



poems

selected and read by

John Ciardi

from his book published by Rutgers University Press

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AS IF

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AS IF

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From his book published by RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS

SIDE I, Band 1: To Judith, I

i

Men marry what they need. I marry you,
morning by morning, day by day, night by night,
and every marriage makes this marriage new.

In the broken name of heaven, in the light
that shatters granite, by the spitting shore,
in air that leaps and wobbles like a kite,

I marry you from time and a great door
is shut and stays shut against wind, sea, stone,
sunburst, and heavenfall. And home once more

inside our walls of skin and struts of bone,
man-woman, woman-man, and each the other,
I marry you by all dark and all dawn

and have my laugh at death. Why should I bother
the flies about me? Let them buzz and do.
Men marry their queen, their daughter, or their mother

by hidden names, but that thin buzz whines through:
where reasons are no reason, cause is true.
Men marry what they need. I marry you.

Band 2: To Judith, II

ii

My dear, darkened in sleep, turned from the moon
That riots on curtain-stir with every breeze
Leaping in moths of light across your back . . .
Far off, then soft and sudden as petals shower
Down from wired roses—silently, all at once—
You turn, abandoned and naked, all let down
In ferny streams of sleep and petaled thighs
Rippling into my flesh's buzzing garden.

Far and familiar your body's myth map lights,
Traveled by moon and dapple. Sagas were curved
Like scimitars to your hips. The raiders' ships
All sailed to your one port. And watchfires burned
Your image on the hills. Sweetly you drown
Male centuries in your chiaroscuro tide
Of breast and breath. And all my memory's shores
You frighten perfectly, washed familiar and far.

Ritual wars have climbed your shadowed flank
Where bravos dreaming of fair women tore
Rock out of rock to have your cities down
In loot of hearths and trophies of desire.
And desert monks have fought your image back
In a hysteria of mad skeletons.
Bravo and monk (the heads and tails of love)
I stand, a spinning coin of wish and dread,

Counting our life, our chairs, our books and walls,
Our clock whose radium eye and insect voice
Owns all our light and shade, and your white shell

Spiraled in moonlight on the bed's white beach;
Thinking, I might press you to my ear
And all your coils fall out in sounds of surf
Washing a mystery sudden as you are
A light on light in light beyond the light.

Child, child, and making legend of my wish
Fastened alive into your naked sprawl—
Stir once to stop my fear and miser's panic
That time shall have you last and legendry
Undress to old bones from its moon brocade.
Yet sleep and keep our prime of time alive
Before that death of legend. My dear of all

Saga and century, sleep in familiar-far,
Time still must tick *this is, I am, we are.*

Band 3: To Judith, III

iii

Sometimes the foundering fury that directs
the prayer through storm, the sucking mouth;
sometimes a gentleness like a parent sex,
sometimes an aimless tasting mild as broth

or the drugged eye of the invalid, sometimes
the naked arm laid loose along the grass
to the brown-eyed breast and the great terms
of the turning flank printed by root and moss.

Sometimes a country in a white bird's eye
coasting the shells of cities in their past,
the roads that stretch to nothing but away,
a horseman wandering in his own dust—

say you were beautiful those years ago,
flush as the honey-blond who rode the shell
in Sandro Botticelli's studio,
and what we are now, we were then,

and lost, and found again—what shall we wish
to visit from ourselves against that death
but their imagination on our flesh?
There is no other body in all myth.

Band 4: To Judith, IV

iv

I look through my dead friend's eyes at the house of love:
plaster scabs from lath, windows break out
in toothy gapes, doors stagger from their pins.
See what a feast this is, my love, my love,
our shelves of mouse turds, dusts, and dirty damp!

I try this vision on like the wrong glasses
and every straightness quivers to a blur,
and every surface whorls to drink me in.
Well then, this is a world for twisted eyes.
Or if my eye offend me I'll pluck it out.

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And still be chanceled in our breathing bed,
the dusk behind the taper and the cup,
as I was once—a holy man, though I lost
my holy ghost, my terror, and my sin
when I had got my own death down by heart.

And there's no nonsense like it. If I forgive
that death, I lose my last prayer. Let us live.

Band 5: To Judith, V

V
The deaths about you when you stir in sleep
hasten me toward you. Out of the bitter mouth
that sours the dark, I sigh for what we are
who heave our vines of blood against the air.

Old men have touched their dreaming to their hearts
that is their age. I touch the moment's dream
and shrink like them into the thing we are
who drag our sleeps behind us like a fear.

Murderers have prayed their victims to escape,
then killed because they stayed. In murdering time
I think of rescues from the thing we are
who cannot slip one midnight from the year.

Scholars have sunk their eyes in penitence
for sins themselves invented. Sick as Faust
I trade with devils, damning what we are
who walk our dreams out on a leaning tower.

Saints on their swollen knees have banged at death:
it opened; they fell still. I bang at life
to knock the walls away from what we are
who raise our deaths about us when we stir.

Lovers unfevering sonnets from their blood
have burned with patience, laboring to make fast
one blood-beat of the bursting thing we are.
I have no time. I love you by despair.

Till on the midnight of the thing we are
the deaths that nod about us when we stir,
wake and become. Once past that fitful hour
our best will be to dream of what we were.

Band 6: Elegy Just In Case

Here lie Ciardi's pearly bones
In their ripe organic mess.
Jungle blown, his chromosomes
Breed to a new address.

Progenies of orchids seek
The fracture's white spilled lymph.
And his heart's red valve will leak
Fountains for a protein nymph.

Was it bullets or a wind
Or a rip-cord fouled on Chance?
Artifacts the natives find
Decorate them when they dance.

Here lies the sgt.'s mortal wreck
Lily spiked and termite kissed,
Spiders pendant from his neck
And a beetle on his wrist.

Bring the tic and southern flies
Where the land crabs run unmourning
Through a night of jungle skies
To a climeless morning.

And bring the chalked eraser here
Fresh from rubbing out his name.
Burn the crew-board for a bier.
(Also Colonel what's-his-name.)

Let no dice be stored and still.
Let no poker deck be torn.
But pour the smuggled rye until
The barracks threshold is outworn.

File the papers, pack the clothes,
Send the coded word through air—
"We regret and no one knows
Where the sgt. goes from here."

"Missing as of inst. oblige,
Deepest sorrow and remain—"
Shall I grin at persiflage?
Could I have my skin again

Would I choose a business form
Stilted mute as a giraffe,
Or a pinstripe unicorn
On a cashier's epitaph?

Darling, darling, just in case
Rivets fail or engines burn,
I forget the time and place
But your flesh was sweet to learn.

In the grammar of not yet
Let me name one verb for chance,
Scholarly to one regret:
That I leave your mood and tense.

Swift and single as a shark
I have seen you churn my sleep;
Now if beetles hunt my dark
What will beetles find to keep?

Band 7: Days

Something in the wild cherry—
the cat or another caution—
triggers the starlings and the tree
explodes. Who would have thought
so many pieces of life in one tree?
The air shakes with their whirligig.
The first have already lit across the field
before the last one's out.

They fling their bridge of lives
and of some sort of reason
across the field, a black
rainbow over my surprise.
What is it I prize in these commotions?
The burst of the live thing
takes me wholly to praise.
And if there are no gods

shaking the tree, as once
the father of man would have knelt
to omens, there is still
principle in his blood:
what goes is all going,
and all going graces
the true quick fact
a taken man is. I am

Band 8: The Lamb

A month before Easter
Came the time of the lamb
Staked on my lawn
To frisk and feed and be
My tenderest playmate,
Sweeter for being
Sudden and perilous.

Fed from my hand,
Brushed by my love,
An acrid and tangled wool
Crew clumsy and cardinal.
The lamb is a beast of knees.
A thin and tipsy chant
Quavers in it.

Year by year the lamb
Danced the black lenten season.
On the Thursday of sorrow
It disappeared.
On the Friday of blood I knew
What business was in the cellar
And wept a little.

Band 9: Elegy

For Kurt Porjesz, Missing in Action, 1 April 1945

Some gone like boys to school wearing their badges,
Some calmly with a look of measuring,
While every wind is April in the hedges
On a grotesque of bony birds who sing
A metal note, weathering and weathering.

Here in this good green scene above the sea
The April world astonishes my look.
This island rock in space turns flowering endlessly
To peaks of cloud still mounting where you took
Your last high passage and your broken luck.

The boys are flowers: they strew themselves in seed
And spring again, anonymous and pure,
For the same eye to follow the same deed

Fractured meat and open bone—
Nothing single or surprised.
Fragments of a written stone,
Undeciphered but surmised.

man again in their going.
Deep in the field of my coming
and of my father's coming
I stand taken
in this one rush
of lives upon us all.
What I had forgotten
was the suddenness of the real.

Now I remember
my mother wept for me
watching her man in this field
go slower and slower
while over him faster and faster
the wind shook out
the inexhaustible lives
that all life leaves.

The empty cherry quivers
in balance, spinning the light
inside itself. I had forgotten
how gradually the real is.
These two thoughts answer me:
between the exploded instant
and the long weather,
what walks the field is man.

But ah came Easter
My lamb, my sufferer, rose,
Rose from the charnel cellar,
Glowed golden brown
On religious plenty.
How gravely he was broken,
Sprigged for a bridal.

I praise the soil
In the knuckle and habit
Of my feeding parents
Who knew anciently
How the holy and edible
Are one, are life, must be loved
And surrendered.

My tears for the lamb
Were the bath it sprang from
Washed and risen
To its own demand
For a defenseless death.
After the lamb had been wept for
Its flesh was Easter.

Of bending in the wind, and soon and sure
Fade, fold, and fall out of the sunburst hour.

Clouds had them once, and wreckage mars them now.
And the same wreckage scatters on your fall.
Spring, which amazes more than we allow
Of our dark selves to show, sets equally after all
On the blind wreck of gland and rationale.

Now only memory keeps its aftermotion.
Good-bye, where no luck serves, nor any word,
Across a swell of sky and cloudy ocean
While April wind and bony bird
Discuss our futures, and have not concurred.

Band 10: Elegy For Sandro

Read down into the dead and close
tiers of the lying sand, soil, grass—
the root-sided, landsliding, unraisable
dawn and dark of the pit—
my stupid cousin, the missing
scholar of all, father of nothing, and boxer
who never won a fight,
lies dumb to the tears of women.

From the womb that stirred in dreams and soft
from dream dark coiled awake the son
of the man-touched, man-giving, and oh unholdable
sweet and milk of the flesh;
to dissolution and the swaying
censer like a pendulum under the timing sky;
the woman who was gifted
gives back her barren son.

He was the oaf of her litter, but not less
love's nor death's. Her better sons—
the un-needing, Sunday-visiting, check-writing
first felt of her blood—
stay her faint at the trembling sill;
but he was the last to need her and first
most gone from all morning
she held to her breasts' greatness.

While this one lived she had a child and was
mother to man. Childless, she sees him down
the flower-spilled, sand-back, and infolding ways
into the blood-black deep past
tears and time to the stone-stopped heart.
A pebble rattles there. The skirted priest
runs out of saints and ends. Her big sons turn her
back to the world where now she is their child.

Band 11: Three Views Of A Mother, I

Good soul, my mother holds my daughter,
the onion-skin bleached hand under the peach-head.
Ti-ti, she says from the vegetable world, *la-la*.
A language of roots from a forgotten garden.

She forms like a cresting wave over the child;
it is impossible not to see her break
and bury and the child swim up a girl
and the girl reach shore a woman on my last beach.

Ti-ti, la-la. I will not fight our drowning,
nor the fall of gardens. I am curious, however,
to know what world this is. The honey-dew head
of the child, the cauliflower head of the grandmother

bob in the sea under the garden. *Ti-ti, la-la*.
The grandmother rustles her hands like two dry leaves
and the child writhes round as a slug for pleasure,
leaving the trail of its going wet on the world.

Band 12: Three Views Of A Mother, II

I see her in the garden, loam-knuckled in Spring,
urging the onions and roses up. Her hands

talk to the shoots in whispers, or in anger
they rip a weed away between thumb and fist.

When the jonquils open she makes a life of them.
Before the radishes come she is off to the fields.
scarved and bent like a gleaner, for dandelions.
When the beans are ready she heaps them in a bowl.

The Fall is lit by peaches. As if they were bubbles
she balances them from the branch and holds them out
one by one in her palm. Her eyes believe
the world self-evident in its creation.

Last of all the chrysanthemums take tongue
from the spikes of November. She lingers by glass boxes
coaxing the thickened earth a little longer
to hoard the sun for sprigs of mint and parsley.

But Winter comes and she is out of employment
and patience. She is not easy to be with
here by the buried garden. Winter mornings
she wakes like shrouded wax, already weary

of the iron day. *Ti-ti*, she says to the child,
la-la. A piece of her life. But her mind divides:
she knows there is seed enough for every forest,
but can she be sure there is time for one more garden?

Band 13: Three Views Of A Mother, III

Three rainy days and the fourth one sunny:
she was gone before breakfast. At three she hobbles back
under a flour sack bulging full of mushrooms.
Well, scolding will do no good. I see her eyes
hunting for praise as she fishes up a handful
and holds them to the light, then rips one open
for me to smell the earth in the white stem.

I think perhaps this woman is my child.
But right now what do we do with thirty pounds
of uncleaned mushrooms? If I let her be
she'll stay up cleaning them till one o'clock
and be all aches tomorrow. I get a knife;
and here we sit with the kitchen table between us,
one pile for root ends, one for the cleaned sprouts.

Her hands go back with her. I see her mind
open through fields from the earth of her stained fingers.
"Once when I was a girl I found a fungus
that weighed twenty-eight kilos. It was delicious.
I was going to Benevento for the fair.
I cut across the mountain to save time,
and there it was—like an angel in a tree.

"You don't see things like that. Not over here.
My father ran from the barn when I came home.
'Didn't you go to fair?' he said. But I laughed:
'I brought it home with me.' He wouldn't believe
I'd carried it all the way across the mountain,
and the path so steep. I made a sack of my skirt.
He thought some fellow—I don't know what he thought!"

Ti-ti, la-la. The memory works her fingers.
"Oh, we were happy then. You could go in the winter
and dig the roses and cabbages from the snow.
The land had a blessing. In the fall in the vineyards
we sang from dawn to sunset, and at night
we washed our feet and danced like goats in the grape vats.
The wine came up like blood between our toes."

We finish at last, the squid-gray fruit before us.
"Leave the root clippings," she says. "They're for the garden.
See how black the dirt is. Black's for growing."
She sets her hoard to soak. "I'm tired now.
Sometimes I talk too much. That's happiness.
Well, so we'll eat again before we die.
But oh, if you could have seen it in that tree!"

Band 14: At A Concert Of Music, Remembering The Dead In Korea

Consider says the music how man is an age
Waiting to be discovered. This is a question
But its answer is a delay, the delay is

The answer. Consider says the trembling of the sound
 What echoes are in a man. His lives spend
 His lives like music; all unknown till heard
 Yet everywhere expected, known in the hearing
 And in the hearing recognized as precisely
 What he had waited to hear. Until at last,
 What have the dead become in their surprises?

The postures of the dead, the trembling sings,
 Are all familiar. None remain to discover
 But only to occur, sighs the organ.
 In the documentary ditch by the newsreel road
 The cramped, the outflung, the piled over and under
 Melt together like sound, whispers the cello.
 Parts of a world contrived beyond surprises,
 The oboe, the failing bassoon, the mottled flute.
 Nothing follows but the music the music:
 Do you really imagine you can hear a silence?

When the trumpets invaded Russia the drums struck,
 The fifes screeched on the ice, the cymbals broke
 From snow steppe and pine cover. Then like a bass
 The ice rocked and the fiddles drowned in the rivers.
 The bows washed to Latvia and the bridges
 To Estonia. The heart-shaped bodies warped
 Open in Polish weeds. Then Spring was all harps
 In the wind over the brassland where the movement
 Fought and died, fought and died and was never
 Ended, cannot end.

For how shall the dead
 Exist who are a silence behind the sound
 Whereby silence is an impossibility?
 There is dying again in the ditches, says the music,
 But I have heard myself in my beginning:
 How shall I be surprised who have no surprises?
 Consider says the music how man must be
 His own delay and answer. His own secretion
 Like music of his lives about his lives,
 Says the fall and the fading, says the echo between
 The hearts of the fiddles invisibly trembling together.

SIDE II, Band 1: A Thought About Shiek Bedreddin

I read in a tattered book about Shiek Bedreddin
 who on his best day sank ten thousand axes
 into the Royal Heir's ranks, and broke eight thousand.
 Men, that is. Snapped brittle at the handle
 for what's crazy in everyone. Called a glory.
 With, of course, a gallows. Some want *that* badly
 to be taken in righteousness. Of Shiek Bedreddin,
 it is written he was hanged between two rivers
 preaching firm faith to his two thousand "survivors,"
 their heads under their arms in strict attention.

Now there's a day's work: ten thousand wraith
 decisions sopped up into history
 like garlic gravy, leaving a bad breath
 somewhere among the back smells of Turkey,
 and everywhere. The slops did very well
 the day Bedreddin preached the way to hell
 to his last two thousand rags of crazy cloth.
 I almost wish I knew what they thought they were doing
 aside from that day's immediate hacking and hewing.
 There must be something to say of that much death.

Band 2: In The Witch-Hunting Season

I tell you, don't trust the living. Their eyes
 go mad for practice. They're possessed, possessing.
 Give them one good Friday and they're up and ready

with nails and religions. Hysteria's their mother.
 There's a scratch in them that won't heal.
 They have twelve fingers sticky with bleeding.

Get thin. Put by some dying before you're owned
 hock shank and marrow, and out nailing Jews
 for fat reasons. Get a grave behind you.

What else made the Sahara a saints' suburb
 and singed the mob at the city gates when the bones
 strolled back as easy as gypsies, all their own?

Ask Ezra at St. Elizabeth's mismanaging
 a dozen languages in a rage of tricks
 to pile all Hells into one dictionary.

Ask Blake head first in the tiger's mouth. Ask Donne
 being bad for God. Ask Byron being bad.
 Ask Dr. Johnson what he's doing dead

when grammar's cracking wider every day—
 paid-in-full Lazarus, the one safe
 man in all dangerous Judea, is my saint.

Band 3: Kristoffer Second

for Fletcher Pratt

Kristoffer the Second, by Grace of God
 King of the Danes, crowned on the hill
 By Denmark's law, died in a ditch
 Grated by Germans. Sing we his saga:

Loud from Lohede echoed the clanging
 Of blades and ambitions: the clatter of kings
 Hacking through mist, their vision of standing
 Erect above time, a rock in water.

Then reeling in rout, hurry of horses,
 Wheels on the nights ways, shivered ambition.
 Alone in his lodge and sullen with sleep
 He dreamed of the devil, Graf Johann the Mild:

Woke all a-startle, smoke for his sidewalls,
 Flames for his hangings. Under the window
 Two knights with a net hauled him like herring,
 Loaded him laughing, Graf Johann's catch,

Brought to his breakfast. "How shall we serve him?"
 Graf Johann sat grinning: "Too thin a sprat:
 Strip him and whip him out of the gate
 And bring me a fish with flesh to its bones."

Loud was the laughter of knouts through the air,
 The dancing of horses dragging his dust.
 At the fork of the road they cut his cord:
 A garrison's joke grew stale in the ditch.

The boy-king of nettles died weeping for water;
 His blood lay about him too dirty to drink.
 From Sylt to Skaane, from Loeso to Lübeck
 There was none found to bury a king.

And down from the turrets of Skanderborg
 The ravens rode to their black Thing
 Wide on the weeds to pick and pick.
 May God forgive all politic.

Band 4: Elegy For G. B. Shaw

"If I survive this, I shall be immortal."

Administrators of minutes into hours,
 Hours into ash, and ash to its own wedding
 At the edge of fire and air—here's time at last
 To make an ash of Shaw, who in his time
 Survived his times, retired, and for a hobby
 Bred fire to fire as one breeds guinea pigs.

In time, one can imagine, schoolchildren
 Will confuse him as a contemporary of Socrates.
 For a time, the fact is, he confused us:
 We half believed he really had lived forever.
 Sometimes, perhaps, a man can. That is to say,
 Civilization is one man at a time,

And that forever, and he was that man.
 For this we will not forgive him. Neither
 The ape in me nor the ape in you, tenants
 Of the flag-flying tree and drinkers of blood in season.
 We meant to resemble the agonies of statues:
 He left us only a treadmill in a cage.

Consider his crimes: He would not commit our diet.
He opened our tombs. He sold his medals for cash.
His laughter blew out our anthems. He wiped his nose
On the flags we die for—a crazy Irishman
Who looked like a goat and would not be serious.
But when we are finished, he will be our times.

And all times will be nothing in his eye.
All marshals, kings, and presidents we obey.
His presence in men's minds is contempt of court,
Of congress, and of flags. So must we pray
That he be born again, an arch and rare,
The race we are not in the race we are.

Band 5: Flowering Quince

This devils me: uneasy ease at my window
discussing the day with quince, flowers of the quince
almost upon me in tree time, in slow
dazzles of budding and bending asprawl since
Spring began my consideration again

of the angels of the blind eye. *This must mean*
the angels sing from the many-folded falls
of the open light, from the twist and gnarl and sheen
of the airy works of the tree, from the writhen scrawls
and mobile arms of its tilt and balancing.

But at once the wind shakes free a fall of light
from undiminished light, the light-machine
sends and goes in an ample-handed sleight.
This devils me: can worlds be made to mean
whatever they are about when they shape a tree?

can the angel-blinded eye be made to enter
a presence without intent whose devils sprawl
calmer than angels in the windborne center
of the quince-bursting Spring? is quince a moral?
The form of a tree is a function of the air

and its only possibility, say the devils.
But the eye sees by religions and recollections.
What shall the green bough care for rites and revels
or the angel imagination whose paeons
moralize the strictness of God's chains

in a world that cannot worship but only answer
one urgency with another? Spring
is no more intricately bloomed than cancer,
nor than the dreams of angels which they fling
age after age at the invincible world.

Band 6: Sunday Morning

I light a cigarette, my dead mouth steaming
with vapors of its own. One jellied eye
splits out of sleep, and blood comes up from dreaming
in poisoned wells, while the bell-driven sky
scuds to St. Joseph's just across the river
calling the Sunday Irish, hands together,
to walk the incensed aisle of the Forgiver
under His eye, His steeple, and His ringing weather.

A sip of coffee muddies on my tongue
and metal citrus savors how it is
to taste the melting wafer there among
the arches of the God. If I were his
would I wake sweeter? Suddenly there leaps,
like a dancer bursting naked from her cloak,
a swell of sun, and on the cloud that sleeps
up from the ashtray rears Our Lady of Lit Smoke.

Saints have seen less and gone with it to grace.
For such a light Nazarius lost his head
to the prefect Anolinus. It was Ambrose
who found the grave. As de Voragine said:
"From it there came a perfume wondrous sweet."
Those old ones had an easy way with graves.
I wallow in the grave of my own meat,
watching the light exult, golden as all their Ave's.

Ah well, I think, I shall not want at last
for the comic operas of the saint. I read
how Brixius charged with fornication passed
two miracles to prove him pure indeed.
Yet was he driven by an angry mob
for having called St. Martin an old fool.
So are all driven, but will the holy squab
testify for all before the Sunday School?

. . . A music for the images of Sunday
under the ray that does if any will
to be Godmother to the light. I play
these rummages toward grace under the spill
of overflowing Heaven. The fat man's prayer
is an easy going random: I will raise
what images arrive across this air
until the sour of time be sweetened into praise.

The warrior image: Nelson in Sicily
drummed up a war to please the Hamilton whore,
and when he captured old Prince Carracioli
hanged him from a yardarm just offshore
then dropped him over. The next day at tea,
the cabin windows open and the old bag
passing the rum, the corpse broke from the sea
and stared out of blind eyes at the hero and his hag.

(I wonder if those blood-tubs ever banged
for better stuff. Sometimes I think I mean
it's better to be Carracioli hanged
than Nelson diddled. And wasn't Josephine
another whore?—There's Empire from both ends!—
I hear my teeth grind in the toast I chew
and ponder through what fogs the squab descends
there where the Irish eat their Christ and hate the Jew.

A moral for the images of Sunday:
I think the world is less than its own light
aureoled on the smoke that sleeps away
from a fat man's cigarette and morning rite.
What have they ever won but marzipan
from Mother Mush or from the sticky lips
of such a tub as Hamilton, who man
the artilleries of God aboard his battering ships?)

The rhetorical image: Voltaire at sixty-one
wrote out a quarrel with the Lisbon earthquake
in the name of human dignity. Half a town
fell into its dark before it came awake,
because a mountain shrugged. And one old comic
(the victim of too much philosophy?)
dipped his pen in blood for a polemic,
declaiming for the mind against sheer casualty.

The silly image: Perillus, a smith of Athens,
delivered to Phalaris of Sicily
a brazen bull so tuned by cunning engines
that when a man was toasted in its belly
his dying screams were changed into a Moo.
The king smiled and the smith was first to sing.
Later Phalaris fell and then he too
warmed into song to please the humors of a king.

Mother Illusion, Mary of Lit Time,
how sweetly gone they flicker and have done!
Dante brought the Universe to rhyme
in such a light. I sort out one by one
these pebbles from a beach of space and pray
from finite stuff some infinite gentleness
to offer the soft air and the bright Sunday
that joys the heavy man at play with his distress.

Ghost of All Shining, Vowel of Light
which rings my bones, gross in their morning-stale,
I dream the swollen doe gone mad with fright
when the hounds bell for her fawn. I dream the whale
anguished with milky love on the grating shoal,
the dove at the cat-shorn nest, the bitch in snow
by the dead man. My Lady Aureole
who are the gentlest man becomes, his good of sorrow—

these beasts are breathed out of my nearest wish.
For joy of them, bright mother, I pray let down

your shining on bird, beast, and fish
till all things live, and all things lack conviction
of all but light. A fat man breathes this prayer
in sight of skinny death who teaches all
the joy man breathes from the blood burning air,
and that man stands most tall measured against his fall.

Band 7: Measurements

I've zeroed an altimeter on the floor
then raised it to a table and read *three feet*.
Nothing but music knows what air is
more precisely than this. I read on its face
Sensitive Altimeter and believe it.

Once on a clear day over Arkansas
I watched the ridges on the radar screen,
then looked down from the blister and hung like prayer:
the instrument was perfect: ridge by ridge
the electric land was true as the land it took from.

These, I am persuaded, are instances
round as the eye to see with,
perfections of one place in the visited world
and omens to the godly
teaching an increase of possibility.

I believe that when a civilization
equal to its instruments is born
we may prepare to build such cities as music
arrives to on the air, lands where we are
the instruments of April in the seed.

Band 8: Doctor Faustus

Gnostic Faustus, Sapphic, sophie,
the face set firm but the eyes Orphic,
dream-dead eyes, eyes brought blind
from a world too-many, eyes of the mind
of Faustus, all that crazy imagination
of fruit out of season, and of course a Mädchen,
and of course the devil behind a column,
very basso, very solemn . . .

Who knows Faustus? Houris? Horrors?
What's that scratching? Fates? Furies?
Who's that coming through the floor?—
the Queen of Maggots or the Girl Next Door?
Who's in the mind of Faustus? the big, overacted,
nightmare-lashing, perpetually erect, tom-tom impacter
mind of Faustus? Is Faustus true?
Is he in me? Is he in you?

Dapper Faustus, deft, demonic,
manic, monoele-Germanic.
What's in the mind of Faustus? the cracked,
hand-rubbing, cackle-ridden, thunder-backed,
blown mind of Faustus way up there
at the top of his tower, at the top of the air?
And all that world spread at his feet—
does he need it all? Is Need his fate?

Leach Faustus, learned lecher,
Don of Puberty, devil-fetcher;
Faustus ranting in a dim green light;
a mind like New Haven on a Saturday night,
or Poe in the suburbs, or Marlowe's Jew,
rakehell, rankle, or bad homebrew.
Whiffenpoof Faustus or Manfred or maddened,
but singing damnation till he wished he hadn't.

Then ptotic Faustus, caustic, clastic,
phthisic, acrotic, kataplastic;
grimoire, grimalkin, and an amber skull
grouped on his desk, the pentacle
limed on his floor, and death outside,
death afire like a panther's hide,
heaving and straining but held by the spell.
Till one line breaks. Then home to hell . . .

"He over-reached," the whisper slips
from wizard to witch, the flaking lips
of demons smirk, the saved and bleached
cluck in the rafters. "He over-reached."

So Faustus turns the page and falls
out of the tower, a million bells
shiver as one to watch him go.
Even Faustus knows Faustus now.

Then up the music and down the curtain:
"Misbehave and you're damned for certain."
"If you haven't got Luther you'd better get Peter,
or somebody else gets Margherita."
"Watch out for salesmen with black goatees:
one of them's Mephistopheles."

Band 9: Thoughts On Looking Into A Thicket

"And stay away from the cellar door
or you'll end up like the Herr Doktor."

But what of Faustus? Poor sick Faustus. Faustus going
down for a moral. Everyone knowing
all about Faustus, taught about Faustus, mad, bad, sin-
ful, witchbrewed, uncontrollable, all-dissolving, skin-
and-bones Faustus, who could have lived fat
and been a judge and a Geheimerat.
But couldn't find anyone whose conversation
was less damnation than Damnation.

The name of a fact: at home in that leafy world
chewed on by moths that look like leaves, like bark,
like owls, like death's heads; there, by eating flowers
and stones with eyes, in that zoo of second looks,
there is a spider, *phrynarachne d.*,
to whom a million or a billion years
in the humorless long gut of all the wood
have taught the art of mimicking a bird turd.

"It is on a leaf," writes Crompton, "that she weaves
an irregular round blotch, and, at the bottom,
a separate blob in faithful imitation
of the more liquid portion. She then squats
herself in the center, and (being unevenly marked
in black and white), supplies with her own body
the missing last perfection, i.e., the darker
more solid central portion of the excreta."

Must I defend my prayers? I dream the world
at ease in its long miracle. I ponder the egg,
like a pin head in silk spit, invisibly stored
with the billion years of its learning. Have angels
more art than this? I read the rooty palm
of God for the great scarred Life Line. If you
will be more proper than real, that is your
death. I think life will do anything for a living.

And that hungers are all one. So Forbes reports
that seeing a butterfly once poised on a dropping
he took it to be feasting, but came closer
and saw it was being feasted on. Still fluttering,

it worked its woolen breast for *phrynarachne*,
pumping her full. So once I saw a mantis
eating a grub while being himself eaten
by a copper beetle. So I believe the world

in its own act and accomplishment. I think
what feeds is food. And dream it in mosaic
for a Church of the First Passion: an ochre sea
and a life-line of blue fishes, the tail of each
chained into the mouth behind it. Thus, an emblem
of our indivisible three natures in one:
the food, the feeder, and the condition of being
in the perpetual waver of the sea.

I believe the world to praise it. I believe
the act in its own occurrence. As the dead
are hats and pants in aspic, as the red
bomb of the living heart ticks against time,
as the eye of all water opens and closes, changing
all that it has looked at—I believe
if there is an inch or the underside of an inch
for a life to grow on, a life will grow there;

if there are kisses, flies will lay their eggs
in the spent sleep of lovers; if there is time,
it will be long enough. And through all time,
the hand that strokes my darling slips to bone
like peeling off a glove; my body eats me
under the nose of God and Father and Mother.
I speak from thickets and from nebulae:
till their damnation feed them, all men starve.

Band 10: On Looking East To The Sea With A Sunset Behind Me, I, II

i
In a detachment cool as the glint of light
on wet roads through wet spruce, or iced mountains
hailed from the sea in moonfall, or the sea
when one horizon's black and the other burning;

the gulls are kissing time in its own flowing
over the shell-scraped rock—a coming and going
as of glass bees with a bubble of light in each
running errands in and out of the sunset.

Over the road and the spruce wood, over the ice,
and out the picture of my picture window,
the exorbitant separation of nature from nature
wheels, whirls, and dances on itself.

Now damn me for a moral. Over and out,
over and in, the gulls drift up afire,
screaming like hinges in the broken air
of night and day like two smokes on the sea.

And I do nothing. A shadow three feet under
my window in the light, I look at light
in one of the years of my life. This or another.
Or: all together. Or simply in this moment.

ii
Lead flags of the sea. Steel furls of the surf.
Day smoke and night smoke. Fire at the smoke's top.
A passion from the world in a calm eye.
A calm of the world in the eye of passion.

The day that sank birdless from staring Calvary
was another. And only another. And no other
than the clucking calm of Eden fussed to rest
from the black bush afire in the first eye.

A calm-in-violence like Aegean time.
Day smoke and night smoke over the palled sea
tensed for a clash of tridents. Far ashore,
a staring army camped beside a temple,

the base of the temple black with powder stains,
the pediment flashing wild in light above.
—A day of the world in which a part of the world
looked at another, two parts of a mist.

At Cassino the dusty German wetting his lips,
his eyes crashed in his face like unhatched birds' eggs
splashed from their nest, looked East from the burning night.
There was no West. Light came from nowhere behind him,

slanted, flowed level, drained. He looked out, waiting.
Where had it come from, the light of his terrible patience?
A dead man waited to die on the shell-scraped
stones of another God, dust of the stones

caked to his body, rivers of blood within him
ran to their dusty sea beside the world.
Calm in his changes, risen from his changes,
he looked his life out at the smoking world.

Band 11: On Looking East To The Sea With A Sunset Behind Me, III

iii
I have no more to do than what I wait for
under the changing light and the gulls afire
in rays of rose-quartz. Holy ghosts of the sea,

they rise in light from behind me. The light lifts
long from the edge of the world and juts away
over the top of the dark. My life sits

visible to itself, and I sit still
in a company of survivors and the dead.
Jew, Greek, German, man at the edge of himself

in the long light over the worlds he ran to
to save unsaved. I practice the man in all,
clutching the world from the world to praise it.