

NINE SONNETS FOR LATE '90S LITERARY CULTURE

The Midwest : *co-sponsored event*

Meistersinger grabs the shears,
hiccup at the fraenum.
To tell what he sang would
break the code, force the school of shad
apart from the other
American food fishes,
“the very prop
on which drapery’s purpose
hangs.” Warming up
the cotton with a hot iron,
the soothing,
motivating
muscles
of our arms.

Artist Friends : *poem for McSweeney’s*

I wanted to make a video, my matted brown
soccer-player hair flew, ears
reddened
as when in the throes of an actual encounter.

Ingrid spontaneously brought me chicken,
made fun of my absurd
mock-Trenchtown stylings
upon giving notice.
I had even imagined
the cabinets.

Several worn flakes of heart
set to feed the porter.
Kind basket
bartle the fisket.

Editorial or Publicity : *poem for the New Yorker*

Mesmerized by my own life,
a shower of potential, an alien form
listing from side to side along the rows of cubes,
ducking in for humane chat that quickly grows
oppressive. The move to escape
family tyranny in fact an exchange for co-workers
foibles and bile, the phone glimpses, snatches of yells,
the difference in the level of impingement like being
in a bunch of grapes instead of part of a melon.
I like that shirt; my silence at your haircut earns me
the nickname *Tacitus* so warm is my implicit approval.
The pleasure of engaging the electric pencil sharpener
mitigated by its lack of a shaving sink, a gap where
the plastic bin, miniature but precisely machined, should be.

You are shorter, you are taller, you are lovely, you are smart,
you are anxious, you are over your head but thickly blissful.
Wool crepe so radiant black, blue.
Gabardine is back too.

Interview Journalism : *poem for the New York Times Magazine*

Always bare-armed, catching cold,
Keitel torsoes toward the piano,
wolfs a smoke and drenches half the site in filial
light and bird-like song, uplifting and tired.
Dorothy as control freak;
discovery of Oz as techno-mastery,
Lleyton Hewitt clutching Kim Clijsters's cross.
We toss thoughts like painted balls—
errhumanized, without a title, bouncing up
the musical, muscled beach with determinate fuzzy digits.
People throw bread to the birds
out the back windows of hospitality.
Adjuncts and attributes violate our condition
that branches should not be allowed to cross.

The Midwest : *second semester*

We allow our attention to spread outward,
like dropped laundry.

Immune to ideas,
we pitch our way
through the sugary
thickness to an amazing veldt,
salted rodeo, place
pointless calls to the hoofy satyr.

“Extraordinarily adept,
the highwaymen
glide wave-like in fields
tilled by people with jobs.”

Lifting the horn
with three arresting blasts we ride off.

Fiction : *a choice*

Tapping,
slow

and
tedious,

consummate
and firm.

Trollopine,
gigallistic.

Animal prints
are hot.

Scan
for inevitable

bass
response.

Nostalgic Hypochondria : *double holiday sonnet for the New Yorker*

It's Christmas so I climb into my bigger car,
bundle up the newspapers and toss them
among the husky rocks.

You mentioned Cheops, like bird sounds,
but I can't quite make the bilabial pop and throat clack,
though fastidious enough.

Had to go see Leventhal,
so I figured I might as well see Tesser,
so I got two referrals from the Walfish,

who nodded when I told him what they were for,
settle a few old scores.
GP fans out into trinity.

Nightmare trip across the fragmented ferment
of the slate gray sky at night,
or nearing night,

breath rocketing out in unmentionable
rasps, condensing under the nose;
I thought then it was a drip

dipping down toward
the top raw,
kind of bloody maw.

A little hesitation stepping off the sidewalk,
a little bread broken into the waveletted life
of wiry shore birds, coordinated diving, stopping off.

Most's has closed,
Stern's has dropped its veil
everything's
on sale.

Alone Together : *colony*

If subordination implies weakness
then each embedded clause
adds another bean
to our febrile sack.

Make the glazier on your back
take off his shirt, turn over
the black empathic pitch,
cool limey pile.

The air,
heavy with bricks,
leans toward the van's rack,
spilling mannequins into the mock Public Garden,
accepting all equally
easily.

Ethics : *poem for the New Republic*

We are both Jewish like Gertrude and Alice
and don't practice like them.
We had to go to that part of the cemetery.
I suppose it's good that they have one.
If Louis Zukofsky had died in Paris,
or had Louis Untermeyer.
I wonder what Alice had to do when buying the plots.
Had they bought them together first,
or did Alice buy them after.
Or I think it's one plot.
Anyway, it probably wasn't: *Madame, excusez-moi,*
mais ce n'est pas possible d'acheter cet plot.
It was probably: *oui, j'ai besoin d'un terrain*
là-bas.

The Midwest : *third semester*

Extraordinarily adept,
the highwaymen
glide wave-like
in fields of unkind,
sordid endeavor:

“To service the loon we must have proof
that the markings you put down
can be pinned to your identificatory tooth,
once removed. You must be
undimmed in your affections
for the secret handshake and shoes,
for without them we are damned, doomed
to walk to court without riding,
completely unable to mount.”

House with Bones : *Wallpaper* subscription*

As part of the mix,
the complexities of academic settings.
When we got home, the telephone rang.

We punched windows in the side, had to use cutters,
but they built next to us and chalk flew in the soup;
they'd hit the water table.

“It's sweet, it's fine,” we murmured.
Young and dopey, our Hope

can't sleep as pea pods get
crushed, wheat husks threshed for her sister's car seat.

Clamoring for your softique,
floating spongily on the bed as Rome burns,

“I can no longer see them, far beyond the parapets....”
Yogurt on hand. Makes a nice caked cream.

New Jersey : *poem for Knopf*

Since it's all pig shit,
turf

controls the criticism,
grape-seeds

smother wineries,
querulous jackrabbit

bites
sink skin.

25 is the new 30.
Sensibility is the new sense.

Deb's picks make
Huppy

Henry
totally spin.

The Midwest : *teaching, stipend, thesis*

Fiddle on the diddle,
and if your creamy shirt
is yours, and your pen
scratches witchily over Crane's,
why not buy the guy a slice?

I'm at the front of the room
smiling, didactic.
I'm wearing a prophylactic,

"the very prop
on which drapery's purpose
hangs." Warming up
the cotton with a hot iron, the soothing,
motivating muscles
of our arms.

Exercise : *therapy*

Can't talk to you
in nakedese

or touch
the perfect

arcs of your
ponytail.

My mother
as control freak

vacuums the sky,
vacuums the vitamin tree.

I vacuum
my heart,

drive through the disgusting,
well-sunned depths

toward
Gargantua.

The Midwest : *advisor*

I coddled you, yet I
couldn't have spoken then, or now

my long lashes brushing softly against the pine,
approaching Amber.

The lasts are petering out, the shoes
sloughing to a stop;

the birds grip tight the branches
and hearts

pulse up the breast.
Seen?

Or not.
Roll up sleeves.

Roll one for me, too,
please.

The Midwest : *commencement*

Loading up the spernum,
juicing up the amp,
cussing up the spittle,
pewing up the damp,

making several portals,
poking several heads,
leaning back to mission,
corking up the beds,

the sunny farmer boy leaves home,
leaves it sitting on the fence.

Touching the knob,
tentatively pressing himself into space.

Touching
little buds of breath that cloud the storm.

Development

does not make a steady
advance;

after an early efflorescence,
a very decided interruption:

If form were all,
‘my ass discharges
a sour mash’
would be a great line!

As if attempting to save itself, it has learned
to keep itself in suspension for a while,

fending off piles with spelt and felt—anything felt,
but far too little

is known about the mental
make-up of newborns.

Series : *The Mill on the Floss*

Every encounter compromised
BY LAZY ACQUIESCENCE AND LAZY OMISSION,
BY TRIVIAL FALSITIES FOR WHICH WE HARDLY KNOW A REASON,
BY SMALL FRAUDS NEUTRALIZED
BY SMALL EXTRAVAGANCIES,
BY MALADROIT FLATTERIES,
CLUMSILY IMPROVISED INSINUATIONS.

WE LIVE FROM HAND TO MOUTH, MOST OF US,
WITH A SMALL FAMILY
OF IMMEDIATE DESIRES
which keep us locked in an insane nursery;
WE DO LITTLE ELSE THAN SNATCH A MORSEL
TO SATISFY THE COMPLAINING BROOD—
INFIRME ÉLU.