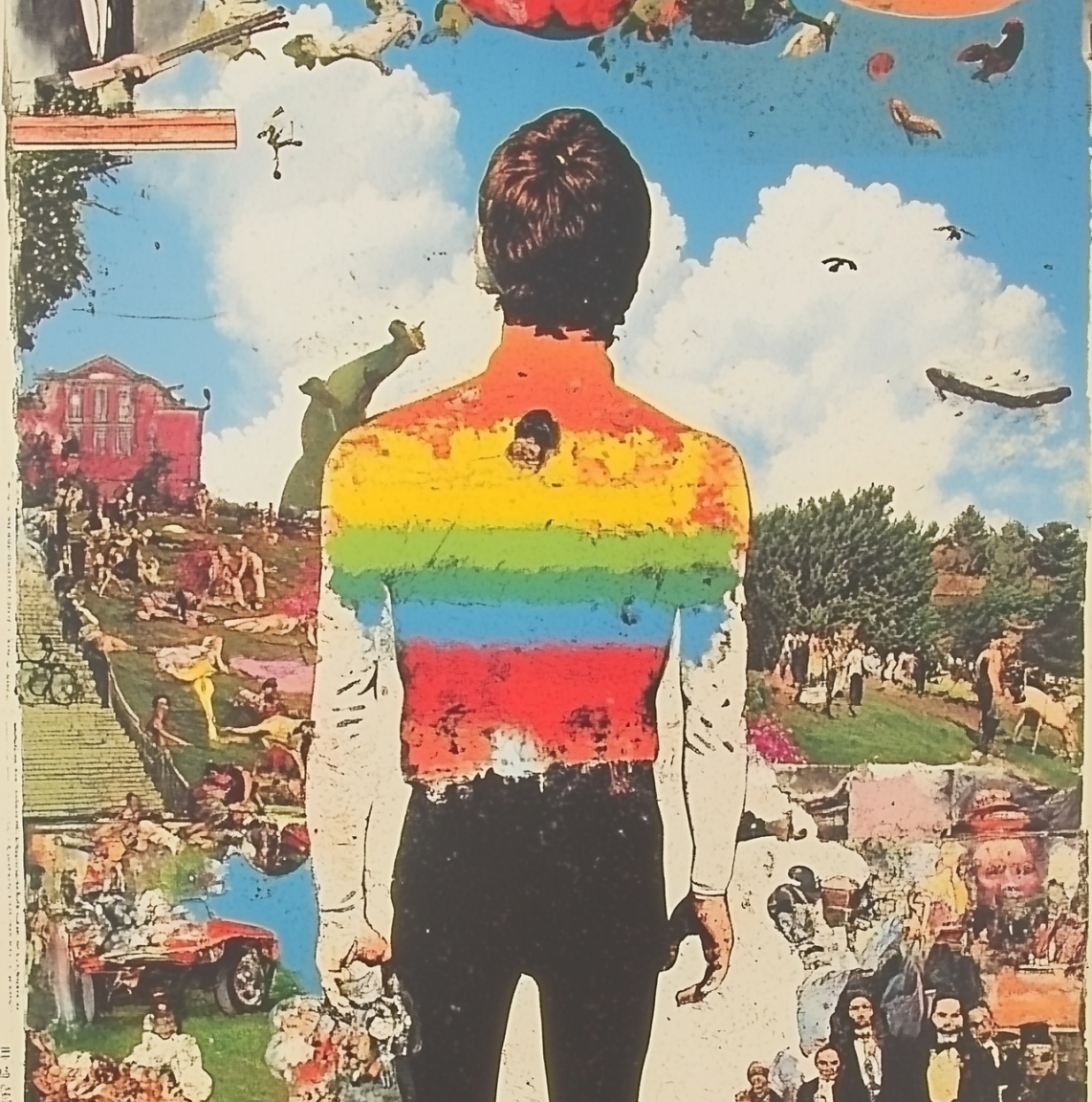




JACK HIRSCHMAN

A Correspondence of Americans

THE 1960 BOOK, LOS ANGELES POEMS, AND LATER WORK

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

The Text-Tech Papers | Los Angeles, 2026

A Correspondence of Americans

Jack Hirschman

1933–2021

A Critical Reading Edition

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans
The Text-Tech Papers · Los Angeles · 2026

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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Three witnesses from the book and biographical record

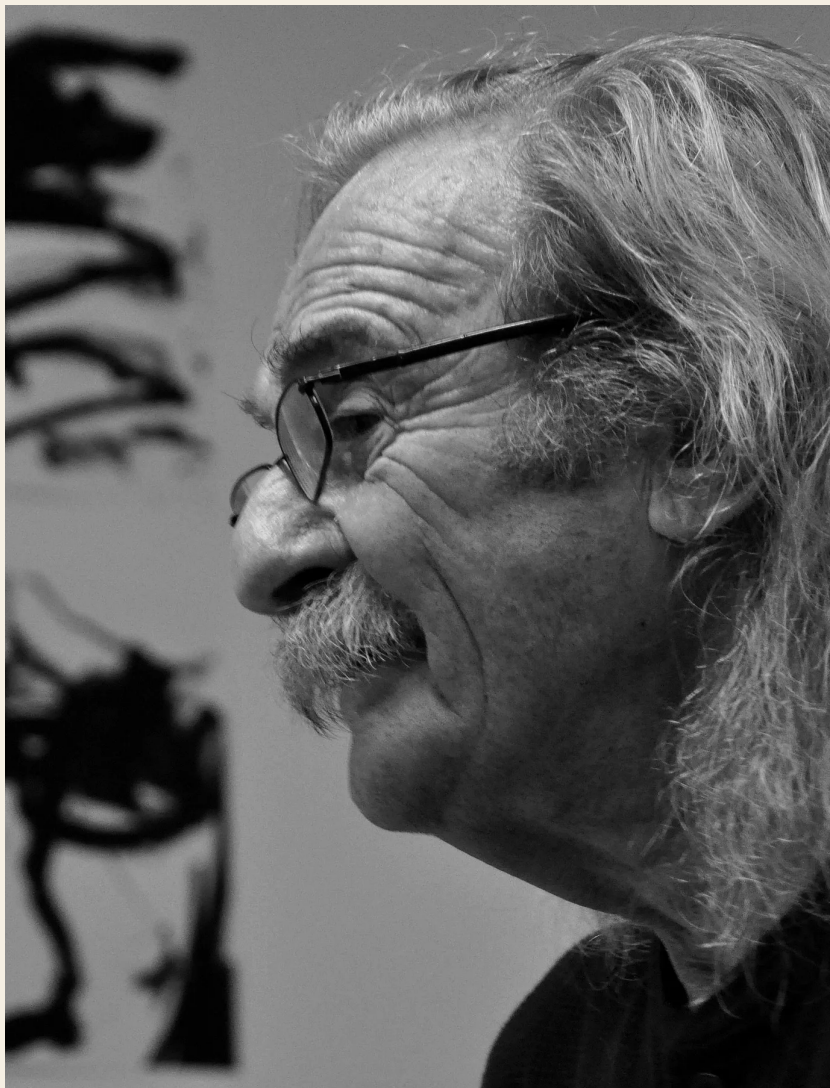
Jack Hirschman

a

correspondence
of Americans

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
1960 • BLOOMINGTON

Title page of A Correspondence of Americans (Indiana University Press, 1960).



Jack Hirschman. Photograph by Marco Cinque; Casa della poesia.

November Day

How much lovelier than
other unleavings for
being so rare after
surprise rain and
clearer Los An-
geles is

than ever (even) New
York or England are
almost forgotten
this brisk this
windbrooming
morning

I have come from gathering
an armful of oak and
liquid amber, in,
off the scatter-
ing gutter,
David

is plucking 'goldenrods
and asters' from the
autoharp till he
must bring it
back to his
school,

but not yet, just now is
squat over it like
a little pythagoras
of wide o-
pen mouth pure
'lavender and gold'

The girls are still asleep
at either end of
the house

And the sun through the
orange curtain here
in this pink room
where I write
my poem
shouts

"November Day" in Coastlines 21-22 (1964), published during Hirschman's UCLA and Los Angeles years.

INTRODUCTION

The first book, the Los Angeles break, and the public poet

Jack Hirschman

Jack Hirschman's first book already contains the voices that would keep arguing inside his work for six decades: the Bronx child and the comparative-literature scholar, the comic performer and the mourner, the formal apprentice and the poet who wanted language loose in the street. *A Correspondence of Americans* appeared in 1960, just before Hirschman moved from Dartmouth to UCLA, and its crowded American music—Hart Crane, W. C. Fields, Allen Ginsberg, lovers, friends, jazz, painting, myth, subway speech—became the starting point for a life in which teaching, translation, collage, political organizing, and poetry were never separate occupations. Los Angeles sharpened that mixture. He taught Jim Morrison and other restless students, opposed the Vietnam War, lost his university post, lived in Venice, and published poems whose typography and anger broke with the academic world he had entered. This edition resets the complete 1960 collection, restores its sequences and shaped lines, adds the two Hirschman poems preserved in the project's *Coastlines* archive, gathers early *Poetry* appearances and later poems available in reliable print or online witnesses, and closes with two bilingual translations. It does not pretend to replace Hirschman's enormous later bibliography; it makes one crucial book—and the transformation that followed it—readable again.

Editorial note

The 1960 book is reset in full from the complete University of Connecticut / Internet Archive scan and checked page by page against the images. Original ordering, stanza space, sequence headings, dedications, epigraphs, and meaningful indentation are retained. Mechanical wraps caused by the narrow original page are removed only when the underlying verse line is clear. Unmistakable damage—such as “die flower,” “one check feminine,” “Tiy the window,” and “impbssible”—is corrected; unusual but legible forms such as “upsidedown,” “betweenwomen,” and “swinding” remain. The five-part structures of “Impressions in the Present-Perfect” and the title poem are made explicit. “The Baseball Poem” retains its stepped field, and “November Day” retains its deliberately broken words. Later selections are not a claim to completeness: they include every independently legible poem in the local Hirschman archive, omit the duplicated “Two” because it is a later state of the first section of “One Finger from the Seasons,” and distinguish Hirschman’s translations from his original poems.

Bronx beginnings

Jack Aaron Hirschman was born in the Bronx on December 13, 1933, to Stephen Dannemark Hirschman and Nellie Keller Hirschman, in a Russian Jewish family. His mother read Robert Louis Stevenson to him, and he later remembered writing “The Bells of Freedom” at twelve. He attended James Monroe and DeWitt Clinton high schools and, while still a teenager, reported for the *Bronx Times* and the *Bronx Press-Review*. That early newsroom life led to copy work for the Associated Press and to a bold correspondence with Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway answered with a reading list—Stephen Crane, Maupassant, Ambrose Bierce, Flaubert, and early Thomas Mann—and Hirschman kept the letter as an emblem of literary permission.

Study, marriage, and the first book

Hirschman studied at the City College of New York and then Indiana University, earning his bachelor's degree in 1955 and a doctorate in comparative literature in 1959. His dissertation concerned James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He married Ruth Epstein in 1954; their son David was born in 1956 and their daughter Celia in 1958. After teaching at Dartmouth from 1959 to 1961, he published *A Correspondence of Americans* through Indiana University Press in 1960, with an introduction by Karl Shapiro. The book placed highly wrought lyric forms beside urban slang, popular performance, sexual candor, painting, music, and a restless inquiry into American identity.

UCLA and the political break

In 1961 Hirschman joined the English faculty at UCLA. His students included Gary Gach, Steven Kessler, Max Schwartz, and Jim Morrison. A 1964–65 fellowship took him to Paris, Greece, and England, where his friendship with Asa Benveniste helped bring *Yod* into print at Trigram Press. As the Vietnam War deepened, Hirschman made his classroom part of his opposition: accounts repeatedly note that he gave draft-eligible students A grades and encouraged resistance. UCLA dismissed him in 1966. The dismissal ended the conventional academic career but clarified the public role he would pursue afterward.

Venice and Los Angeles

Hirschman lived in Venice from the later 1960s into the early 1970s, writing, translating, painting, making collages, joining demonstrations, and contributing to alternative-media culture. *London Seen Directly*, *Black Alephs: Poems 1960–1968*, *HNYC*, and *The Burning of Los Angeles* register the formal and political turn. The two poems recovered here from *Coastlines*—"November Day" and "The Dead Spot"—place family music, Los Angeles weather, Norman Mailer, the tar pits, decentralization, and a deliberately broken page within the same field. His work on René Depestre and other revolutionary writers further drew translation into his Marxist formation.

North Beach and the street

Hirschman settled in San Francisco in 1972 or 1973. At times penniless and homeless, he became a daily North Beach presence, writing in a small room above Caffè Trieste, producing poster-poems, reading at benefits and demonstrations, and treating the street as a literary institution. He was friendly with Beat writers but resisted the way drugs and spiritual fashion could become substitutes for collective politics. His alliances increasingly ran through labor, communist organizing, the Black freedom struggle, international anti-imperial movements, and younger working-class poets.

Communism, translation, and small presses

Hirschman joined the Communist Labor Party in 1980 and worked with its cultural group until the early 1990s; later he was associated with the League of Revolutionaries for a New America and the *People's Tribune*. He edited *Compages* from 1982 to 1989 and participated in the Union of Left Writers and the Union of Street Poets. Translation was not a secondary service but a central poetics. He translated or co-translated writers from French, Spanish, Italian, German, Greek, Russian, Albanian, Hebrew, and other languages, often bringing poets of resistance into American small-press circulation.

The Arcanes and family losses

Beginning in 1972 Hirschman developed the long sequence he called the Arcanes, poems that joined kabbalistic patterning, politics, daily life, multilingual punning, history, and visionary address. His son David's death from lymphoma in 1982 became the source of the "David Arcane" and a lasting wound in the work. *The Arcanes*, published in 2006, gathered 126 long poems across roughly a thousand pages; later volumes continued the project. Hirschman married the poet and artist Agneta Falk in 1999, in a ceremony conducted by David Meltzer, and divided part of his later life between San Francisco and Yorkshire.

Poet laureate and international organizer

The Before Columbus Foundation gave Hirschman an American Book Award for lifetime achievement in 2002. San Francisco named him poet laureate in January 2006, a post he held through January 2008. He used the office to help establish the San Francisco International Poetry Festival, first held in 2007, and continued international organizing through the Revolutionary Poets Brigade. His laureateship did not domesticate his politics: readings, translations, hand-made books, revolutionary elegies, and poems for friends remained parts of the same practice.

Final years and record

Hirschman read in San Francisco only days before his death at home on August 22, 2021. The scale of his record is unusually dispersed: more than one hundred books and pamphlets by some counts, many translations, broadsides, poster-poems, audio and video performances, and manuscripts held in several institutional collections. The University of Southern California preserves papers from 1962–82, including translation manuscripts and material connected with *Requiem* and *Hunger*; Dartmouth holds letters with Thomas Parkinson; Indiana University holds the manuscript of *Yod*. The archive confirms what the street career can obscure: Hirschman was at once a learned textual worker and a public poet who refused to keep learning, art, and political life in separate rooms.

A CORRESPONDENCE OF AMERICANS

The complete 1960 book

*old men carrying their fathers and philosophers / weeping in the dust,
America perhaps, Don Quixote—Malcolm Lowry, Under the Volcano*

Calligraph

Her hair hysterical, thrown back at the sight
Of the rose my throbbing boyhood brought,
Incensed, how the man in me leaped from my blush
And struck a trembling smile upon her mouth,

And how, drawing a tattered kimono close,
With fingers soft as pounded paraffin,
She bent and lifted up a thin-necked vase
To put the flower in.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 15.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Folio*.

Hart Crane: April 27, 1932

In retrospect at dawn, through the bottle of gin
That was his window on the world, he saw the sun
Not quite. The sun, not; something on the horizon,
And then no thing but one, a someone, Chaplin
Dancing there. And going nowhere dancing there
And yet his shoes, too large, the old burlesque
He knew would drop its jaws and show the cigarettes
Butted and heaped to keep his arches warm, were
Opening instead and radiating beams of red and white
Across the sea between. Alternately, the foamed
And bloodied thighs seemed waves rocking the boat home
To a star-forgotten island under the knotted smiles,
But too drunk for the fathoming of such flanks
He drank.

The bottle's upsidedown. But you are all support
For arms that wilt unless embracing, *mon capitaine*.
So we are on the deck together, three again
Gazing at the distant swoons of the Florida port
Of palms. They'll welcome you with knives sharper
Than whalestooth behind their grace, you spewed
Son of a hook and a scar. And you who knew
First the electric touch of flesh strikes darker
Than any plumb can gauge, they'll dismember
With finely pointed pens. Except you. Listen,
Before the sun that blinds at nine, at dawn Chaplin
Was dancing on the dragon's tongue, I swear,

O shoulders,

Gone! So, limp, I cork and hurl and watch it float,
My bibelot.

At twelve o'clock the sun came down to dote, a pom-pon
On the sea that floated blue like a sailor's cap,
And the pure sky, unreconciled, stood without rank as
At twelve o'clock the sun came down to dote, a pom-pon.
The scuttled giant of a hulk settled at the bottom,
In his blacked eyes were fishegged irises, a highway of
Fins trafficked the broken bridge of the nose of
The scuttled giant of a hulk settled at the bottom.

And such a span was the nimbus of the bellbottoms
The fanged generations, minnow and shark,
Lay down together in the sanctuaried arc,
And such a span was the nimbus of the bellbottoms,
That at the bandy-joined wishbone of death and love
He dove.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 16–17.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Prairie Schooner*.

W. C. Fields

By Jove, my glowworm dove my chickadee Death's
Caught up with me at last with the last billing,
And so many elegant days are still unsipped.
'Tis a fraud, I say, 'tis a fraud; 'tis fraught
With imminent danger, the coming of this fellow
In the bright nightgown.

Drat it, goodbye stuffed fowl of a life foreshortened,
Goodbye rim of the glass of pure water forlorn,
Goodbye blond pulchritude of farflung travels,
Sunflowers I shall not sniff, balls not juggle,
Goodbye. In a moment rather I shall endeavor
To climb the wagon whose steeds will wend
Bumpily along the road's parched tongue
To the provinces.

But, Jehoshaphat, my good man, has the chef
By some mischance omitted the paprika?

is

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 18.

Ikon

of Allen Ginsberg

His howl grabbed me by my high intangibles;
His humor, of the ghetto-American, riddled
Me silly as Fosdick of the cops
My gassy dialectic escaping to be filled
By dancing inbetween despairs, and flops.

A cloud in trousers bagged by the wind
I came down the musical chute to find
In a riff-raff flat, a pock on the cheek
Off the stumblebum-bandaged nose of the Bowery,
A kind of a poet and a humankind of skin:

The frockcoat face with its curling sleeves
Of raskolnikovian-rivington weave,
Then the homed spectacle of his eyes, a cross
Between the visionary and mission bum-boss,
So shoulder-drooped they kissed across his body;

And a kitchen as shampld as the czarina's
My grandmother s slum, whose bulbas
Bloomed in the potted beds, and every bed
Grew a plot of hysterical revolution as
The sons of the gunsels slept.

We sat, we talked over crumbs while a roach
Shuttled like a brown monk to and fro
Across the thread unwinding tongues spelt out,
Tottering this way. with whispers of my host
And, with my host of praises, that:

Shrug which kept our balance and composed
An hour's ease between my eyes and those
Of the invert in the apocalyptic rant
Who swaddled a century burning in his thighs
And tousled the strings of its dying instruments.

From his hands I saw that he
Was in a perpetual state of litany;
Between the thin blue lines of lips
I could almost read with fingertips

The wine-drenched letters of a race
Driven across the tragic page
Incomprehensibly with laughter.

Here was no perfection of tongues
But a babel apprenticing;
Confounded and blasted young, what
If whatever came up spat out of throat?
Dimestore prophetics at best, and yet,
With the everlasting eyes of Chariot
And, of Gargantua, the laughter,

become
I felt our words promising to

Huddled buddies under the bomb,
Learning like Fields and Marc Chagall,
Yeats and Finnegans and all that fell
From the first into the human tense
To scramble to their feet and dance
Circles round the crater,

Billowing across the dazzled sky
Benignly tender zeppelins of a smile,
Signature of all things yet to come
When the light fades and we lay down
Drumbeat and intellection's scars
And wake to name the things around by heart.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 19–20.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Hip Pocket Poems*.

Spirit of '76

Halleluiah, I'm a bum on Easter Sunday,
 woke up to tory fife & drum-tattoo
I just

& tapping my pocket to find the bottle's safe
I found a tin-foiled box of Copenhagen snuff
Inside the hole inside the hole in my jacket.

Halleluiah, I'm a bum on Easter Sunday,
Not a dingbat thing in the universe to do
But listen for the tory fife & drum-tattoo
Approaching, & gaze up at the girder above me
Where Nathan Hale's my gibbeted bedfellow

The savior's barred & boarded the saloons
& the wreckers've torn down the coin-dropping El-tracks
& left the indifferent blue.

Halleluiah, I'm a bum on Easter Sunday,
While closer comes the tory fife & drum-tattoo,
& it doesn't make a bit of difference to me
That Tliirty-fourth & Fifth's the tallest bottle
In the world, with a golden bald eagle at the top
Of its corking, sticking its beak out at me
In broad daylight, because it's sticking its beak
Out at you, bum, tattoo.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 21.

from The Ptolemaic Statues of the Serapeum of Memphis

for Leon Golub

Pindar's body is most of all whole,
Throned among these poets and philosophers:
Though his face is pounded flat by time
His scepter Olympian muscles of a lyre
Strumming a song aimed at the parallel dromes
Aimed at the horizon's breast-splitting cord,
Pindar's body is most of all whole,

Otherwise rubble:

Heraclites,
A bony-thonged leg.
HPOTAT stumped
Like the very letters of his name.
The waisted torso of Orpheus
With chipped intimations of wings
Dead about his feet,
 While a few scattered and decapitated
 Sphinx from the Avenue of the Sphinx
 And the holy Serapeum
 Have their bodies turned to them,
 Enigmatically.

And above all
Players in this play
In this sun-eaten pit and basin
In this amphitheater of sand
Where I am here today
Come down in flesh and bone,
A mid-twentieth century
Son of a melody sounding
And resounding void of theme,
Come down to find the meaning
After many bedouin driftings,
The Father and the Truth

To attach these senses to,

Above all

Players in this play
Plato only holds the key
To the stage behind the stage,
Of whose statuary body
Only hieroglyphs remain,
A dwarfed and hooded mystery
Where the head begins at waist:
Nothing but a fist but the fist
That burning to be
The very listless essence of,
Absent of all mortality,

I turn

To the sculpturing wind
That the sculpturing wind
Turn me to stone
And then erode until addenda
And appendages be gone,
And being but a rubble in the midst
Closer to what timeless being is,
I shall be a knuckle of that fist
Closed round the key

That a few scattered and decapitated
Sphinx from the Avenue of the Sphinx
And the holy Serapeum
Are turning turning their bodies to,
Enigmatically.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 22–23.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Chelsea Review*.

Tornado

Amid shambles blown, blown pages of a Gideon,
A farmer with a pitchfork stepped
Before the microphone and said it was a huge
Black arm did it, come sweeping across
The tabletop plain, grizzly, on a binge.

His wife, kind of scared and something shy
Of things stuck right before your face
To talk into, was in the distant field
Pecking at the wreckage of a moviehouse
Fallen out of the sky, for pans.

And still agog, the kid in overalls
Was dancing on shingles, leaping
From tree to tree, his blond crop fluttering,
Yelling to all the buried farmboys
About the swinding tail of the dragon that snapped.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 24.

Non-Objective Painting of America

Here nothing is fixed. Like nature
Nothing ever stands still long enough
For a pen to set down upon paper
Or a brush to found upon canvas
A structure directed and tough.
Everything's everywhere moving
North south east west
And always away from the center
Where there's never the natural danger
Of freak accidents.

No wonder then that the middle
Is part of the west, and the north

Runs into the eastern border
And something like a sombrero
Straddling the southern border

Makes the south run into the souther
And so forth. And you ask: Can a hero
Emerge from this impossible muddle?
Where is the splendid antique structure,
The centered figure, the blue beyond?

And it answers: That's me, America,
For you. Where the muddle is the hero,
Continually practicing how to be whacky,
Since everyone knows the blue and the blond
Are as joky

As Joyce and bats as Bugnolo,
Who can find a slice of Virginia tobacco
On the back of an anonymous hearse
Traveling north from East Mishawauka,
And taking it to his studio
Forget it ever was,

While scraping and rescraping a creation
Out of movement out of seething inspiration
Toughbrown and green and hot with combustion,
An immensely infinitesimal universe.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 25–26.

The Bestiary

*eternally angry, eternally separated, in
a cataleptic frozen gesture of abandon . . . —Djuna Barnes, Nightwood*

Strophe

We have forgotten what enchantment is. Each step
Is a descent indecently descendant of a shame,
Shedding what perversities we cannot name
As one continually sheds a weddingdress
Descending to a newer nakedness
That only new perversity can claim.

Remember, once, going up these stairs
Once before going up and finding doors
That were opening upon
Whole albums of warm and human breath,
And the tomboy titillations down the bannisters,
Sliding down to the barking, carpeted floor
And standing upright and parting your hair
The better to see the firelight upstairs
Arranging itself in a troop of golden falcons
To wing you back up for more.

Now jealous parakeets cawk me out of the rooms
Where I have left a little of my night
In rabid signature upon a body's white
Neck and bosom, and in mascara tins,
And I fix behind me my vestigial bones
That all my sisters see me here,
Each step taken lonelier
Than the step to be taken were,
That all should cry, Beware, Beware
Her flashing eyes, her floating hair
Weave a circle round her thrice,
And gathering in a queenly train
Behind me, of amphibians,
How in the name of Light should I
Tear my body from their cries
When we are altogether damned upright

As we are all together stitched and bound
To go down to the basest step of the night
Gazing at the naked beastface of our wound
A paw away and froze in a muzzle of ice.

Frontpiece

Here it all begins, Dear,
On this spinning disk,
With the needlepoint, Dear,
Grooving out a grin
Down the midmoist center
Of the icon with
One cheek manly boned, Dear,
One cheek feminine,
Cheek to cheek alone, Dear:
The fundamental crackdown
And debasement of the rhythm
On this spinning disk
Where it all begins.

Birds

I'm here as the penguin.
It's all so new,
This habit of tuxedo,
And the birds one finds
Herself confessing to:
Long-legged Ibis,
Bent with a beeriness
Turning her against herself,
Pecking at her groin;
And Ulula, Cuculus, Garrula,
Grus—all manner of aves
Strayed from the vias
Of Ave Maria: owls that owl,
Vultures that vamp
With night grown deeper
Behind its cowl,
With bawlk of bats

And tedium's flit,
All come out with hoot
And howl, with chitter of wing
And tittering strut
And God knows what
Hell is this parliament of fowls.

In the center Madame Pavo,
Robin-jackdaw-peacock-squatter,
With her hundred eyes
Growing wider, growing fatter
On their "Ecce, ecce, bravo, bravo,"
Shows between her two plump cheeks
A dagger-sharp and shiny beak
And bows down
Making the rounds
Of the parliament of fowls.

Abc

Albino-white and alabaster freezing
She struts before her mate who
Follows her blond-tail swing,
A property man who keeps acute
Eyes upon his holdings,
Though she can put a blinder on
To draw the shades of any man
When she goes agelding.

"Blueblooded bitch with high cheekbones
Flank to flank she knots her stride
With mine, of all the mongrels
Hounding after hide,
And I would rear with teeth unbit,
If not for the yawn in my stomach's pit,
Bite off her tail and bury it
With the bastard child inside."

Cock among chickens, cuckolded,
He tries to strut, mistrustful,
Through

Coops where tittering “Anycockllo’s”
Leave his bantam chest deflated
Stub his royal claws from clinging
And that beak, degenerated
To a scared crow’s lechering.

Musicians

Trombone, sax and bongo-drum
Bless the bed that we sprawl on
Darkly spectacled.

Blow and thump an antiphon
Filling up our vacant gut
Shot with hope and fear.
With the organistrum dated,
And the bombardon, negotiate
Some other frantic spires
Improvising Bach, or better,
Cantatas by Saint Buxtehude.
Watch us choir.

Like white altarboys we pipe
Fugues as whistle-clean as fifes,
Ascending and sustained
Way up on high, here architect—
Tiptoploftically; then crack
And break our throat and drain
Down through dams and panting lie
On the white sheet rhythmically,
A spreading stain.

Trombone, sax and bongo-drum
Bless the bed that we sprawl on
Darkly spectacled.

Cats

In the tiled confessional
Retching, bent and white as sin,
I spill with guts and jiggerin

Dead wrens that I am knotted with
Into the still pool
 And the nursery bird is crying
 The sky is falling.

Some cat's clawing at the door,
Some cat's crying to get in
While I'm kneeling on all fours
At the putrid chalice rim
For absolution

 And the nursery bird is crying
 The sky is falling.

Now the claws are round the knob
And around the bowl my own
Cling to the wine of my overflow
As the door miaows like a snarl
In an empty groin

 And the nursery bird is crying
 The sky is falling.

Try the window, quick. Or razor,
Sharp. Jump! Cut! Jump! Cut!
But between the actor and the act
Lies the failure: You can't
Cut out of your heart

 The nursery bird that's crying
 The sky is falling.

Let cool music therefore drown us,
Fill the jiggers up around us,
Watch us making it and while
We are slop and sliver, pull
Someone, please, the flush!

Centerpiece

Exactly at the midnight moment, exactly in the crack between
The dark hours behind us and the dark hours before us
Half of the hunter's body and half of the hunted's
Seeking me came to me begging they meet in me,
Turning and turning; sic, sic shall they
Be received by me; sic shall they
Be found; sic shall they be
Opened

Dogma

Be fruitful and multiply your fruits, saith the Dogma,
And I will judge you not. Turn out the light and let me
Feel the texture of the double-croched kiss in the dark,
The stubbled and beard-bumbled smack of seamed lips,
And I will judge you not. Straighten and twang me as I
Hear the twanging sadistic tongue, a Maestro of the Art,
Coming down like a frenzied baton on the white behind
Where a hymn with notations the droppings of blackcandles
Muffled in the night is printed, and spreading, and hot,
And I will judge you not. My voyage among you is as seer
Of Darkness, dense and lapless as the sea that drifts
From cell to cell dilating and contracting like a uterus,
A sponge. I am what I feel and what I feel I foreshell:
Be fruitful then and multiply your fruits, saith the Dogma,
For the time is come round to the toll of a second coming
When one man betweenwomen spliced on a bed, clinging together
Gregorian chimes, shall announce the gospelled resurrection
Of the tooth of the mastiff that chewed through Dante's rhyme.
I felt its bite long since, saith the Dogma. Rising, I feel
You rising in its clench. And I will judge you not.

Lupine

Stretched across the floor, sole to sole
Touching except for the bottle inbetween,
We prowl each other with words like steppenwolves,

While in the chairs stationed at either side
Our loves and desolations sit stupefied
And powerless as angels must have been.

I speak one tongue, you another, yet Decay
Erects no barriers for the consecrated
Few who prowl each other with words like steppenwolves:
Nothing abrupts its drunken lyric power
. Spreading like stain to all four corners
Of the body, immediately translated.

And what we give to those who sit above
With the bitten fingernails that are theirs
While we prowl each other with words like steppenwolves,
Is mercy like the coins to keep them blinder,

As I raise my hand to hold her chin up higher
As you raise your skirt to catch his tears.

Dancers

The three of them
Scrawling across the white wall
A signature ominously looming and beautifully
Joined by the arcs their
Arms make, over and under
Like ribbons run round a
Maypole-tree

With creeping undulations of the serpentine forms
With clean unwavering sweeps of rounded spiral
In continual slow ravel and unraveling

Joined by a laughter dark
And as cold as the legs
From which, shuddering,
Fingers flee
The three of them
Scrawling across the white wall
A signature beautifully looming and ominously.

Sphinx

In hoary youth I sit, beyond depilatory, blond
Turning to beermare tawn, yawning the leonine
Growl: One beast, twice cat and triply masculine,
My paws, though pinned at wrist, still prowls
Like crusted infants' lips the nipples' rounds
Groping in foetal-lidded dark for the blood
Their skins were titled to before the knife's
Long prod-insheathed scraped out their lives
And I (auburnly flowing with a Byzantine
Book of verses, mind-meanders, though supine
Plugged up with rag of thumb and dumb peroxide
Dab the roots of modesty for good.

I pause to lick. To run my parched tongue over
Their sun-bitten minnow bodies, although an act
Forking into scenes of mother and the murder
I commit with the noisy silence of an actor

Practiced in his part, nothing attracts
Me more. High drinks, songs, the fine
Bitches dancing on all fours around me,
Or two in one two-step dip writhing serpentine
Are so much bagpipe puff. Bored, I pause to lick,
Like an old king and father who only knows by itch
That he has children, at the very tips of his fingertips,
And drops his hands on cool throned dominion, stonily.

Backpiece

Cheeks to cheeks thus wedded
Like Cancer and Capricorn
Or a rosary bead torn open

Or the great triptych closing
On the third day of Creation
Of mad old Hieronymous Bosch,
To the fundamental crackdown
And debasement of the rhythm
When the sun comes up the color
Of beer hungover us all
Joining anonymous torsoes in
Decadences bottomless,
Millennial and anonymous fall.

Antistrophe

Dry heaved, dawn cracking at the littoral zone,
Scum-hemmed and blenny-stitched, with the fin
And gillprint paths upon the sand directing us,
We slither a forked tongue body out of throat,
We worm by inches, brought low, the going-up,
The slow evolved anabasis home.

Here at the foot where so many have failed
And fallen back into the pond drowned in senses
Leaving behind the bones that are curled
Ornamentals, thongs for the sandal,
We lug up our belly, we rise to all fours
Aware that each movement, crawl after crawl,
Covers a shadow crawled over before
Covers a movement played over and over
In the fall.
Heavy the ascent, heavy with thunderfoot
Plod and dynasties dragging vestigially after,
Ponderous and unsure. Up ahead a shiver of light,
Something forgotten, something familiar like laughter
Wakes up the spine. It is here we must part,
My prophet; here I stand erect, and from recall
Of a glory that once inhabited this mansion
Bombarded, divided, broken down into atoms,
Hysterically scattered down the well
Of the lapping night, a home
Blasted out of itself,

I turn,

That is to say, return
Converted to the reconverted place where
I began, my eyes behind like Teiresias

Gazing on Sodom & Gomorrah's endless kiss.
The beast I was, I will not be still here,
The beast who aped the most perverted star
In dying discovers, in the holier-than-here,
Himself more than man, more an
Angel at the top of the stairs.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 27–41.

Editorial record. “Strophe” is acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Chelsea Review*.

“the free and the lonely”

a fragment · in partial fulfillment to Leonard Ehrlich

I write letters I string to my fingers and let fly,
In the furious ink of days I write your answers
Stuffing them into the enveloped silence, screeching
Dead or insane but (God!) not blind.
My walkingstick tapping an overtured map out of code,
From blondy centripetal Kansas hunting your brow
As you hunted with sound, hunted John Brown
Down deep in remembering blood,
I enter the cubicle tamped and compacted with poems
Of days when skeins of manuscript never stopped,
Our knees close-knit amid fiercely whispered fumes
Pillaring our music like a crooned acropolis.

Now these fingers stumble against your symphony undone
When the mind, with an oboe wildness, broke
And Franz Schubert's ghost settled into your room
As I am settled, an emaciate frayed cloak

That sits before you, all works aside, in a fraternity
Of music and meaning eternally failing as the desires
Our waning western light conceived to ensnare us,
Yet down on our knees,

Old Maestro, who finds in the mind perpetually wandering
Like a Jew, the Zero that all the keys are thronging
To, the Door jambed open and the gaze upon
The Shrug of a couple of comedians

Singing and dancing pantomime and tell-old tales,
Laughing at butterflies' lidding adagio,
Content in this cramped cell, hushed as Shiloh,
Reading the one the other's lips uplifted like braille.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 42.

To Butler Waugh

What would you have me do,
Knock upon your skull to prove
That it is wood, and kill
The child in it? I could
Not damage skin so beautiful.

How would you have me lie,
Agree time passes, your eyes
Indifferent? Or that it sits
Indifferently, beyond? I
Do not for a minute

Believe it. For the truth
I hear shaped in your mouth,

Shaped from night-broodings God
Knows how deep, is a youth
I hang my spirit on.

Then how would you have me nod:
Yes, the blond days are dead,
Dead the fraternal dynamo?
Yes, if you stuff mere words
In my head. Otherwise, no.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 43.

David and Saul

David in the chamber
Lays his fingers fall
Over his harped torso
To the genital.
Saul, the aged lion,
Growls in his loins.

Melodies plucked pure
Tiger-red and black
Do not reach the ears
Of the raving king.
Sinewy Jonathan
Consumes the song between.

David and the prince
Tall and taut as strings
Play upon each other's
Body young imaginings.
Saul, the aged lion,
Growls in his loins.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 44.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Coraddi*.

2 × 4

toward dawn

No longer the singular we two wedded in bedlock,
The simple conjugation of our love has given way
Anatomically to forms that have eroticized the shock
That in sharing our decadence decadence decays.

The path we once knew, immediate to our senses
As a rose within a thin-necked vase,
Deviously sinistral we've wandered and demented
In the ultimate light, ultimately base.

by day

The night persists. The fictions held between us
Curl and grow frayed in their neglected bindings
As our fingers play past them on another corpus
A young American suicide, the intricate windings

Of a derelict through boyflowering Alexandrine
Streets, ryder and nightwood and the ghostly loves
Of a woman not yet risen from her sleep, Justine:
The palpable pithed strings the mind is soundless of.

tonight

I lay beside you and you were whore
To my touch, and boy I craved but never could approach;
In the shadow of your neck I became the pale boy before
Me, and the girl, at your breast, open as a broach;

woman and yet
I lay with another

With whom within and against what cheek I cannot say,
I cannot say anything, as we kiss, that's past, except
The thrilled breast at my tongue I will not betray.

and now

In this 2x4, tender on down to the soft breathings
And the cigaret passed as a metronome commenting on,
Should you turn to me to touch and find that something's
Come between us; should your fingers tick with agitation,

Tense, and cross with mine your wrist, and where
The furious strum is, I will, even as my lips erode,
Lobe with a kiss more global than the world your ear,
And whisper, when you whisper what we're coming to, God!

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 45–46.

For Bill Sheridan

Tonight I know what being the dead is, Bill,
Though no snow is falling softly softly falling
On my heart, no, nothing that has never not
Fallen already and already melted tonight.
Here in this silence intruded upon only
By her breathings from within I think of you
And how an hour ago I saw your pale face light up
The iris of her eyes with an old romance pale
As your face, hopelessly pale but enlightened
Before her eyelids fell.
And yet we could have dashed the wineglass
To the floor that night, as in a blood-let game
Boys play; I could have given something to your
Loss, but her wing was in my mouth.
I should have seen ahead before instead of now,

Or seen before ahead to know that all the pale
Boys before me were prefaces to me, the failed
Boys before me, me then now.

Now we have fallen a fall tomorrow will
Desperately try to raise but this time finally
Fail: the way the fictions held between us,
The way the child of pretension we tried to raise
Between us finally has failed this fall.

This fall! God, Bill, where are you wandering now?
The last time we saw you it was down the hall
Of some narcotic trance or transcendental dream
Of flesh, corruption-bound like the dented
Fruits of the season; the last time, I spoke of you
In whispers, as if to reconstruct the texture
Of a skin I sensed would shrivel up
With guilt in love through hopeless dissipation
To morbid wordlessness; the last time, tonight, I saw
The iris of her eyes light up with an old romance,
Pale as I do not know what Dying-For destined face:
I only know what being the dead is, Bill,

Without the snow falling softly softly falling,
Without the gasjets burning, without the scrawled
Confession; I only know what being the dead is, Bill,
Here in this furyless room where my cold hand no
Longer hopes even for your cold hand gently
To guide me back for dying.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 47–48.

Impressions in the Present-Perfect

I

I have the two buns again

For your sleeping cheeks,
Bought in the dawn's bakery.

The glasses of orange juice
Stand slenderly; the coffee
Perks in the dome.

The boy, as though he knew
We wanted to be alone,
This morning especially sleeps.

Outside the snow has fallen.
I can hear the cries

Of the skiers.

Darling, are you dreaming still,
Or am I?

II

The cabin is buckled tight
And bundled up to the chin
With sweaters knit with reindeer.

In the central fireplace burn
Chunks of maplewood dark
As the cocoa.

A guitar. Others clatter in
Scattering crystal on the floor.
Gazing out at the white knob

Of the hill and the fine lines
We have drawn, we whisper together
While the rims of the cups dangling

From our fingers touch and vibrate
And are still.

III

In the little shop cocked
To one side of the street
I buy the tam o'shanter.

Unraveling the scarf you
Shake the snowflakes blondly
Out of your hair.

The proprietor, anxious for home,
Muffles the bells with his palm.
In the avenue's twilight slush

We stroll high and as flushed
As cheekbones. Hungry but miles
From the inn, we press together

In doorways and, of one leather,
Appease our appetites.

IV

Even the empty bandstand chairs
Arranged like a musical overture
Invite us to waltzing.

When you throw back your head
As we whirl, past lovers,
Resonant in the wood,

Stop, stare, and the silence
Applauds long after its music
Is through. At the table flickered

With lobster-shell and breadcrust
We map a chessgame of our future,
Then tilt them into the cinders

The waiter touches to light
Two flaming blue Drambuies.

V

So tipsy is the path we blaze
Through the midnight drifts
The total zodiac grows dazzled.

Our chase outpaces Orion.
From the new dippers we drink
Crystal to quench the heat.

In the waning darkness
I strike you like a planet
And laughing, your pleated skirt

Admits one pleat more.
We see in the ice-blue morning
Hunters with guns approaching

The ground we have left behind,
Placid as flak moving south.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 49–53.

A Marriage of Death and Love

When Cohen went out and committed suicide
By stepping in front of a hit and run fender,
It was desolate Sunday on the boulevard:
Only the animals in the zoo nearby
Screamed at the body and iron thud
Screams that my body, awaking for love
In another part of the neighborhood, thought
Were the usual copulations in the clover.

And I who had not known his human breath
Known that its ghost still walks the stairs
Of the haunted body of his daughter Beth,
By whose arm interlocking down the aisle
Like band of wedding cinched to weddingband,
I can feel his will & testament to the bone,

And to her eyes, so bridled and impaired
On this high holy birthday of his death,

Can make this marriage vow and plight
A truth by God I promise to adore:
That as our bed is stretched between two walls,
That as our world is spun between two poles,
And we are each and both of us divided integers
Whose total sum is naught but the night
Before us and the night we bellow for,
Going to and fro and up and down in fright,

So the dark daughter on the shore
Tonight is joined to an heir by law,
The son the father never bore
Though his desperation wanted,
The poet son whose own night bears
A lightness for the pain of fathers,

And for their self-slaughters
Will dedicate his pen to lead
The dark daughter on the shore
Gently, ever-gently to the waters.

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 54–55.

A Correspondence of Americans

I

I miss those free-wheeling interborough rides

Of minds lit up through the tunnels
Where we were palely cast, and the less widest, wide
Spin and descending sift of puns down the funnel

To shuteye purgation: of the Deuce of Heads
Put together and become the one and only King Jam
Boxed in the dark age of a die and rattling ahead
Of our time Jimjack, jimjammed, jammed

In with the comicstripped faces and the frumps
Plush from soft broadways, closing, where Kid
Mulligan just happening by offered his stump
Tapping pennytones, ponderous upon our lids.

I left it, boy, and you, and I say endlessly riding
The rails riding nowhere, shuttled for a freight
Somewhere, America, bound, with a weddingbond guiding.
So cleanly damned my weeks are like the old iambic feet

Out here, limping toward their sabbatical ends I say
Endlessly limping. And healthfully, unsicklied unto death,
With a biblebelt to keep my trousers up and lots of space
To hold my follies in, and a twanged American Gothic breath

That frequents the local tornado haunts, vainly urging
From darkness a vision of trembling hands emerging.

II

From afar, this day you brandish a bride, Dear Jim,
I gift you a handful of wishes (stop) that godhead,
The unutterable vows we made to die in need of him
Forget: his limbs are broken (steps) quite dead

(Where you are tomorrow already is, as shadows go

Easy up over the gotham we trod, westwardly ho,
And the sky is cathedralsdomed like a stained blue
Eyelid closed upon a benediction of you.

Farrer now, the niggers minstrelling waters behind,
I am dawning too and stretching reflection from toe
Bent as coastlines bend embracing trades and tides,
To the badlands of my face forefathered into stone.

And her galloping, spur-hysterical mane of night
Fallen loosely like blond towns among the grain
Resolve all differences, and the votiveness of eyes
Uplifted on the bicepped hill) dear Jim, a gain

Of boys it was, no more, a fungo's soft preliminary
To play. (Steeped) now, no less than ever I be for her
Sugar in hand, rod, snake underhoof, dad, coming to her
As the lore of the land, widespread as sodomy.

III

Level, yet, your sculptural profile was with mine
Mounted high across the rivers of coffee spilt:
What volume we raised, divinity, was our divide,
Though close as one can come, we came, to guilt.

Like the flies that ate philosophies off our lips
Cactuses on the moonsplayed desert fret the mind,
And the rhythms of the streets we knew outside
Were splintered, tropical pick-up spicks.

And the nights, above all, the spaces complementary
In our eyes. Now nothing is before me, and behind
The tense of fossilized hoofprints and the weary
Pilgrims' stop, as if they had been beaten into wind,

And I move as the metric in a poem whose theme is ruin,
But more than theme or metric the poem is a ruin,
Fractured by handling cracked by time and weather,
Whose darkness is doomed henceforth to the scholar

Who'll appear with incisions of pen where, knelt,
At the edge of new waters, giantstep-trodden, I,
And peck at and pick out the message that spelt
The invisible twin opposite these arms would edify.

IV

At the extreme end something beginning is sown,
The last cablecar not chattering to its stop
But stopping to start up and clattering down
Hills like an old tune become apocalyptically bop.

So it was, the moment after the sudden earthquake
Astonished their downfalls into shatterglass toasts:
Hands fumbling into pockets fumbling with the shakes
For butt-ends to rebuild the Barbary Coast.

It all reminds me of. The same face, Love, ever

Changing and anew. The man who planted bombs
Last Christmas in your eyes, I've seen the blossoms
Up through schisms breaking; and I know howsoever

The whirr of planes approaches me, dearer by far
They are actually approaching you. Overshadowing
Unto. Like a lip I'd lay upon yours, silencing,
While wide baywaters lap trinities, heart to heart.

But I am. Fog horn, calls from low dives. Gulls cry
Above my cry. Overshadowing you too. Fag on fag
Lit up at the extreme end of. Something, a cry
I am, beginning to be fogged. Far gone and gone on jag.

V

Our images, Jim, have come to the ice
Left in once drunkenly lifted cups.
In the slow dissolutions, crystal clear,
Faces are staring, of infinite failure, up.

You at the other end of the inevitable bar
Extending crosscountry, the picketed harbor
Of your eyes; and, picketed, I at the other,
And inbetween all our mad specters:

The tenors intertwined, the widening forever
Frontier song like the future tense of dreams
Unlimited. O it's dissonance now, but listen,
I'll stand you one and then you'll one for me

And one by one we'll topple down the ghosts
To the gay center, where I'll say to you:
'Lean against me with your irreligious brogue
And I will lean the shoulder of a Jew,

Sagging as a smile, and stagger with you
Past the stoned fictions of ourselves as gods,
Out of these swinging doors, this omaha nowhere,
Bound, for all space, nowhere, clods.'

Publication. *A Correspondence of Americans* (Indiana University Press, 1960), pp. 56–60.

Editorial record. Acknowledged in the 1960 volume as first published in *Botteghe Oscure*.

LOS ANGELES AND EARLY PERIODICAL POEMS

1961–1965

In Memoriam Ernest Hemingway

Lightning-runs down the midnight
Dakota sky.

We slept in back of the wagon, feet
stuck out of mosquito netting.

It was hot.
Wy-

oming in the morning was indian-
red with ax-nose mountains of

Shoshone, chin-cliffs of sediment
piled high and telling of

when mountains fought
each other and
Big Horn narrowed
with clay and silt
to

montana browns and greens. Bucks loping
on hills, wilderness bear,
a great tree growing out of the head
of a moose.

We headed south in Idaho, riding clear
of towns, taking back roads, filling
the back of the wagon with sprigs
and flowers.

Never turned the radio on.
Never read a headline.

We hit California. The newspaper said,
Papa, you were three days dead.

The cities and towns piled up again.
The sun got blinding. She put on dark glasses.

I drove slowly through the streets to the end.

Publication. Casa della poesia online text; poem dated 1961.

From “One Finger from the Seasons”

I

In the beginning I was soused with words, the page wasn't wide
enough to hold my spillover, I ran and ran and the puns
and brashbrandy flew out of my mouth slant-rhymed.

In time I looked at her. The lines
broke. Look at mine. Look
at hers. And neither died of it.

That Irishman, they say, sang best
at seventy-seven.
It isn't easy to write
the word, love,
and mean it to be
spoken.

2

You move from a repose
I am far behind,
and vain.

The simple way you
take things in
that are, after all,
trembling.

Two years ago I was
a Lublin juggler,
a Dublin jew last year
was I.

Since you have put
your finger on me,
I have no desire,
no more water

in the bucket,
no more moon
in the water,
only this snow

falling, this
slow filling
up of room.

3

I wanted a death that was
simple, weightless, a profound
rose thighs gather round
in darkness.

You give me this endless vase
and gardens of your mouth,
and still I count, sick
ounce by ounce, my pollen,

conscious of the little veins
exploding on your eyelids,
dying a lonely man
one finger from the seasons.

Sleep, my lovely feather.
You call my chest the sun.
The difference is a matter
of stone.

4

The tree outside the window,
when I look again it's spring,
and this room of our in-fighting.

Meli meli's Greek for the honey,
your hair. It was bourbon
in winter.

Changes, the laughing slip-
ping out of things,
and the way we spring in

each other then, lush and green,
and later still with
my finger on

the form of which
the seasons are
expressions like:

Are you done?
I'm aching.
Come here.

Publication. *Poetry* 102, no. 2 (May 1963), p. 97.

November Day

How much lovelier than
other unleavings for
being so rare after
surprise rain and
clearer Los An-
geles is

than ever (even) New
York or England are
almost forgotten
this brisk this
windbrooming
morning

I have come from gathering
an armful of oak and
liquid amber, in,
off the scatter-
ing gutter,
David

is plucking 'goldenrods
and asters' from the
autoharp till he
must bring it
back to his
school,

but not yet, just now is
squat over it like
a little pythagoras
of wide o-
pen mouth pure
'lavender and gold'

The girls are still asleep
at either end of
the house

And the sun through the
orange curtain here
in this pink room
where I write
my poem
shouts

drunken and lovely clear
out of me Matisse's
last day on earth

Publication. *Coastlines* 21–22 (1964), pp. 45–46.

The Dead Spot

for Mailer

The dead spot, the blank
 third eye inside me, and Nothing
will not do
nor Tao nor Zen nor
 any indeterminate music

It is to have given up trying to break down
It is to have copped out on despair
 in a skeleton of an old roadster
and banged
 banged
 banged
axle and hub and rim
hard into where they will fit, That's all
I know, that's all
I care about
 on this hill
And rode down into the tarpits and wilderness
And founded Los Angeles

You hold to that older dead
 spot
That power of filth and groans
That thrust of up and down
Jingo Jew and Christ
Manhattan,
 that cock

There's a whole land flattened it out between us,
the color of a boredom I got
a whole city painted in

different colors, different
size houses

no center to it
but every man for himself
is

in it, it
in him

American,

Which is why, no matter the torment and incision,
the riptooth anguish of
your style
I got to smile

Here, where even these words are
an old brownstone rotting
and who gives a damn
in words damns himself,

the 'rough beast' having passed through your town
a long time ago, and, roughly, is the boundary
of mine

And slowly slowly is moving its vague sun of a
body back across the land to get you good
this time
for having been here yourself,
and having gone back
like a Jew. And cried
And lied.

Publication. *Coastlines* 21–22 (1964), pp. 46–47.

The Baseball Poem

A wrist (to repeat
with a shift
of ac-
cent, mood, of emphasis
attentive to) now
needed

The wrist I lost
hold of, of
what was most
loved as a kid
in the swing of
Ted Williams,
the effortlessly
breaking as
of the curved
way true to the
mark, of the stuff of Prince
Hal,
the poem ought to be,
as love is
a style she holds
out to me
to perch on the pulse of,
aristo-
cratically, as I am not so but can
at will flop for,
sloppily,
to please the crowd

For the game (the
jugglery,
evasion
that's the invasion of
privacy in, say
(yes,
say it, him, and by
all means

empathetically)
Charlie Chaplin)
is as it must be
drawing
to the close of its
night now,
one is 30,
having learned control,
how to pick the spots,
and sits
high up in the tiers
instead of
the lobsterbacked
bleachers faraway close,
and knows no wrist of a
rare kid's form
will bring down
that bird with the sun in its beak to break all records.

Publication. *Poetry* 106, no. 6 (September 1965), p. 398.

LATER POEMS

1967–2010 and undated online witnesses

London Seen Directly

The smell of her on me three hours after
in the streets the lick of her around
my lips the Hampstead blossoms

taste of her rich flesh the narrow
walk I am lined with daffodils coming
up through my thighs the eyes of

the buds of others I malingering over
skirts up to the hip anguish subsumed
in the garden I gaze clearly out of

All loveliness is remembering origin
is one rose folded asleep upstairs
behind eyelids I drink continually

with my nostrils going round and round
the bowl of the heath at twilight
until I reel and fall awake into

the moment all this has taken place
we haven't moved an inch your smell
winds through me the gentle rivering

Stillness of the east and of the west

Publication. *London Seen Directly* (Goliard Press, 1967).

Balaban

I ran down the street and into the house smelled
of oregano and shook Mickey Monaco, said
C'mon, Balaban's got a breadloaf
climbing over old Gruber's fence, he thinks
the mad dogs is doves.

But Mickey grew up in the bed till he was too old
and besides Balaban was crazy, he sucked
his tongue and got left back twice.

So I ran to Joey Bellino's house but his mother's
black stocking said Joey was out early shoe
shining. And besides, that Balaban he's a
crazy kid, he suck the tongue and Joey says
he get left back three times.

So I banged on Bitsy Beller's window yelled he was
near the top, the mad dogs waiting down
below he thinks is doves.

But when Bitsy stood up he turned into a stiff
cue stick. And didn't want nothing to do
with nobody cracked upstairs.
And Dickie Miller became a semipro. And Howie Fish
a doctor. So I ran down the street full of hope

by myself because I was on fire. But I got there
too late for Balaban. Two of them had a stretch
of skin between their teeth fighting over it,

and the foam of their mouths and Balaban's blood
spattered in such a way, the most the greatest
picture looked me straight in the eye, made me
sit in the gutter and cry,

and when I got up vow to be
Balaban from that day on

Publication. *Black Alephs: Poems 1960–1968* (Phoenix Bookshop / Trigram Press, 1969).

Pravda

for Allen Ginsberg

Allen, your anti-Stalin remarks are
Lousy with the old lies of zionism
Lacquered up with buddhism's
Eternal Nirvana of spontaneous
Narcotic Now.

Go on, you don't believe the shit you've
Instigated in poetry's good name.
Not even forty-years later.
Sex, dope and capitalist drivel.
Before you can say Cockadoodledo,
Elemental Leninism emanates
Radiant collectives of the real and the
Georgian still tunes all black laughter.

Publication. *Best Minds: A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan and Bob Rosenthal
(Lospecchio Press, 1986).

That Poet

That poet you admire so—

in my fifteen years
in the workers movement
I've never seen him
in attendance at
a demonstration against
social injustice, or at
a memorial honoring
a revolutionary hero,
or at a rally in support
of an uprising people—

is not even a fighting
surrealist
but a bibelot
dribbling over
with obsolete pus.

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

Paute Ant Pudding

They would go in deep night before the ants were awake
with an empty sack and another with burning coals.
They would stuff the branches where the ants were sleeping,

into the empty sack, scrape them down,
and pour them into the sack with the burning coals.
The legs and pincers would come loose in the heat.
Back in camp, they would empty the tiny bodies
on a mat of leather, wash them clean with water,
and with flour and hot water make a gravy
which would cool into a pudding by daybreak.
A hundred years later, this ant pudding can still
rise off the ground or a modern table
and fling itself at the face of any fucking Nazi

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

Asa

I can't conceive of you that way
without my skull filling with our belly laughter,
and the curve
of a dirtpath down the lots at the end of a street
in the Bronx.

Old friend, see what you went and did?
kicked the bucket with your tin leg
down the long final stoop, and the dead neighborhood
come alive as if for a fire

Now I carry a head at my side, thigh-high,
in my hands held up to the sun,
on my shoulder, on my arm,
in my thought at the tip of my pen
I carry an essence of Asa
who was brother though not blood,
a palm on the shoulder of childhood,
a sway of the magic of the poem,
who went off to war
and living afterward in exile
kept a fingerpoint on me
that made the island far away next door.

For a spell of years we travelled the poem together,
though continents apart, by in and exhaling
gematrias of the art of the jazz of words—

“Chances are...”

Chance hasard

Chance is czar

about covers it,
and the design therein
of all those paths where seraphs and serifs
and sephers multiplied.

I'll always see him, arms widespread, skipping and jumping
at the top of the steps of the sublime stoop,

which were the forms of his poems themselves,
put together, mundane with arcane,
by his lifting of the letters by the seats of their pants,
turning them over and inside out,
making pacts with the absences within and between them,
dancing them down to the pitchpenny street
and through the cracks making books
of pinpointedly succinct sophisticated alchemies
that could mint new Abrahams at the bottom
of the Yellow River
in the Third Century B.C., and make them sound
like daffodils on Hebden Heath.

It was always bright darkness when Asa at table
spelled out the lineage of alphabet and trees,

dazzling the babblers with his style of understatement,
perfectly inserted like a synchrony,
and the seams of paranoia would split at his hip
deep self-deprecations,

and the wood as if hypnotized stripped to its
mystic glyphs

Now he's supposed to be one with the spaces
between and around
and within the letters he most adored,
a style and content at last,
but the bucket's anxious racket as it tumbles
sounds like Fire!
and the ladders called out simply won't lie down
precisely because they're also your poems

I just can't conceive of you that way
without my skull filling with our belly laughter,
and the curve
of a dirtpath down the lots at the end of a street
in the Bronx.

A little kid can turn on it
with a stompy clomp of dust,
in knee-pants, tee-shirt,
knickers in the fall.

You did.
Me too.

Meet you there after school.

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

Nellie

After his shouts, the strops, her screams, the thrown things,
the doorslam, the bitter weeping,
out of the thin box, as the delicate paper was parted,
she'd lift the sheer mojud stockings
and run her fingertips along them,
slowly smiling girlishly again.

She'd begin singing a Perry Como song,
she loved Perry Como and would sing
the same song he sang, all day long,
on the Make-Believe Ballroom Time.

Then, in a black brassiere strapped to her freckled shoulders,
she'd sit on the bed, fit the stockings,
stand up and notch them to the garters
that hung down from her black girdle,
A ripple of fat ran round her waist, squeezed out
by the girdle, different from
the plumps that swelled out from her brassiere.
And I saw a blue bruise, the shadow
of a belt-buckle on her thigh.

But she was singing again, and over the girdle
she'd put on a pair of pink bloomers,
and over everything, then, a brown-and-white flower-print
summer-golden dress.

Her white heels had holes in the toes where her nail-polish
showed through. The bottle of polish, tweezers, lipstick,
rouge, brush and emeryboard were on the vanity table
over there looking in the mirror.

Her lips swam in the Como song with rose-red strokes,
reaching the end with a shiny glow,
like the waxy cameo of her mother
on the brooch in the drawer.

She'd hold out her hand and say, "Come, darling?"

We'd walk hand in hand up and down our street
in the twilight,
and the neighbors would cry out: "Hi, Nellie!" or "Hello,
Mrs. Hirschman," and "Hi, Jackie. My, how you've grown!"

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

A Woman Gives Food

for Sarah Menefee

A woman gives food to a hungry hand.
The law says that it is contraband.
That law must fall, must lose its teeth,

must gum along the desolate streets
and come to the line where blessed soup
is smuggled in between the lips,
and know subversion for what it really is
and how this mean-lawed land is dead without it.

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

When

When I saw in the council chambers of the big city
the mouths of the council members
opening and coming down
on the fat sandwiches
that'd been delivered to their places,
coming down and chewing and leaning over talking
with half-stuffed mouths, or heads thrown back
laughing, their bellies chortling,
and all the while
one after another homeless person
stood not far from them
but far enough from them
before a microphone
requesting help for their most basic human wounds,
protesting against a syndrome without alternatives
except for skid-row hotels or a concentration
camp in the downtown desert;—

when I saw the indifference of this system
physically manifested
by those pigs of local government,
I thought: it can't be quick enough
that they're led to the sty they belong in;
it can't be quick enough
that they're forcibly removed
from the people's chambers
and replaced by human animals who, at least,
can smell the heartbreak
and the enduring dignity of the American people.
Those pigs are worse than the rottenest
blue pork at the bottom of garbage-can Los Angeles.
Hungry men and women never should have to be
subjected to their poisonously filthy mold.

Publication. *Endless Threshold* (Curbstone Press, 1992).

Streetscene

for Eugene Smith

She was on her knees
in a Tenderloin doorway
eating chunks of darkness
out of a small tin can.

As I passed, a photograph
of a Haitian man crawling
on a Port-au-Prince sidewalk
30 years ago came to mind.

There was no difference.

I'd like to hold the nape
of capital down to a plate
of dogfood on a street
with the mange.

I'd like to see capital
with lacerated knees crawling
from one reality to another
for a change.

Publication. *The Back of a Spoon* (manic d press, 1992).

Bulvan

In memory of David Lerner, poet

A bulvan raging
with the whole
post-holocaustic
garbage-culture in him
rude/radiant, crude/clarifying, smooth/smitten
with the dregs
like most of us
driven or bent
on rising from
the fallen sparks
standing the drunken
or junken street
on its feet and
sending it home
with a poem in its ear

Now let's see him there:
another accident that wasn't
another suicide who was suicided
another poet the system's good-riddanced
because, among other things, he believed
in socialized medicine

I tell you, as a member of
the League of Revolutionaries for a New America,

LRNA by acronymic name,
the junk that murdered David Lerner is the same
that cuts evicts starves and kills
people everywhere these days,
and you know its name.

So don't just lie there, harps.
His big bear hulk needs psalms of flame
to get him home

Remember his gutsongs
and the poet from whom he came.

Publication. *Bull Horn*, August 1997.

Who Cares

But the Nothingness he meant,
which now is planetary, isn't negative,
rather an aperture, an opening
to the other side of actual self,
to the process of hearing light,
not unlike yourself when you bring
all that in your everyday seems drifting,
evermore ungraspable and transient,
where all values beyond money
seem rootless and on the wane,
bring them along with your crumpled body
in the darkness, and afterward,
because sex is of the animals
and the stars, is in fact happily
the animals and the stars,
find that point outside the window
(ancient grit of wall, or tree or lichen)
and gaze at it, enthralled, fixed,
as if nothing were ever so radiant,
meditative, informative, attuned,
like a computer window in a world
of "cybernetics," he said, speaking of
the future some thirty odd
years ago, of this visual
listening to light
just below the surface of things,
this planetary All in you, constructed
of holocausts and ecstasies, the snail's inch
and the worker's steel, demonstrations and
monotonies, golem and robot, opens to receive
most stumblingly, hungrily, desolately, authentically
sounds from deep within the wilding stillness
and there, when five small human bones tug
at your sleeve of skin, the question-mark
falls away and you know who cares.

Publication. *Left Curve* 21 (1997).

Likeunto

for Matt Gonzalez

what comes out of the cool
blue of a sky-need
reaffirming
and resonant to years
before it was dirtied up
by hoods of the klux-headed,
deaths-headed sort,
as well as hoods of
the criminal state
of things now,

when a brother, part of
brotherhood
out of the, or certainly when,
blue in the cool
dawned with warm
words
ringing true among human beings,
developing
one me,
thus you.

Publication. *Likeunto* (FMSBW, 2000).

The Whole Shot

In memory of Gregory Corso

Most, given the death we've all been given
before we die, die.
Greg didn't, Greg wouldn't, Greg ain't.
He burned his being burned and being burned up
right in front of you,
up front,
in your face, he was a fighting little neighborhood,
city-wide.
I never saw him sing, he never sang, copper,
O but he sang.
And guzzled and fixed and trashed and mashed.
Consumed. He was consumed by consuming,
competition's fool
from Maldoror through every lowdown kind of
kinahoor clear down to his own stretch marks
in Dannemora.
I went to see him in the hospital once

when his head, 3 times its size, some blood
he'd dissed in the drunk-tank had kicked in.
Which was after he'd once right-crossed me
for no good reason, like my best friend the
Calabrese kid in my neighborhood in The Bronx.
Which was before a bull-dyke once decked him
for dissing lesbians, and for being monstrously cute,
humiliating in public to women and men alike,
a self-styled "rotten fuck" who never cleaned up,
a nice guy who said, "No more nice guy",
all brag and loudmouth blow,
fame up his ass
"I'm Gregory Corso"
like at a horseshow,

provoking, stirring shit,
yelling, "Hey, Ginzy!" up to Shig's place on Grant St.
when Allen was visiting, for some dough.

Or: "Hey, Jackie, where's Neeli? He took
Max for a walk?"
In this bar or that, running with this or that mug,
that chick or this,
toking in an alley or back in the john,
or cross-legged serious in the Caffè Trieste
reading the Chronicle or The Times
mixing it up with a mouth in a gallop
like Billy Hallop
with twinkle and charm out of hell,
he was one of a kind
of a devil character,
so you might never have known
he could precision an image
to its finest fain.
turn a phrase and make it sit in
with a combo of sounds
that unearthed a flagrant poesy
from ancient undergrounds,
write from a spring
without himself in it
and make the running diamonds
"the whole ball game"
or "the stiff arm of Cuba"
more than just sport,
"the whole shot"
in the senses that toppled
lying news reports,
taking one's breath away
and leaving a real agape suddenly
sprouting daisies in your empty spaces,
the way it is when you're met
by a pair of eyes on the street
above a mouth that might say anything,
above a body that might do anything,
yet those eyes in a slow, smiling

recognition rise and wink:
"Hey you, human bean, you Poet,
You synechdochal yokel of All,

Nothing's concealed,
Nothing's hid.
Cross my heart and hope to live."
The Kid is dead.
Long Live the Kid!

Publication. First read at New College, San Francisco, January 24, 2001.

The Happiness

There's a happiness, a joy
in one soul, that's been
buried alive in everyone
and forgotten.

It isn't your barroom joke
or tender, intimate humor
or affections of friendliness
or big, bright pun.

They're the surviving survivors
of what happened when happiness
was buried alive, when
it no longer looked out

of today's eyes, and doesn't
even manifest when one
of us dies, we just walk away
from everything, alone

with what's left of us,
going on being human beings
without being human,
without that happiness.

Publication. *Front Lines* (City Lights, 2002).

Path

Go to your broken heart.
If you think you don't have one, get one.
To get one, be sincere.
Learn sincerity of intent by letting
life enter, because you're helpless, really,
to do otherwise.
Even as you try escaping, let it take you
and tear you open
like a letter sent
like a sentence inside
you've waited for all your life
though you've committed nothing.
Let it send you up.
Let it break you, heart.
Broken-heartedness is the beginning
of all real reception.
The ear of humility hears beyond the gates.
See the gates opening.
Feel your hands going akimbo on your hips,
your mouth opening like a womb
giving birth to your voice for the first time.
Go singing whirling into the glory
of being ecstatically simple.
Write the poem.

Publication. Casa della poesia online text; poem dated 2003.

All That's Left

in the world
—whether in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia
as well as in China, Japan, the United States,
Europe, the Middle East, Africa—
all of them cannot,
despite their resistance,
despite their refusal,
stop this march of death
because they,
as well as all that's Right
in the world,
despite their refusal,
despite their resistance,
already are counted among those
in this last parade.
Communists and progressives,
nazis, fascists and reactionaries,
zionists and anarchists of every stripe—
none are excluded, none can evade the march.

This one's not coming
with hammer and sickles or swastikas
or flags of any land.

This one's the march
all wars surrender to.

But when?! comes the unanimous cry.
When will it really happen?
If death is peace,
when can I truly die?

You will never know, and yet you do,
because you may already have,
and this life is your way
of paying homage to the power
that loves you enough
to have taken your life away
and left you with the taste
of immortality on your lips.

Nothing mystical: no Christ,
Allah, Jahweh or Buddha in the wings.
Even lying on your back you're marching.

This is not a cynical or pessimist
or nihilist poem. Join death
to your life and you will live
as if there were no drum to march to.

There is no march at all.

You're done. All will be well for all.

Publication. *All That's Left* (City Lights, 2008).

Between the Page with the Heart

Between the page with the heart
and the mind wrestling upon it,

and the ear which later will receive
those limbs of light as perfect harmony,

there's a stillness whose volume speaks
worlds of words defiant of measure,

treasures of the unsayable, secrets
of the ever-beginning enchantment

and the never-ending gathering
at the lips of the kiss of the poem.

Publication. *All That's Left* (City Lights, 2008); also published by the Academy of American Poets as "Poets Eleven Poem."

Blue

Love comes over me
like someone who walked
away and left her white dress
with the little blue flowers

behind. Behind, behind
going into the future
radiantly naked. What am I
to do with it? Put it on?

I don't wear dresses. I love
what's inside them. But
this one's so sad and alone
I'll just let it lie

awhile on my chest,
against the curve of my arm
and just let blue flowers be
blue.

Publication. Casa della poesia online performance text; recorded in 2010.

Human Interlude

She was standing against
the wall near
the Tevere Hotel holding
 a plastic cup
as it began to rain.
I dug for a coin, walked
 up to her
and dropped it in.
 It fell to the bottom
of an orange drink.
I blushed, looked into her
 ravaged eyes and skin
 and hair prematurely
greying, and said
I was sorry, I'd thought
she needed some bread.
 "I do", she said
and smiled, "I was
 just having a little
 drink."
And we stood there
 laughing together
as we watched the raindrops fall
 on the orange lake
above the drowning money.

Publication. Casa della poesia online text.

That's You

for Raffaella Marzano

for Raffaella Marzano

You make possible
what can't exactly be,
understand what can't
precisely be understood,
put your foot down
where there's a resonant
footprint in the earth
where it belongs,
wait before eating
to see whether
others need more
and worry things into existence
only to translate them into hope.

When I think: Italy
a certain kind of weeping
comes to my eyes,
not because I'm sad
but because I'm singing.

That's you.

Publication. Casa della poesia online text.

TRANSLATIONS

Two bilingual poems translated by Jack Hirschman

Like You / Como Tú

Roque Dalton · translated from Spanish by Jack Hirschman

Like you I
love love, life, the sweet smell
of things, the sky-blue
landscape of January days.
And my blood boils up
and I laugh through eyes
that have known the buds of tears.
I believe the world is beautiful
and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone.
And that my veins don't end in me
but in the unanimous blood
of those who struggle for life,
love,
little things,
landscape and bread,
the poetry of everyone.

Como Tú

Yo, como tú,
amo el amor, la vida, el dulce encanto
de las cosas, el paisaje
celeste de los días de enero.
También mi sangre bulle
y río por los ojos
que han conocido el brote de las lágrimas.
Creo que el mundo es bello,
que la poesía es como el pan, de todos.
Y que mis venas no terminan en mí
sino en la sangre unánime
de los que luchan por la vida,

el amor,
las cosas,
el paisaje y el pan,
la poesía de todos.

Publication. Roque Dalton, *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination*, ed. Martín Espada (Curbstone Press, 2000).

Lament of a Neapolitan Mother

Alfonso Gatto · translated from Italian by Jack Hirschman

Mine, the son, he didn't belong to the war,
to the bosses who leave me weeping
behind the door like a dog; mine
belonged to my hands, to my sallow breast
where mothers dry up over the heart.

He belonged to me and to the sea
that washes our feet all life long,
to the black dress that blinds me
with dust if I cry out. Mine, the son,
he didn't belong to the war,

didn't belong to death, and the pity
I'm looking for is to wake with his name
all night long, to stop the trains
so he doesn't leave, he who's already gone
and won't be coming back.

Mine, the son, and his death, mine, the war.
May horses run over my breast, and
the trains and the rivers he saw: may fire
burn my hair where only night
walks at my shoulder.

May the wind
remain with the hallucinated world, the salt
with the abysms that dazzle, the shroud
with our mourning...

Italiano

Mio, il figlio, non era della guerra,
dei padroni che lasciano ch'io pianga
dietro la porta come un cane, mio,
delle mie mani, del mio petto giallo
ove le mamme seccano sul cuore.

Mio, e del mare che ci lava i piedi
tutta la vita, del vestito nero
che m'acceca di polvere se grido.
Mio, il figlio, non era della guerra,

non era della morte e la pietà
che cerco è di svegliare col suo nome
tutta la notte, di fermare i treni
perché non parta, lui, ch'è già partito
e che non tornerà.

Mio, il figlio, e la sua morte mia, la guerra.
I cavalli mi corrano sul petto,
i treni i fiumi ch'egli vide: il fuoco
m'arda i capelli ove la notte sola
alle mie spalle s'accompagna.

Il vento
resti del mondo allucinato, il sale
degli abissi che abbagliano, il lenzuolo
del nostro lutto...

Publication. Casa della poesia bilingual online text; performance record, Naples, 2010.

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TEXTUAL RECORD

Witnesses, variants, and limits

The complete 1960 book was transcribed from the University of Connecticut copy digitized for the Internet Archive. Every poetry page was rendered and compared to the reset. The inherited 101-page project PDF was not used as a textual authority because it contains a title page followed largely by blank placeholders.

“Two,” printed in *Black Alephs*, is a later state of part 1 of “From ‘One Finger from the Seasons.’” It is documented in the archive but not duplicated as a second poem. Its revised title, condensed lineation, “Look at mine, look at hers,” and closing “to speak open” are the principal visible variants.

The Casa della poesia profile linked several additional poem pages that returned only the general profile during this research pass. Those failed retrievals are preserved in the research folder but are not represented as verified poem texts. No poem has been reconstructed from a search snippet.

The later-poem section is a gathering from available witnesses, not a selected or collected edition of Hirschman’s later career. The full bibliography, manuscripts, broadsides, poster-poems, and recordings substantially exceed the scope of this volume.

COLOPHON

Set in EB Garamond on a six-by-nine-inch page, following the Julia Boynton Green production system. Every page uses the project's cream field. Poems are reset as live text; book titles are italicized in editorial matter; meaningful indentation, stanza space, epigraphs, and sequence divisions are retained. The cover uses clean collage art extracted from the project's layered Hirschman file and recentered under live standard cover typography.

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