“After great pain, a formal feeling comes”

After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round -
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -

_____________________________________________________________________________

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As freezing persons recollect the snow:
First chill, then stupor, then the letting go...
Adam Zagajewski (1945– )

Try to Praise the Mutilated World

Try to praise the mutilated world. 
Remember June’s long days, 
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew. 
The nettles that methodically overgrow 
the abandoned homesteads of exiles. 
You must praise the mutilated world. 
You watched the stylish yachts and ships; 
one of them had a long trip ahead of it, 
while salty oblivion awaited others. 
You’ve seen the refugees heading nowhere, 
you’ve heard the executioners sing joyfully. 
You should praise the mutilated world. 
Remember the moments when we were together 
in a white room and the curtain fluttered. 
Return in thought to the concert where music flared. 
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn 
and leaves eddied over the earth’s scars. 
Praise the mutilated world 
and the gray feather a thrush lost, 
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes 
and returns.

[translated from Polish by Clare Cavanagh]
September 1, 1939

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.
Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;
"I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,"
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.
Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

[First published October 11, 1939]

Notes on the poem:

September 1, 1939: the date of Germany’s invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II.

Martin Luther (1483-1546): founder of the Protestant Reformation.

Linz: Austrian city where Hitler spent his childhood.

imago: unconscious representation of a parental figure (psychoanalysis).

Thucydides: Greek general (460-400 B.C.) and historian of the Peloponnesian War, exiled from Athens because he failed to prevent the Spartans from seizing a colony.

Nijinsky (1890-1950): Russian dancer and choreographer, who wrote that his former lover Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), ballet impresario, “does not want universal love, but to be loved alone.”

“Who can speak for the dumb?”: Proverbs 21.8.

Eros: Greek god of desire.
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Ironic points of light
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Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.
Adrienne Rich (1929–)

**North American Time**

I
When my dreams showed signs
of becoming
politically correct
no unruly images
escaping beyond border
when walking in the street I found my
themes cut out for me
knew what I would not report
for fear of enemies’ usage
then I began to wonder

II
Everything we write
will be used against us
or against those we love.
These are the terms,
take them or leave them.
Poetry never stood a chance
of standing outside history.
One line typed twenty years ago
can be blazed on a wall in spraypaint
glorify art as detachment
or torture of those we
did not love but also
did not want to kill

We move but our words stand
become responsible
and this is verbal privilege

III
Try sitting at a typewriter
one calm summer evening
at a table by a window
in the country, try pretending
your time does not exist
that you are simply you
that the imagination simply strays
like a great moth, unintentional
try telling yourself
you are not accountable
to the life of your tribe
the breath of your planet
IV
It doesn't matter what you think.
Words are found responsible
all you can do is choose them
or choose
to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
which is why the words that do stand
are responsible
and this is verbal privilege

V
Suppose you want to write
of a woman braiding
another woman’s hair—
straightdown, or with beads and shells
in three-strand plaits or corn-rows—
you had better know the thickness
the length the pattern
why she decides to braid her hair
how it is done to her
what country it happens in
what else happens in that country

You have to know these things

VI
Poet, sister: words—
whether we like it or not—
stand in a time of their own.
no use protesting I wrote that
before Kollontai was exiled
Rosa Luxembourg, Malcolm,
Anna Mae Aquash, murdered,
before Treblinka, Birkenau,
Hiroshima, before Sharpeville,
Biafra, Bangla Desh, Boston,
Atlanta, Soweto, Beirut, Assam
--those faces, names of places
sheared from the almanac
of North American time

VII
I am thinking this in a country
where words are stolen out of mouths
as bread is stolen out of mouths
where poets don't go to jail
for being poets, but for being
dark-skinned, female, poor.
I am writing this in a time
when anything we write
can be used against those we love
where the context is never given
though we try to explain, over and over
For the sake of poetry at least
I need to know these things

VIII
Sometimes, gliding at night
in a plane over New York City
I have felt like some messenger
called to enter, called to engage
this field of light and darkness.
A grandiose idea, born of flying.
But underneath the grandiose idea
is the thought that what I must engage
after the plane has rage onto the tarmac
after climbing my old stair, sitting down
at my old window
is meant to break my heart and reduce me to silence.

IX
In North America time stumbles on
without moving, only releasing
a certain North American pain.
Julia de Burgos wrote:
That my grandfather was a slave
is my grief; had he been a master
that would have been my shame.
A poet’s words, hung over a door
in North America, in the year
nineteen-eighty-three.
The almost-full moon rises
timeless speaking of change
out of the Bronx, the Harlem River
the drowned towns of the Quabbin
the pilfered burial mounds
the toxic swamps, the testing-grounds
and I start to speak again.

1983
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

**Crossing Brooklyn Ferry**

1

Flood-tide below me! I watch you face to face;
Clouds of the west! sun there half an hour high! I see you also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home,
are more curious to me than you suppose;
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me,
and more in my meditations, than you might suppose.

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things, at all hours of the day;
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme—myself disintegrated,
every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme:
The similitudes of the past, and those of the future;
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings—
on the walk in the street, and the passage over the river;
The current rushing so swiftly, and swimming with me far away;
The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them;
The certainty of others—the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry, and cross from shore to shore;
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide;
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east;
Others will see the islands large and small;
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high;
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them,
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide, the falling back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence;
I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd;
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood, yet was hurried;
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships, and the thick-stem’d pipes of steamboats, I look’d.

I too many and many a time cross’d the river, the sun half an hour high;
I watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls—I saw them high in the air,
    floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
I saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies, and left the rest in strong shadow,
I saw the slow-wheeling circles, and the gradual edging toward the south.

I too saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look’d at the fine centrifugal spokes of light around the shape of my head in the sun-lit water,
Look’d on the haze on the hills southward and southwestward,
Look’d on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
Look’d toward the lower bay to notice the arriving ships,
Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops—saw the ships at anchor,
The sailors at work in the rigging, or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels,
The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sun-set,
The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the frolicsome crests and glistening,
The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls of the granite store-houses by the docks,
On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank’d on each side by the barges—the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore, the fires from the foundry chimneys burning high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black, contrasted with wild red and yellow light, over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.
These, and all else, were to me the same as they are to you;
I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return.

I loved well those cities;
I loved well the stately and rapid river;
The men and women I saw were all near to me;
Others the same—others who look back on me, because I look’d forward to them;
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

What is it, then, between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.

I too lived—Brooklyn, of ample hills, was mine;
I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the waters around it;
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day, among crowds of people, sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night, or as I lay in my bed, they came upon me.

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution;
I too had receiv’d identity by my Body;
That I was, I knew was of my body—and what I should be,
   I knew I should be of my body.

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw patches down upon me also;
The best I had done seem’d to me blank and suspicious;
My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?
   would not people laugh at me?

It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil;
I am he who knew what it was to be evil;
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb’d, blush’d, resented, lied, stole, grudg’d,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant;
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting.

8

But I was Manhattanese, friendly and proud!
I was call'd by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men
as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh
against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street, or ferry-boat, or public assembly, yet never
told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing, sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

9

Closer yet I approach you;
What thought you have of me, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance;
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot
see me?

It is not you alone, nor I alone;
Not a few races, nor a few generations, nor a few centuries;
It is that each came, or comes, or shall come, from its due emission,
From the general centre of all, and forming a part of all:
Everything indicates—the smallest does, and the largest does;
A necessary film envelopes all, and envelopes the Soul for a proper time.

10

Now I am curious what sight can ever be more stately and admirable
to me than my mast-hemm'd Manhattan,
My river and sun-set, and my scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide,
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight, and the
belated lighter;
Curious what Gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with
voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as
I approach;
Curious what is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man
that looks in my face,
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you.

We understand, then, do we not?
What I promis’d without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not
accomplish, is accomplish’d, is it not?
What the push of reading could not start, is started by me personally, is it not?

11

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg’d waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sun-set! drench with your splendor me, or the men
and women generations after me;
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!—stand up, beautiful
hills of Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house, or street, or public assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my
highest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small, according as one makes it!

Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown ways be
looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the
hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water! and faithfully hold it, till all downcast
eyes have time to take it from you;
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's
head, in the sun-lit water;
Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-sail’d schooners
sloops, lighters!
Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower’d at sunset;
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall!
cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses;
Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are;
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul;
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our divinest aromas;
Thrive, cities! bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and sufficient rivers;
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual;
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.
We descend upon you and all things—we arrest you all;
We realize the soul only by you, you faithful solids and fluids;
Through you color, form, location, sublimity, ideality;
Through you every proof, comparison, and all the suggestions
and determinations of ourselves.

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers! you novices!
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward;
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us;
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently
within us;
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection
in you also;
You furnish your parts toward eternity;
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.
A Close Reading of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is a poem about a man taking the Brooklyn ferry home from Manhattan at the end of a working day. It is one of Whitman's best-known and best-loved poems because it so astutely and insightfully argues for Whitman’s idea that all humans are united in their common experience of life. A long poem in nine sections, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" prepares us for the final poem of *Leaves of Grass*, when Whitman writes, "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,/ Missing me one place search another,/ I stop somewhere waiting for you." Whitman achieves, in these two poems, an intimacy of address and commonality of experience that bridge the gap between writer and reader.

Whitman's narrator begins the poem "seeing" the flood tide and the setting sun more clearly than his fellow passengers on the ferry; he regards the crowds as so removed from him that he cannot understand them:

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me.
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, that you might suppose.

As the speaker shifts from addressing the crowd to the second person, something strange happens: the crowds become not only the literal crowds of commuters on the ferry, but also, more expansively, everyone who has ever rode the ferry, and then, finally everyone who has returned home, including the reader of the poem. Throughout the poem, he alternately despair of his distance from his fellow men, and then feels himself coming to know them, as in the fifth section where he writes, "Closer yet I approach you."

As if to mimic the "ebb-tide" and the "flood tide" that Whitman continually refers to in the poem, the poem itself moves closer, as in the intimate address of the first section, and then farther away, as in the second section, where Whitman begins to list a series of abstract, meditative observances, each beginning with "the" and using passive, verb-less syntax. With phrases like "The similitudes of the past and those of the future," and "the others that are to follow me, the ties between them and me," he creates a rocking motion within each line, as well as a kind of distance between the speaker and the reader. In addition, the expansive anaphoric lines mimic the movement of the boat and the ebb and flow of the tides, which is at once comforting, mesmerizing, and even, in its repetition, numbing.

The third section is a detailed description of the sights and sounds of the ferry ride that the speaker claims will be shared by every future rider of the ferry. The repetition of syntax is shown here to its full advantage and scope, where he begins each line with the word "just," invoking both the Bible and Shakespeare, and serving the greater purpose of uniting the disparate elements of the scene around him.

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refreshed by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refreshed,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemmed pipes of steamboats, I looked.
He gives equal weight to both natural and manmade images in this section, noticing the "numberless masts of ships" as well as "the swift current." Whitman writes of "The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme." The repetitive phrasing in this poem is an enactment of the poem's subject matter (e.g. crossing back and forth). Each individual on the ferry, but also in the past, present and future of Whitman's world, as well as each disparate image, is at once completely separated and joined to a greater purpose, what he comes to call later "the soul." The ferry journey at the close of day brings to mind Charon carrying his passengers across the River Styx; though this is not a poem only about mortality, this layer of image and myth lends weight and gravity to the very real and very commonplace experience of the daily journey home.

It is in the third section that the first of two central images of the poem are established, the seagulls:

- Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
- Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,...

This is one of several "split" images in the poem representing both the speaker and the crowds from whom he feels distanced. Like the seagulls, the speaker himself is split, somehow between the past and the future (living in his own time, but apparently able to imagine the future), and is neither in Manhattan or Brooklyn, but between the two, both distanced from the world around him and inside it. Throughout the poem, he will refer to shadows as the "dark patches" that have fallen upon him, comforting us that "It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall." For Whitman the light is purity and the dark is weakness. While much of the poem is a celebration of beauty, he berates himself for having "Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd/ Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dare not speak." The rhythm of these lines is quicker than the pace of the rest of the poems, with continual, unrelenting stresses, lending the lines a sense of authentic and painful passion and regret. It is not that the seagull he sees is either "bright" or "dark" but equally both, two opposites existing in one body, a contradiction.

The second central image of the poem is that of the speaker leaning over the edge of the boat with the sun behind his head and, seeing spokes of light surrounding his face, imagining that another passenger, endless numbers of other passengers, will someday look into the water and see the same thing. "Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water/ Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams/ Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water." By the end of the poem, he treats this image rather differently: "Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or anyone's head, in the sunlit water." Throughout this poem, the speaker becomes somewhat casual about physical identity, and ownership of a particular body. If he claims that we will see what he sees, then we must, in some sense, be the same person-so that ultimately it doesn't matter whose head he sees there in the water. The circle in the water is his head, the reader's head, and the sun itself at the same time, and so the experience of looking into the water is both great and small. Because he is describing such a particular angle, no onlooker would be able to see what he saw, but at the same time, the sun itself might see it, or anyone looking into the water might see it with his own face. The light at his back divides him in two, like the seagulls; his back is dark while his face is lit. There is something about this vision that is disorienting as well. He claims to be "dazzled" by the "shimmering track of beams" as if it is the light that has made him momentarily lose reason and imagine himself to be a kind of ambassador to the future, telling us that he is thinking
of us, that he has, as he says in Part 7, "consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born."

The ninth and final section of the poem revisits each imagistic line, almost word for word, as if in an incantation, but transforms the simple fragments to imperatives:

Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste with the hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes have time to take it from you!

It is strange and beautiful here that Whitman, known for his endless generative powers, would return to each image, almost in comfort, hypnotically, to remind us of the connection between past and present, writer and reader, and to enact the scene that he is setting, where the same visions might be seen twice, one passively (reading about it) and one actively (seeing it for oneself). This section, and the poem, culminates in a final stanza where Whitman uses the pronoun "we" for the first time, as if reader and writer have finally been joined together, but also literally referring to how the passengers are seeing, at last, those on the shore who are waiting for them:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside-we plant you permanently within us,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

As the reader, we are at once the future "perfection," waiting for the arrival of the ferry, but because we are now presently living, we are the travelers as well. In the final line, Whitman refers to "the soul," as if there were only one, without ownership (i.e. not your soul, and not my soul). There is also a slight echo with the unwritten word "whole" (parts toward the whole) as if the words might mean the same thing. Whitman has united the disparate elements of the crowd, and has drawn closer to his fellow travelers by imagining a unified whole. The dualities of the poem are resolved: light and dark, reader and writer, past and future, life and death—all become momentarily the same as the ferry approaches the shore.

Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge (From The Bridge)

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
—Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momently, shrill shirt ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)30
Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.
Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City’s fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies’ dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

[1930]

Notes on “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge”

proem: introductory poem (“To Brooklyn Bridge” is the introductory poem to Crane’s long poem The Bridge)
pivot: to cause to turn; to turn (around something)
Liberty: (among other things, the Statue of Liberty)
tumult: loud noise, commotion, agitation
forsake: abandon, go away from
apparitional: ghost-like, seeming to appear
inviolate: intact, not violate or profaned
panoramic: comprising a wide view
sleights: as in “sleight of hand”; pun on “slight” and “sight”
And Thee: The Brooklyn Bridge
bedlamite: madman
Down Wall: (1) Wall Street, (2) wall of a building
rip-tooth: the tooth of a rip saw. A rip saw is a hand saw that cuts wood with the wood grain. Rip saw teeth are chisel-shaped, and the teeth spread slightly outward.
acetylene: as in “acetylene torch,” a welder’s tool
derrick: large crane for hoisting and moving heavy objects; tall framework over an oil well or hole
obscure as the heaven of the Jews: heaven is a vaguer notion in the Jewish tradition than in the Christian
guerdon: reward
accolade: award
terrific: terrifying
pariah: an outcast
unfractioned: continuous, unbroken
immaculate: unspotted, pure, clean
parcels: tied packages
curveship: pun on “worship” and “ship” and the curve of a ship (and the bridge).
The Broken Home

Crossing the street,
I saw the parents and the child
At their window, gleaming like fruit
With evening’s mild gold leaf.

In a room on the floor below,
Sunless, cooler—a brimming
Saucer of wax, marbly and dim—
I have lit what’s left of my life.

I have thrown out yesterday’s milk
And opened a book of maxims.
The flame quickens. The word stirs.

Tell me, tongue of fire,
That you and I are as real
At least as the people upstairs.

*

My father, who had flown in World War I,
Might have continued to invest his life
In cloud banks well above Wall Street and wife.
But the race was run below, and the point was to win.

Too late now, I make out in his blue gaze
(Through the smoked glass of being thirty-six)
The soul eclipsed by twin black pupils, sex
And business; time was money in those days.

Each thirteenth year he married. When he died
There were already several chilled wives
In sable orbit—rings, cars, permanent waves.
We’d felt him warming up for a green bride.

He could afford it. He was “in his prime”
At three score ten. But money was not time.

*

When my parents were younger this was a popular act:
A veiled woman would leap from an electric, wine-dark car
To the steps of no matter what—the Senate or the Ritz Bar—
And bodily, at newsreel speed, attack

No matter whom—Al Smith or José María Sert
Or Clemenceau—veins standing out on her throat
As she yelled War mongerer! Pig! Give us the vote!,
And would have to be hauled away in her hobble skirt.

What had the man done? Oh, made history.
Her business (he had implied) was giving birth,
Tending the house, mending the socks.

Always that same old story—
Father Time and Mother Earth,
A marriage on the rocks.

* *

One afternoon, red, satyr-thighed
Michael, the Irish setter, head
Passionately lowered, led
The child I was to a shut door. Inside,

Blinds beat sun from the bed.
The green-gold room throbbed like a bruise.
Under a sheet, clad in taboos
Lay whom we sought, her hair undone, outspread,

And of a blackness found, if ever now, in old
Engravings where the acid bit.
I must have needed to touch it
Or the whiteness—was she dead?
Her eyes flew open, startled strange and cold.
The dog slumped to the floor. She reached for me. I fled.

* *

Tonight they have stepped out onto the gravel.
The party is over. It’s the fall
Of 1931. They love each other still.
She: Charlie, I can’t stand the pace.
He: Come on, honey—why, you’ll bury us all!

A lead soldier guards my windowsill:
Khaki rifle, uniform, and face.
Something in me grows heavy, silvery, pliable.

How intensely people used to feel!
Like metal poured at the close of a proletarian novel,
Refined and glowing from the crucible,
I see those two hearts, I’m afraid,
Still. Cool here in the graveyard of good and evil,
They are even so to be honored and obeyed.
. . . Obeyed, at least, inversely. Thus
I rarely buy a newspaper, or vote.
To do so, I have learned, is to invite
The tread of a stone guest within my house.

Shooting this rusted bolt, though, against him,
I trust I am no less time’s child than some
Who on the heath impersonate Poor Tom
Or on the barricades risk life and limb.

Nor do I try to keep a garden, only
An avocado in a glass of water—
Roots pallid, gemmed with air. And later,

When the small gilt leaves have grown
Fleshy and green, I let them die, yes, yes,
And start another. I am earth’s no less.

A child, a red dog roam the corridors,
Still, of the broken home. No sound. The brilliant
Rag runners halt before wide open doors.
My old room! Its wallpaper—cream, medallioned
With pink and brown—brings back the first nightmares,
Long summer colds and Emma, sepia-faced,
Perspiring over broth carried upstairs
Aswim with golden fats I could not taste.

The real house became a boarding school.
Under the ballroom ceiling’s allegory
Someone at last may actually be allowed
To learn something; or, from my window, cool
With the unstuffment of the entire story,
Watch a red setter stretch and sink in cloud.

[1966]
Notes

Line 15:
James Merrill’s father, Charles E. Merrill, was a founding partner of Merrill Lynch.

Line 33:
Alfred E. Smith (1873–1944) was governor of New York and a 1928 candidate for president. José María Sert (1876–1945) was a Spanish painter who decorated the lobby of the New York’s Waldorf Astoria Hotel in 1930.

Line 34:
George Clemenceau was the premier of France during World War I. He visited the U.S. in 1922.

Line 36:
hobble skirt: a long, straight skirt

Line 74:
In The Stone Feast, by French dramatist Jean-Baptiste Molière (1622–1673), the stone statue of the commander of Seville visits his murderer, Don Juan, and drags him off to hell. Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni (1787) presents a version of the story.

Line 77:
In Shakespeare’s King Lear, Edgar, disowned by his father, wanders the heath disguised as a madman and calling himself Poor Tom.

Line 98:
red setter: the dog and the sun-set.
An Urban Convalescence

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,
I find them tearing up part of my block
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.
Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man
Laughs and curses in her brain,
Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*.

As usual in New York, everything is torn down
Before you have had time to care for it.
Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall
What building stood here. Was there a building at all?
I have lived on this same street for a decade.

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises
Some five floors high, of shabby stone
—Or am I confusing it with another one
In another part of town, or of the world?—
And over its lintel into focus vaguely
Misted with blood (my eyes are shut)
A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves,
Which years of grit had etched until it thrust
Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.
When did the garland become part of me?
I ask myself, amused almost,
Then shiver once from head to toe,

Transfixed by a particular cheap engraving of garlands
Bought for a few francs long ago,
All calligraphic tendril and cross-hatched rondure,
Ten years ago, and crumpled up to stanch
Boughs dripping, whose white gestures filled a cab,
And thought of neither then nor since.
Also, to clasp them, the small, red-nailed hand
Of no one I can place. Wait. No. Her name, her features

Lie toppled underneath that year’s fashions.
The words she must have spoken, setting her face
To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,
Let alone understand.

So that I am already on the stair,
As it were, of where I lived,
When the whole structure shudders at my tread
And soundlessly collapses, filling
The air with motes of stone.
Onto the still erect building next door
Are pressed levels and hues—
Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.
Who drained the pousse-café?
Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.

Well, that is what life does. I stare
A moment longer, so. And presently
The massive volume of the world
Closes again.

Upon that book I swear
To abide by what it teaches:
Gospels of ugliness and waste,
Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,
Of a shrieking to be faced
Full into, eyes astream with cold—

With cold?
All right then. With self-knowledge.

Indoors at last, the pages of *Time* are apt
To open, and the illustrated mayor of New York,
Given a glimpse of how and where I work,
To note yet one more house that can be scrapped.

Unwillingly I picture
My walls weathering in the general view.
It is not even as though the new
Buildings did very much for architecture.

Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires
That these as well be blasted in their prime.
You would think the simple fact of having lasted
Threatened our cities like mysterious fires.

There are certain phrases which to use in a poem
Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright
But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.
For instance, how “the sickness of our time”

Enhances, then debases, what I feel.
At my desk I swallow in a glass of water
No longer cordial, scarcely wet, a pill
They had told me not to take until much later.

With the result that back into my imagination
The city glides, like cities seen from the air,
Mere smoke and sparkle to the passenger
Having in mind another destination
Which now is not that honey-slow descent
Of the Champs-Élysées, her hand in his,
But the dull need to make some kind of house
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.

[1962]

Notes

_The White Goddess:_

calligraphic: calligraphy is the art of fine handwriting (calligraphic is the adjective).

tendril: a twisting, threadlike structure by which a twining plant, such as a grape or cucumber, grasps an object or a plant for support.

cross-hatched: marked or shaded with two or more sets of intersecting parallel lines.

rondure: a circular or gracefully rounded object.

pousse-café: a small drink served after dinner (especially several liqueurs poured carefully so as to remain in separate layers). [from the French for “coffee chaser”]

_Time:_ news periodical.

quicksilver: mercury (the only metal that is liquid at room temperature). If you rub mercury on coins, they will shine like new, but this shine will not last.

the Champs-Elysées: famous wide street in Paris. [French for “Elysian Fields,” the “Fields of the Blest” in ancient myths where the just went after death.]
Matinées

for David Kalstone

A gray maidservant lets me in
To Mrs. Livingston’s box. It’s already begun!
The box is full of grown-ups. She sits me down
Beside her. Meanwhile a ravishing din

Swells from below—Scene One
Of Das Rheingold. The entire proscenium
Is covered with a rippling azure scrim.
The three sopranos dart hither and yon

On invisible strings. Cold lights
Cling to bare arms, fair tresses. Flat
And natural aglitter like paillettes
Upon the great green sonorous depths float

Until with pulsing wealth the house is filled,
No one believing, everybody thrilled.

Lives of the Great Composers make it sound
Too much like cooking: “Sore beset,
He put his heart’s blood into that quintet…”
So let us try the figure turned around

As in some Lives of Obscure Listeners:
“The strains of Cimarosa and Mozart
Flowed through his veins, and fed his solitary heart.
Long beyond adolescence [One infers
Your elimination, sweet Champagne
Drunk between acts!] the aria’s remote
Control surviving his worst interval,

Tissue of sound and tissue of the brain
Would coalesce, and what the Masters wrote
Itself compose his features sharp and small.”

Hilariously Dr. Scherer took the guise
Of a bland smoothshaven Alberich whose age-old
Plan had been to fill my tooth with gold.
Another whiff of laughing gas,
And the understanding was implicit
That we must guard each other, this gold and I,
Against amalgamation by
The elemental pit.

Vague as to what dentist and tooth “stood for,”
One patient dreamer gathered something more.
A voice said in the speech of birds,

“My father having tampered with your mouth,
From now on, metal, music, myth
Will seem to taint its words.”

We love the good, said Plato? He was wrong.
We love as well the wicked and the weak.
Flesh hugs its shaved plush. Twenty-four-hour-long
Galas fill the hulk of the Comique.

Flesh knows by now what dishes to avoid,
Tries not to brood on bomb or heart attack.
Anatomy is destiny, said Freud.
Soul is the brilliant hypochondriac.

Soul will cough blood and sing, and softer sing,
Drink poison, breathe her joyous last, a waltz
Rubato from his arms who sobs and stays

Behind, death after death, who fairly melts
Watching her turn from him, restored, to fling
Kisses into the furnace roaring praise.

The fallen cake, the risen price of meat,
Staircase run ten times up and down like scales
(Greek proverb: He who has no brains has feet)—
One’s household opera never palls or fails.

The pipes’ aubade. Recitatives—Come back!
—I’m out of pills!—We’d love to!—What?—Nothing,
Let me be!—No, no, I’ll drink it black . . .
The neighbors’ chorus. The quick darkening

In which a prostrate figure must inquire
With every earmark of its being meant
Why God in Heaven harries him/her so.
The love scene (often cut). The potion. The tableau:
Sleepers folded in a magic fire,
Tongues flickering up from humdrum incident.

When Jan Kiepura sang His Handsomeness
Of Mantua those high airs light as lust
Attuned one’s bare throat to the dagger-thrust.
Living for them would have been death no less.

Or Lehmann’s Marchallin!—heartbreak so shrewd,
So ostrich-plumed, one ached to disengage
Oneself from a lost love, at center stage,
To the beloved’s dazzled gratitude.

What havoc certain Sunday afternoons
Wrought upon a bright young person’s morals
I now leave to the public to condemn.

The point thereafter was to arrange for one’s
Own chills and fever, passion and betrayals,
Chiefly in order to make song of them.

You and I, caro, seldom
Risk the real thing any more.
It’s all too silly or too solemn.
Enough to know the score

From records or transcription
For our four hands. Old beauties, some
In advanced stages of decomposition,

Float up through the sustaining
Pedal’s black and fluid medium.
Days like today

Even recur (wind whistling themes
From Lulu, and sun shining
On the rough Sound) when it seems
Kinder to remember than to play.

Dear Mrs. Livingston,
I want to say that I am still in a daze
From yesterday afternoon.
I will treasure the experience always—

My very first Grand Opera! It was very
Thoughtful of you to invite
Me and am so sorry
That I was late, and for my coughing fit.

I play my record of the Overture
Over and over. I pretend
I am still sitting in the theater.

I also wrote a poem which my Mother
Says I should copy out and send.
Every gratefully, Your little friend . . .

[1969]

Notes
The Ring Cycle

1
They’re doing a Ring cycle at the Met,
Four operas in one week, for the first time
Since 1939. I went to that one.
Then war broke out, Flagstad flew home, tastes veered
To tuneful deaths and dudgeons. Next to Verdi,
Whose riddles I could whistle but not solve,
Wagner had been significance itself,
Great golden lengths of it, stitched with motifs,
A music in whose folds the mind, at twelve,
Came to its senses: Twin, Sword, Forest Bird,
Envy, Redemption through Love . . . But left unheard
These fifty years? A fire of answered prayers
Burned round that little pitcher with big ears
Who now wakes. Night. E-flat denotes the Rhine,

2
Young love, moon-flooded hut, and the act ends.
House lights. The matron on my left exclaims.
We gasp and kiss. Our mothers were best friends.
Now, old as mothers, here we sit. Too weird.
That man across the aisle, with lambswool beard,
Was once my classmate, or a year behind me.
Alone, in black, in front of him, Maxine . . .
It’s like the Our Town cemetery scene!
We have long evenings to absorb together
Before the world ends: once familiar faces
Transfigured by the hi-tech rainbow and mist,
Fireball and thunderhead. Make-believe weather
Calling no less for prudence. At our stage
When recognition strikes, who can afford
The strain it places on the old switchboard?

3
Fricka looks pleased with her new hairdresser.
Brünnhilde (Behrens) has abandoned hers.
Russet-maned, eager for battle, she butts her father
Like a playful pony. They’ve all grown, these powers,
So young, so human. So exploitable.
The very industries whose “major funding”
Underwrote the production continue to plunder
The planet’s wealth. Erda, her cobwebs beaded
With years of seeping waste, subsides unheeded
—Right, Mr. President? Right, Texaco?—
Into a gas-blue cleft. Singers retire,
Yes, but take pupils. Not these powers, no, no.
What corporation Wotan, trained by them,
Returns gold to the disaffected river,
Or preatomic sanctity to fire?

4
Brünnhilde confronts Siegfried. That is to say,
Two singers have been patiently rehearsed
So that their tones and attitudes convey
Outrage and injured innocence. But first
Two youngsters became singers, strove to master
Every nuance of innocence and outrage
Even in the bosom of their stolid
Middleclass families who made it possible
To study voice, and languages, take lessons
In how the woman loves, the hero dies . . .
Tonight again, each note a blade reforged,
The dire oath ready in their blood is sworn.
Two world-class egos, painted, overweight,
Who’ll joke at supper side by side, now hate
So plausibly that one old stagehand cries.

5
I’ve worn my rings—all three of them
At once for the first time—to the Ring.
Like pearls in seawater they gleam,
A facet sparkles through waves of sound.

Of their three givers one is underground,
One far off, one here listening.

On ring is gold; one silver, set
With two small diamonds; the third, bone
—Conch shell, rather. Ocean cradled it

As earth did the gems and metals. All unknown,
Then, were the sweatshops of Nibelheim

That worry Nature into jewelry,
Orbits of power, Love’s over me,

Or music’s, as his own chromatic scales
Beset the dragon, over Time.
Back when the old house was being leveled
And this one built, I made a contribution.
Accordingly, a seat that bears my name
Year after year between its thin, squared shoulders
(Where Hagen is about to aim his spear)
Bides its time in instrumental gloom.
These evenings we’re safe. Our seats belong
To Walter J. and Ortrud Fogelsang
—Whoever they are, or were. But late one night
(How is it possible? I’m sound asleep!)
I stumble on “my” darkened place. The plaque
Gives off that phosphorescent sheen of Earth’s
Address book. Stranger yet, as I sink back,
The youth behind me, daybreak in his eyes—
A son till now undreamed of—makes to rise.

[1995]

See and hear Merrill read this poem at:
http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/merrill/merrillarchive.html

Notes
The Ring Cycle: four long operas by Richard Wagner that combine Norse and German mythology. The operas are not frequently performed as a complete cycle. The production that Merrill attended in the 1990s has since been retired. A new production of The Ring is underway.

The Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad is sometimes considered the greatest singer of the twentieth century. When World War II broke out, the Metropolitan opera stopped performances of German opera.

Giuseppe Verdi was an Italian opera composer, more known for his tuneful airs (in comparison with Wagner). Wagner and Verdi are generally considered the greatest opera composers of the nineteenth century. Sometimes it is said that you either love Wagner or you love Verdi but not both, though of course many opera-goers do like both composers.

The first opera of The Ring, Das Rheingold, begins with a slow sequence of notes (an E-flat chord) that is meant to represent nature and the Rhine river. This sequence speeds up and increases in volume until the first singer, a Rhine maiden, makes her appearance.

Our Town is a play by Thornton Wilder. In the “cemetery scene,” dead people of the town awake and talk to each other as though they were attending a reunion.

Fricka and Brünnhilde are characters in the opera. Hildegard Behrens was the soprano who sang the role of Brünnhilde in the production Merrill attended.