

Richard Elman

# HOMAGE TO FATS NAVARRO

with drawings by

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# HOMAGE TO FATS NAVARRO 1978

For Paul, Harry, Chuck, Brian, Bill, Mark, & Lou

For Alice

For Roberta Pryor

To the conscientious and dedicated employees of the Central Intelligence Agency, whoever you are, for persevering in your efforts to alchemically change certain literary imaginations into mush and shit.

“We live in a dangerous world. So do the ants.  
Nevertheless, they cooperate.”

*Zoltan Gestetner* (“Stimme”)

“Of hominy, of heavenly hominy....”

*Lucullus*

“Don’t *ever* say you gonna cut or shoot somebody ‘less you do it, hear?...’ cause when Theodore Navarro *says* he’s gonna cut you that’s what he’s gonna do....”

*Fats Navarro* (as reported in Charley Mingus’ “Beneath the Underdog”)

*Blues*

*Nobody's leaving me great estates in the country  
Nobody's willing me matched sets of rubies.  
Nobody's sending me millions to write poetry.  
Happy I am to be my own man.*

*Nobody's seen de troubles I'se seen.  
Nobody's got de pleasures. No-  
body's walkin' 'round on my hands.  
Happy to be my own man I am....*

## I. STREETS OF THE MOON

### STREETS OF THE MOON I

(Port Antonio, Jamaica)

Upper Bay Street  
like a lost earring  
dangles above the sweating  
shoulders of this city.  
Little white houses  
spaced here and there  
among the palms and jacarandas  
in full bloom shelter  
nobody you know very well.  
There are kitchen gardens  
full of green tomatoes,  
yams, and almond smells.  
At night you climb  
the throbbing boom boom boom  
of the funicular of dreams  
past the thieves and the spivs  
and dolphin ladies offering  
their tricks. Are you anywhere at all? Cities  
like brooches on a widow's breast  
slowly darken for your gaze  
and some still toil where they lie  
supinely below you in pools  
of liquid night. Suburb of lust,  
this terminal is a wound  
in the hillside, vagina  
to the sea this dim ravine.

CALLES DE LA LUNA I  
(Puerto Antonio, Jamaica)

Cuesta arriba  
Calle de la Bahfa  
que cuelga como un arête perdido  
por sobre los hombres sudados  
de esta ciudad.  
Casitas blancas desparramadas  
entre palmeras y jacarandas florecidos  
cobijan a quien pueden.  
Hay huertas llenas  
de tomates verdes,  
names y olor a almendras.  
De noche se sube  
entre las sacudidas  
del funicular del sueño,  
por cuevas de ladrones  
y rateros y negras sirenas  
en oferta. ¿Dónde estaremos?  
Ciudades como albajas  
prendidas del pecho de una viuda  
se van apagando  
en el ojo del que mira  
algunas todavla agitándose  
al estirarse en charcos  
de noche llquida. Suburbio  
del deseo, esta terminal  
es una herida en al montaña,  
vagina al mar este barranco  
oscuro.

*translated by Luis Harss*

## STREETS OF THE MOON II

(New York)

Undersea on the A-train, stalled at midtown in the cold darkness of that lunar beneath ground landscape, the man with the cold-boiled face grinned at us as if he had been scalded by every sweating passenger in the car, but when he offered “Free Admission to the Burning Hell film tomorrow night,” and gave directions to a church uptown where one could see the show, in a voice that crackled like an acetylene torch, nobody even laughed.

The man raised a placard in one hand supered with the title, “Burning Hell Film.” Then I saw some resemblance to my ex-father-in-law, if his face, too, had been acid scorched by this even greater rage: those pocked cheeks and that pale bald head had been shaped in hell for every gouty retired ex-dentist and underpaid stock exchange clerk to wear inside out, all the passengers in my car, I thought, were thinking, and each of us cringing despite the fact we knew it was appropriate to seem amused.

The doors closed on that face like a pair of black shears and he was, for a moment, cut off from his boiled black suit: just another almost-flat head pressed against the doorframe. Then it tumbled backward onto that neck, his placard waved again, and he turned to face that other set of tracks.

He disappeared beyond our speed, as so many who have been in my life for a station or two on the subway, but, of course, I fully expected to see this man again, for I had seen him many times before. How often when I was married he hung out down the street on Broadway in front of the 79 Street restaurant next door to the Spanish-English church: that same scorched look and boiled suit, some scripture on a placard about retribution or hell as a coming attraction. This piece of the urban *kharma* I had always thought was just there to hector all the others passing by until one evening when I went to the newsstand after an ugly fight with my wife he told me, “You too will be dead someday.”

I could not disagree with him about that. But tonight behind the rapidly closing doors when he seemed to be glancing at me hard again, the poorest person of any in that car, now 43, and unemployed, and scared, and his offer was “free admission” to the “Burning Hell Film,” I couldn’t help but wonder if I had not passed up a good bargain.

## STREETS OF THE MOON III

(just outside of Savannah)

Culpepper and Klein, the corner, flames  
shoot the Japanese plum bushes  
near the gutter. Bronze Indian chiefs  
command camellia bushes to watch  
a central gas main sputter  
invisible waves of heat. The  
children with their schoolbooks  
also gather. Like a yawn that spreads on the face  
of the day the heat is rising, and  
the churchyard dead are rising  
from their bloody beds of damp red clay.  
Charleston is only 90 miles away.  
We'll catch the Silver Meteor  
just in time for some she crab soup  
and the Sensational Travelling Echoes  
will sing all Sunday morning, and  
we'll sleep through the hurricanes  
and get high on the tornadoes. In the swamp  
tomorrow bubbles up like gumbo.  
The outer islands quake and shimmer  
much too green to be so blue.  
The moon has fallen into Cyprus Hole.  
It takes three days for the gater to  
swallow all of it.  
The dead down here are beyond repair.  
Church spires soar to remind us  
this is the last place in the world  
to have such an odd thing happening  
since Denver caught the tailwind of L.A.

## STREETS OF THE MOON IV

(Stony Brook)

Sometimes the moon sits over Stony Brook  
like a fat pumpkin husk, and my love  
walks through the tides of her sleep  
and parts the thick spartinas  
to be wet in the bite of the sea.  
Feet bang the shoreline and her tides  
flowing through her into so much water  
wash her the color of pumpkin moonlight.  
When we fuck the dog weeps, restlessly. Night  
grins a million stars. I curl up  
in my sleep next to my mate on this ship of night.



## STREETS OF THE MOON V

(Tuscon)

Hard to know those mountains:  
If they are very far up, or  
we are so low down  
depends on so much sunlight  
pickling the cacti.  
This very bright day the snowy  
peaks in the front windshields  
of silver Cadillacs reflect  
mirrored bronze and gold  
glass boxes under  
Arbey sombreros. My daughter  
takes me to one of the very first  
MacDonald's, a classic  
of white tile interiors, and  
chrome rimmed red counter  
stools. Fighter jets,  
meanwhile, pointing silent-  
ly at the ether gaps between  
precipices scratch at the bumps on a rash  
like long tapering fingers. . .  
Could they be jet-propelled  
yuccas? Is this whole empty Speedway  
(except for all the cars),  
shadeless, and bright  
as white bond paper  
beneath a spotlight, or tensor  
lamp, soon going to explode  
its treeless tinder  
as licking flames of movement?

## STREETS OF THE MOON VI

(Chicago)

A party of angry spooks across the lake  
were discussing betrayal when I arrived  
and was handed a bowl of spaghetti,  
a martini, and a dish of Neapolitan  
ice cream. I said, "How do you do?"  
They asked, "Are you Stalinoid or Stalinist?"  
Before I could sit myself down  
on my polynoidal cyst  
a woman with blue-grey hair  
explained the difference to me  
between *homo faber* and *homo ludens*  
and then a silvery haired homo explained  
the difference between this grey haired  
woman and my mother. Like craters on the moon  
the lake looked black and deep  
outside the window. A wind  
bellowing from here to Winnetka, or,  
worse, Sheboygan: the air like crystal  
before its been washed.

## STREETS OF THE MOON VII

(Hudson Falls, N.Y.)

O'Leary's bitch gone dead and rotten  
down beside the Feeder Canal  
where the schoolkids go  
to smoke pot, and cock pull, or play  
*muffky-fuffky* with all the sweet  
fat pretty fading girls. Mud  
season, and my friends all walk about  
in lobstering boots above their calves. Cold  
even for April. Canal's frozen over. No  
lobster for 300 miles, or  
more, which doesn't stop all these yellow  
rubber feet from tramping down the snowpaths  
to make tracks for ski-dos; and  
it doesn't stop a dead dog from going bad, or  
the heavy mud from running  
soft and dark the one or two  
fine hours when the sun is as bright  
in the low grey sky as after a  
swipe of silver polish with a rag.  
Such weather tarnishes the slush piles;  
it infects the glistening black and green  
plastic sacks of garbage stacked  
like duffle bags in front of every household,  
making them brittle, so that they tear  
if you look at them too hard. All the yards  
are splintery bare with last summer's  
corn staves. The old man Griffin's  
coal silos sticking up, abandoned,  
empty, as in Joseph's captive  
dreams in Egypt, are pharoanic, bleak  
as phalluses of stone, or sphinxes,  
overlooking the even grimmer prospects  
of our neighborhood. Half a mile away  
icy grey cakes of spume and PCB  
sludge in the rapids of the Hudson. I see  
sparrows, tight as angry baby fists,  
but only one blue jay I know  
survived the winter, and a few  
raggy brown and white cats. On  
the Five Combines an eel was caught  
dead, elongated, like a wound-out

condom. Home soon to thick pea-soup;  
the mud is turning green with algae.  
I'll have a slice or two of wholewheat  
cannon ball bread from my friend Billy-  
boy's Swedish coal-stove, and then, as it turns  
dark blue throughout this industrial  
flatland, the whole earth  
between the smoking towers of Hercules  
Powder will shine in the mud  
like the full moon on Venus, or  
a red hot meteorite.

## STREETS OF THE MOON VIII

(Paris)

Outside the theatre  
she glistened in red  
plastic like a bomb  
about to go off. Her  
eyes argued with her  
shadow. For a moment  
she came toward him  
not seeming to notice  
the way May heat  
seized her by the raincoat  
and threw her slicker  
image back at the  
double glass doors  
posterred with Roger  
Caussimon. Shortly that  
amiable large face  
would beg him to decide  
if he should buy a ticket  
to hear of encounters  
at Orly Bar, or  
a skuzzy weekend lay-  
over in Montreal  
where they blew their  
noses at him  
for applause. The life  
of a performer  
is to be superfluous  
just at the right  
moments. In the plush  
dark loge he oversaw  
they were all alone  
except for her friend  
so blonde she made her  
dark hair splendid for  
contrasting so much  
modishness with his  
immodesty. And, afterwards,  
in the night she was

beautiful, his goddess  
of nothing doing at all  
she must be beautiful: Rue  
St. Denis smelling  
of fog and oysters:  
*Antoinette, Antoinette. . . .*

## UNDERGROUND HYMN

Sunday afternoons the subway trains  
are mainly black in the City. Downtown  
on the Lexington Avenue line it's colored  
people-fag time, the dark tired  
old women sitting inside their heavy  
mauve and green coats, after serving  
Sunday dinner somewhere, have shopping  
bags stuffed with children like kewpie  
dolls from a Coney Island shooting gallery,  
or else it must be raining carbons and sepias  
because there are no white people anywhere  
except for me (who might be on another Continent).  
The good white people are all at home  
dozing off, or watching TV, playing  
with their children's toys. Like a worm  
through stilton cheese I move standing tall  
in all the lower realms of the city.  
How wonderful to think it has changed  
into its darkest best colors for me  
this Sunday, no day of rest for anybody here:  
The elegance of all these skins, glisten  
of wary eyes before each window frame  
as we pass up to the elevated line  
with multiple negative images of ourselves  
reverberant between the grimy stanchions,  
the City's lights jewel the rain:  
our train reaching for each glitter of rail; --  
and I among a chosen people.

## FALL & ALL

There's a flush on the nape of the neck of the day.  
Paradiddles of beautiful young blushers heat the air with their bodies.  
Get off the streets if you don't want to get laid.  
Footsteps are glimpses of glances single file this Indian summer.



## II. HOMAGE TO FATS NAVARRO

### FOR MY FRIENDS AT OSSABAW

So much of what I have to say to men  
fails as this snow falls upon an empty  
island: Down through these trees it spots some air plants  
where the sharp marsh spartina rushes toward  
its dissolution, and what then remains  
ephemeral as election, or  
languages learned and half-forgotten  
is a sort of moisture that crackles  
so much softer ground across. The thaw  
comes when it must a moment later  
when buds in the lavender magnolia stem  
are swelling to it *here-we are here*, they say,  
befriended by an atmosphere, as if  
the sun will rinse this shoreline all orangey  
tomorrow meaning softening of rime.

## BEETS

Startled  
the heron  
soars to  
the nearest  
branch.  
Plovers  
hover,  
cows graze,  
pigs take  
cover.  
The deer  
shows his  
flag to  
the bush.  
Raccoons  
don't shy  
where he  
has oak

nearby;  
cypress,  
cabbage  
palms, and  
dolphin  
at sea  
sound their  
fictions,  
trumpet  
his wind-  
y coming.  
Two beets  
a line  
away  
sunk in  
the Earth  
he adores.

Cold air  
freshly washed  
glassware  
brilliance.

People  
and camellias  
squeak when  
you touch them.

My finger-  
tips ache. Live  
oak leaves rattle  
trees overhead.

There are snakes  
in these woods, they  
say, the alligators  
hibernate.

Light, which denies  
malevolent possi-  
bilities, lingers  
everywhere at once,  
falling across  
these groves, laundering  
the idle cows. The  
pigs racing near  
my feet. A deer  
shows his flag  
among the donkeys.

## LOW CELSIUS NOTATIONS

The sky seems so much closer after a snowfall  
when cotton wools stick to the tree tops  
and fall everywhere around us in great tufts  
or skeins. The wind on the wide Sound is brilliance  
threaded beyond this grove of oaks, or  
pressed out flat like blue oxford  
on the ironing board. The large grey gulls  
shuttling above us, as in a loom, between the  
separate branches, appear and disappear  
and reappear again, as larger shadows on the  
snow. There's a soft place at the base  
of the nearest tree. Depressed to be this  
utterly deep powder blue, it yawns and glows  
a little in the night when everything else  
outside our window is black on dark.

BIG FALL,

Stony Brook

The maple leaves turn strawberry  
every cold new day; this air  
gaudies the trees, the yellow hiding  
under sprinklings of green  
vanishing utterly, and then there's amber  
varnishing all the oak leaves, and  
the brightest buckthorn berries  
frost the cheeks of school kids.

A YOUNG WOMAN,  
for M.W.

You come into a room, any  
room, and I am pleased to know  
my desperation again. Simp-  
ly touching your light  
auburn hair is enjoy-  
ing the possibility of a  
shudder. I close my eyes to think  
pleasure to be you  
and so young.

## ROOMS

### I

When I think of you it is mostly in rooms that I see you with large bare white walls.

A telephone is near your elbow on a small table. You are reading from a book, or writing in a diary much like this. Waiting for the phone to ring.

You know the phone will ring just as you know you will take another breath. You are not impatient. The phone will ring. That will be your lover calling.

I think of you in your room above the traffic in the light of the well of rooms with numerous windows surrounding your room.

You must go to your lover, eventually, but now simply to read, scribble on this paper with your pen.

I see you as smaller than you are in the scale of the room. Dwarfed by the walls and the scratch of your pen. Walls yellow at the ringing of the phone.

Your hair is very soft and darkly still against your shoulders.

The traffic cannot reach you as you read.

### II

In the limousine where she sat all alone waiting to be driven to the cemetery after my father's funeral, Pearl said, "He really loved you, Richard," and I felt all the panic of locked doors again, hands raised in anger toward my face, and I turned away from her, and crept beneath the outstretched arm of another mourner leaning into the back seat of the car to kiss Pearl's angry startled face. . .

### III

My daughter's room is in the desert.  
Other children are in other rooms nearby.  
There is so very little shade the distant  
mountains loom as very large, and  
almost black.

In her room Margaret tries to forget  
her family, as I once tried to forget  
my own, once, but she is still quite  
small. There are the things she needs.

She is so tiny in her room and even  
smaller in the vastness beyond.  
She sends out a loud sound on her stereo  
to tame it to her scale.

This is her weapon against the silence of the  
desert, silence in her heart: playing the  
stereo very loud she tames the angry vastness  
to her size.

### IV

I remember my mother in her room by the  
wide window weeping.

Her body seized by spasms, a cramp  
of sorts.

She knew she was unloved.

She has wasted her life with this man.

"Now you know how it feels," she said.  
"My friend told me now you know Pearl."

She wept without breaking the set  
mask of her face.

I had come upon her being tender to  
herself, for a change.

### V

I live in old slanty rooms in an old  
house upstate. All my neighbors are old  
and bitter.

Dwarfs glide behind the shrubbery  
beneath my windows on shiny steel  
wheelchairs.

Across the street is an old peoples' home and next door the mansion of some people who made their money "when they built all the canals."

The "canal people" never seem to be at home anymore.

Their house wears a blank look beneath its spruce grey paint. awnings flapping at the breeze.

I watch an old man walk as if hoping not to be noticed into the liquor store next door.

His face is very blank too, when he buys a pint in a brown paper bag and walks away again, alone, in another direction.

These rooms seem to slant down on me harder as he walks beyond my sight.

I think of your stark downtown room, and another in rooms with her son, and of my daughter sending out a sound to meet the vastness.

We make or find a shape to enclose us from the world and, for the while we live inside that shape it is a world for us.

We sleep under roofs toward which our dreams move.

The world occupies us for a little while only as four walls, a space surrounding us. So much easier then: My daughter sleeping under desert stars, and the woman I loved in her cold white city rooms, and I in my old slanting space.



## THE RETURN

Trees make the  
connection ground and sky  
regular steps.  
Oak branches  
sway which way:  
you are going.  
Down is one  
grey quiet raccoon  
for all these pretty  
brown calves on the  
grass. Ridic-  
ulous. Hurry. Soaring  
by breaths of the  
Highest Regard.

## SONNET 1

Whoever loves  
himself loves an  
antagonist  
worthy of others:  
so they say bells  
ring in my ears  
but the din hurts  
beyond the grave.  
So they say far  
meaning near to  
preciousness.  
So they say bees,  
meaning humbly  
meaning humbly  
stung by himself.

## SONNET 5

The way you back  
into the future  
surprises even  
me sometimes. You  
curling vagrantly  
next to my side  
indelicate as  
we talk of socks  
stowed beneath your  
bed, or if to  
tease the eyebrows  
more heat is re-  
quired: Stocks&bonds  
can be traded like people?

## SONNET 20

Looking at love  
sometimes alone  
the waters break  
my eyes open  
as if these glassed  
refractions were  
an image of  
some images, slight-  
er than any  
single hairline.  
To touch its not  
the answer as  
it is not there  
when we look up.

LAST DAY SONNET,  
Ossabaw

Just as we are about to leave the  
redwing blackbirds are flocking here  
with duck trios: the cows also are  
beginning to herd some pigs across  
the marsh. With everything so pale  
blue after the cold front, time  
seems no longer than palmetto  
shadows; the time remaining drinks  
at its shadows like the livestock,  
and we feel that as diminishment:  
Hard to say when we'll be seeing each other;  
hard to know if we can make it elsewhere.  
Are we still animal enough to care?  
The weather warming drives me into winter.

## SONG

Last day of March  
jiggles beyond my sill:  
my daughter cannot find me;  
one ex-wife miserably ill.

Nights of dark March hate  
slamming at dusty rooms;  
the dog growls where I wait  
to trust myself to her hands.

Remembering the click of the phone,  
the cold cut off dead  
centuries of hate for yourself  
so sullenly said.

Remembering being held  
in the warm gell of sleep  
by your friend for the night, and the friend  
you wished you might always keep.

Married for life to your hate  
is like steady work. Like pain.  
Whoever is lonely tonight  
will be lonely tomorrow again.

## A SUMMER NIGHT

The absolute state of weightlessness:  
lying on my hammock under Laura's big maple  
with all the stars of an August night out  
I listen to the Northern Service of the CBC  
in the Crete dialect broadcasting  
between spoken announcements  
Fanny Brice singing,  
"I'd rather be blue thinking of you. . . ."

## EDIBLE LANDSCAPE

The descant of willows is hazy,  
a wraparound, a covering up,  
not so much weeping but laziness  
as if their world could be transformed  
ash green and undulant  
in down sprawls. Maples  
are uppermost posturers –  
through every leaf and branch  
there is display and a vain  
self-regard inviting you  
to come in and under and among  
and be all the more dappled  
a deep dark green. In sugary  
light the sky has been powdered over  
and the elms are missing  
like giant broccoli stalks clipped  
from a garden, but at night  
there's the sudden smudging of the dusky  
evergreens, soaring  
of new sweet ears of corn  
battered with late  
smears of sunlight.

## HOMILETIC PARABLES

Her mother never loved her I don't know why,  
but I am not prepared to say it didn't matter.  
When I was little people said you're crazy:  
No wonder Antoinette could get so bitter.

His mother loved him much beyond their means:  
Until such time as he was married  
he was the son and the moon and the stars for her  
and for himself the heavens were grey and emptied. . . .

All of which goes to prove that mother love  
is not as crucial to the life of men  
as boys, or girls. We take what we can get  
and dismiss the rest as avarice and live.

(translated from the German  
of Antoinette Messerschmidt)

## MIDDLE CLASS MESS

Poverty settles on a house  
like glitter from the air.  
Behind the middle class façade  
economies appear;  
The sink gets clogged with hair.  
Tiny chrysalides of lice  
sprinkle the sills like wedding rice,  
and romance is neglect,  
and love is circumspect.



## LATE AFTERNOON WITH A CAT

The cat in the sun can't hear  
his purring for the leaves  
nearby in the wind moving  
over him with slow  
soft cat-like sibilance,  
as if these branches were caressing  
his own stolid cattishness  
with their own attentive  
shadow pawings. Finally,  
it's the scumbly spot  
the cat makes when he moves away  
from this place to hear himself  
purr that is feline; this  
haunch of dark green shadow  
dims the crouching eyes  
of branches about to spring  
down from overhead.

## FOUR SONGS FROM *APOCRYPHA*

### I SERA SONG

I in my flesh make no excuses  
for the arms I have sought  
around myself. I am warm  
inside my arms, but at night  
I sleep on my lover's chest.  
His beard sometimes scratches my thighs.  
He moves me beyond myself  
like a warm stone suddenly  
pried from the earth. Please  
enjoy my flesh almost as if  
I had prepared myself for you  
to be consumed. Zoag and Galid  
are men I have known, and they  
were both good. They were always  
good to me. If I have complaints  
they are not against men  
but against this time  
as it washes through me,  
and around me. I never wish  
to be dry of the present  
and when I am alone at night  
I am safe in my arms  
as if I had myself for lover.

### II THE CHILDREN OF SERA

The sun doesn't bother us at night.  
We live in water much beyond our bellies.  
Our fathers are not our fathers.  
Our mother has a crooked tooth.  
At night we sleep in a crooked tent.  
Mother guards the door with her hips  
against the dark that falls elsewhere.  
She guards us from night but sleeps elsewhere.  
Love isn't love unless she is there.  
Love isn't love unless we love.  
We recognize the absence in our frowns.  
When mother is elsewhere with a lover  
we lie with each other near the fire  
and call the big logs father.

III  
ZOAG SONG

There is no end to my befuddlement.  
I eat lamb's tongues and talk of raisins.  
The mountain comes to drink at my feet.  
I love shadows when they are wet.  
Don't fear me because I am fearful to you  
when you see me at night as thin against the moon.  
I shall soon move on to another place.  
The stars have forgotten me here, nor do I  
know much of them except they are bright. Forlorn,  
I eat sweet lamb's tongues and spit out soft bones.

IV  
GALID SONG

I am jealous of every branch that moves  
in the wind freely, and keep lone watch  
on the wind between the leaves. I know  
the number of twigs that have fallen,  
the rust of desire on a bough.  
I feel the sun on my back sometimes  
as if I were this tree, though I have no shade,  
and cannot bend. I am stubborn.  
To my jealousy I add this passion  
never to feel my own limits  
except as I may see them shadowed  
in the rapt languorous movements of another.

## THE DAY AFTER RETURNING

I cook soft meals for myself,  
go out into the garden and just sit,  
or speak to some friends on the phone;  
and nothing resists me here. The screen  
door slamming in the wind doesn't resist me,  
nor the wet splash against my chin  
of the glass I bring to my lips.  
I am utterly without an apposition here  
like some infants must feel when they are set down  
after being held; and see myself reflected everywhere  
in windows as I bang from room to room.  
In the early morning I talk to myself  
and cook the same breakfast I had for supper.  
Nothing to resist me. No sign anywhere  
I am acknowledged by any other humans  
when I pass them on the street inside my car.  
If I hear birds they are like sounds  
from the radio in that other room. Nothing  
comes to be directly except through corridors  
of time as if I was waiting for your coming  
again to know my own shadow.

## MEDICAL ADVICE

Blood sugar raises anger.  
Hypertension is  
the alarm any system gives off  
when blown. Like opinions  
just read off to differ,  
the blues benumbs our flesh,  
making us numbly warm.

What do we seek from these  
doctors of the fact?  
Prescriptions  
for a herbal of numbers?  
A special heavy water tea  
to cure the cancer it can give us?  
A piece of the pie for the action?  
Or the whole cupcake?

Lusting acting and till action  
lust, I walking through these  
empty oak boulevards on the  
isle of pigs cured himself  
of trichinosis. Somebody  
perhaps when it is warm enough  
will swallow the rhino's horn, too,  
which is a kind of overweight unicorn.

## PRAYER FOR THE BLIND

As I am a Christian  
I forgive my parents.  
All my former lovers  
are now my very best friends,  
and I shall be redeemed  
flashing of godliness.

Also I take this to mean  
directives to myself  
to be kind if I cannot be  
happy and gentle when I am  
not firm. Christian that I am  
makes me so much more alive.

Lord I shall bequeath nothing  
after I pass on because I have  
only raw faith to sustain me.  
Christ I do supplicate before thee  
my ever present neediness:  
make me whole again.

## QUATRAIN 4

I doubt if any man could have been  
as Jewish as he once was: To  
deny the possibility of Paradise  
from the arms of his beloved.

## INTENSIVE CARE

for Edward Elman

This giant frog with his bare legs splayed  
and tubes coming out of every part of him  
was once my father. As he sucks for air  
through his clotted lips, he seems grotesquely  
infantile. He was always the biggest  
baby in our household; now he is teething  
on the growth inside him, his own decay.  
I can deny him nothing any longer  
because I know he will never recover  
from this visit. I touch his hand and talk to him  
because he cannot feel me, hear  
the memory of my voice. His wounds  
won't heal. My words quaver  
like needles pinging life signs,  
are modulated on the dials  
above his bed. I want to say, "Try  
to get well as I have forgiven you  
my childhood and your babyhood." But  
the warmth of his dying flesh surprises me  
with the pleasure of a forgotten caress  
at a ballgame once when he seemed happy  
with me for an hour or two. Now he is gruff  
and snorting again, and has managed to escape  
the reproaches of my tenderness. Now he too  
denies me nothing of his helplessness and pain  
and death, as if we were even more the look-alikes  
in our humiliation for being monitored  
by machines, the serious young nurse, and the  
orderly resident. What will he do,  
I wonder, when his own father begins to die  
like this, and check myself as he  
is taking care of the very worst for me,  
and I am not without some forgiveness  
for his matter-of-fact cold  
diligence. My wounds are not here  
to be healed. I must leave all of them  
because the actual business of this death  
is without precedent in what I can remember  
of that angry man who did not wish to talk to me  
before he lost his voice to a breathing  
tube. The nurse siphoning fluids checks  
another dial and declares her patient still  
critical, grave, and worsening.

FOR B.

I

You – all night long – kissed me  
with your hips. My friend  
you were so light in my arms  
I felt the faintest soft spring winds  
moving currents with us.

II

You were shaken.  
You would not be shaken.  
All stems and petal soft.



## A WINTER LETTER FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE, 1975

All week long I've been digging  
out of this temporary winter grave  
certain cold clods of memory  
to be definitely apart from you,  
but the unknown I've heaped up  
with it seems dangerous, repetitive,  
patches of glare ice on snowy roads.

Skidding, swerving, sliding,  
slipping too much I've become  
again so distant and polite to myself  
as I went on, like a relative  
I did not care for

  passed on a highway  
when I waved behind my face  
in a mirror at a  
  small black dot.

                                Strange, knowledge of you  
even here permeates this unknown for me;  
and when I go out to experience myself  
alone I am not lonely. I wanted to let myself  
forget you awhile, go numb, concentrate  
on simpler tasks than pleasing you  
such as typing poems, stirring whiskey  
with icicles, or looking for droppings  
in the snow. Not possible. Going outside  
myself I was in danger of losing you  
as if you could be shaken from me  
like this snow that settles in my hair  
and turns to water. The possibility  
of so much cold indifferent air  
made my face hurt. I hadn't even been  
crying, though it always seemed I was  
just about to begin. I'd left you.  
Lost you. *No*. There you were again,  
a trickle against my face, formations  
of deep shadow on the snow, a sudden  
footfall. But I haven't wanted you here. *Haven't*  
*wanted wanting you*. So cold  
to so much heat, the inference of auras  
forming on every snowy head, I wanted  
to get underneath the hard edge  
of this world we peopled together once,

for now to be just *here*, like the snow,  
settled, packed in upon itself, protected. . .  
but sudden gustings always blur my eyes. My  
love for this landscape seems unrequited. . . .

\*\*\*

For two days its been snowing at me  
unashamedly;  
the deer, the foxes, and the squirrels –  
they must be somewhere in all this whiteness, though  
they leave no tracks.

The colors of my life  
are elsewhere too. This is exquisite  
inanimation. Snow forming itself  
so perfectly, again and again, without  
you or me to witness all that falling and  
this rising up. Ample, delicate, and white  
on every needle, like a delicious fur  
along thin branches: elegance, a high  
fashion of firs and spruce, gorgeous  
because the sky is sometimes salmon  
or silver foil as if this forest had been photographed  
reclining against some backing out of Vogue.  
I can't escape your glamour. The landscape  
heaps itself here before my window  
like your naked body sprawled on satin  
sheets. Thinking of you in our city of noise  
darkens my flesh with your blood. Your  
flesh with my blood made a separate pact  
to separate in space, if not in time.

Thinking

I continue to inhabit this brilliant  
tacky blind outlying suburb of overdressed  
trees going nowhere, I am astonished  
I have been so easily seduced  
by costumes; and yet I hide here  
even more than I should. Did you encourage me  
to go away from you? Why do I seem to want  
to be unhappy enough to come back? Among  
these dark files of mannequins on this snowiness  
the landscape suddenly pulls itself apart  
like a negligee, but I am not surprised,  
experience neither pleasure, or discomfort, only this  
stark voyeuristic need to be somewhere

you are not. I keep on looking at the world:  
No openings for us anywhere except  
what is forced shut again to harden and dry  
as if all these suddenly close-hued heavens  
were a mucilage for dropping bejeweled  
dollops of frozen air upon the earth.

\*\*\*

My breath hardening on these windows  
when I stare out through smears and snow crystals  
at an unknown filled in so white and thick and cold.  
Day after night I've looked into myself  
like an old bottle I would like to shake loose  
so that certain stuck feelings could be free  
to pour out from my lips, I'm glued here  
like a dottle in a dirty pipe.  
Something in me resists  
any new intentions. I can't go back yet  
on desires I've seen blanked out. I've begun to think  
have I been here all the while, poor smudge, or  
somewhere else? Am I with  
these blind rushes of snow that streak  
across every tree, that slowly circling  
hawk above Monadnock, this sinister light  
on the snow through thick branches, and  
the thinner branches of daylight  
against this snow. Everything here  
has fallen, dropped, like ash,  
burnt out and bleached. Earth  
must soon cave in and give  
beneath all this heavy whiteness.

Late afternoons  
my eyes are spotted like an old dog.

\*\*\*

Darling on the  
late pink belly  
of all these fat  
white January days  
are fingermarks  
my feet made, and  
when I go out  
at dusk into purple  
grey air a coldness

sets my shoulders.  
That still burns  
on my lips. Trees  
shake Spanish fans  
forward and back.  
So frivolous. Inside  
these damp layers  
I have put over  
myself sweats even  
here for you.  
Most beautiful  
woman of warmth, of my  
most intimate terrors  
and befuddlements, sister,  
lover, little mother, my whore,  
and dear sweet friend:  
I am so cold here  
among these mountains  
your breath is still  
pasted to my beard.  
Snow cannot open itself  
to strange pink fires  
at sunset, love, and hem-  
lock boughs bending  
toward bare snowy fields  
white palmettos. The  
latest alarms to my  
flesh are signified by  
certain hot wants that take me  
through this undergrowth  
like a weasel among dark aisles  
of frozen verticles, my breath  
furred when I walk, feet  
chewing at the snow  
loudly.

## SONNET 26

I like the butcher's daughter, the pull of her  
breasts downward when she leans over me, and her good-  
natured sulks, those fat childhood memories her flesh gives  
running off from her sinews.

She lists over me, and covers me with her strong  
white thighs.

She kneads my flesh as if I were so much veal.

Or she takes me for the lean beef I am.

Her smiles are as rich to me as the  
odor of roasting meat.

## 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 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*

## CHET'S JAZZ

The jamming together of fragments  
puffed through a failing wind  
reiterates such sounds as can extenuate  
the hurt lips on the caved-in face.  
“If you could see me now,”  
sings the ghost of pretty boy Chet,  
faintly flirtatious, and when he blows again  
he goes up and down on tip toes  
as if reaching for distortions  
that are the ghosts of melodies he started  
20 years ago with Gerry Mulligan.  
Strange feedback now to spook  
his old sidekick with these noises  
which announce they were never there  
in the first place, and then to declare,  
“that’s one we call *Broken Wing*.”  
The titles tell one story of a talent  
broken, strung out, in jail more times than he has  
notes left in his mouthpiece, but the tunes  
aren’t grim. Behind Chet’s clerical specs  
a death’s head blows frivolous trills  
on a brass horn, blue notes so oblique  
his group can only vamp again a rhythm like applause.  
Chet’s got it tonight. He’s on!  
Even his sweetest clinkers encourage  
us to believe in inspired errors.



## DRIVING HOME

for Alice

Radiant blue grey  
clouds above the cold  
earth remind me of  
the sounds of Fats Navarro  
blowing inside the car.  
As this vamping wind  
shivers my fenders  
Long Island seems  
sanctified and clear:  
holy the earth, these  
trees silver and gold  
with leaves like ingots  
kernelled on their boughs,  
this sudden glistening solid  
state which static interrupts  
metallic bliss. These sounds  
are light, inside is out, the  
glow as real as any  
images of pain he may have  
ever known: this hard Bop light. . .  
Today along the Parkway  
Fats pierced the Fall of  
all of Heaven with his  
trumpet sword of delight;  
a brand new gusting first snow  
darkened the air as silver  
dust that, tarnished, split  
the frozen hills it touched  
like soft ripe orange melons.

