

*Work in Progress as of 5/20/2015*

# AUTOMATOMA

## Selected Poems

by  
Richard L. Rose

*“ . . . What boots it with uncessant care  
To tend the homely slighted Shepherd’s trade,  
And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?”*  
—John Milton, *Lycidas*

### **Foreword**

The poems are selected from other collections and from current work. Without prizes or notice, I have happily composed poems and music for more than fifty years. The urgency in the poems comes therefore not from advanced age but from a concern about our feelings and imagination being contracted out at the very moment the earth requires our labor-intensive efforts. Peace,

Richard L. Rose

**Automatoma**

Of our first disobedience now the fruit  
has ripened in a thing against our nature,  
a growth that rules us we have bred from rules,  
a coded being, supreme appliance, image  
and appendage overgrown: a cyst  
like an ovarian anomaly  
with true eyes, hair, eleven misplaced teeth,  
and six or twenty fingers on a hand—or more—  
made to assist.

### Offload

So in those days did keepers of the codes  
 receive each one the stacks to own and give  
 successors—lines like tea-streams from a sieve.  
 None kept the whole nor knew another's loads.  
 And so we lived on geode-perfect lines,  
 laid planes on planes so lovingly aligned  
 by rules; thus separated, none would find  
 behind this crystal clarity designs  
 or meanings, questions, knowing or desire  
 to know. All had been done, offload complete  
 and, all in care of all, lest one should ask  
 for more within our crystal cage; inquire  
 of sacred artifices, and unseat  
 the rules which give each safety, place, and task.

We were done for by our artifices  
 doing for us what we need not, must not  
 do and, given all we asked, should not,  
 in courtesy, decline. So if one says  
 that we were yearning for a better life  
 before the system failed, consider, please:  
 from governance to working on your knees;  
 from butcher's cleaver to the surgeon's knife;  
 from office memo to the railway switch;  
 from deftly plying words to bending pipe;  
 from making cells to towers of any size;  
 from drilling down to data or to ditch,  
 our automatic comforters could wipe  
 our tears, delight our hearts, and fill our eyes.

The wide-spread crowd also provided votes  
revealing what we thought, compiled our lives,  
counted births and deaths, husbands and wives:  
a cloud to guide us made of data-motes.

So all in care of all, the crowd dispersed,  
the public places cleared, the element  
inclined to anarchy or to foment  
unrestful musings compiled from its first  
deflection; filed and held for questioning  
in endless loops by algorithmic troops.  
We could not but be at peace. You say  
an undercurrent of distrust was stirring?  
You are forgiven. So must drowsy dupes  
of ease be gently wakened to the day.

We were so glad and settled being served!  
We loved our things at hand. Convenience  
became us. Credit swept away expenses.

Taste every form! The Haida mask, the curved  
Etruscan leaf, the pansy petal's flavor!  
Such treasures suited us as we became  
royals, sea-men, hunters, any name,  
role, desire or feeling we would savor.  
Imagine all of us roped eye to eye  
in cabled unity that never sleeps,  
in automated oneness, seeing all,  
breathing an animated, wireless sigh,  
throbbing with simulated pulse that beeps,

crowd-surrounded. All in care of all.

All in care for all, imagine us,  
and, if you can, forgive our vigilance,  
our violence, and—yes—omnipotence.  
Forgive the self-affirming god in us  
who made that world and saw that it was good  
to let the Outer Mind of all displace  
the heart's rehearsals, cultivated grace,  
enacted wisdom and embodied good,  
engagement with our lives and with the Earth.

The promise of reverberant connection  
with heady thoughts had filled a puffed confection.  
Ascending with our profits and self-worth,  
having offloaded sense for delectation,  
we floated on delight without direction . . .

### **The Installation**

"Fixtures become us."

(Here he mentions plumbing,  
jointed conduits, and sinks.)

"Inners make outers."

(Nodding, finger pointed.)

"It's topology," he says.

"Outwards the inward—"

then he lingers, pauses—

"folds, bends, twists, pulls, or absorbs."

"We in our beings

are effects and causes.

You are fixtures like us."

Closing his sloped face,

he then slides; connects us;

seats us deeply into our work.

**Patch this to his midbrain.**

In a six foot line that one must read as five  
 by somewhere stealing stress, more briefly to arrive,  
 the Morphemic Operator designated  
 contrived (uneasily) to write a pattern slated  
 for another operator from the pool.

Tedium, praise for the end of the shift, or the Rule  
 itself a challenge (confining duty to directives):  
 though she was only to abbreviate connectives—  
 for whatever reason—she had tired of this  
 and pulled up a readout problem none would miss.

It came from the bench of a Particle Counter  
 like a meditation upon emptiness.

This Scintillator on his early morning stints  
 (shift same as hers; as tedious, on evidence)  
 was wasting costly beta cocktails on restarts;

his overruns required excuses and new parts.

The screen's left margin stealing a space each line,  
 zero untrue and shifting, he could not assign  
 corrections fast enough to track the slight advances  
 and declines; the rubato robot ruined chances  
 of his ever keeping error five percent:

Just the problem for subvocal management.

She produced a ponder program to improve his dwell  
 on noise and static and give him peace with the erratic:

*Come, Oh come, Oh sweet and careless feast of lips and hands  
 and breasts and tongues and catching, spilling,  
 wasting, reaching, tasting, drinking, stretching;*

*Come and come again, droop and rise increased; dwindle,  
dally, strum the belly of desire; swim the medley—mound  
and cave, brook and pyre, reach within reach settling  
only to reach higher, slowing to heaviness and subtler,  
bluer fire;*

*Come, blue-green and slippery from slumbering eddies: lie  
slyly on my thoughts, you fingering, shallow roots;  
drench me, seize my gentle flowers, crush my shoots with  
swelling softness, salt me in your shuddering breeze.*

This the Morphemic Operator for the Counter  
whose quench curve flagged and error rose unsated,  
prepared: a sutra, subvocal and subzero,  
to conduct him, as a pilgrim on a saunter  
through emptiness and cool expanses of unstated  
uselessness, to dwell in secret warmth of snow.

**The News We Never Missed**

Rockets eyeless and aimless from Gaza  
drop and pound on the hardened and buried.  
Rockets answer them, flattening Gaza.  
Four and twenty young blackbirds not singing—  
baked—are carried in green coffin wrappers.  
North of Baghdad and nestled in bunkers  
waiting union, the kisses of missiles  
spreading Sarin are captured in thousands.  
Sinai's pharmacist, selling his thousands,  
dozes painlessly. Flown from the Maldives,  
Roman Seleznev runs out of credit.  
Smallpox is found in a drawer like a pencil  
never missed, like Ebola in Guinea,  
or like Eagle Tail, choked on a hot dog.

### Seeing Regis and Kathie Lee on a Bus in Richmond

For man's convenience but for women more—  
 because a man will tend to go without  
 and let a finger freeze or be the last  
 to notice the disease that turned his feet  
 to yams, and spend instead of save excess—  
 come such movers and appliances.

Some from acres surmountably intact  
 scrape floors, while others pave the foliage smooth  
 as commentary; sometimes *we* are moved,  
 as by this broadcast to a bus  
 of drowsy riders settling on no thoughts  
 going down Carey Street to Shockoe Slip—  
 a street that only goes one way—who slip  
 from rides to drives as unaccountably  
 as little gusts throw sand along the curb;  
 who watch cold bucket jaws drool masonry  
 and, waiting turns, apply the images  
 chattering in our eyes to some defect  
 that these appliances repair or ease—

all these appliances: the shuttle bus,  
 the crane tipping to set a mixer neat  
 on scaffolding as twirls in petitpoint;  
 the Hosts of Muddled Flight who justify  
 themselves by being namebrands nationwide,

identifiable and talkative  
as once Amana, Waring, Bendix were,  
speaking from exhibits of The Home  
To Come (whose kitchen's so convenient  
we no longer use it).

But women, used  
to transformed versions of reality,  
to these devices men put first or last,  
always prefer incarnate evidence  
of what some wish became, or even how  
obedience to an internal code  
could be inferred from placement of the hands.

They muse upon the application less  
than context, such as Meaning of a Touch,  
of corn that grew from what we didn't eat,  
of baby's feet that curled without commands  
to show them light; of smudge of painful color  
in a crystal blur of raging fact.

They find secreted these original,  
these germinal and ever incomplete,  
imperfect meanings even in the Show  
that lets its image chatter slow enough  
for us to see, and in the Talk that stool  
to stool somehow restores to us the Word.

**Landmark Shopping Center**

Landmark will survive my mention  
I assume -- the shopping  
Pickups, Hardtops, Coupes ingress,  
the nibbling Backhoe leer,

Shored and guard-railed, Shirley Highway  
like a fault-line thunder,  
gliding fenderlings shoal  
in the parking lot,

surround Sears Automotive,  
sniff the slake-lime halls,  
gabble in the slack currents  
between tides,  
desires founder.

### A prophet

. . . While Youth makes good its escape,  
 Age blazes its return.  
 So it was with Avery Crawley,  
 called from snipping chromosomes.

Once, at his bench in Bethesda,  
 he saw things differently.  
 From centers that surround—from cells—a  
 a beacon signaled him, he says.

"In a simple cell division  
 captured by a vision:  
 on one page my life completed  
 embracing dragons I defeated."

All that he was he left behind.  
 (Logic, too, it would seem—  
 for the logic of a dream.)  
 A vision swallowed up his life.

But he left a path to follow,  
 the pattern of the whole  
 eternal cycle of return—a  
 probing past speech to find speech.

Unlike cloud busters, healers, quacks,  
 spoon benders, fortune tellers,  
 Crawley neither sought true belief  
 nor sold orgone, ankhs, or angst.

He seemed amused by those who did.  
Sometimes he'd lift his ball cap,  
look at you with cloudy eyes  
and tell his vision like a wisecrack.

"All things on earth shall pass away," he'd say.  
"Of course, many should.  
Your wastes are curdling in the seas.  
They seep from aquifers and drains.

"They tangle fur and beaks and brains  
yet you feel none of this.  
Your middens fill with goods unsold,  
your streets with sleepers in the cold.

"All things on earth shall pass away  
and none of you will notice—a  
feelings and dreamings die together  
while you eat seed corn in warm weather . . . ."

### **Crooked E's and Other Swell Ideas**

Many were the elaberrations,  
 the buffaloes and buffalos  
 massing in corridors,  
 their whistles bristling,  
 racing from stage to exits.

Makeshifts  
 of bones and hieroglyphs—  
 bricolage of shelters,  
 hedge annuities, monoliths  
 and multiple holdings—  
 scaffoldings  
 secure for now—  
 do not mistake:  
 they are provisional.

So much meant to last  
 at best will simply hold.  
 Pardon, but have you noticed,  
 mean time,  
 how the tables turned  
 not only for Greenwich  
 but for the “green world”?  
 And how usury is small potatoes  
 compared to derivatives  
 and gas bubbles like drunks  
 guessing their way upstairs  
 on a delicate spiral path  
 Of prices and pizzazz?  
 No AC for CA, but Surf's up.

How piquant.  
Nothing was more natural  
than to set the standard  
by the center of the Empire,  
having finally made it not  
Spain or Seven Nederlands  
Or France, but closer  
to Aldersgate and Cheapside,  
where the gin distillery exploded,  
showering the thankful mob.

Nothing is more natural  
than looking in the mirror  
to be centered, Mr. Fox,  
whether we're talking poles or souls.  
What becomes of discarded centers?  
Do they roll away like doughnut holes  
or rust out like unvisited strip malls?  
"Position yourself,"  
the advisors remarked,  
singing another tune, but descant,  
as they left us holding the tulips,  
junk bonds, and swollen ergo sums.

Summing up, it would appear  
that appearances are what they seem  
and that unseemliness  
is what we have to work with.

**Deflections**

Making shifts continually,  
riding bubbles to surmise our lot  
within a multiverse where the demise  
of time's arrow, like as not,  
with other certainties,  
makes us a drifting snow,  
a scattering of selves,  
we inspect the scene  
for some perch to hold it captive  
in landscape, story, score  
or string of formulas,  
but finally, seeing the hour,  
genuflect, rise, leave the service  
as the fauxbourdon swells behind us,  
and again approach the day  
with its deflections.

### **Wooly Bears**

Nature also has its fasts and feast days,  
its Shrovetides and somber passion plays,  
its seasons of contrition and confessions,  
its invitations and its grave processions,  
its Jubilee years, coming after plague  
and pilgrimages holy, long and vague.

With pinching steps and bristly flourishes  
the wooly bears, for leaves or low October,  
or whatever nourishes a great endeavor,  
drop to the highway at midday and die  
in quiet thousands; in this dolorous way  
they leave behind no trail but themselves—  
no slimy ribbon of mycelia,  
no stained glass or slaggy heap of tailings.

No sunken bridge or termitary tunnels  
crumble after them. No wake of pillage  
trails their pageant, but some of them grow wings.

**Morning Find**

Going to nowhere  
faster than usual—  
only a day since  
grackle departed  
feathers (as usual,  
left on the doorstep),  
gone to the where none  
fares any well from—  
still among breathers,  
sweeping the carnage,  
I wake in plumage.

**A truth**

Immense in a tiny back yard  
the oak with its terrifying crown  
a frozen dance of dryad arms  
slowly shakes everything in reach.  
What is this tangle, this individual?  
A record of its own life in splay  
of paths, spray of leaves  
thrown out in all directions,  
raking the sky, here is proof  
being centered is untroubled travel,  
unlike the pinched face beneath it  
of the house with stained roof  
which suffers from the idea  
it is alone and cannot move.

**Morning horizon**

Temporary states,  
less loquacious,  
less densely and intensely  
outrageous than us  
pass us with solemn restraint,  
spacious sweep, incurious steps.

Able to become whatever  
they may seem while being  
what, do you think? Angels?  
Shades, vaporous particles  
crackling past us on their ways  
in and out of entities? Or  
is that red plum-flesh  
alive with pain and desire?

### Sunday Afternoon

I organize my life around no Cause.  
 Perhaps this should be cause for some regret  
 because a Daily Office fills the time  
 that would be ordinary otherwise.  
 Stations are provided, places marked,  
 rubrics followed and events announced.  
 Whether Prayer or Trees come first or Guns  
 or Better Schools or Gender Equity,  
 Deterring Crime or Saving Market Share,  
 or Marginalization of the Arts,  
 these causes help to fill an afternoon  
 that seems to be about some grief in joy  
 or joy in grief I cannot recognize.

The robins have returned to fill the gutter  
 with their sticks. Forsythia retires  
 to the background for another year.  
 A late frost takes some casualties but comes  
 as no surprise, since months of freezing rain  
 and sleet and snow so hard our tracks don't sink,  
 and ice polyps made of laurel buds  
 have made me wary of the ordinary;  
 uneasy with the afternoon, the warmth,  
 bees in holly, and steady pulse of clicks  
 the ratcheting horizon makes past noon,  
 the light that sinters memories to bone.

### **Spared**

Metered by heart-beat, rise  
 and fall of chest, the plod  
 of pondering, while elsewhere  
 in this tea or hand  
 lifting the cup, or sky  
 all is scintillas perishing,  
 I only see the dawn.

### **A necessary bias**

One can only take so much—  
 clank of tailgate,  
 ooze of verse,  
 pails of clinkers  
 left from squeezed proceeds  
 of pteropsids and titanotheres.

What coheres, adumbrative  
 though it is—  
 the marred, glassy,  
 matted, inert  
 fixture of a mind—  
 narrows, skews, but thereby warms the heart.

How to see out from this hard,  
 knowing crystal,  
 face to face  
 with your angles?  
 It takes a kind of squint  
 finally to make out the distant hurt.

**Lucretius**

So, did the costume of that gospel we are bit  
players battered, blown, and always losing something  
that we may later need become a creed too tight  
fitting, like all uniforms, though, fear of hell  
dispelled, the gods and death itself were shown the exit?

You, who portrayed your holy book, interpreted  
stagecraft, lined out scenes, and wrapped the universe  
in one scheme, cutting even into love's sloughed image,  
you could not take poison, potion, or position  
conditioned on delusion. You had too clear a head.

This stage, this world's the pattern we inhabit, so  
careless in our play of wills that we've forgotten  
the plotting has been done, ourselves the consequence.  
Dissolution waits. We try on hope, convince  
ourselves, and relish, if we're wise, that we can know.

**Teak Walker***Act I*

His pace his own, it only happened  
she was keeping up with him.  
In her string-bag she carried things  
he wouldn't eat without a fight.  
The streets were rivers; he could dive,  
come up in shattered glass and screams,  
drive, trailing cheers, and break away  
in squealing turn and nitrous haze  
low as a shadow to the road—  
or he could simply roll and glide.

She waited while he got a trim,  
pulled her socks and held her purse.  
His barber smelled of talc and chaw,  
chanted the Racing Form, and wheezed  
when he had to reach across  
Eric Walker, smooth the cloth  
and crank the chair down to the floor.  
"This boy has grown. Why, thank you, Ma'am."  
She kept ahead of him, so close  
they could hold hands. No, better not.

Passing the Dollar Store, the bar  
that he could tell you all about  
although he'd never been, her friends  
on every stoop, they paused to lean  
into the Preacher's car and nod  
regarding how the world had slid,

weaving from car to car in twilight  
motionless in amber talk,  
drivers sitting on their hoods  
and willows tipping down to hear.

They reached their porch as thieves ran out--  
banging the door--someone he knew  
struck her where her gray hair thinned  
along the crown--some kind of pipe.  
She shuddered like a bat he'd poked  
once in a tree; her arms fell down.

Tomatoes leaped off down the steps--  
down, down--and she talked to him or God.  
"Abide with me," she said  
and smiled at him and closed her wings.

### *Act II*

Her name was Myra—Rudy's cousin  
from Mobile. Rudy later said  
she brought him lunch because of Teak—  
Eric Walker—Teak, they called him.  
"Black Teak, only wood that sinks.  
He drinks it in but doesn't speak:  
too dark inside to be too close  
to anyone, he live alone,  
eat alone and work alone—  
a tree so big and dense takes space,"  
She said, first leaving sandwiches

where he could find them; later, soft  
as bedspread his mother cast  
like a fishnet over him,  
Myra James knelt down to him—  
her hazel eyes on him alone;  
she settled over him like grace—  
the kind of grace his mother said  
was greater than our sin but not,  
till this, a thing to be believed.

He'd filled his head with program code—  
not what you showed to anyone  
or talked about, except sometimes  
he told his mother—if she heard.  
Myra would smile and bring him drinks.  
One day he didn't go to work—  
Rudy had no lunch, they laughed.  
"Download anytime you want,  
Teak, honey. I will serve your file."  
With Rudy Program Manager,  
gone every other week on calls;  
two salesmen and a clerk in front,  
Teak was the only research staff.  
He had four clones he rolled between  
tying their memories in knots.  
Sometimes after they had raced  
together he would talk to them  
like a boy who walks the hots  
around the track another turn.

Myra didn't interfere.  
 Just to be near him was enough.  
 She came midmornings; stayed past lunch.  
 Teak could palm a coconut,  
 his hands so big; and when he stood  
 was nothing that he couldn't reach.  
 One day she watched him change a light  
 without the ladder or the help  
 another man would need. He knew  
 she watched –and changed the ballast too.  
 She watched him and the way he lived  
 so close in on himself he'd crowd  
 her out if ever she allowed  
 herself to seem to want him more.

They knew how it had been and why  
 since Zula Walker passed from Can  
 to Can't. The darkness left behind  
 grew deeper, like an abscess, sore  
 and cavitating everything  
 he did. She meant for this to change.

He would not play ball in school  
 or Navy. He would not hang out.  
 He had one goal —and object code  
 was only part of it —one pole  
 worth discovering —one aim  
 worth uncovering in time—  
 in due time. Nothing could be scant  
 in preparation: Master code,  
 crypto, and make some rank.

He did all this and bought the store  
with Rudy, who grew up with him;  
Rudy who hustled, made cold calls,  
pumped up sales, played the track;  
Rudy, gone every other week,  
leaving him with Cousin Myra,  
who knew that if she got too close  
he'd bolt and spin and break away;  
Rudy, the one friend who made good—  
but always left the books to Teak.

*Act III*

The plums and arbor were Teak's age;  
pink Liatris and nodding Phlox  
grew under them with sage and chives;  
tomatoes of all colors, staked  
with red peppers, grew beside.  
He'd kept up Zula's garden beds  
but mostly, working on her knees,  
tough as roots that wouldn't come,  
and hands spotted with age like leaves  
begun to mottle, Zula kept them.

Myra arched her back and yawned,  
pointing her toes, and turned to him.  
He counted freckles on her nose  
and traced their sprinkling on her cheek.  
He held her down."It's time to walk,"

she said, kissing him, pushing back,  
sucking her teeth, "and this must change—"  
But Rudy pulled her down again.  
"You sure these back-ups worked for him?"  
"Poor dense old Teak, I'm telling you,"  
she said, "he let me see the files.  
Didn't know a thing I did."  
"Cousin, he's got code for brains.  
His precious store he doesn't own.  
And the bid we get for this  
will set us up in Cozumel.  
Good old Navy buddy Teak—  
I'm the only one he trusts."

Rudy didn't know he'd seen  
the night he swung the pipe and ran.  
Three years passed before they met  
in Pensacola, bound for school—  
tough training Big Teak helped him through.  
Teak had a goal.  
The plane would land.  
The LOAD command would arm the file,  
crash both drives and print these lines:

*"Teak don't swallow all he drinks,  
and it's ebony that sinks."*

The Prosecutor had Teak's books—  
the real ones he had kept, and tapes  
of Myra, faithful to her friend.

His mother never loved him less  
for failing her, though she was mute  
and something from her mind was God's:  
the angels took it, Preacher said.

But every shoot she set grew tall  
and strong like him and bore good fruit.

"Your hand," he said. Now it could end.

### **Cruise Control**

Cruise control is a state of mind.  
Lock the speed in. Insert a pause.  
Find within any urgent drive  
cause to hesitate. After using  
live explosives—each charged with shock—  
taking pressures till power exhausts—  
detonating precious plans to costs  
day by day; after watching what  
jam why to gassy nought: Why, then,  
shut down, drift in a cloudy thought;  
cruise and troll in a lake of mind;  
drift past deadlines and then notice Death  
slam his brake in the other lane.  
Cruise control is a state to mind  
borders of—a long dotted line  
showing history where to cut.

### **Drive Through**

This has been your life. Let me clear away  
inconveniences. Am I in your way?  
Pay or reckoning automatically  
in a single stop: Key your number in.  
Ever there to serve. Feeling queasy yet?  
Everybody does. As they will explain,  
Rollovers occur at a higher rate  
nowhere better than –given there's a where  
one of us could stay rather than drive through.  
By the way, come Spring, you've already won  
flights to anywhere you can ride on moths.  
Beatitude depends upon your attitude.

**Drive-Through Teller**

Convenience cannot be denied;  
therefore draw alongside—whoosh—  
pneumatic spiriting away  
any needs you bring here: checks,  
deposits, fees too dear to name.  
Through-put care. Give it a code  
to rout your anguish, grief and doubts.  
Draw near. Take, and sign. Be saved.

**None comes more quickly;**  
goes more contentiously  
than Firm Opinion.  
None.

## Palliative Care

*Cloak the eyes.  
This trance though  
incurable  
can be made  
bearable  
salved by words'  
holy spit.<sup>1</sup>*

Cloak the eyes. This trance though incurable can be made bearable salved by words' holy spit.

Now to Dub. Try to keep from doing what was done to you. You can't. The crazy rite you endured goes on. Nothing going, you spin in place. Take Dub Wishard. So short of names, Lou picked Duvier, her Cajun uncle's. Called Duveer, Dovey, and Douche, his freshman year he made it Dub; joined the Gams. Spinning in place, his son's Duvier. Dub Two's a Gam. His freshman year he made it Del—throwing up vodka, Corona, and a possum behind the House. Dub was thrilled Del was a Gam. Gastric lavage done, so was Del. The spin cycle might have wrung another Dub, male or female, but a year's drunk weekends later Del dropped out and had a wreck catching the truck who cut him off. An ER nurse named Tracie remembered him from Foster High playing drums. Two weeks later they lived together.

Spin in place like the Earth. Granted, it shifts position—who's tracking it? We search our dreams. We dream our searches.

Lena Lawrence the Director died. Rochester-trained, aspiring to make Dumont Choir a Shaw Chorale, she lost to Del. Trace said the altos and Dawn could stand Del's voice absent Lena's vocalise. The free-will help pleased Pastor Mills. (Lena'd been paid.) Were they surprised when Del arrived with speakers, drums, bassist, girl singer and keyboard charts riddles to Dawn Mills. Choir rehearsals Del called *sessions* two weeks until the Pastor sat in because Dawn made him. And Del returned to Dub's rec-room. The episode discouraged Del for seven years.

Dub would have worried but for Lou, Arla, and the Siamese. Cornering the cat at

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<sup>1</sup> For readers' relief, this work is set as a prose poem rather than as the two-foot lines in which it was composed.

last—string-garrotted—his eye-brow bleeding for the last time, Dub couldn't say where Sweetie'd got to. That left Arla and Lou, his mom who wheezed at night across the hall as the live-in took her to the pot.

*—Sixteen of us, eight facing eight, me and Lois, fifteen years boxed Models; taped the boxes. Near as you now, she died. I'd like it that way—quick as a snip. Lucky Strikes slip off wheels to packs and hand to hand. None knows it. None feels the going. Where's my smoke? That Arla's hid it. My house she waits for, Lorena, as I for this BM. Nothing you've done can make it pass.*

Lorena screamed. Del hid his phone. Arla woke Dub. He held his pants up, elastic gone; stared at Lou's hand on his new tile floor. Arla called. She was the one waiting to call all this time. He guessed this while the orange-vested driver spoke.

*—So often when we get the call they're on the toilet. Maybe you know it's death. You rush to bear down, maybe to expel it.*

After that, Del left off calling Trace. That kind of talk she said upset her life with Mike—that dirty talk. From the Bahama cruise Arla owed herself without Dub, Ciguatera sent her home itching and sleepless. So the reefs blanching from touch and commerce reached into Dub's life. Arla insisted Lou woke her nightly. Later she saw Lou afloat in daylight, puffing over coffee, which burned like ice. As her cells' gates flew open, she stalled in dingy smoke. Where does this system end—skinsedge; chair-railed surround of supper table where Dub's sister Sis ladled soup after Grave-side; the wide-spread plans of Uncle Mick who followed Del into the bathroom smoking and talking so Del couldn't sit; or mycelium of enterprise infesting Mick, whose investments in micronils ran to millions; or blue film of gasps, wheezes, whistles, shrieks, fulminations, roars and whispers far and near—the Troposphere—or where trance ends?

Mick took Del on, showed him extruders; how loose gel hardened as it whipped and cooled. Grignard and cross-linked resins beyond him, Del preferred the show room: micronils cool to touch, silver, some jeweled for Asian markets, some jet black, others

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opal, intricately whorled within. Twelve women milled the edges smooth; inserted wire flowers for the line of Bagatelles, and custom-wrapped. Mick's division made Standards, Bagatelles, Economies, and Smoothgrips; employed hundreds. Del found his place.

So, on that day, left behind not by Rapture but by selves streaming off unsnagged from duties, Dub was alone. Coming home from shifting rows and columns, he knew they'd been there—a glass in the sink, a drawer ajar. They watched; recorded twenty-four seven; put itching powder in his bed; turned his stools black with warfarin; flooded his crawl space; called and hung up; wired his home; wanted all he knew so they could scrub his mind, impair his power to think through their far-reaching, sordid, festering schemes—pustulant issues which took away his mother, wife and son. And now they wanted his house to stop him talking.

Here is the issue: incommensurables, incompatibles, an antinomy—the one in many; the many, one; protean; the appetite for savagery yet able to trace the beautiful line of a forehead, to slice out a shoulder of cow or a man for butcher or bodymerchant—transactions equal in value, all the same to restless creatures who can do anything.

Try loving others as yourself. It can be done but be prepared. Things will not change or go your way. Cut with the grain.

Pray simply *Our Father*, all from one source called Parent—a kind one—wanting all our best. Sis believed this. Her Papa, Lou's Bill, was why. Touchet Parish, where Bill came from was tallow trees, rice, scum-sheen inlets, giggling frogs mud mushing moonlit nights, and herons. You could shout. No one would hear. Green bottle flies hopped—or changed coordinates—to reappear a yard away.

So Bill and Lou appeared in Richmond, shivarees sung, lace curtains packed, and saints appeased, to roll tobacco and lay lead pipe. The city stretched past Ginter's Hill, past burley fields around Marse Robert, past Jordan's Branch, and sprouted taps to every

house. *Like roots*, Bill said, the pipe he laid—cradled down, ropes pulled back up, Finch showing off standing on it, like a boat's hull overturned in the ditch a spring had filled—spread west and north. Its runners watered shacks and mansions all from one source. *Sis girl*, he told her, *we seem to know things but it's the bayou feeds our roots. All of us tap it. We're only how it makes new life.*

Plumbing supply was Bill's new life for forty years. He passed in sleep. Lou heard him say *The anchor bolt has broken clean*. To Papa she was *ma gentille*. Lou called her Sis. *Take care your brother. Be sure you change him while I'm gone*. Now both were gone. And behind the faucets in his office Dub heard chattering, churring, scraping—like men's low talk, crickets, and patting a grave with shovels. How could she change him? Cover his eyes? An ermine cloak of water turkeys lifts off the bayou past moss-hung live oaks. Fills the sky. He sees so much he's blind, entranced. Try to see. You can't. Blue ibis, *poule d'eau*, the cape-winged crow in tupelo sing one refrain. Cut with the grain.

***Cut with the grain.***

Who can name it? Not a person, place, or thing, *Hallowed be*, but who can name it? Sis wrote down what Father Jim had said. *We want an understanding that does not exceed our comprehension. More than this is pride, denial, waking dream. The Holy Name's a space for breath alone, where words cannot take root*. Sis was eldest of eight children. Two died at birth. Two died from smoking. Two over-ate. Dub went to college, grew Wishard & Son. Here's the truth Sis comprehended: she was the last.

Mick told her Del would have to go for calling Roxanne late at night. She knew his voice. The girls in Shipping all knew his voice. Mick had moved him twice. No more. Del had to go. Sis called Old Finch. *Cher, crois-les pas. He's not chaviré*. Her Papa said Finch was not nuts; only twanging his *bombarde* made him seem so. His mother's family, the Abouettes near Petite Anse, was glad Bill took him East to Richmond. Without Old Finch, Dub would be lost. He took her call.

—*Onri ci.*

—*Henri, it's Sis. For Del again.*

—*Ma gentille Sis. I'm achalé—fichu, you know?*

—*You're not worn out—just ornery.*

—*May kingdom come! How do I please you?*

—*Find him something.*

—*Nothing comes without looking. Del expects the fish to whistle and drop in his pocket, like my Looey keeping the orders Captain gave us. Finally shot for it. Did Captain mean to hold this hill forever? I said as his head blew off. In our retreat I found the Captain in a ditch. Del don't know to leave the hill no more than Dub, shut in his office. But I will see what I can do.*

So kingdom comes. So Sis gave Mick the name Finch found. And Del then drove for Lavabo's whose PVC replaced the pipes Papa had laid. And Dub heard voices explaining what he had to do. *Thy will, Sis prayed, be done with us.* Unstuck from fate, we have choices. *Don't listen to them, Dub,* she said. Later that day, as she was told, Dub gave the keys to Finch, packed up, and drove away. In actions, in mind; on Earth, in heaven: *Go where we send you,* said the voices. Dub passed through Staunton, Paris, Wando, Fairall, and Fairborn. Finally he heard them say, *Stop here.*

Sis got the call. She shouldn't worry. He had enough to live on, to have some days to grow. Said his mind was a ferment, a yeast-pocked, frothy, brooding, bready mass stealing sleep. But in Chicago he ate quietly, found a two-flat, met a wholesaler of Tygon tubing at an expo. And *no, as far as Del, well, he's on his own.* Sis wrote the address. Vanua Levu sank, she read, while off Gwadar another island rose, caul steaming, crusted with clams. So debts are cancelled.

So in autumn, as Mick's plant released the latest SP-Micronils and locusts left their slit bodies to live with roots, Sis prayed for Dub's delivery, Del's restraint, and Mick's return. Mick's Master's was in scrambling olefins. He therefore knew the coming roll-out of Micronil's Scented Product line did not target Special People but SP-ganglia. Like a dead

thing this secret lay between them. Sis prayed Mick could return as she watched him descend into roots. So few knew or understood—would ever know or understand—his life with roots. Sagging demand meant fewer jobs processing, packaging, pimping, promoting, lobbying, betting, marketing, banking, distributing—all rooted in a product multicolored, multitextured, rolled and sucked by infants and matrons, obsessively collected, sniffed by connoisseurs, sung about in ads. Lovers shared them. Heritage models in estate sales brought fortunes. All rooted in Micronils, the global brand of thimble-sized beads in signature packets uniquely etched, kept as hedges of intrinsic value. When demand sagged a tenth percent, another tenth, then four, then five, the SP line was introduced. Its neural hook through the noses of consumers pulled demand so high that Micronil became the market. As in the times when tusk-shells, butterfly-beads, crinoids, stamp-seals, and quartz bowed down to Lapis pendants treasured in Uruk, Micronil prevailed. The roots held.

Ancient history. You need to know the five events which made Mick change—five fingers pointing, pinching, tickling, promising, spanning Mick's underworld. You need to know how he returned, disentangled from roots, trance-emerged, ready for the bonfire.

First, Dub's Rescue. Sis had to see the way he lived. Mick drove. Backed up, the Dan Ryan did not release them until noon. Near Addison and Lincoln, Dub lived by tank-topped Lolla hot-damning in the hall her Lollo, a remora who gazed at traffic and his hairy legs with equal wonder. Their child, Wiinara, conceived playing Wii after marinara, said look for Dub downtown in Grant Park. Mick turned around. In the forest of biped pachyderms without heads or torsos Dub could sleep shielded from signals by metal legs—the only place the voices left him. A tiny girl in a red sari danced on the slippery slates under the arcing fountain spat from the Giant's Face. Sis called it Dub's Siloam. But for Mick, trying to see around Dub's rocking head to change lanes, Millenium Park was only a marker to find Lake Street. Lollapalooza behind, the van sped south with Dub crying and drooling on the armrest. Back in Richmond, doctors, guessing Arla's toxin passed to Dub, gave IV mannitol and mood-molding mortar rounds flattening feeling, muting the voices, and calming Sis enough to leave Dub with an aide. Mick

drove her home, stopping as always for the corner vagrant Sis gave her change. The Altar Guild kept Sis while Mick opened the backlog on the roll-out. “Coca” every other message. The Secret out. Claims and payouts, rueful confessions, long litigation—all for a bead to finger and sniff. Mick knew how to avert it. Distraction was needed. Here is a city where half of the residents traded in counters worthless in themselves but standing for labor, love, trust, craft, and power—the roots that last as long as the trance goes unchallenged. Mick was pinched between the dream and how things were. The company line would be: Stonewall. Insist coca leaves are inert ingredients, claims unproven, cases unrelated. *Thank you for your query, but no interviews now.* Or ever. Mick knew this was coming. But Sis, always caring for hopeless cases and causes, did not know. The thought that she would soon know him differently burned. Soured his breath. *Reflux, Mick?* She said. *Did you take your pill?* He took off watch and ring, lay down beside her unsleeping, unable to fit back into their circle. He dozed.

His phone rang. Finch.

*—Ici Dub's room. Out of his head. Fou raide. Bill gone, now Dub. Me manque mes copains. He can't last. He already smells.*

*—But he's only sixty.*

*—We all only something when we go, you know. Tell gentille Sis.*

So wild on Benadryl, Dub had been dosed calm to a hypoxic end. In the hall with Mick while Sis sat with Dub, Finch frowned and said,

*—While you were gone, Del wrecked his truck on the Powhite. Lavabo's fired him.*

*—Where is he?*

*—Back in Dub's rec-room.*

*—Too much for Sis.*

*—Ma gentille Sis says charred meat and cigs will do me in. We're all foqué you know.*

*I'm eighty. But I tell you about Sis. I knew her since petite. She's a gombo woman.*

*Studies on you. Makes the soup to bring you round. A healer—a sad thing in this world*

*to be.*

Dub did not come round. Paroxetine, the last of many speculations why voices screamed, shut the remainder of his liver down. Cloak their eyes. What we do is make bearable the trance they're in. Tickled by the thought, Mick found the Distraction needed by Micronil: The Annual Turnaround Awards and Exchange Sales Event. Matchlessly made by eating, food's demand was the model Mick discovered. Coupons the donors received discounted purchases of the next new line. All the old micronils melted in vats over bonfires circled by dancers and singers in civic festivals. Memo to managers:

*Only replace what was made. Think of a soup stock in one pot, serving all.*

**Look out**

Mommy said Mr. Know-it-all  
would not even notice me  
so I slipped behind omni  
science, presence, and potency—  
all the big ideas—to a ledge  
where I could sit on a flat rock  
in the sky. A condor sailed  
beside my rock wall.

The slowly prancing lizard, snake  
basking, skitter falcon chicks  
make waiting in their nest, clicks  
and whining made shearing sticks  
from downed firs, cedars, and lodge  
pole pines centuries below sink  
into my eyes and ears; find  
where to live. I wake.

Stony Man and other faces  
imagined in mountainside  
hidden in cliff or scarp, hide  
the fear that I am being eyed  
by some fair, eyeless, faceless judge.  
A face makes it seem less blank.  
Tames it. Ah, but it stays wild,  
as air-breath-space-is.

**Not inside for long**

None goes so far to say  
that all our dart and scurry,  
machines and screens aside,  
are less high thought than worry,  
floor-plans failed, we'll be back outside.

Our nibbling urges cover  
ourselves and all we reach—  
even the passing clouds  
and restless sea with clutter,  
and holy time with jabbering speech.

**Gig**

Rising to the occasional  
glory, singing and wandering  
out on various melodies—  
songs that stuck in your throat like a  
pointed willow stick—something you  
sang has led to *grenouille au jus*.

**Five Stations of the Resurrection**

First is the emptying of all amenities  
from pockets, shelves, accounts, and guarded attitudes.  
First, lose all the necessary amenities.

She who lost seven demons, false divinities;  
spent all she had on spikenard; on another Way,  
after he fell, was consoled, cannot touch, but sees.

Push past angels. Rush in. Pick up the very cloth,  
still damp. Search the shape of space, dark as it is true.  
Run past yourself. Deny nothing. Retrieve your path.

Caravaggio seats you opposite, where the dish  
teeters. The eyes cannot stare into being all  
that they want to see on the backdrop of dark mesh.

Once all's lost, one comes through locked doors bringing peace;  
guiding hands to touch, hearts to search on every side,  
and lives to be an unencumbered sweet release.

**Luna**

Beauty has no mouth,  
all of it in flight  
and rapture,  
its maroon eyes  
empty.

**Embrace All Accidents**

Shall all things coiled on the shaft of the world

hurled listing toward rarer spaces

racing despair and dispersion

run out like a yanked top-string—

dangling—shall living pass away?

Weigh the ancient matters:

Manners of form, fit and inclusion.

None now chooses rightly: No, not one.

Egg, sphere and ellipse were forms of motions.

Such notions of our path, center, bounds,

life-bonds and play come to enclose,

as rose widens, from within:

then in rosette to orbit us.

Compose thus: Mark events

and intents. Be full of all movements

and arguments. Embrace all accidents.

**2°, 575 gT, 2795 gT, 350ppm**  
*(after Bill McKibben)*

Some businesses you have to mind,  
like those near Cow Town,  
where I came from.  
Now *us* they lead to slaughter.

Not all of us, of course.  
Not all at once.  
The top execs  
expect some to survive.

An islander pulls out, moves on,  
lives on roots,  
builds oxcarts.

So shift your assets to oxen.

**Wildfire***(Oklahoma, August 2012)*

A propane tank popped  
twenty feet to crater  
bedroom and kitchen, leapt  
the berm and railroad track  
sending swords of flame  
dancing on end and falling  
like straight pins into a cushion.

Someone saw a stranger  
tossing burning newspapers  
from a van. No straying  
mustang race of sparks,  
this wildfire had a mind  
behind it—mostly human.

Less accidental, wild,  
and uncontrollable than  
unforeseen, the heat  
we feel these days raced free  
since Coronado, wheeled west  
and east in conquest, scorched  
coasts; tipped pack-ice, drowning  
equally all the views  
on what or whom to blame.

*Love's old refrain*

Love's light, last light, least light shining,  
some take love's rarity the famine sign  
of general despair. It is a false disparity,  
whereas love surrounds us beyond all bounds,  
and grounds, feeds, and bears us in the air;  
waters us; cares to lift our leaves; stings the Earth  
with roots and probing minds that sink and rise,  
think and surmise; drifts into dreams, thick with the dead,  
and streams off daybreak from our minds' lake in ropes of fog;  
scatters light in the blue domes that pass us cup to cup  
until the last least cup remains.  
And drinking it to nothing, we are rarity  
enough, and least enough, and all enough, and lasting.

**You've time.**

After raging awhile against the darkness  
you might think about what you've been doing,  
which, in the scheme of things, is not much.

Live again. Increase your sample set.  
Become the stooped ash you just passed.  
It has an emerald borer on its mind.

Exchange faces with the sunken stream  
under your feet, its clarity from mud  
and gravity revealed as you drink.

Become the dragon-wing in anthracite  
or sooty miner finding it, or child  
watching warring ants clear the dead.

Wear other masks. Live other lives. You've time.  
Another mask or Age or stage or face  
beckons, clears your space of death and rage.

## Good Medicine

### 1

What was, and is, and is to come  
 Is not beyond understanding  
 But sitting across the room.  
 Given any two, it is the constant third,  
 Special but not spectral:

*The between*  
 That beckons from another's eyes,  
 Not thing or being  
 But relationship,  
 A domain whose variables  
 Rise from interactions  
 And fall when we slip  
 In betrayals.

*This passage lies  
 Through others' eyes.*

### 2

This passage is a tunnel  
 With ancient trails to other rooms  
 Where by trials and ordeals  
 We try out our ideals  
 Such as they are:  
*A great catch,*  
*A sharing of bread,*  
*A send-off for the dead.*

Above, the martins throng the Spirit Mound—  
Not souls, but birds  
Who know where insects can be found.  
So are creeds—  
The high aerobatic acts  
Made of deftly soldered speculations,  
The flux of words.

### 3

Worship defines the object of devotion;  
Then canon follows revelation.  
Given the ritual or rationale,  
We choose tradition or reformation.  
Either names the nameless.

This is not a person, place or thing,  
Only the *between*  
Summoning us to action  
That ties and re-ties us to the given,  
For we are gifts of the survivors  
By whom and from whom we rise.

**4**

You are the gift,  
The gift of survivors,  
The *gift outright*  
Of land and family and culture.  
Despite your wishes,  
You are the gift.

*Attend. Learn what was given.  
Give and respond and listen.*

You are the gift,  
lifted from the human and animal,  
the beautiful and terrible.  
Despite their wishes,  
you are the gift.

*Hear then the holy message:  
there is no easier passage.*

**Partners****1**

What's given simply is too vast  
for us to take more than we make.  
The universe has us outclassed.  
A witness wants to be believed,  
but in passage to the report  
intention frames what is conceived;  
though truth may always be our aim,  
it is embedded in belief.  
Someone must work to clear its name,  
a partner for the passage through the dark:  
a Krishna, Enkidu, Nestor, or Clark.

**2**

the only partner I have had in this  
to wait, to listen, and to see me through,  
unknown, yet inches from this line, is you;  
yet I might know you well enough to kiss--  
with each always purchase of the other,  
with each a continent to understand,  
with each a hidden people, hidden land  
sharing all lines and the quilted cover  
of the Earth, now surveyed;  
waiting to be remade.

**Coda**

As in the dark,  
fumbling with a rib,  
by trial and omnipotent failure,  
be in us a clean heart, O God.

Complete, as the folded day,  
or sudden turns of circling birds  
in streaming swarms,  
a new spirit within us.

As the plumed mimosa closes,  
folding equally her fronds,

hold, like leaf-green day,

your presence within us.