

Richard Elman

THE MAN

WHO ATE NEW YORK

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1975

CONTENTS

The Man Who Ate New York
Curriculum Vitae
Taking Out the Garbage
Couples
City of Secrets
The Three Sisters
Caliope Song
Last Rites for an Old Wrong
Plutonic
A Message from Saturn
The Garden
For Louise Varese
Vuillard's Garden
October Visit
First Ruminations
Ossabaw Island
Island Dreaming, Ossabaw
The Lichen Painter
In the Woods
Night Sweats, Ossabaw
Second Ruminations (The Paris Review #65 Spring 1976)
The Dead Forest at Ossabaw
The Demonologies of Robins: The Paranoias Of Sparrows
Dyogenes the Cynic
Channel Crossing, Ossabaw
The Dream of Almost-Certain-Death
Fragmentary Advice to a Child
The Maltese Experience
End Piece
Ossabaw in P-Town

*Some photographs in the summer heart garden
are tidy as memories, their edges uncurled;
one hardly notes such sepia was blood:
So dim, so dry, they are permanently fixed
by our tears, and some are untended.
These are not posing, thin
like long twin tender summer shadows grown awry
anticipating autumn, see—they equivocate,
and curl. . .*

Fragment of a 20 year old poem
recollected by Bob Fass

*The man who ate new york
began in the Bronx,
among the cauliflower bumps,
licked his way slowly south,
toward Spuyten Dyvel.
Between the watery thighs
of Hudson and Harlem
his tongue sought out a marshy highland,
grazed all down the bodegas
of Upper Broadway on mangos, guavas, and guanabanas
crossing east to Central Park West
to taste the first wild garlic and morels
plucked by bored matrons.
Midtown he mouthed his way
through snakes and eggs
heaped high in brass tureens,
and he fressed a few cold Rockettes,
and a brace of potted goosed stenographers from Charles,
and a MacReidy&Schreiber cherry cobbler,
before he started to chew on the fat round rump
meat of Chelsea and Greenwich Village
and Rivington Street pork
and Soho fish. He polished off all Duane Street
in one big swallow, tipping that great platter
of homemade fill toward his chin
when his shoulders reared out
of the marmalade waters near Cortland Street, and then
he picked his teeth with the Woolworth Building,
and belched the roofs off Wall Street
before tiptoeing across to Brooklyn
for a midnight snack of leftover cold chicken.*

for Rosalyn, Herbert and Mark

CURRICULUM VITAE

All these sudden sharp exquisite jolts and rushes
we have for others at restaurants, parties, and movie theatres
are never typed in lines of small letters on our resumes.
We never indent the chronology of yens,
crushes, fantasies, affairs, never present under Experience:
FIVE YEARS OF HEAVY LONGING FOR INES,
or TWO GREAT NIGHTS WITH MARGOT MERINGUE OF CROWELL.
Asked to describe our lives, and careers,
we write of summer courses in Russian at Harvard,
or leading Audubon groups at 19 through Central Park.
9/27/68: who flashed with us, her hot knee pressed
to ours in Gleb Struve's class? What was his name –
that boy we showed on 10/12/64
our first Canadian goose in flight?
Married, two children denotes intimacy.
Our list of references usually depicts
we were once capable of keeping friends;
we include answering service numbers and if we are veterans,
not dental work, miscarriages, or addictions;
or all the years spent with Dr. Chime talking
about our feeling that time was slipping through our fingers in a
doctor's office somewhere.
Of the work we sometimes do beyond flirtation
it's the job of vocational guidance counselors to divine
that when we say we type at least 80 words a minute
we are really talking of our ability to cook bouillabaisse in a percolator,
and that we like our coffee breaks best of all
near the water cooler with Phyllis of the Women's Movement.
Even a menu is more specific.
Prices are listed and the cuts of meat.
They will sometimes warn,
"Allow twenty minutes for preparation."
Resumes are incitements to be born again
between boredom and acute distress
on somebody's list of futile accomplishments. Every morning
somebody opens an envelope under pale blue fluorescent light.
Sometimes also in the greenest meadows of surmise
we lie awake at lunchtime with the afternoon paper folded beneath
our heads
to stare at daytime stars, imagine ourselves
presidents of small Balkan republics, queens, ducklings, free-lance
fuckers
because we think we cannot be Pan forever
and the afternoon rush hour will soon be on us again,

and again and again and again we are without
any other work to do except to save the living
from the dying, ourselves included. Always
on the tips of our tongues our lives
have been lost somewhere, and what we have misplaced
to remind us of who we never really were
are these lists we print of people we never liked and jobs we hated
in place of Julie Christy, Che Guevara, Pantagruel:
Editorial Assistant, assistant to the producer of vomit,
program director, production chief,
bagel maker, fund raiser, resident buyer,
executive cock or pussy
to the Vice President in charge of trade *shlock*.
Love, there is nothing here you would want to list upon your tombstone,
not even a hope, some endearing words from a poem,
your brief witty one-liner about despair. Where are the books
that failed you when they were published?
The half-written reviews of other peoples' lives?
Those random moments in the movies
with Jean Moreau and Edgar Kennedy? When you
and the assistant treasurer's sister and/or brother
on 12/23/67 facing the buffet
at the annual student-faculty gathering
exchanged look hot briefs
above a trivet
that was shortly to be covered over
with a shiny brass casserole of Swedish meatballs.

For I.K.

TAKING OUT THE GARBAGE

Every few days I unfurl
a great green plastic sack
and fill it with my garbage,
fastened at the top
like one of Santa's bundles.
I bring it down the stairs
to the side of my building
to wait for the garbage men.
I usually feel much better afterwards.
My high depends on whether my sack
is half-empty, or full to bursting.
I go from room to room in the flat,
after coffee and the papers, throwing
things into this sack, emptying
ashtrays, divorcing myself
from old journals, complaining
letters from women, and grapefruit rinds –
all for that shiny green sack
I associate with what they ship
dead bodies home from Viet Nam, or after
an air crash. Partially the high
comes from the sense I have that nothing
and nobody has a hold on me
that can't be thrown into this sack
to be ground into a sharp and rusty mush
and disappear forever from my life. Well, maybe
it isn't so and I use the sack
and the trip downstairs full to bursting
to meet my beautiful neighbors
lugging similar dark sea green
burdens. There we all go
saying goodbye to things to a clink
from empty claret bottles, an occasional
slosh off a milk container
never fully emptied out: and on those dusty
blue infrequent days when I find
my sack is less than full
after fastening on top
I seem to lack purity of mind,
find myself eating old leftovers
to dispose of their containers, worry
a lot about this drawn wrinkled old green sack
of stuff I'm bringing down the stairs
half empty, and of the waste I give to waste
in time and worry, and further waste.
Am I contributing my share? Doing my part?
It's as if I'm being stingy

to the garbage men who are all-too-eager
to spin that clanking mouth
demanding more and more
and even more filth from me: waste
making waste, and clutter
being a sort of hold
adulthood sometimes takes on people.
I never think of buying less, or having fewer guests,
but continue to implode the cycle
full to bursting, and once
when I came down
with a nearly empty tinky-
tanking sack of old tin
dog food cans, and a few coca
cola bottles, I caught myself
thinking on the basement stairs
I hadn't been feeling very happy
or well, lately.

COUPLES

I spend a lot of time
staring into restaurant windows
through the blinds of red and bright green
neon at couples:
I'm not presently one of them;
don't even want to be like them.
Why stare?
Because once past the glare the light
seems better there. I believe
all couples smell differently than me,
like lamb cooked pink
whereas I am like risotto or, perhaps, a paella
in which small bits of chicken,
fish, pork, and greasy Spanish sausages
have all been intermixed. It's the only truth
of couples
that when they are together
they seem to crowd the light from others eating dinner,
and lonely singles disappear
into shadowy corners near the bar. I love this life.
Don't see myself as the ketchup bottle
primly stuck between salt and pepper shakers
or sugar bowl in front of a man
and his wife. My neediness
has dignity, the ease
with which I have learned
to unhitch myself from women I have loved
but did not care for.
But I enjoy watching couples leave the movies together:
disappointed with their central fantasy
they will shortly turn their backs to each other
to settle for sleep. They may even cuddle, and snore,
or fuck. Well, so may I.

Then envy them their boredom with each other,
the ease with which they can sometimes turn away
from a passionless embrace to their pillows
knowing sleep awaits them like a secret lover, resting
with them on this bed among these covers
to kiss them when there is light, and they are feeling better again,
tomorrow perhaps, or in the kitchen alcove some other night.

(for Lilo Shuldiner)

CITY OF SECRETS

Deciphering lists
of seven digit telephone
numbers on his wall,
Howard Singer discovered
the Sun. It was in
the constellation 622 8744.

Daryl Dempster found
water in the names
of persons advertised
under *Professionals* in his Blue Book:
Washington Chwast, PHD;
Naomi Willemette, R.N.

Of Anna Poppolo's bas-
ic work in the
field of lunar gravity
research began with roaches:
do they appear most often
when you are lonely, sad, or just bored?

New York is a city of se-
crets like double takes
when the Haitian bus driver
explains CREATION by turning U
up Columbus. Only alchemy
evades the garbage man.

Phillip Lippman and Sal Banter
are foremost at the
Vortex. Uppermost with the
Stars are Wiley Cajuns,
Levee Hall; the D.E. Hol-
brooks ponder Eternity from Pomander Walk.

On warm wet Wednesday
mornings I've seen umbrellas
dropped from Venus punc-
ture water mains. A cer-
tain Blake, retired, 40, dog walking, does
Time around this hedge around that corner.

THE THREE SISTERS

Take Sister Charity
who comes in a pink cloud
to Great Jones Street,
shelter for homeless men:
she does not mind roaches
if the weather is warm,
but in the winter her thoughts
all terminate in the Bronx,
borough of trees and hilltops,
Mosholu magic above the parkways:
who can afford the token
costs when the fare is raised
to sixty cents a ride?
In the last three weeks of his life
Luis Cernuda wrote gay poems

Sister Zarzeula of Drabble-
Sur-Seine also comes
to Great Jones Street as
if to perform miracles:
Adored by giants she has
known the love of Spanish priests,
Franciscan monks, and novices for whom the making
of wine out of hash, and stew
for our daily bread declares itself
Annus Mirabilis. She
walks all night long from the
boat basin to the delousing room
with a couple of old fellow travelers
to apply for relief, be given none.
In the rec room she watches a bit
of TV and takes the night with her
when she disappears. Down
First Avenue we hear her
crying over the broken glass panes
in Ted Roethke's greenhouse.

Our final visitor is Sister Rose, ex-
communicant of martyrs, now
sisterly to all. To Great Jones Street
she totes a cart of Genoa salamis, Po-
lish hams, tomatoes, boys-
enberry Hagan Dazs ice creams, bananas
in yogurt, and canned chilled preserved
lychee nuts, all free
of botulisms. The poor do not feed
on such fare. They cannot offer her

food a place at the table of misery:
they demand chicken and fresh bled pork.
Bang the table for Robin's Island eggs.
They'll not be denied their rats.
Poisoned by so much generosity
a permanence of mind is what
they demand of their antidote. So terrible
who knows better if store cheese and ale
go well together. When Mandelstamm married his death
the wife was preparing to write
the first volume of her memoir of the poet.

CALIOPE SONG

On happy days
the piano tuner
tinks my top keys;
the electrician
working on the ceiling
in the next apartment
kicks open my front door
because I can't afford to
call a locksmith.
Howard is tender,
and Richard is mean:
The crescent moon
is turned the wrong way.

Less happy days
mean finding work to do
such as organizing my books
so that the classics
are distinct from topic-
al works, as those of my
contemporaries. I play
a little Bach, and a lot
of jazz to cheer me up,
and peer outside at five
to watch the crescent moon
in the pale blue sky
turning over on its belly.

I'm lucky to have days
like this. Days that are
neither happy, or less.
I get a mess of work done
on the phone. I even cook
while I'm on the phone,
and sometimes I've washed
dishes, too, and fixed the cord
on the record player. Love
don't depend on what
you can never get at four
in the afternoon. Writing
is the art of keeping still
indoors for days at a time
while others are out
shuffling their papers.

for Barbara

LAST RITES FOR AN OLD WRONG

Wettest fuck ever
was one wet Thursday afternoon
in Tadpole City:
Fifteen years after
we fell in love
she called while my dog
was barking. Married,
divorced, with kids,
and stretchmarks, and bed
sores, she said, "Please
let me come over. Let me come
now. I don't want
to go to my grave
without ever fucking with you. I care
for you," she said," a lot.
I've always cared for you."

Later that front bell
ripening to a flush, a
squish, just like her face,
when the open door
announced her heavy breathing
up the stairs.

We wasted no time with words,
a casual question if she wished wine,
beer, or coffee, and then
to the warm pool of my bed,
all kiddy drool, as on the
Tantric slide we slid
fifteen years too late, or early,
like kids grown large on separate swings
riding on air they could barely breathe
together. Had we found something
together in that sudden updraft
we could share?

Good fuck, good laugh, kisses, hugs,
the winy air; dog barking
at the door because he could not
join little Smiley Sparrow at their pleasures.

PLUTONIC

We call our winter nights the soul kiss.
Our tongues are like succulents.
The earth is very beautiful.
Even death is beautiful.
We are cysts. You can feel us growing.
Certainties cling on the skins of lovers and mourners.
From where we are all your rottenness is remote.
Air like breath.
Breath like water.
Night honey on our bodies
wets all that is dry and wanting here.
Our planet smells like a woman tonight after love.
To think that cool love smell
of so much acrid sweetness everywhere
can come from plants. We are purple
vegetables who grow and touch and later die.
You cannot trample us in your sky.

A MESSAGE FROM SATURN

It's true we sleep on dark blue satin sheets.
Our favorite food is air. Cold velvety
air replenishes the blood. Mostly we are bloodless,
though when we breathe we seed the atmosphere
with small dead stars. The sky is always
passing through our gills small galaxies.

You receive these emissions because, like algae,
we lie awake billions of years from now after we come
on water beds blowing marijuana smoke rings.
With one arm flung out in our sleep we turn
upon the blushing cosmos of our neighbor's shoulder
to kiss the face of the night, again and again.

In the winter we wear satin pajamas. It snows cocaine. On dry
summer days gold dust throbs everywhere
as if the universe were sneezing. We, who
congealed infinity to be your predecessors,
are swinging in vast darkneses. Time between us
is more than any single life can bear.

THE GARDEN

Among certain friends
we cultivate our selves
like gardens, hedge
trim our selves in, rake,
and turn over the soil
of poor minutes lost together
to begin again with a fresh air
warmed by frail green
tender springish looks.
Behind the longest gazings
of the dark green shrubberies
the grass is wet like a mirror.
Fenced in, as colts,
our faces are singular,
unitary, and green.
under the grazing leafy shade
of so much dappled innuendo.
We are uncertain
if we have ever been properly cared for,
and can never be sure from minute to year
if we are growing vegetables or flowers,
how the weather is likely to affect us:
of heavy rains, and sodden frosts,
the long swollen summer days.
We suspect ourselves of various blights;
we are June nests for black flies,
all perforated with the movements of worms.
Pinch this soil
to believe yourself awake
before your friend. Finger
this dark crumble of richness
between thumb and branching finger
until all its fineness disappears
below our hand into our doubts again;
and then we have only such love
as friends to tell us
what we are, and when
we may be ready
to open our lives to the sun.
The clay of our hearts
has ripened when we can feel
the intense longing glance
of the cauliflower offering us
her adorations,

and all those tomatoes who glisten at us
like blisters off the winter sunset
we shall never taste this far north again.

for Phil Lopate

FOR LOUISE VARESE

For love we waste our lives,
if that is love, or life, or waste.
We call this living: to be
every day there for a life
like a greeting for a lonely
stranger; to be in life, in love, trans-
mitting, as water laps a tub
in the blush of which we steep
the warm air
 rising colder.

 All this is slip-
pery. Waste is feeling loveless, de-
finite, emptied out, as though the things we give
are what we lack. We can never
get back this watch, or word,
that glance, or touch, a breath, the moist
passage over coffee of a moment,
lubricant startlement
when we start to come, or sweated
throes of passionate sheets
raveling down along our silent bodies
in poured light. As though
time was not the labyrinth
of our blood where, at the final walls,
spears of green and reddish light
illuminate the table
is set no more amply
than with one small platter of fruits: Caviar
of praise to the seeds, the ecstasy
of the scooped papaya split agape, a blaze
cooling silky orange
beneath so many biljelly octopus eyes; the soft
finely grained vellorous
pink flooding across another face.

VUILLARD'S GARDEN

It's snowing pigments in Vuillard's garden.
The family of four nearest to my eyes
are stranded among purple and bluish mounds of cold greenery
in their usual fuss of slushy white garments; the man bends
all the way over his dark jacket to his youngest child,
as if to make her into paddy cakes
beneath his wide yellow straw hat. Every morning here
is a change of seasons. They've shoveled the
path clear orange, burnt sienna, Naples yellow. At my desk over coffee
that old French sky on wall falls a little lower,
as though its impastos were sagging. That childless couple
chilling near the hedges midway down
among the shrubberies have started whispering together
about how cold the afternoon air
has suddenly become. I'm sure they will shortly rush home
for chocolate, or tea, an hour together in bed
before they must dress for dinner. We exist
in very different time zones. Your afternoons
are my first usual glimpses of the
mornings. See two men bending
bowed like single brown brush marks
before a turquoise ribbon of horizon –
what nights ahead do they portend for you? It's late
fall again in the suburbs of Paris. Fifty years ago
the sun went behind all these clouds of Pain's Grey and Lamp Black
where evergreens bulge indigo. These garden paths
continue beyond our picture. Where they are overgrown
some shadows on the lawns have jelled as solid.

for Donald Dike

OCTOBER VISIT

Emerging from the path beside the old barge canal with Bronk
one cold bright Sunday afternoon in late October
a flight of large black birds spanned
the silvery sky. Within the glow of yesterday's bright leaves
there was this first faint thin acrid whiff of snow
against our nostrils. Bronk said they must be crows.
I said to Bill, "Crows don't migrate. They don't go South."
The footpath underneath was quickly dwindling.
"Some do," Bronk said, who knows the names of every dogwood in
the field,
and snapped a smudge of dry grey wild white aster between his thumb
and forefinger until it crumbled.
Bronk put a silence to me when he added:
"This morning when I went to mow the lawn
there were two fat old black fellows standing there."

Bronk was seeing crows everywhere. "I'm 56. I feel like zero."
Before the winter is over he may be motherless.
In the cold Hudson Valley air he has trouble breathing,
walks alone every morning at 6 to his lumber mill
doing loud breathing exercises until he sounds
among the silent streets just like a crow.
The darkened houses of deceased barge captains
open their doors wide, and porch lights swell up yellow.

We are climbing up the slope toward Pearl Street
where Bronk tends his giant cast iron coal stove
in a great yellow splendor of Victorian gingerbread.
Bronk has just served me strong dark coffee
and a thinning succession of slices of damp homemade white cake
with pistachio icing, when he sees the crows.
Just as I am trying to tell him
come to New York and socialize with other poets
Bronk says, "I can't relate to anything that's happening *anywhere*."
He is very crowish today because his mother may fall off her porch
and break her rib at any moment. We climb
down beyond the paprika farm of his Hungarian neighbor
and Bronk reiterates, "It's all zero to me. I'm at the edge of it
I feel it. I don't know which way to go."
The silvery sky is all atremble with black.

Bronk says, "I've never seen so many crows."
He says, "If that old elm behind my house should ever die...."
The woods are not so pleasing to him any more.
He has strolled beside this crumbling antique limestone trench
one too many times, bathed naked here with eels
and lake perch, felt responsible

for the incremental silt of other peoples' dirt.
Bronk doesn't want the winter to come again, and what may follow.
The crows bemuse him. What do they mean to say
by flying south so early in such large black numbers?
Bronk will offer me another slice of fine white cake
with slick light greasy green icing. We will talk
about a lost friend, and costume as metaphor. He will treat me with
respect
as if I were some long thin black crow
dropped down suddenly upon his lawn for a visit
on the way south. His mother always goes south, too, in winter
while he sits home and tends the furnace.
I love Bronk, for his poems, and crowy lawns,
his white and yellow cakes, and old canals.
He is going from me I feel I don't know where,
Fades like October light, so gently.
He leaves his chilly afterglow as when we climb
the wooden porch steps to enter his gloomy old house.
O gentle guide go slow.
I love you the woods love you as you have loved us all.
Believe, for now, in crispness, and crumbling.
Believe you are not alone in all this bright October yellow.
Stay devout through January, February, and bitter March.
You have all these passing crows.
I am your friend for life.

for William Bronk

FIRST RUMINATION

Among certain lunar presences our experience is limited.
This exhaled wipe of sky announces spores
in sauce pans, and flower pots, to speak with us. If corporeal,
they flash lights at us at parties when we are not looking,
give off peculiar aromas, flirt with our best friends. Was
that shadow

Mars who took you about the waist on New Year's Eve?
We talk to ourselves to be overheard by them. The radiation
gives us cramps, and makes our hair fall out. We are dizzy
after making love, before falling asleep, at odd times
between meals.

This free fall of images from gloomy stars
is projected onto our dreams as if we were skydiving with them
through a hatch of space somewhere with only
our pillows to keep us aloft. Way beyond the other side of
the moon

millions of lightyears subsist on inorganic wheat germs;
their sparrows are much larger than our own. In winter
the pain of their abundance shrinks our souls. It's a
nothingness

so vast and rich we are sustained to have wishes.
So here comes my latest darling, like a fingernail paring
off the brightest edge of the crescent moon: she will be
with us tonight for so many minutes and hours before we must
expire:

So beautiful, so wonderful, so glamorous, clothed around
so much utter nakedness.

for Etain

OSSABAW ISLAND

Any action of any living thing at any time is a poem.
Breathing is a poem, and rain, and rain on stones.
Stones are also poems for their weight and feel.
Their rough and smooth, and jagged semi-gloss.
The life beneath. Lichens. Ants. Newts. Tiny brown toads.
We are conscious of poems as cubes of pearly blue
light between the standing pines along the waterfront
They permutate in time the sensate.
One tiny fiddler crab
moves with the horde, and the sudden heavy noisy
forced march of thousands are also a poem
about mud flats with holes, and bright green
brush stroke grass.
About persuasion, percussions of crab
orchestras.
There are the dream poems of the fiddler crabs,
and tree stump poems. Of live oak boughs that bend
around knot holes as black boar's head poems.
Pink banding of the sea just after dawn, and breaker
poems. Birds afloat on the great wet belly of the
world. Egret and Ibis starched against the blue.
So, possibly, as poems – ourselves.
We are known to the known fiddler crab's dream poem,
and through that knowing write of ourselves,
our fingers, arms, and limbs, with which we investigate
others such as cockroaches, and brown
squirrels.
All life is linked by poems.
Notice the way insects carry the heady news of their
poems. You are stung with their metaphors, your bare
flesh a hot infection. The rich
itch knowledge.
Notice the semaphore of light against new spring
grass under a grove of live oak trees at five in
the afternoon. Pale green patches along
the bark.
Your dog notices you when you are typing this poem,
as if your devout posture and the rapid abject plucking
of your fingers were making of you quite another.
Your dog smells his poems in your sweat. Your breathing.
All your generosity of sudden lurch and peckish movement.
You go to the house of strangers and notice how their
dog immediately makes up poems about your dog.
We sniff our choices in the world like subjects
for our poems, and waking on this island, after
the long sleep of city life, we destroy our selves
at any turning in the oak leaf path with poems.

The mist rolls
beyond my windows when I wake with no
woman next to me as a hot sleepy feeling poem,
just as the small pearl of come adhering to
my night hardened prepuce is a bubble hot dream poem.
I switch on the deep yellow sky burst
prone beneath a streaming ceiling, and electric
light poems throb in the blue smoke
trailing off my first cigarette this morning.
I eat a small peach poem, and drink a water poem,
like a man cut adrift from his dreams
to founder among the sounds of birds he cannot see.
A poem is also crackles; the notice I take
of networks of ceiling forces, plaster buckling
under so many damp nights and days.

for Sandy West

ISLAND DREAMING,

Ossabaw

Even snakes shudder when you catch them dreaming.
They bend circles out of any road they're crossing.
The hardly bashful brown dog of this island,
squatting anywhere, has his secrets, too.
What perfect worlds inhabit his paws. When he shuts
his eyes to slouch inside the cradle of his knees,
he dreams his savage purposes, dreams he has lost
his collar, is a moth, yellow on brown, or gold on blue,
and all our good intentions for him are red birds
he must chase, or buttery caterpillars. He mates
with the pigs and island donkeys, wakes up a howler.
He has interchanged his dreams with snakes
and the porpoises in the channel, with the whippoorwill
and the thrush, and the little grey squirrel with a brown tail.
This island is the secret dream of fish dogs
and raccoons. The dolphins wink as they dip.
Under its cabbage palms the island floats
like a barge stuffed with marsh grass,
its mockingbirds chortling. All the channels
between the Golden Islands have been greased
like ferry slips to receive us, smoothly.
The rising of the silver sun is strange, too,
on wet mornings when the deer walk slowly, tinted,
with a strange little hobble, across this dream
toward the pale hot shimmers of morning.

THE LICHEN PAINTER

They were pale,
grey green,
or underlip pink
bared like a grin
on rocks, and oak bark.
Adhering like a fur
of dry glass bubbles,
or lilac buds pressed flat
to drab pieces of forest,
they scabbed old wounds
from the sun.

If yellow
they seemed to patch
those parts of her known world
punctured by cold and gloom
with delicate improbable statements,
or, ancient acridities,
oak leaf brown against the snow,
scattered the rusts of creation.

Even before she knew what to call such clingers
she loved finding lichens.
Their insubstantial holds
on a fallen branch, or boulder,
were miniature cities
for manufacturing images.

Once she tried eating some.
Slightly bitter, like ash,
they left the aftertaste
of a puckering peeling world
to be harvested with cameras,
conte crayons, and water colors,
in Nova Scotia, New Hampshire,
the Sea Islands of Georgia,
until certain stuffs enlarged
with oil and turpentines
seemed almost palatable.

for Nancy Brown

IN THE WOODS

The little black pig
ran out from under the oak leaf caves
and dropped his snout
when he heard my footfall
and spun about
and ran the other way again,
causing this piece of the forest
to shake its cabbage palms
down at me, and then
a deer loped sideways through the underbrush
with a cow and her two veal.
She was orange
and she stared laconically
and wiped the air
between that deer and her babies,
her tail bright with flies.

for Margaret Elman

NIGHT SWEATS
OSSABAW

In glass jars on the bottom shelves of our lives
a sweat jells across our faces opaquely
as if we were torturing leftover meat in broth
over a very low flame.
Sometimes the night
reminds us that we're along with night sweats.
The sleepers are all around us.
They have each other in their arms.
Fragile
we wake to the two or three crude holes
punched in the lid of our captivity
as if inside an infection of water droplets
or gnats with little wet wings. Who
has turned up this heat so late? The coverlet
stews at our feet, and the pillows are soupy. No day light
yet blinks down at us from the ceiling ventilator.
We lie beside the body of our selves,
the dream of fish, like mildew, some damp itch
that has chambered under our necks, in fissures
of our elbows, knees, and crotches. No birds sing,
and the trees beyond the window ledge
are all sopping invisibly inside
a marinade of blackness, this spicy dark sauce
of mosquitoes and night mists. The locusts
snore in their colanders of branches. Bull frogs bathe
in puddles of sperm. My bed rests on a swamp
choked with nightmare, and fish mares, and night fishes,
or perhaps we're all sinking into a softened gumbo
of herbs, roots, celery stalks, and okra
on which the meat was braised and flavored. In such highly
seasoned atmospheres
one learns to be parsimonious about breathing. My neighbor
swabs her breasts with one small ice cube. Tomorrow
the sun will find me bleaching through these cheese cloths
surrounding my windows, and I'll wake up dry
as a mushroom in cellophane or chicory lichens
in their salading on rocks.
Already the woods are being spooned small globs of daylight. Somebody
with pursed lips has begun to blow
across the night, separated from me
by stagnant seas of damp white linens. I'll close my eyes
and forget I am an island here
to become the world once more in sleep.

for Lin Root

SECOND RUMINATION

Very old bodies always seem to be melting
like fetuses or flaccid lumps
of mozzarella cheese. They are as shapeless
as fish eggs on a pond, as if every cell
were attenuated in some viscous
infinite ejaculent of primal form
to be a sprawl. See how they shift
at the beach or sunbathing by a pool
the fleshy parts of themselves they have
ill-used for so long toward various poorly defined
conjunctions of muscle over bone.
Oiled for the sun, they resemble
giant halibut or flounder. But
we sometimes miss the pleasures
of their dishevelment, that their flesh
can be imagined drooling beneath their frames
in long volutes – so in need of being held together by our arms
are they after being so misshapen by a life.
Some have opened themselves wider than they could care
to remain alive. Now, again, they need to be
sealed, closed off, somehow made porous
but invulnerable, as inside egg shells,
or as if the caress of our bodies
with so much imminent powder and ash
could have the properties of certain permeable cloths.
Why do we turn away from them
because they carry within their flesh
these old scandals of mortality
our bodies have been so programmed to affirm?
Always we're seeking to refute them
as though to agree all the more we will someday be as abject
before the capitulation of specific forms
in this general abasement of muscle and bone
to flesh. Are we compassionate?
They are the nightmares of our souls.
Ectoplasmic visions. Incontrovertible
blobs of evidence linked by some history
to an intelligence we fear. Even
without their faces we would know them
from the shoulders down beyond their portmanteau
bellies to those trembling nests of warm jelly
in which they hide their genitals
like easter eggs or tarnished bits
of family plate. They come to us annealed,
zippered and pocked, fat waffled,
inflated here, deflated somewhere else, satinned,
or they come bandy-legged and spattered,

like lead that has dribbled off a mold,
and so frail it seems we can snap them
into pieces between our fingers, but always
they come to us, daring our reproaches,
demanding we acknowledge some complicity
in that humiliating fate
which is so much more dramatically foretold
in the flesh of humans than in animals. How
can we benefit from the warmth of so much
seeming compost? To be as alive
as they are within such lubricious sacks
reproaches us unless we agree we can love them.

for Rosalyn and Herbert

1974 THE DEAD FOREST AT OSSABAW

These women reaching out with dead arms
their dozens of bleached grey fingers
have been slimming for decades
to come dressed for this ball
with their dead white bird feathers, and silvery leaves
and fruits; and they've all taken chairs
among the sea turtles and scooped horse shoe crabs
with their lacey cream hems flouncing
in the water. Around such roots
are slick veneers of glossy lavender sea and sand,
like a wax, prepared for the dance floor.
So many limbs twisting under that slippery
surface. Such sluttish crotches
of silvered cedar, pine, and oak.
The sea plays with their garments
to the rhythms of the dancers.
The sea trinkets them with orange floats,
old combs, bits of bottle, shells. It has ravished them
night after night warmly
except that now they are all dead,
as if they had reached some ultimate threshold
of pleasure in this surf. They could not go beyond
being stripped and processioned here, bare, ultimate,
cleansed, and brittle. The newer trees,
like debutantes who have barely opened themselves
to tender winds and eroding sun
bend so much more easily in this tidal flowing
with little sharp sighs and groans
from their dry virginal bodies. But these
are antique cliques, a *demi-monde*
of gossips to my solitude. Foreshortened,
on the beach, they seem to extend beyond their shadows
in ecstasies of lifelessness, as if to reproach me,
or perhaps entreat me, in the glitter of this gala hot noon,
to lie so woodenly with them in their throes.

**THE DEMONOLOGIES OF ROBINS:
THE PARANOIAS OF SPARROWS.**

(for Ralph Robin)

Only bullies are afraid
of people who are taller than they are.
I can't reproach my shoulders
for having only made acquaintance with your nose.
And why is it after 13 nights at dinner
you still jump out of your seat
like Rumpelstiltskin to talk down
to me? Do you really think
I approve of muggers? Murder? Genocide?
Because you occasionally whine
must I assume you're a friend of the common man?
Some of the things you've accused me of
recently include being unkind to shopkeepers,
South Vietnamese pimps, and Cambodian Chinese.
I suppose you don't know I harbor equally angry feelings
about blind Yemenite brain surgeons,
and policemen of Irish Catholic descent
without trigger fingers who are collecting full pay.
But the world, I'm afraid, is not composed
of all such oppressed minorities,
though they exist, of course, and whenever I find myself scolded
for not caring about the Bulgarian-American population
of Savannah Ga. in need of public housing
I assume you're saying, "Richard is a nigger lover."
Well, I'll cop that plea. Better that
than hating and calling oneself righteous,
or instructive. What have I got that you want?
My hair. There's really not enough to go around,
If you honestly think it's fun not being able
to fit inside your ordinary bathtub,
and sleeping in most beds sitting up,
consider all our other uncommon neurotic problems
we might have faced together as poets:
such as you knew one of my ex-wives,
and I never did. Also my very last psychiatrist
was named Ralph. *Ralph Ralph Ralph....*
Six years on a couch puking out that name
and I was glad to go to Bellevue for a rest.
I'm sorry I've published so many books.
I assure you they're all out of print.
Does it make you feel a whole lot better to believe
you're not a whore simply because you've been screwed
a few times less often over the past decade?
I'm twenty years younger and I smoke
twenty times as much. Our poems differ

as do our natures. Your mother
probably loved you; mine loved canasta.
Let's presume against such lower middle class suspicions
as we imbibed with our mother's fears
that I really was being sincere when I said I liked some of your poems.
A lot of good poets never won the Nobel Prize,
and never should. Some might even get published
some day by the University of Nottingham Press.
There are, in addition, numerous subjects
we might have talked about but never did
such as my poems, or your poems and my poems,
or our poems, or Robert's poems, poems
written about the island.
We might have shared the pleasant buttery light
on the dunes at five PM, or written poems about it,
or perhaps about a girl friend. Frankly I prefer
having the most beautiful women in the world
choose me over you (but, if necessary, the reverse)
to sitting around over a glass of thirty year old bonded
remorse arguing about who knows more
about the responsibility of the human race
for cleaning up those rings on table tops
left after the fall of light among the tea cups
has eaten through an old veneer.

aka Little Smiley Sparrow

DYOGENES THE CYNIC

Up to his armpits in his own hot water
Dyogenes the Cynic dreamed a tub
where he could think his life away.
Outside its rims he imagined everything mundane
vacated until only the idea of him remained
while he was corrugating warmly inside.
This philosopher's tub or thinking tub
he thought should be regularly drained
of everything except himself and a few girl friends and,
then, cleansed, refilled to be a banquet
of the mind, or sort of calm warm mental ocean
to which other mariners of inner space
might be drawn. Confined to his barrel,
banded with copper from the mines of Judea,
and bent from seaworthy cedars of Lebanon,
he thought he must surely emanate some aura
as certain shellfish are known to open out
with garlic and thyme in hot strong soups.
He would be the Nectar of his own ceremonial
krater. He foresaw himself, lips
barely breaking the surface of that broth,
discouraging to those followers who thirsted
or perhaps hungered for as much of his overflow
as they might be able to collect with their tongues
around his circumference. Toward the end
of his rather long picturesque existence
he pictured an institute or symposium
or college of large and smaller bowls just like his own
of seasoned wits, and the world attending them
with offerings of Frankish mountain berries,
or *baba ghannouj* in blue stone jars,
or buried Roman pickled fish in mortars.
All truth he supposed would issue
from deep down below the mossy reaches of his self
to break the surface of his otherwise
placid reflections momentarily roseate,
though evanescent, as bubbles; for truth
he believed was intimate, a product
of growth through elimination. He who knew
all the troubles of his peers by odor
as he soaked inside his prophetic vat
left us this recipe for disorder:

*Plop people into water, bring
to a boil stirring them often
until they pop their selfish kernels and/or soften.
Then remove, devein like shrimp, and serve
until they lose their nerves and freak
out cold on a bed of their own lettuce.*

for Saul Newton

CHANNEL CROSSING, OSSABAW

Sweet island air. Marsh gasses
bleed the blues
in marsh grass. Spartina
waters in this light
at not quite five in the afternoon
are blade licked
soft and singularly clean;
so greens are blue,
and blues are almost delicately green.

So many mossy strands
this water shadows
and dismisses
as properties of leaden
olive. The light
is almost black
along the shores;
it sharpens toward the sea,
breaks like blue glass
but here is marsh moss,
again, soft, as if bleached
with salt. All the white
birds cackle and quack
between here and Florida.
Egret and Ibis startle.
The young deer hang
three feet above the creek
then bound straight down
into marshes with a splash,
dun against blue and olive.

We're passing through this day
much too soon. Stay and be
beautiful here, under this silvery
sun, to be inert
like moss or lichen, to be
simply blue or green, and
spongy, or pliant. But
the day has already split
like an old mirror, and all this
talcum of light on quiet
greens and pearly coquina
blues is infused
near our stern opaquely,
as if the white
churn from our wake
in so much close-hued

air was a medium for mixing
in suspension wishes
as colors. Pretty soon
we'll reach land again;
our prow begins to chew
islands of warm
chaff. The birds
and the waves are laughing
at our hurry to arrive
somewhere solid, an anchorage.
Already the shrimpers
under nets have retired
for the night. They've stretched out
their masts like the wings
of giant pelicans. To find
some respite here
they are camouflaged,
animate wild-looking
big white butterflies.

for Nancy Brown and Anne Frazer

THE DREAM OF ALMOST-CERTAIN-DEATH

When you are cranky with the sleep you've had,
or groggy with the sleep you lack,
you begin to become aware sometimes
of the dream-of-almost-certain-death.
It's not strange. Others share rooms
in the apartment where you have
placed your soul for a few years.
There's a common phone, and fridge.
People take messages for each other
on a pad supplied every year at Christmas
by the local lumber mill.
The locations have been scouted way in
advance of actual habitation by rote.
It's a dream of singularity, of almost
certain set-apartness.
It begins with a strange salty taste
in the mouth, like blood, or semen,
begins somewhere between the shoulder
blades, or the hairs on the back of
your neck, after a nap, perhaps, or
before brushing your teeth first thing
in the morning when you have already
brewed coffee and walked the dog.
In the dream of almost-certain-death
you are a stick figure, perhaps,
preparing to leave home at 35 on
the shoulders of a beautiful young
woman.
Or you are making your first million
on a talent you've so far suppressed,
such as horse shoe pitching.
A feeling like headache, or menstrual
cramps, certifies you as a guaranteed
potential dreamer of almost-certain-death.
Your death you have finally understood
is a condition of your reality, a certainty.
You can no longer afford to believe in
your own originality.
You will die.
You will perish.
That beauty mark or freckle
on your cheek is a gossamer spot, as gaudy
and frail as one of Mick Jagger's costumes.
The little flutterings of your pulse are
impermanent, too.
Convinced of your disposability, committed
to impermanence, it must surely seem to

you and your friends that you have been
living inside a dream, afraid of enjoying
yourself there, like watching a difficult
foreign movie in a deep velvet seat, with only half of yourself.
But life proceeds without subtitles.
Some get angry. Others go crazy in their
ignorance of the plot. Still others, the
lucky ones, walk through the open doors
of the dream, and sit down on its furniture,
have a few drinks, and eventually meet
another stranger, and die.

for Margot

FRAGMENTARY ADVICE TO A CHILD

If you don't have real parents
You should have a puppy,
Or an editorial friend
With a face like sand:
A dim wit will do for some,
Or a handout from an aging bum,
But you are pretty child
And what you need
Are friends your own size,
Whether big or small,
And somebody pretty good to blow his horn,
And a dulcimer to peck at
Like a trigger,
And somebody to clean the night out of your eyes,
and a lawyer or two around in case of fights,
And a judge with a handsome grey beard,
And a jury composed of women
And teachers and doctors and fools
And thought for food
And faultless pills
And food for thought
And spools of light
And a driftless eye
And a lip of fire
And a quickening heart
For the plight of men....

THE MALTESE EXPERIENCE

In the Maltese experience we are all lonely islands,
or we tack across stretches of blue sea in fast yawls
for a weekend or a day, have lunch at that sleazy place
with good beer in the port, sun bathe,
and drop by for cocktails at the Ambassador's domicile,
flirt with his pretty daughter, perhaps fall in love,
and later on that night sleep with the maid.
Dark clubfoot, she becomes possessive.
She didn't know we were interested in others.
Our throes were originally passionate
enough for any woman to hope
the smell of oranges in the oily night was love.

END PIECE

I watched the budding linden trees in defilade
rain down light spring greens all April, and
when May burst pink Japanese magnolias
all across the yard, I was in Georgia
inhaling the true cinnamon of that giant white bloom
which has the power to harden lovers. Yesterday,
or the day before that, I can't remember which,
came back and the leaves were clattering slightly,
enlarged to the size of a full grown child's ears.
They were heart-shaped now, almost hard, and one
shade darker. So many so redundantly displayed
in their perfect shadowy symmetries when I walked
beneath that double aisle of trees
I stared up through bits of the busy sky
at the applauding green of trees in a forest.

OSSABAW IN P-TOWN

*This whole island
lighted blue
encased in a bubble of glass
by light which clarifies
all the contours of land
and sea, all boundaries, and seems
to extend out beyond the farthest
point of sight to bulge brittley there,
and broken.*

*It's a fragile light, curved
at the edges and beyond the tip
of the beholder's nose, blown
out from the lips of artisans.
From hour to hour it brightens,
or turns bluer, adds powder
to its blues, or softens purplish,
and then is almost brown,
or grey, or black, upon its outer
edges.*

*Broken by points of yellow,
green, and white fire, this light
has the noise of surf, and fig horns.
It bears the laughter of children,
and gulls, lamentations
of women, dogs, small buoys.*

*When the day is all bled out
it haunts the boats
that breathe in it, rest
in it, lave in it,
like a damp heat:*

*The little green and red
striped dinghies of the Port-
ugese, the large
pleasure crafts of the rich
that are the color of butter sticks,
or ripening cheese, or wine grapes,
slicing through that light
are encased by it.*

*Night now once more
with matchfires flashing
on the sandspits at the point.
The Cape is almost levantine*

*with heat. Remembering
the warm pellucance
of those days like a soap bubble
that has burst. Remembering
light: that round
peninsulated light. Glassy
Cape Cod light*

*that the painters running out of the doors
of our Cities like children after their first rainbows
lacquered the various
incidents from their lives with.*

*August 10, 1975
for Esther and Herman Maril*