.  
My dreams are compost heaps of passionless meditations.  
In my garden, in the sacramental, elusive hours,  
With my elders, I can engage in Victorian studies  
Of phenomes and the luxury of damnation.  
The fragrance of illusion is everywhere.  
The summer rounds its curve, and then I dream  
Of poet lawyers, home from work, my age now.  
For example, Wallace Stevens, still vested  
After a day at Hartford's insurance offices, walking  
Among the shade perennials, endlessly repeating  
The word "subrogation,"  
Under the toneless air of his plants.  
Among my shade perennials the hose's spray drums  
Their leaves with sounds that resolve my dreams  
On one day and give them a longer life  
On the next, and with whispers that all that is  
Imaginable of this world is necessary to it.

### Vernon's Clock Haikus

I.

The wind, loose inside  
The clock, with widow's moans, wreaks  
Havoc with the hours.

II.

Each night at bedtime  
He winds the clock forgetting  
That both hands are gone.

## Stalingrad, September 1942

—commentary with short poem,  
for (and after) Vasily Grossman

### *commentary*

<sup>1</sup>Simple, canvas-covered bi-planes,  
The Polikarpov U-2,  
Designed as training planes,  
Used as cropdusters  
And termed ‘Kerosinka’  
(‘Kerosene lamps’) for their talent  
Of bursting easily into flames,  
Flown by

<sup>2</sup>(The Germans’ nickname for)  
Young Russian women,  
Pilots, ages 18 to 20 years,  
From the Dubovka airfield,  
<sup>3</sup>Cutting their engines, gliding  
<sup>4</sup>Across the Volga, over  
The front lines at Mamaev Kurgen  
(The high Tartar mound),

<sup>5</sup>Releasing night flares  
To warn the Red Army’s  
Guards Rifle Divisions  
Not to fire in the air,  
<sup>6</sup>And throwing grenades,  
And mines onto, into  
<sup>7</sup>XIV Panzer Corps  
Of von Paulus’ 6th Army.

### *poem*

In their kerosene lamps<sup>1</sup>  
Night witches<sup>2</sup> fly  
Silently<sup>3</sup> west<sup>4</sup>  
Lighting candles<sup>5</sup>  
And handing  
Their little gifts<sup>6</sup>  
To Fritze<sup>7</sup>  
Keeping him awake.

**Runelle, August 1944**

My grandparents' columned house in the country  
Was not large enough, I suspect, either to contain  
Her loss and the gestures of sorrow made, or to  
Surrender her to incompleteness. She sits in sudden  
But perpetual sunlight, ash-pale beneath the farm tan,  
On the hardwood floor between the canasta table  
And the flowered cretonne sofa, a faint perspiration  
And taste of mint on her upper lip, hearing no voices  
But seeing beyond the telegram the opaque colours  
Of tomatoes and pansies outside, and the settling  
Of dust on old wicker. Somewhere in the room there  
Is the edge of an envelope with the last letter unanswered,  
Her glance on which (as slight as the turn of the ring  
On her finger) will start forever that strange alchemy  
Of mourning, and conjure the image of some old blind  
Country widow trying to make lace for a christening.  
But not before both now and then, on the floor  
Nearby, through memory and an infant's will,  
I grant her some few minutes in which to write a reply.

### **Time Change**

Daylight-saving time ended early  
This morning, so I had  
An extra hour to spend  
With the sparrow stranded  
In my screened porch.  
In that hour  
(Which was not really an hour,  
Or any time at all),  
The sparrow showed me  
That he had no bones,  
No wings separable from the porch.  
As time caught up with us,  
I saw his dream of the door  
Through which he flew and  
Dissolved into indestructible space,  
As if in the hour before,  
He had not been there.  
The November sky,  
Now on standard time,  
Was a light, forgetful matte color.

## Shooting Skeet, Thanksgiving Day

—for Natalie

Flushed, weathered ground, the landscape speechless.  
Rude, unfenced distances.  
Fields the color of warm toast.  
The sky couple-patched with white and pale blue.  
The beauty of gun barrel metal almost intolerable.  
We slip one game load shell into the chamber  
And pull the pump forward,  
Touching hands, chest, shoulder  
With the twenty gauge shotgun.  
We read the clouds, looking for entryways  
To transcendence, and pull the trap.  
The clay pigeon leaps forth to redefine the air.  
An Aztec's rabbit thrown into the sky.  
Windstartled, moon-ignited, a bird with thin blood,  
Blind from expressive, excessive clarity.  
Its simplicity elliptical.  
And it rises, out and away.  
For a moment the sky does not know how to release it.  
The target hesitates, as if it had forgotten something below.  
It hangs between before and after,  
A whole note held by the orchestra's string section,  
For half a century, the time she takes to close one eye,  
Exhale one breath and press the trigger.  
The frozen ground rings like iron struck with a hammer,  
A strange, elapsed quality, this sound that drifts away  
Like the laughter of long dead hunters,  
As Vallejo's wind changes its clothes.

### **Desk Calendar**

Before traveling, most people ignore  
The days on their desk calendars,  
Which leaves some few  
Who notice dates  
Of departure and do nothing,  
And some other few of us  
Who tear off the pages  
Until we get to the day of our return,  
In some attempt at continuity  
Or assurance.  
I think of my desk calendar now,  
With its day of the week a week from now,  
Staring blindly back from its future  
At my empty chair in my office past,  
When on one of those crumpled dates  
I threw away,  
I take the four peso (one way) ride on  
The green bus marked  
“Mismaloya/ Boca,”  
Careening along Mexico 200 South  
High above the breakers  
Of the Pacific Ocean  
On the way to Boca de Tomatlan  
To find the page and rescue that day.

**The Lawyer's Daily Time Log  
(for billing purposes)**

7:00 a.m. Shave, look in mirror  
For signs of noncompliance with  
The Federal Possibilities Act.  
(Non-billable)

7:40 a.m. Drive to office; thoughts  
Re: first principles of ambiguity.  
(Non-billable)

8:15 a.m. Research statutes  
(The tingle of a law book's spine)  
Re: application of rule against perpetuities  
To unborn children;  
Analysis of dreams of bureaucrats.

9:30 a.m. Preparation of waivers  
And consents for election of directors.  
Attend nonexistent meeting of Board  
Of Directors of dissolved company.

Noon. Luncheon meeting  
With deceased client re: moral flaws  
Of intestate succession; review of,  
And revisions to, Last Will.

2 p.m. Review of pre-marital contract  
Specifically Article IV (Representations)  
Re: either party's past devotion  
To Dante's Beatrice (or Proust's Albertine).  
Prioritize the order of past marriages  
And future passions.

4 p.m. Conference call with clients  
Re. obscure laws of association  
From enigmatic words handwritten  
On back of stained wine list;  
Amputation of oaths before a notary public.

5:30 p.m. Sit at desk. Recite the mantra  
“Time is of the essence”; review  
Various abbreviated forms of eternity;  
Attempts to contact Kant’s fellow-legislators  
In the kingdom of ends.

6:30 p.m. Drive home to some  
Final unaccountable justice  
(Non-billable).

### **Eternal Torment, 1954**

Leave the radio on  
At the rural FM station  
And listen to the words and shouts  
Of some evangelist as he conjures  
The eternal fires of Hell over the air.  
Think of Hieronymus Bosch  
And the right panel of his triptych  
“The Garden of Earthly Delights,”  
And maybe then of Goya  
And his “Saturn Devouring His Son.”  
Let those images of chaos, insanity  
And eternal torment presage  
Another vision on a bright morning  
In a dark barn in 1954,  
With Kit and Rhody,  
Your grandfather’s mules,  
Half harnessed to pull an ancient wagon.  
The moment when the wagon  
Moved lives on.  
The wasps’ nests drop.  
The mules sink and rise in  
What looks to be black clouds of soot,  
As the wasps, frenzied and enraged,  
Rise and dive under their hooves.  
The lethal humming and braying,  
Mixed with the bucking and thrashing  
Of tackle and mules,  
Their eyes wide, wild and white,  
Go on forever  
In the Museo del Prado in Madrid.

### Vernon's Mule

Vernon's mule, Rahab the whore.  
Her coat the color of coal-oil.  
She can do it all  
Except travel in a straight line  
In a plowed field.  
Close reined, she has some awful  
Strange, maybe foreign, gait.  
Hers is a peculiar rhythm of indifference.  
She loves tobacco smoke.  
The flues of her nose go straight to Hell.  
She has one good eye,  
And sees only with her rheumed one.  
Noontime, she will not be moved,  
Tethered to her shadow, standing  
As if on or beside some intolerable truth.  
He whispers to her  
That she is an absolute son of a bitch,  
With a bird's ass for brains,  
That she is a phantom  
Hounded from the ordinal dark.  
And she brays, dobro-like,  
A gentle reminder  
That Vernon is only  
Some strange, young thing creatured  
From her need to people her world.

### Poem of the Street

I heard her one December on a street  
Near the south bank of the Rio Cuale.  
She preferred her poems  
To have no words, or at least only  
Those words that crawl on the ground  
(Not the quick and harmless,  
But the heavy, lethal ones),  
With large empty spaces within,  
Or between them, allowing all of us,  
The innocent bystanders crossing over  
For coffee and fruit, to listen  
And thank her for those things missing  
From her poems (the thoughts lingering  
Just outside of them), this barefoot Indian  
Woman with a backpack full of holy  
Relics who shouted past the waiters  
Between the sidewalk café tables into  
The mid-morning dark of the Hotel Aldana,  
“Fuck you! Invisible thieves!”  
While behind her the stolen images  
Nestled and disappeared into the strong purple  
Of bougainvillea on the high white walls.

### **Christmas Tree Poem**

After dinner  
Paint your toothpick  
Red and green.  
Think of it as  
Shostokovich  
Once said, as a  
Christmas tree  
Slightly edited.

**Vernon's Motorcycle Haiku**

The Bank and me own  
The farm and house, but I own  
The Harley outright.

### **A Kentucky Field in February**

Brown is the only color.  
It parodies my shadow.  
It churns and daubs my sight. Brown  
Rests in the parquet of corn  
Stalks and plow marks. Brown is a  
Permanence evolved in bright  
Cold. Evening collapses to  
Brown. Clouds in the field's eyes are  
Brown. Burnt umber, creosote,  
Ru ocher, the entrances to  
Brown, are rarely brown. Brown is  
Ruminant and make-believe.  
It poses as tobacco  
Sticks and barn lofts. It disdains  
My thoughts and senses. Brown lies  
Breathing at the end of sweat  
And experience, beneath  
Its color without tone or  
Access, like mules under harness.

## Candle

There is nothing else to do when the ice storm  
Pushes us indoors like blown, frozen leaves  
And pulls the lights from our house, but  
To place the candle on the table and sit,  
Like two waning fantasies, our faces open  
And seen in every direction.  
The flame trembles, sputters and convulses,  
A moth in spiritual debauchery.  
An epileptic Prince Myshkin.  
The shadows move. We gasp for breath  
With our cold pursed mouths, bite our words  
Before they are spoken and mark on the candle  
The number of Gospels we've read,  
In the Old Believer style.  
Time may be their father, but we have lost  
Count of miracles and pay no attention to them.  
The wax melts, unforgiving in its diminishment,  
With scorn and contempt for the word 'now.'

### **Last Day of the Year**

Last day of the year,  
Driving to the Capitol from western Kentucky  
For some final corporate filings.  
The luxury of clear roads  
And early morning rests on my eyelids  
Until a few miles east of Elizabethtown  
Toward the New Haven exit,  
In opalescent pockets of fog  
I see the cliff's shadows  
Like stoop-shouldered old men  
Reserving austerity to themselves,  
And the ice hidden by blown snow.  
I catch the late moon in my throat,  
My stomach an alembic of sparrows  
And think for some reason  
Of William Carlos Williams'  
    *No one*  
    *To witness*  
    *And adjust, no one to drive the car,*  
And travel like a trumpet  
Touching at times on the right notes,  
Over a score by Hummel,  
With a prayer, not for certainty,  
But for the postponement of uncertainty,  
Brakeless and finally alive in the thin light.

### Lincoln Gazes at Indiana, 1827

The Ohio River a gleaming sheet of light, drifting a chill mist across which he stares at Indiana revisiting glimpses of a midday frontier moon, from here in Kentucky, down below Judge Pate's house, after acquittal of the ferry charge against him. The land he sees is criss-crossed with want, patience and expression, scaring images out of his head, scarring images into it. The hills, streams, cliffs are studies of phrenology. The arc-warped horizon sinks to shore, the expiry of land and water, where beech, birch, maple and ash interweave their foliage in small, secret conventicles, their voices inexhaustible.

Rivergrove, riverweed, riveroak in tangled surrender of history to the present. Her sons left home years ago on other older ferries to make room for themselves when they return, across this river to Kentucky. Longing of course is just another form of captivity. He may have mistaken himself for someone else, with scrapped apostate opinions, or some ancient mask preserved in the earth, but he did not return. He did feel a slight shift in pressure when he crossed that first time. Veil of shade, void of light. The tawny, dank twilight proselytized the ground. He may cross over again for 'law days,' and learn about Reason, the eighth and most deadly sin since it justifies the first seven.

Those birches rest on the far bank, indelible, irenic, their silence in praise of the mystery of passage- the safe passage of anyone through the dreams of others (at least those not remembered when awake). And in each passage he can construct a consolatory world with chinks of blue in the grey-churned clouds. The river and shore and trees, the harmony of forms and lines with no destination than some inner key to a dominion of sinew and pity. One foot in the water, no coins in his pockets, he will cross over again to Indiana, the skiff kissing the dock as light as a butterfly. The Ohio roils its sediment with his thoughts, and is the fluency of his language. Nothing yet, is ever lost.

### **Rainbow At Night**

The colors are different—the grays, dun browns,  
Taupes and ink purples. A rainbow at night  
Strains in the dark for sloppy kisses of pale moonlight.  
It is so subdued only insomniacs have half a chance  
To see it, or some nocturnal creature like this one  
Under my window, tottering home, foiled  
By the bartender (who refused him a last whiskey  
Before closing), or foiled in love (a short, furry  
Leopold Bloom fumbling for his latchkey).  
His lidless eyes reflect the spattered dazzle  
Of these almost invisible colors. With his mirthless  
Smile, my drunken possum finds this rainbow  
To be almost as real as the imagined one  
In some rowdy Irish melodrama, just before both  
Of them disappear, this ceaseless source of dreams,  
In the weary milky darkness of dawn.

### Postcard From Palm Springs

The sand is pale honey.  
The desert's rocks' shadows are ageless.  
The small and sudden mountains  
Were placed here by some landscape architect  
On a daytrip from Los Angeles,  
Maybe to give the residents  
Some sense of *mirada fuerte*  
(Picasso's Andalusian gaze).  
In the Indian Canyons there are trail signs  
Warning of attacks by wild horses.  
Sparse lines of palm trees wait  
Like children for the sun to wake and free  
The snow cresting the peaks.  
All of the colors are sacred. In the evening  
The cool air rummages through me  
In drifts of possession.  
The night sky never darkens.  
The few persons here, who don't play golf,  
Like me, wander in a frail, old silence  
Like Spanish explorers in search of an ocean.  
I leave early tomorrow just as exotic,  
More or less, as when I arrived.

## Shadow

Awake on and off through the night  
I negotiate with the mice  
Who carry the virus of insomnia.  
I offer to sell them my shadow  
With its passion for orchids.  
In the end the terms are not acceptable.  
I wander about the house  
A movie extra without a script.  
My shadow changes with each surface  
On which it falls.  
I become an unhung oil portrait.  
Beneath the shadow of varnish are  
Shadows of pigment  
(White lead, copper green,  
Sienna ochre, ultramarine).  
Sometimes my thoughts  
That were a thin volume of light,  
Timid essays  
Become a bold philosophic tome.  
Or my shadow transforms  
The simplest of my movements  
Into some immortal gesture.  
What we become we forget.  
At daybreak  
My shadow will be a Taoist  
Eating only vegetables,  
Refining cinnabar to show its aging,  
With dreams of sprouting wings.

### **Riding with Vernon**

The world is random.  
Things are always shifting,  
Except for speed  
Which is absolute  
(The rushing noise of tires  
On asphalt like the whirr  
Of a movie projector),  
Which is why Vernon's driving  
That 1954 Ford,  
All nosed and decked,  
Was at least as dangerous  
As his philosophy.

### **Shooting the Moon**

My thumb in her face I shoot  
The moon from my back porch  
Thinking how strange  
For the Naval Observatory  
To even try to define  
“The end of civil twilight.”  
It is enough that in early  
Evening the moon is Vermeer’s  
Young Woman with a Water Jug  
As she reaches for light, or later  
As she descends, all sullen  
And tired, stumbling over things  
And thus giving them form  
Once again, including  
The lunula tattooed  
Eternally on my thumbnail.

### Waiting For My Wife To Return From Omaha

I have lived many lives,  
Some in which I shaved before showering,  
And some the opposite, with brushing  
My teeth being the variable,  
But in none of these various dreams  
Of living, until now,  
have I had to wait for anyone  
To return from Omaha,  
Leastwise my wife.  
It is dark and already late.  
The hours float in front of my eyes.  
Octaves of sleep pulse in my ears.  
I sink into possession  
Of breath and shadow.  
I am as abstract tonight  
As the Austro-Hungarian empire.  
My deepest remains are open to the sky.  
My wife on the other hand is very real,  
As she sits in the commuter aircraft  
In the peat colored night  
As it walks her over  
The parquet floors of Indiana  
And the dulcet waves  
Of the Ohio River, and out the door  
To Kentucky, the light on the curve  
Of her neck, to me standing  
Under the moon's bare shoulder,  
Thinking of a story with hardly any ending,  
Demolishing even the ruins,  
Emptying the world so we can be alone.

### The Suitor

He comes each morning in his soft grey tuxedo  
(White tie, tails), to watch my wife  
In her bathrobe at her table under the window  
Reading the news on her laptop.  
Every day he is there, just beyond the lace curtains,  
Quite recherche, sitting in the tree.  
He looks ridiculous. I want to tell him that  
No illicit soul will be smuggled from our home.  
(My wife did not like  
Catherine Deneuve in *Belle de Jour*.)  
But such things are not said by husbands just out  
Of the shower. Besides, his ardor is such,  
I suspect, that he has lost touch with reality.  
He courts my wife through leaves and lace  
With the same absurd cooing sounds over  
And again, like Osmin the guardian, cast to sing  
The one song in Mozart's  
'Abduction From the Seraglio.'  
My wife checks her email messages.  
If he could write, no doubt his letters would equal  
Those of Flaubert to Louise Coulet,  
Or Kafka's letters to Milena (maybe even Felice).  
I think of this short, feathered rival  
In a fool's supreme act of passion and deceit,  
Sending a message reflected on her computer screen,  
'The sky has brightened for me!'  
(Oh please! Nietzsche to Salome. July 1882.)  
His breast swells. His throat extends.  
In fraught but tempered song, in the octave  
Of late spring, my wife's suitor makes reckless  
Idyllic promises to her—  
Rescue from the Turks,  
An elegant career on the operatic stage,  
Gifts of a silver-gilt pencil case  
Or a small brooch.  
She waves at him as I dress.  
My wife and I agree that my jealousy is misplaced,  
Or at least exaggerated, given his youth and size.

### Three Self-Portraits

—for Max Beckmann

#### *Self-Portrait in Florence* (1907)

Villa Romana, the winter view of Fiesole. Trappings of imagination hang above this veranda and adorn its necessity. Morning here knows nothing of evening hidden since the last frail hours in some lost domain with no color except the shadow of color. The ivy and vines converge with another time. I abhor the privileges of emotions and understatement. There is a profundity between the marble slabs under me that casts this hand-cocked cigarette in a white amaranth and my black coat to closed sky (with clouds covering the backs of my eyes), and my face into one of Vivaldi's mandolins, all damascened onto a canvassed northern landscape.

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#### *Self-Portrait In Tuxedo* (1927)

Berlin. Before the end begins. I am standing in this room dressed well, almost a lacquered effigy, with taut light of evening (like memory polished) reflected on my pants' stripes. My gaze and straight mouth measure breath's duration. Directions point from me, as from dark movement at the end of a dream. The walls here are resilient and tuned to the gestures of colors and painted sounds. Wing-collared, I think of eternity as an allowance to me of limitless irony and precision.

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#### *Self-Portrait In Blue Jacket* (1950)

Amerika. My studio. Life no longer is premature. The forms of forever, such as immortality and memory, are not so different here. My orange shirt and rust vest exorcise my past. My blue sport coat accentuates the present tense. Sometimes I stay up all night reading the notebooks of youth, and see morning under its moon. After breakfast I practice deception and avoidance. I find ambiguity in old things and find new things about which to remain silent. I have learned to forget without flinching, and I have learned only so much as can be forgotten. I will not be burned or buried in Europe now, or anywhere else. There is a formal ease in knowing this.