



Return *to a*
Place *like*
Seeing

poems

John Palmer

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Notes

i.

Motion Notes

Attachments

The fog burns up and stones,
black, big as cows, shine in the meadow.
A cow's rubbed her throat raw on the fence.
A tuft of hide and blood, damp star,
spangles the wire. Flies in eccentric
orbits envelop our heads. We know
our hair smells like honey, essence
of flowers, the sweet side of decay,
dying and all that. I know you,
always rushing ahead, without realizing,
wanting to be done, your being done
the gravity that pulls me along.
This meadow could shine to the earth's
very brink, but like any ambition
you'd come back the same. Burning,
too material not to return.

Evidence

All week the curtains have bellied in.
Shadows climb past the window,
 and each afternoon one strays
inside, across the narrow sill,
 a girl with a querying, soft tread
approaching her infant brother,
 too pretty, she thinks, to be a boy,
his face too lively with sleep to trouble.
Someone has oiled the good oak trunk
under the window, left static,
 snapdragons, a fan
of thank-you notes on the bed,
as if it were late July,
and the afternoons still brilliant, full
 of elms and their low speech
like a river's. Withdrawing, a shadow
is the consternation of woods,
of riverbanks, like the misgivings
 in a wise, dark-eyed, immortal sister
at the evidence of change—the light
as it finds out listless rooms,
stubborn features on a landscape,
 as it sets each in a motion that is,
as first, the motion of something else.

First Stepping in the Deerfield

It is cool like a passage out of hours.

The dark channel, neither playful nor menacing,
cleaves to the far bank, away from sand, this beach of little,
dappled girls and their cries.

It is cool in its insistence on speed,
the swifts like cobbles lightly submerged in glass.

It is serious and abstract in its one obligation.

For affection, it has the underside of the sky,
the paler, uneasy underside of willows shirring in thought.

It has the faults of the valley, its lamentations and white scars.

Vault of winds in its eye,
score of hawk-whistle and plain-chanting, up-water dams in its past,
it bows out to us, sheering our ankles and racing.

Time told by the rope swing's arc,

body in space, frozen a beat,

River, receive us, wading, asquint in this green sun.

Original Sin

The sun's still low, catching its breath.

A neighbor's music crawls,
voice first, along the street, under
a rumble left over from last night's storm.

Last night, I woke and my three-day fever
had lifted with its dream—

sweated over and over again like guilt—

of card players

exchanging white, ribboned bundles.

In the yard, where the willow

dangles from heaven,

is a storm-toss of sticks and the thin,

browned fingers of the tree, broken

as if for wanting to be alone.

I hope it will be cool this morning,

like islands beneath an airplane,

and, after all, no voices,

only these ragged clouds

and a blue sky like a shiver.

I'd wanted to be alone,

a small room close to the treetops,

the only words needed

on a day unimpressed by any sound

but the slap of blinds against a sill.

And though the day was as quiet as that,

as the start of a deliberate separation,

I was already wishing myself away,

in other houses, warmer company.

Love Triangle

The air particulates. For early evening's memory's sake, it bluely atomizes, furring the sun to orange blotch, and blunts its points on east, on river, on wishes, ever only abject, flung like Quikshops through the suburbs. While space fills in, bluer yet, to be pricked by candlelight, I've an hour on either side of me and gangs of whispers, loiterers, angers in my chest. Our old fox trots past, home, along the fence, some flicky catch bearding his jaw and only the dampening ground between him and rest in the raspberries' roots. Just so far along the rise then down to the easy curl of body in its den, the physical dark pulled close around, and wishes become instant in his mouth—warm, forgettable, whole. An hour on either side but this moment like pieces in my hands, an object, *objects* to be shelved, closeted, and only after years displayed, as “Dying Day,” “Cheaper Self,” “The Start of Horror.” You, you and I, and I of a hundred insufficient eyes, bluely watchful, jittery, little beard.

Onset

He sniffs ammonia,
the third time in a week, remembers
waving as her taxi pulsed,
once, at the corner
then bore into the tide of traffic.

The night freight crosses the sky,
its nightmares of coal
careening toward a city's mountain
of cold. A cricket skitters
across the alarm clock's
digital welts, as if cellophane
bunched in his head were crackling
open. His hands buzz,
sizzle like crossed wires, flare white into
each iris. He can't sleep. Heart
races to keep up,
as if the roar tonight were just love.

Naked Person's Song

I've come as far as my warmth will take me.

Now, someone grinding wind
blows my hiding place in the hedge apart.

A bird drops feathers; the philanthropic
trees of the boulevard drop leaves.

I weave a little boa, beg a paper
from the newsboy with spiky hair,
and, there, I'm clad again, an advertisement
for a vacation in the Islands.

So, I come to sun and surf and snorkel
in their tepid, pearl-colored bays,
as if I were someone with a billfold.

All the while, brick by brick,
my little house gets hauled away to build a jail.

I would visit you there, old life,
bring you cakes and magazines.

It wasn't to be so far from you. I left
thinking I couldn't be missed.

Reserve

The Outer Banks, N.C.

So many fish, such hoopla flashing ashore
in sequins, then spinning and crowding around
the fishermen's waders. Red pick-ups roar
by themselves, coffee in their pipes, fouling
the hot, gull-tinctured dunes above the beach.
The Cape's out of its head with March contentment.
Its Orpheus is strumming somewhere, levitating
the spirits of winter-thinking water and scrub,
the loblollies in anguish over carving sleet.
Even the horizon, blue lips, cracks with joy.
Camellias, paper wrappers, litter the grass
just inland where benignly his song goes to work.
I'm engineering a complex of dams and alternate
channels to steer the ebb into a black puddle.
Kites and school children flit in the air, down
and into the future from the hill at Kitty Hawk.
Old hands razzle up fish, glistening iron
straight from the water. Be glad winter's dead
and the sky boils to fame, wise storms, new guests:
That's his song. He turned to her, of course,
because he didn't want her, sent her glimmering
back to the dead. But you, flesh, O far-away-bones,
why make me wait?

A Deed Instead of Knowing

Mad or not, sad or not, rapacious,
concupiscent or not, indigent or not,
curious, clever, keen or not,
glad but bored or not, boring
your lonesome bit into any
handy mind or not, a cry,
a straggle of destitution wending,
snaking, weaving (or not) its way along
the river valley, moonlit alleys
you call memory, cold history,
that collective—*what?*—its quantum,
common stuff that owes
its twenty-eight essential, sane
irruptions to God or not, God!
or not, forsaken, shaken,
taken to the flecked and very edge
of galaxy and continent and love
and me, who doesn't know,
and can't, the single way for you
of words and sends instead this and not
reproof, not proof, but maybe plea.

State

They are thoughts, mechanical as wings.
No one stops here anymore
except to find a room for sleep.
But the sounds go up and down, again, like wings.
When night comes, it fills the body with bees.
My last great adventure was over
the mountains struck from snow-blue metal
and, since, only versions of the local utterance.
I've lost myself, the other voice of things.
I could stay, try to sleep,
let even these few, thin,
recurrent thoughts fade like statues.
They say, "There's a calamity that attracts the iron."
That's a false translation but for its sound ...
Stinging like rust,
spread through all the ill-used valves.

Attention's Brief

Nothing's final, even the ice,
even the day's lovely heart slicked
with time and what rare event,
like two children skating across
the river and soft into a bank
of quiet. But nothing begins,
and with an air of home, around
a cradle of melting logs, their embers
tremulous as a thing underwater.

I watch, temporarily, as dusk
continues up the valley in a gray
elation, a gray, serene song.

In a wind like a humming, wind
like one erasing with light hand.

Elysian

The sun at four's still dead overhead,
and someone clever's playing *The Firebird*.
The women of the boulevard are wrapped in gauze,
their narrow shoes like masons' hammers
tapping past this prostrate cafe.
A street crew's sawhorse winks a warning amber.
From the manhole, a black man's hand
motions for its spirit level, and bikers
just beyond the hole are bent by waves
of exhaust. Lovers in the awning's shade
lean their heads together but speak
in hands. They say the wind has ribbons
it passes through the broken places in a heart.
I let small coins splatter in a saucer,
have the man with the little linen towel
direct the quick way through the diesel air.

Goal

A roar in Spanish rises

from the party downstairs,
carries a glittering whistle

like birdsong with it, past

my window. Someone from
someone else's country

has scored a goal on television.

Black, importunate clouds
are reaching from the north.

Across the way, a woman

clatters utensils in her sink.

Naked, she slips a taste
of something between her lips,
stares as if, instead, the dusk
were softening to peach, here,
in the heart of our courtyard.

The tv keeps up its ecstatic
cackling. No one's cat
visits for her dish of milk,
comes like the silver pulse
inside a thunderhead.

Reconvening

Now, like the overall rose and alternate

lap and run of the sea off Matinicus,
you have an encompassing look, a catch in your breathing
that signals the sunrise.

You speak of it coolly, pointedly,

so that surfaces know their flash.

You are brackish, persuasive as tide
or the salt-stickled breeze

as it twines past the lobster boats

riding their own reflections,
as it curves through pilings,
across the mussel-flats.

Each in a fit of balance,

the gulls spiral inside their own shadows,
over the one, long shadow
of which you are the edge and impression.

Long Shadows

They are, really, only circumstances
of a generous calm, of a low, gold
mood like a wine's. We watch them
swaying and crowded in front of
the vaporous sun like hours crawling
toward the hills, like a lake's blue jetties.

The radio is full of poverty,
then of sweet, bookish absences
so that the air might hiss and fatten
and the winsome leaves of the maples
draw attention to their minute
responsiveness, their green agility.

We're in this too, we're meant to say
and promise, afterwards,
to reach a slender arm out
not to hold, but as a sign of having
needed privacy, comprehension, help.
And, shortly, the moon will be under
their sway and smile, only crookedly,
at something in particular—you
and me, which is like one thing, one,
in a day blistered into so many
discrete enmities—you and me,
then a silence like evening, following.

Exchange

There's the gray tide shuddering out and later

the mud, blue-silver in its flats,
collecting needles of first sunlight.

Farther down the inlet, cars flash
along the iron swing-bridge. Each crossing sounds
like breath across a bottle's mouth.

The leaves nicker like bones or chips of glass,
like those hard, morning voices
that are first in the market, exchanging
forecasts of marriage for the latest

signs of divorce. A heron wades
along the Indian dam, fixes his eyes

on the repeating rocks. Marginal enterprise
of stalk and snatch, he's silent from here.

In a lobster boat's wash, a channel buoy
taps out its irregular silver time.

The motor thrums through circles of light on the water,
coins from a maker of half-potent wishes.

Houses by Cézanne

The road swings south of the dusty houses,
slopes past outcropped mules to the sculpted fruit
of orchards by the coast, to flowers whose essence
rides like gold-green oil in cruets, to the sea.

Nobody built these houses.

They came like geometry:
some air pumped with a blue, evening light, made
voluminous by the crunch of shadows.

What's gray
is linear. What's green is a possible life apart,
a breathless step down from the street to a flat
with cobalt bowls, long-stemmed tables, and lemons.
She drew his hand clenched around a lemon, signed
the sheet "DuToit." Pressed fists against his eyes.
What's white curves like the opening of a prayer.
Nobody's waited for. The farmer in his wagon
said the hills had their "cloud-caps on." His wife
saw houses wrapped in secrets.

Nobody lives here:
arc, parallel, bisected hill, tan points
beneath blue-metal sky.

Nearby, a hostel
built in a monastery kitchen sends its guests
to bed in ovens. Everyone dreams of fire and air.
Everyone dreams of tongues of fire.

The children
who mocked as he worked grew arid and repeatable,
a row of black cleft-marks above the road.

These Afternoons

They are not, after all, indifferent
to us. They take one another, mingling
like smoke in hair, like a dog's trail-away cry
hanging across otherwise unmarked seconds.
Almost all heat, we too are inseparable
and sit here on the porch of mid-June,
grown suddenly hazy with reticence
about the most operatic of events—
the train at the field's edge hauling itself
to Canada, the butternut tree unfolding
its blue umbrella, most of our skin
naked at last. And we might say
their undulations, their old-fashioned
meanderings through time like a horse
and carriage along a street vaulted by elms,
are like our own deep, if unremarkable, shadows
drifting through a story of love and comfort.
Nothing seems to happen otherwise.
I think you are still pale and beautiful,
and this near-absence of wind, hot
condition of the eyes, these small,
humid rubbings on the arm and cheek,
like sexual breaths, make a long moment,
then slip waywardly through the deep grass.

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