

SIMON PERCHIK

Who enters my city come by words
armored with phrases, skills
with verbs, gifted in turns :rush

from streets where news is not clever.
Enter my city

through sound
:your radio tuned, bring words
to seed this yard, gather up our lips
practiced simply for you.

I can't talk, my teeth
maul every word
or its ashes :my beard
drained, battered grey
-I stutter
gnaw, my words
swollen and raw
broken against a cough :my accent
here and there
till silence.

I can't speak to you! my hands
half way to my mouth -a baby
tracing all the bells in the crib
finds its own mouth -my hands
can't reach, can't rescue the words

but you can lift my hands
drag the river beneath, water
that's not too old, not faded.

You can sort my face
-answer me! open these dried jaws
and that child still sleepy
will swing from the ledge
the loudest bell in the sky.

Let me fall with masons.
No winter circling.
No gathering. Where no leaf
is groomed by saws
and the talk
powdered. Stone

will answer me, touch me
easing me here or here
—all masons. Bunched. We
are not disturbed
housed at last
inside our art, hands
wet from simple talk :nectar
squeezed from stone

that you may press a latch
and recognize a death
a word here or here
tasting that mountain :mother
taken to her son, may know
a terrible distance
is listening, a mason

is talking
hiving stone, both
sweetened by the other
listening how high they are
which was last to enter.

I will leave one shoe :a note
for you to open –half
as if I were still asleep
and each night bring back
two by two all the stars
except one for you to open
unfold, unfold, and unfold :laces
cloudless across our bed.

Who can lift this shoe
carried in tow across those galaxies
those eyes now staring at a note
that began as eyes –you too will limp

and under each step the darkness
turns the cold growing enormous
as in dreams where the Earth
takes root in your heart
and you try one kiss more
to wake its sleeping mouth
–I leave half

but no words, no blood-stained teeth
rickety from fear, from avalanches.
In a sleep that tramples our bed
my foot will suddenly thaw.
You will be holding a half.

Only a rag
cherishes its threads, my face
scarred, torn, bitten :cloth
come down from mountains
for a stone.

Before the first, without any sky
who could expect the closest star
to swallow the Earth
as in the sunlit womb
that swells around all planets and fires

—before the first dream, without any shadow
each spark flares out
for still more light.

In such a fire you feel
the life leaving you :your twin
face up in the Flood
though you were saved and the Ark
paired you to look forever
in the water you drink—even now

your arms around your heart
as if the fire inside could be held
—you begin to dance
a circle stretched wider and wider
till everyone is singing —you hear

your twin, a splash, around and around
that the Earth at least for a few hours
not see you holding your hand underwater

—from such a hand each morning reaches out
tighter and tighter —who would expect
your first breath would sing
only to the dark.

No cannon was needed, pines
mangled from heat, shrubs
older than trees, all growth
grotesque, aim
impossible, the general
buried beside this path north
or south, his sores
boiling small cones :a grove
snarled with one more root :a fever
let down in Georgia.

My car parked, the black hood
stoops into place. I'm caught
on a page, my key
snaps! 1/30 sec, f 22
and a damp print
will cling, it's dim ends
curl in milky- sunrise

my car berserk, ejects
between its lens and wiper
a chipped Tarot, my car
made polaroid, fitted
though the meters and stars
are still rising, a ticket :punished
for not moving, summoned

to see the pre-thought, the wish
before it became my gravesite :the street
trackless, I'm called
to see the Justice presiding
to see my picture, the card
return to its deck :my footprints
traveling by car.

The forehead misplaced, one eye
escaped, my nose
kept climbing, its horizon
pale :my cheeks
gone lame, the quick smile
stolen too.

I filled out forms

NOT RESPONSIBLE

my face erased by shaves, hairs
hid from their razors, the eye
spreads backwards, I squint
for detours :signs
taken away as I lasted.

Swallowing the nuts and bolts
the jargon of my trade, I spoke
terms and fees, soft jokes, cigars
and pie, a laugh, a simple breath
the size of the heart : the rock
softened by a hand
but mostly by my eyes.

No one sees the mortar hurrying through
the laugh I gasp
the hoping in and out
the word TAP

It must be a man to tap my shoulder from behind
to say, "Go home," or say, "Now."
or say, "It's over." or say
anything the size of the heart
and touch me by surprise.

A use : as generals a horse
my customers attend this desk
race me in a chair
to hurt the wood
dismount a treaty in each hand.

I become invisible
dress to outwit my colleagues
to hunt the issue, the gist
: a million years above a street
whose one young maple
screams insensibly with reds and yellows
oranges and blues it cannot hear the ease
that comes from dying
 from experience
 from being safe.

This leaf had eyes, heard
its tree put down a root, saw
how cold can granulate

:death

a snow, a loss
as painless to the tree

or is it my skin awake
my skin gnawing on the shade? am I
the only kid who ate the cold bark raw?

:here

a street tree clusters in my hand.
I touch each leaf alive
hugging the oak, the elm
heating the air with my heart.

My lips had the trim
of a young boy on the rise
the first time I remembered to spit.

Is it possible
to be side to side with battle
never touched by smoke
or am I still a cadet
swaggering to class,
never near the shrapnel—
if an army did occur?
I must have fought someone
somewhere in this town.
Is it possible?

My lips are bent from asking,
“Did something actually happen?”

Can it be true
my warnings to clients
only rumors I imagine?
Those heroic losses
those graveyards named for me
:all bullshit over and over and over
shaping my lips
to hold to words, great words
while talking out loud on the streets
walking to meet and bully
some boy who looks my way
acting like a man?

Your breasts, little sister
are drinking my perfume, are lips
tasting steam, are clouds.

Do you know, little sister,
How much an ocean weights
when I sing from its peak?

Little sister, in your tiny breasts
are ships, are winds, are anchors
soft and fine as silk :skies
that only sailors really see.

We have lost authority
to wed the earth with gods
and gods with natures which
would seed the earth,
have abandoned that poor myth
to woo the atom.

And ancient as the hope appears
that a Zeus and Hera
would parent now an issue of abundance,
how well the intrigue of modern matrimony
solicits to that solitary celibate
to split into a holy union.

Fingering the file
the moist fresh bait
flapping from his hands, he
has been exchanged for me,
substituted by my firm whose fist
stomping at his door has just
shaken hands to grab his catch: a case
already swallowed in a skin
dented and bent from listening,
from all the sweet faces that
dance and sing, from the hundred
hundred hands convulsing mine to stay the kill,
jabbing here! here! here!

As petitioner
he cues the Act of Bankruptcy
whereby, wherein and wheretofore
all his debts dissolve
on that blue litmus
of hocus pocus
every debtor waves
to disappear in front of creditors.

Collected now
all debts are filed now with the filing fee
gone and he goes
counting the house.

Gently with his left arm
he rests a gentle elbow on my desk,
holds, hugs, signs this check
to hear inside his name
how once a teacher praised
his penmanship, then jumping up
from Public School he whips to me
laughing, "Here! I wish to hell
I made my dough that quick, Perchik,
I wish to hell I could," deaf now
to all the ink crackling in my knees,
to all the men weeping to rest
gently as that boy with his left arm.

Stumbling on the noon of my unfinished day
I have been tricked into the view
of a day with half a hundred dozen
buildings half undone and one,
starting now to nudge its womb,
spills out its warm Spring dirt
that I might, in these clenched hands,
feel each mountain in Peru
and never know a finishing.

The taste of Scotch
brings winter now. A flavor
makes aware, cold, conscious.
Old wounds are irritated now,
inflamed in 1944
and as the smell of whiskey
whips the wind alive, who else
could touch the glass
to taste the cold
but these drunken bomber pilots.

Where are you Timothy Corsellis?
Have you stained the air
with another death?
For twenty years
the hands of detonation
on my face, a
listening,
raking the war
for your verses
that first called the dead
my dying.

I entered the house
through a room without corners

:your garden
arranged, a guest

could sit
before touching hands. Inside

we danced so late
a moth wanted to enter.

I still wait, hear
paint gripping to a hull, its mast
punctures the sky, air
pulling away.

Mother,
do you still have your headaches?
Was it this fault spiked your brain
—great beams talking voyage?
—sound disappearing even there?

In this hieroglyphic :bricks
a queen. Tribal memory unreliable
she is allowed to lean :an alphabet
where death completes the tablet :a wall
taunted and retold.

Her face worn deep in this grammar
missing too are verbs :her eyes
lack pivot BRICK-WANTS-ALL
a difficult word.

The translator has doubt
:a grain to the wood.
Then who sits here?
KATZ-FROM-HAMILTON-AVENUE?
Everything she touches—a kingdom now
seems senseless.

There is no other version.
Her flowers, gone. Her breasts, her thighs.
Nothing is needed now
or forgotten.

The king saw butterflies
and laughed. His queen watched
two angels kiss :nothing
could fly this high :five thousand years

and the error uncorrected. I tried
cremated. The queens
each in inside rooms, kings
huddled close to bricks. I wanted glass.

I was outvoted. Too late. Both angels
coughed, the butterflies trapped, my eyes
everything to fall.

This nail on which you hung your coat
grows in the wall :a tree
waiting for its leaf.

Eight weeks a cold room, the closet
kept empty but not closed :your name
is mentioned often.

Green at last this vineyard
fixed in a grid, the sun too
a gauge :I aim, rush, talk

in a bird :your phone
still busy, my words
coil and cluster :grapes
capsizing

my voice
can't leave. Alone
a word slips. My hand
wet with first wine.

I've got to give today a name :the street
dips, climbs :a ramp
lifts from my hands :defects coded
CHARLIE ABLE CHARLIE ABLE
ABLE BAKER comes in low at 3 again.

Bullets are tracking my plane again.
Gasping and bent and deaf
I squat in control and climb :I'll name today

Sneakin Deacon, increase my week
to 12, practice more :the weapon
a simple rubber ball :a boy
who trains by play.

The weeks are longer now :the street
twists to rags and doors :high wings
bridge into my ears :a sound
gaining altitude :the thud
skids in low at 3 again.

On streets like these there's no such wind.
Each bounce a little lower :it's natural
I need a name.

I add, you
lavish :to stay alive I

went insane, began
by talking outloud in the streets
spoke in numerals :you

gave words, clinks and clanks
:reaching for
as I now do, watching for
as I now do, waiting for
as I now do
a bell of us to ring and ring and ring.

Or is the moon
passing near a slant of geese

 :under her windows
each morning the waves :the street
foams from her sun rising.

What more could her hand love
but the most enormous animal of all :the sun

floats
and when she found it necessary to go ashore
her bed was dry and a secret between only two :her

and the most joyous animal of all. *Is this*
such a heaven? Deep in my last hour
did I pray to float to her young chalk? Is this
the street?

 I
see nothing. Who
did I help dream?
In my room too, a ramp of oceans lift
repeat a story
for once to end with laughter.

Our windows opened for escape
:this freeze night the thermostat
rung down :warmth

returns to cloth :our beds
exhausted
bring in again a family :each
hugging. And the heat somehow
roars in us
slams and clangs
clinks and bangs
heralding again
the darkness :the cold
we force ourselves to know.

In this proud ruin
I study the lightning bolt
hear from cities tiered below
a name for this hard flash

:the name of our city forgotten
they know this place
by the name of a storm. We

gave up everything
except our hatred was too noble.

Who can touch these knots
And say, "I do not feel your son"

:my father's father's photograph
spanning boards, his hands
bleaching black to brown
his marrow turning white
to crack the wood, the varnish
the too late chemicals.

Again the Little Dipper circling down
refills its cup –my spoon
strikes something black :a fuselage
outlined by cockpit lights and shrapnel
guiding the dropped wing, the bombs
as if I tied a chalk to each
trace their cities clockwise

–again I load too much sugar, try
to whiten the sky with winter stars, my mouth
frozen open under the most northern star.
How much more can one tea bag weigh? my spoon

strikes, then drifts, peeling a runway
from the thin, black wick
across the readyroom map –I keep drinking

burnt string, bend each spoon :my throttles
jammed in the wide curve
till every star tightens on another

ties blooksoaked Mars, slowed at last
to pilot my emptied plane, its smoke
his, its nectar his, its wings
his frosted swords :my spoon

again more sugar, a coral will rebuild
this bedrock melted from his mouth
whiten his breath, sweeten his breath
his hot, infecting breath washed
till even dogs will not bark –at last

the distance :one knot in the string
where war is kept away
and cities rebuilt
as eyes opened underwater –this tea

so close to death
my jaws won't close, this string
too cold and my spoon
circles only overhead, kept cold
for north, for his dead
or why this black air pours like honey.

As a shadow brings down the dark
my shade again its thin string
another night face down, circling
what's left from the Ark :this floor
never dried and its planks
varnished coffins that fit my sides
as scales still cover to forget
again the sharp string spinning down
a slow, homeless water :rain

falls slower at night, the sky
darkened by a moon more caring
than the sun will let down light

-in this dark my window shade
one side the sun, the other
two by two but only the moon
will count the nights and why the dead
wait named in stone

-only the moon :hope
carved into each gravestone
and a man who lies face up
on wood that stopped moving
half sea, half waiting.

Without an epitaph
without a mound over it
-there are too many here, their roots
as leaves will stumble
pulling a branch the few feet

-too much fell :this ditch
won't touch the dead :this tree
fallen away from its leaves

-without a leaf to nurse
without a song inside
-so much split as ribs might sprout
into mornings :each leaf
opened to float these trees as if a raft
could carry away two by two
the tears waiting here for more

-without a tongue, without eyes
without a warm mountain to cover it
-so many mornings have fallen, the sky
too steep, too sharp

-without a grave
my heart left bare
to build from cracks in this bark
a sky :my breath
won't cover my heart
unable to come to its feet.

I am always listening to terms, a corpse
abandoned in my sleep
tells me my name
can't be repaired, it won't cover me
against loss from madness, threatens
with the same gesture every night.
Who can believe
any kiss will be the last?

My one nightmare. I keep shifting bedrooms
never bother to jump, to demand
we deal in an office, "I want
to see your desk, a bookcase, something
official. I want to see your words
coming loose, to inspect my name
as it leaves your lips," perhaps
the damage can be fixed, by my lips
or this finger holding back some part.

I sleep less now. I don't undress.
Your voice has worsened. My throat
is sore and neither
turns up for the appointment, "Maybe
you don't know what to call me."

It's easy to grow tall, you pee
against a tree and the faintest sound
grinding the sky into puddles, rain
oceans! warmed by relentless waves
tied, and with the same split second
untied, heated till the turbulence
and along the bark you feel a sea wind
cooling the branch already nursing
from the same knot that cradled
its first born leaf and thirst

—it's simple, you begin to hate the house
the doors, the rooms and the sun too
off on its own, never again allowed
in the ground—you make a sea
to cover your arms and lifting branches
becomes easier—you teach the roots
to float and the needle-sharp stars
you will feel even when your fingers
let go and the sky is suddenly dark
teeming with icy peaks
weightless, taking you with them.

It's when you sweat that a raft
spreading out as if your belly
and the small candle inside
tries to set the sky on fire
—slow, so your mouth
will stink from salt and plankton

—you wait till noon, mow the lawn
half sea, half wooden table
half when you swallow the cold beer
your breath fills with coastline
with waves and the sunlight
no longer thirsty, this time

afraid—it's when you open your jaws
let them float over the chipped tooth
the missing finger, the thunderheads
and your skin drains, keeps out the cold

—you bathe this heat into rows
shirt sleeves rolled, elbows bare
where the bones sniff for air
for dirt and the long dive back

—from miles away you can hear
one sea calling another, lost
—you drink the stones to finish.

This time the splinter, wedged
the way even a board fights back
-warpaint! Your thumb tipped

with peroxide and just above the ridge
falling birds, falling branches, your finger
already infected, changing colors

is swollen with rivers as if one arm
weighs more and slowly the poison
sifts for dirt, soaks in

beginning to sting where your finger
caresses a hinge, a lid, a kiss
and this needle-thin paint

a deadly brown, a suddenness
that takes down even moonlight
once it touches the skin and dries.

Nobody said it was easy
–hanging knives, invisible yet
juggled as if your arms
don't belong to you, tossed
one behind the other
and overhead that featherless river

–no one sees you circle the airport
careful not to cut yourself
adjusting for turbulence, windshear
and on all sides the waterfall.

Casey, thirst can help with this
keep track and while the sky is stirred
drink, it cures forgetfulness
–you can retrace those waters
every mother heats with just her arms
and lullabies–practice! those blades
are already timed, holding your palm
face up, listening for stars
as they reach near the surface.

You dead must think this acorn
will collect you in a circle
the way some cloud
once collided with the Earth
-it's still raining :the pieces
trying to finish it off

-you like to hear the story
that has no place else to go
will bring you to the surface
though this hillside is still battered
by stones and you have to count out loud
on your fingers the evenings
the drop by drop till all that's left
is the sun -you don't have to ask
how it happened.

You listen just to keep warm
and each morning you hear
the same darkness, are sure the sun too
has cooled, that a single tree
rebuilds this cemetery
carries the gene for water
brings back the child
who took its first breath from water
where there was nothing

though there are voices that never dry
that want only each other, seated
around a small fire, shielded
from the wind by stones

-you dead want the Earth
to yourselves, blown out the sky
falling in one solid piece :a thunderclap
half marble, half for leverage
moving you closer, making room
drifting, staring, cold.

The spider has it made
settles in the way each nightfall
tightens around the sun

then eats it dry
though these branches
are not that organized, their leaves

escape beside evenings
darkened with graveyard marble
already moonlight and no turning back

—you bring it a small blossom
half loneliness, half stone
to breathe for you

lowered into this web
broken open as if its roots
could reach out, tighter and tighter

swallow the Earth whole
and along each path sift
for this stone no longer struggling.

Even the sky gets old
bent over, tries to hear
and what's left has trouble breathing

creaks and this weather vane
half fish, half by heart
turns its roof upstream

is breaking apart from age
and that dried in the bone
death march –you never forget

where each star falls
exhausted, the step by step
leading to a tired woman

and the room whose door
becomes impaled on the warm bed
when you enter.

Even the dying wince, their stench
makes you gag –you can't ask
must rely on their skin
and its yellowing glaze
with just enough sunlight left
for directions back

–they languish at night
looking for what must be
those tiny rocks mourners leave
as if the dead could still
find refuge in a few simple words

placed near –the dying need this doubt
to go further, not sure why
their eyes once had such power
and now can't open to demand

where to make a boundary line
that's safe once inside
with all those stars, far off
not yet arrived
as still warm dirt and mornings.

You sense it knows, the road
narrows, picking up speed
and off in the distance its curve

can't escape, plays music from the 40s
-you are somewhere in England
listening to rain on a runway

-had it guessed then how its years
would end, here in Nevada, four lanes
not caring where the winds come from

or the radio half airborne
half static, half already too far
though the station is still on the look-out

and clouds are overdue
even in the desert
-it must know, it has to, the hill

constantly turning its head
and you slow, begin to sing along
have one day less to worry.

And the sun by a single stroke
broken into rain and forgetfulness
-you lift a child's bat

that still has heat to it, a ball
overgrown and against this mangy glove
stumbles headlong as further on

-this attic needs more room
the bases are full though you try
to remember the route stretching out

to dry the air Vaughn will need again
but not just now -what you store
is drought, drought under drought

-your brain half rock, half
drilled for this dust all these years
falling from thirst and leaving go

-tell me, who would come here
except to climb forever, not sure
why your steps won't go away

as if it takes all that time
to be remembered
and softly by its name.

