

A SHOUT IN THE STREET

Poems by Ryan Fitzgerald
Advisor: Suzanne Matson
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NOTES

“The dim coolness of my room was to the full sun of the street what a shadow is to a ray of light, that is to say, it was just as luminous and offered my imagination the full spectacle of summer, which my senses, had I been out walking, could have enjoyed only piecemeal; and so it was quite in harmony with my repose, which (because of the stirring adventures narrated in my books) sustained, like the repose of an unmoving hand in the midst of a stream of water, the shock and animation of a torrent of activity.”

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

QUESTIONS TO THE READER

Where do you go when you leave?
Are there times when you cannot?
When someone smiles, do you smile back?

Are you happy in this life you chose?
What did you give up to be here?
How often do you think of death?

What do you find yourself living for?
Do the good days outweigh the bad?
Is there a meaning in all this light?

I

ON LEAVING FANEUIL HALL

Friday night and suddenly you don't know
where, no who, you are. Part of you wishes
you bought that letterman jacket back
in high school, or learned to like the taste
of fried haddock beneath Atlantic sky.
In another life, you live in exquisite
diploma frames that put people at ease,
you don't need to hide behind a clever
knot in your rep tie. Everyone you love
is sleeping. It's okay, they can't hear you.
Sitting on the curb, you recall ruining
a set of tires because you didn't know
there was a windshield defogger. Now
you summon strangers' cars, assume
the best will happen because it usually
does when you're young and because
it's late and you need a ride home.

ODYSSEUS

Conversation of the low light, and piano
chime and warm bread — faint sourness
nestling on the palate, he wants to speak
of yesterday, remembers digging for
quahogs and fighting stubborn flounder.
He wants to explain where he's been,
but can feel the distance as if it were
right there beside him. Everything
has changed. They don't have paper
menus. The couple a table over scrolls
their phone screens instead of talking.
He scratches at his collar that's become
a little too tight, thinking he should've
shaved like Telemachus, hidden his grey
bristles, but he keeps sipping his wine.
Cold air sneaks in through the patio.
Outside people are wearing jackets or
at least a sweater. Winter is coming;
He can only think of summer: Race
Point, the whales crossing Stellwagen,
horizon eyes and fish scales, evening
rum, sweet rocking, slow lap of wake.
He tells his son they will fish together
under a July moon. The air is heavy
as if fog has rolled in; they clink glasses
and for a moment coexist in sound.

A NEED FOR AIR ALONG
THE BANKS OF THE PISCATAQUA

On a cloudy night just before
summer collapses in exhaustion
I walk to the end of the dock,
watch the way navigation lights
reach their red and green arcs
towards one another. The boards
beneath me are rough and damp.
They're themselves. In the dark,
no one can see their obtruding
nails, rust-stained, the gentle
failing of their planed bodies.
From across the river, I hear
children playing hide-and-seek,
their shrill voices like a fisher cat.
I can't make out their figures,
but the lights keep stretching
the rippling space between them
succumbing to yellow.

SEPTEMBER

Dates soaked in rain water
and a constellation of sea-shells
spread across cooling floorboards.

EVANESCENT

I.

That July you stepped on
the blueberries we spilled
onto the hardwood floor —
a stained fight, the carpet
purple with their crushed
flesh, returned to pigment.

II.

You misplaced the watch
I gave you, washed it in
the pocket of your jeans,
until it could no longer tick,
saying it never mattered
whether the hand could turn.

III.

I know you didn't read
my copy of *Heart of Darkness*,
but kept it because you liked
the look of Penguin Classics
and needed a black book
to stage your Polaroids.

OUGHT

My hygienist tells me I really ought
to drink my coffee with a paper straw

on account of abnormal staining
that could become detrimental

if I were to miss my routine cleaning.
I concur with her judgement,

move onto to my next appointment
where the optometrist asks if I read.

Have I considered the *20/20/20 rule*,
he asks, explaining how consistent

eye strain accelerates prescription.
I try to imagine myself interrupting

the world of a sentence to stare off
at a white wall, counting down

until I can return to my reading,
like a child told to take a timeout.

I think about changing my habits,
convince myself how easily I could

adopt another life, as I open the door,
hear the chimes of the café I come to

every Wednesday for an espresso
that sits on my palate — certain to stain.

FLUX

It's mid-November in Boston
and the oak leaves catch fire
as they spiral down to earth.

On the phone, my mother asks
where I'll go. Instead, I tell her
about what I'm having for dinner.

Soon it'll snow; the city will turn
to salt, the blue ground trampled
by swarms of black rubber boots.

I say I have to go.

The T screeches to motion
hobbling along its iron track,
ding, ding, a woman chases
to no avail, the driver choosing
to ignore her dying call.

II

PENELOPE

Smell of damp oil-cloth and
peat wisp in country kitchen.

Today, I counted each stone
that frames the fallow pasture,

wondering if the man I knew
twenty years ago will return,

stout seeping, his sandpapered
cheeks reddened by wandering.

Alone, reading in green light,
mildew-dotted paper between

my strong hand, housewife hand,
sun spotted, fading summer.

As a girl I wanted to be alone,
never imagining this absence.

I was content to hide, scratch
my name into the plaster

behind my bed — a space
for me to be whoever I wanted.

Tomorrow, yet another cord,
to stack to burn, ash to ash.

From the window, I watch
as a woodchuck deadheads

my frost-covered flowerbed,
each petal nibbled to nothing.

I see the birch's brittle limbs
wind-shattered, the lilacs

long dead, withered brown.
I strip the shutters to unravel

the threat of a bee's nest, its
oozing hum the only sound.

HAUNTING

Chet Baker haunts
the cluttered kitchen
covering the hum of an electric fan
and a candlewick flickers
gold like Eden's lost stars.

Is your figure less than Greek?

Through the open window
a full moon reveals my vacant
street, the lone lamppost
cold in its concrete existence.

But don't change your hair for me...

I want to forget Ovid —
the lines that lie locked
in a frail red binding, flaking
with each opening.

I'm sick of fences
and balconies and window panes,
of books and paintings
and sculptures.

Not if you care for me...

I want to watch a flower wilt,
to burn a poem to nothing.

KITCHEN IMPLEMENTS

Suppose the lemon peel
wilting on the engineered
countertop becomes wings
and the coffee grinder, tired
of use, begins to speak
such flattering lies of how
suited you are for flight.
Even the knife joins in,
dulled by your constant
sharpening, but you can't
help but notice the popcorn
crumbs pushed beneath
the cabinet and soon you're
swept up in your routine —
the floor immaculate again.

MOCK BLONDE

It was that night in Montréal,
covered in snow and two bottles
of cheap red wine I paid for
with crinkled American dollars.

Earlier, in Notre-Dame, I had felt
a growing pressure from words
I knew, but couldn't understand.

Then at Modavie, you
ordered for me, smoothing
out my broken cognates with
your practiced pronunciations.

The signs were there. I began
to feel like my grandmother who
sat at the edge of conversations.

When we came in from the cold
your cheeks flushed and beautiful,
I admired you the way one does
something they know can't hold.

The room was, the walls were,
white, was the floor, the mattress,
an island of cotton surrounded
by emptiness and artificial light.

Your teeth were wine-stained;
your mock blonde highlights
shining as if it were summer,
the rose garden where we met.

I said none of this — awoke to
makeup stains on my pillowcase
and a scribbled note that said
you had gone out for croissants.

WHITE-TAILED

On the shortest day of the year,
I watch as a doe devours
the base of my arborvitae.

If I yell, she won't listen;
she is where she belongs.

LAST CALL

Despite the snow, I find myself
stuck to the grimy floor
of a knockoff honky-tonk,

watching accountants purport
to be cowboys. Everyone else
seems to believe in rhinestones.

The men pretend they used to
pickup prom queens and drink
cheap beer beneath a southern sky.

I'm as distant as my denim is
from the field it was made for,
mouthing the words to another

country heartbreak that all
the whiskey in Tennessee
can't find a way to drown.

I'd like to try the electric
bull, smile at Boston girls
who researched how to make

their hair reach for heaven,
but I know it's as mechanical
as a line-dance. I'd like to

talk to someone about more
than what I'm drinking,
to stop this ringing in my ear.

SKATING IN JANUARY

They've installed a temporary rink
on the Frog Pond, smaller than the real,
but it's still skating I suppose.

Anonymous — I glide, recall
that line from *Gatsby* about the intimacy
of large parties, how one can become
insignificant in a good way, feel
the body relieve itself from its act.

At mid-ice, a girl in a neon jumpsuit
begins to spin like an Olympian,
twirling faster and faster, until
she's a flamingo balanced in sleep.

Chaos erupts — people buck
their curves, reach for cameras;
I weave through them, trying
to preserve my motion. Haven't
they seen a figure skater before?

Suddenly, I'm angry.
I want to stop her.
Somebody stop her.
I want to skate.
Doesn't everybody want to skate?

AN ATTEMPT AT EXPLANATION

Because I often believed what I was told.

Because shall and will are very different words.

Because it's easier to read than to write.

Because the poem wasn't what I wanted.

Because the poem was never what I wanted.

Because I couldn't speak French.

Because in life doors rarely stay open.

Because behind every door was a woman.

Because my favorite flannel began to fray.

Because in New England, beds are cold.

Because there was no one in the meadow.

Because there's always time to waste.

Because I overheard my name in a crowd.

Because I'm drowning in plain words.

III

THE POET

Today, an old man on the C line
interrupts my reading of Baudelaire's,
The Flowers of Evil, to ask if I'm a poet.
My first instinct is to renounce
the title like Peter, afraid to name
what lies too close to my heart,
but I admit that I'd like to be one.
So he wants to talk about love —
insisting poets know it best, Neruda
or Shakespeare. I say there's more
to write about than love, that love
falls easy victim to cliché, that boys
use it to throw at bedroom windows.
He pulls down his black-rimmed
glasses that had hidden his age; I see
how the years have pooled, eroded
his profile like a cliff in the desert.
I can tell that he loves someone,
that he needs an affirmation
of happiness and not another poet
proclaiming the merits of despair.

COLD STEEL PEN

I sit before my mirror,
stare at ripples. I'm blank
today. There's nowhere
to go; no one to dress for.

If only I had the orange
Cézanne painted, or at least
a city to swallow me whole.

FELINE

A slender, black cat stalks
time past and present with
her moon eyes that purr
for sun and lukewarm milk.

She grows restless; the door
forgets to open. Her round,
porcelain bowl lies waiting
at the center of the carpet.

As if entering a corn maze,
she paws the perimeter,
inching closer to the bowl
that holds nothing but dust.

ITALY

I lied about the girl
in the Italian hotel room.

I'm sorry, but a part of me
wanted to hurt you,
to assess the thing we called love —
our late night tapping of keys
from opposite sides of the Atlantic.

I never thought of myself
as a cruel person, but I wanted
to see how much you'd care,
to test the power of my words
that felt like rain drops falling
against a terracotta gutter.

Your voice crumbled to static.

Of course there wasn't a Sophia;
I liked the neatness of the lie,
the lack of blood on my hands
as I watched a candlewick slip
to smoke and wisp to the ceiling.

THE FALL OF TROY

When I was young I dreamt
I could outlast the tides.

In bed at night I would study
the blueprint of ancient Troy,
imagining a trench, crenellated
walls, fortifications to prevent
an onslaught of salt and foam.

The rising sun was no match
for my conviction; my limbs
became a shovel, heaving
piles of wet sand, striking
water, but still digging
deeper and deeper, my body
disappearing from view.

A scout from the beach umbrella
would bring me lemonade
and I swore to protect everyone's
flip-flops and sandwiches.

While the sea roared, I prepared
for siege, turning my attention
to a breakwater, before diving
into the belly of my creation,
yelling at the encroaching waves
as I imagined Aeneas would.

Within fifteen minutes,
water poured into the city gates —
I sat watching the ocean
have its way with me,
yet in my heart I believed
it could've been different.

LIMINAL

Eccentric, snobbish, a disheveled Brooks Brothers campaign, he enters the classroom with his train-beaten briefcase and enameled fountain pen, decrying the state of the universe, yet somehow remains endearing, charming even in his denunciations. As always, he unclasps his watch, places it face down on the table, acclimating to the room like a prisoner, but before he can be comfortable, he pulls down the shades to block out the telescopic eye of a news-camera, installed for the pre-game coverage of tomorrow's football game.

AN AFTERNOON IN MARCH

In my dream I'm always running
from an unstacked woodpile
on the edge of a snow-covered
meadow. I recognize the silence
that comes right before the lake
splits in two. Everything new,
but remembered. Rain ruins.
Maybe this year I'll finally see
the sunrise over Mount Cadillac,
if I can convince myself
to fumble around in the dark.
Each year is the same. I think
too much about bears. I forget
which ones to run from. I think
about the five-hour ride, the lack
of decent coffee. At least birds
know where to go, when to return.
They speak in the imperative.
I need a pastime that doesn't
involve watching. I should be
happy — the sun is warming,
flowers are sprouting from salt.

THE TENNIS COURT

I knew you were you better,
had watched you play
through the hole of a chainlink.

You said you would teach me.
I didn't listen. I pretended to know,
glossing an article on grip.

The heat blurred all
but the sound of your calling:
15-love, 30-love, 40-love, why
love? Of all the words for nothing.

It didn't matter how many sets
I went down, there was always
another buried inside of me.

Before leaving,
you had me rake the clay
until there were no wrinkles,
until our shadows returned
to our bodies.

IV

OTIUM

Stone wall, hawthorn path,
reading under shady bough,
warm stream, frozen buck.

THE ALLURE OF A STRANGER

I can't help but look at her hands, which, as if she's French, she always keeps on the counter. Today her nails are done — white, in contrast to a tan developed from seven days in Cannes and her Cartier Love Ring on her right hand that, though absurd, I find to be beautiful in its excess. She can't ignore the texts from Peyton on her Apple Watch, deciding whether she's free for drinks, while I try to make my penmanship more interesting, casually curling to script.

IN THE PRESENCE OF

Because I'm alone, I notice everything. A girl has snuck away from her mother and is sitting beside me on the gallery couch. One of her sisters plays with the water fountain in the corner, another insists upon the severity of her hunger, while the fourth looks at each painting for exactly ten seconds before moving onto the next. I've spent weeks studying for the moment when this portrait will reveal its secrets, as if knowledge is the highest form of intimacy. I can tell the girl beside me is searching too. If she asks, I know every detail — oil on canvas: painted by John Singer Sargent in Paris during the fall of 1882, famously described by one critic as “four corners and a void,” but she could look up the information on her own, there's no need for me — I'm not her mother, or even a museum guard.

A CHARCOAL SKETCH
OF AN UNKNOWN BEAUTY

Girl with orange peel and apple core,
wearer of phosphorescent geometrics
that fade to ruffles above your knees —
an exhibition of café hush and steam.

The sound of riff and rain,
reverbs against the window pane.

I cannot tell the color of your eyes,
though I think they cannot be blue.

I know nothing but your performance —
the rehearsed comb of hair, artless,
ensnared in an acetate tortoise shell.

The way you pretend to read, only to
ink the margins with the indifference
of those dotting eyes, fluttering focus.

How your tan legs squirm, interlock,
cross in their obligatory movement —
the white rubber of your tennis shoe,
tapping anxious seconds on marble.

With a turn of foot you leave in bells,
a hollowed chair, espresso sediment,
and now, finally, I can think of you.

EL JALEO: OIL ON CANVAS: 1882

In the Venetian silence of the museum
the taverna becomes audible. You enter
through the scallop of a Moorish arch —
their applause growing with rhythm, arms
slithering, Andalusian voices singing of
a girl mourning at the feet of her matador.
You're startled by footsteps that aren't in
the meter of the song plucked from steel,
reverberating, scratched in brushstrokes.
You wonder who else is there — what
foreign presence — this was supposed to be
between you and Sargent. A woman
opens a brown leather notebook
and stands face to face with the dancer.
She seems to know something you don't.
Her chignon and blazer feel academic.
You want to know what she hears in
the howl of the haunted man at center.
She slips away; the ruckus returns,
swelling in darkness: emerald, ivory.
The dancer reaches out a ghostly hand,
twisting like a silkworm on a verge of
creation — feet march in, you recognize
the routine shuffling and rising jeers
as a wave of indifferent school-children.

CRANES ARE FLYING

Across the darkness, a girl swaddled in black
rubs the thin gold of her signet ring
to the beat of the projector's incessant baton.

She's not alone. The classroom is almost full,
though empty at center — limp bodies pushed
to the perimeter, their attention drifting to
laps, notebooks, and each other.

The girl is transfixed, drowning in the illusion
of black and white. There is nowhere to run.
The door is locked by the clock that barely tics.
She can't move — the music accelerating to
a spinning vertigo, flashes of white in darkness.

She seems to speak with her sunken, Slavic eyes,
icon of Orthodoxy, but she has no sound,
only the whining strings of the movie score.

On the main screen, Veronika loses Boris
to a bullet in a flooded birch field in Russia.

Against their nothingness, the light returns.
Like cranes, they flap their feathery wings
and rush to their perpetual summer.

AFTER *MANHATTAN*

*“Why is life worth living?
Well there are certain things,
I guess, that make it worthwhile...”*

For me,
French press coffee in the morning,
Ruston Kelly’s crooning of “Poison,”
In Search of Lost Time by Proust,
the melancholy of Russian Novels,
the suspense of Hitchcock movies —
especially the ones with Cary Grant —
Vermeer, but more so Rembrandt,
those bright cutouts by Matisse,
the enforced of silence of Bapst Library,
the warmth of Scandinavian interiors,
eavesdropping on T conversations,
people-watching at a baggage claim,
the chicken cemita from Street,
the Sausage Guy on Landsdowne,
that every pizza claims to be the best,
that people find ways to smile.

ITHACA

You've been good to me, held me
in the warmth of your libraries,
but I want to be anonymous again
to feel the changing of years
as a sudden fissure.

This comfort can't last forever;
the waves of the bell tower will stretch
to silence, as I leave this place
of immaculate façades and old hymns.

Better I leave while I'm happy.

Through the dim leaded glow,
I see the lindens, neat and longing.

NOTES

Reference is made to the following authors and works:

Title: James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York, 1986), 28.

Epigraph: Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (New York, 2002), 85.

Haunting: Chet Baker, "My Funny Valentine" (Blue Note Records, 1989).

In the Presence of: John Singer Sargent, "The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit" (Paris, 1882).

Cranes Are Flying: Mikhail Kalatozov, *The Cranes Are Flying* (Moscow, 1957).

El Jaleo: Oil on Canvas: 1882: John Singer Sargent, "El Jaleo" (Paris, 1882).

After *Manhattan*: Woody Allen, *Manhattan* (New York, 1979).