

CORRUPTION

I am about to recite a psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation extends over the entire psalm. Once I have begun, the words I have said remove themselves from expectation & are now held in memory while those yet to be said remain waiting in expectation. The present is a word for only those words which I am now saying. As I speak, the present moves across the length of the psalm, which I mark for you with my finger in the psalm book. The psalm is written in India ink, the oldest ink known to mankind. Every ink is made up of a color & a vehicle. With India ink, the color is carbon & the vehicle, water. Life on our planet is also composed of carbon & water. In the history of ink, which is rapidly coming to an end, the ancient world turns from the use of India ink to adopt sepia. Sepia is made from the octopus, the squid & the cuttlefish. One curious property of the cuttlefish is that, once dead, its body begins to glow. This mild phosphorescence reaches its greatest intensity a few days after death, then ebbs away as the body decays. You can read by this light.

LOOSE STRIFE WITH APIARY

Watched a man watch a man. One man made smoke out of nothing by scraping together two stones. Another kept time using nothing but stones. One man made love, another made pain with a stone in each hand. Somebody take out these stitches, I'm ready to open my eyes. So this is the new world—just like the old, only brighter. Word is the governor's wife scattered loose strife in the barnyard thinking it chicken feed & the wetlands turned purple overnight. We make ready vectors for smallpox & language. Books on magnetic tape, books on bookkeeping, on being, on coping & beekeeping—I could have told you, all it takes is a meadow & nerve. Come, let me show you the recycled cosmos inside my apiary. A veil on a peg. Queen deep in the sweetness.

HOTEL LULLABY

No matter how often you knock
on the ocean the ocean

just waves. No matter
how often you enter the ocean

the ocean still says
no one's home. You must leave

her dear Ursula. As I write this
they polish the big

chandelier. Every prism
a sunset in abstract

or bijou foyer depending
on where you stand.

They take it apart every Fall
& call it Spring cleaning.

They bring me my tea.
They ask me my name

& I tell them Ursula,
I don't even know

how to miss who you left.

FIRST CIRCLE

It's dark in here, the dark inside of a man
in the dark. It's not night. One hears crows
overhead, dawn fowl caws, the shod soles again

treading their sunlit plots above. One grows
dotish-fond of such things. Long live the things,
their ways, their roots pushed goatish & gray

through the skull, in this earth that gaily spins
though one has crossed its smutted green threshold
to reign in a crate. We have done no wrong,

my friends, & yet we find ourselves soiled,
sold, carbonized teeth in a moss-riven jaw.
Once I sat on a stool as my grandmother told

me of heaven. She cleaned fish for our living. I saw
how her rusty black knife unseamed the sunset
in each belly—coral, ochre, carmine, raw,

lice-infested sunsets in a pail. So many nights.
Night in the kitchen shack, night at the crumbling edge
of our milk-pond province, a blade, lone cricket

raving in the lawn.

EVENING WITH STARS

It was light. Whoever it was
who left it under the gumtree last night
forgot to close the gate. This morning when I stepped
out on the breezeway I had to shoo off a she-pig
& three rag-pickers before I could tell
what it was they were carting away
through the leaves. I had the houseboy bear it
into the sunroom. After attending to my & my employer's
business, I returned sometime after midnight
to examine it. A pair of monkeys
were hoisting it over the threshold
toward a courtyard of fireflies. When I shook my fist
they dropped it & I settled down at last.
It was gilt. It was evening with stars.
Where a latch should have been, a latch
was painted on. Over the lid, a procession.
Chariot. Splintered tree. Chariot. Chariot.
In the lamplight the hollows
of the footsoldiers' eyes were guttering.
I'd say they looked happy.
Tired & happy. Their soil-flecked boots
sank down to the buckle in weeds
& lacquered nettles, six men to a burden.
It was light. I could see
in the middle distance a bone priest
picking his way through crop rows
toward the wreckage of an iron temple.
Scarlet clouds moving out. Jasper clouds moving in.

Here, on a cistern, a woman
keeps nursing her infant.
She is unwell.
The workmanship is astonishing.
You can pick out every lesion on her breast.

Mostly, I am alone.