

# Jerome Rothenberg

## THREE PARIS ELEGIES\*

[1]

into my own dark sunday light approaches like the moon through feathers  
that's no sooner seen than sunk by blindness & the thought that everyone  
is dead around a city that's about to vanish as it has before sucked down  
an empty pocket oversized & with a smell of earth the bright adventurers  
of 1910 whose streets these were sharing a common grave with those who  
followed reaching even to the place where you and I are waiting with the  
friends who drop out one by one like cybermonkeys flying into mindless  
space

[2]

above a gorge we hung  
& swayed  
the mountains were alive to every side  
stone witnesses  
the air was still with only a distant puff of wind  
we sat suspended by an iron wire  
voiceless  
no one to talk to in the world  
but you & me  
that revelation  
I think I prize its emptiness the most  
so even now arrived in paris  
I sit alone  
& feel it bursting from my chest  
electric  
final  
rush of footsteps down an empty street

\* Set to *Three Voices for Joan La Barbara* by Morton Feldman (with text by Frank O'Hara).

[3]

why does a well-dressed man come up to me & ask me for a handout?  
 (this is a dream, I think, it can't be real)  
 why does a smiling mother dressed for church reach out a hand to  
 touch me shadows all around her sitting on the ground  
 why does she ask for help  
 & why do I keep walking walking past her  
 where there is no street or sun  
 even in paris on this hottest day in summer  
 what is the sound that comes at us around a corner sound of a wave  
 suspended in the air of hives of bees of hands applauding in the dark  
 who is the man who wears a flower in his ear a shirt with many folds  
 a vest a beard the buttons glowing like electric sparks  
 the more I search his features I can see his lips are gone his tongue is  
 heavy hanging to one side & forming words that never reach me that the  
 darkness covers  
 all the people on this street sit flat against a wall some open-eyed  
 some sunk in a deep sleep  
 all are dressed up  
 the men wear business suits & blazers a cardigan a double breasted  
 jacket a tuxedo tie & tails but have no coats or hats  
 their shoes are simple always a dark brown or black with marks of  
 sand from garden walks in paris laces open sometimes without socks  
 & the women well dressed too although the hair of one is hanging  
 limply with another's there are open spots that show her skull a third one  
 has the traces of a beard a large wet stain under one armpit  
 just look at them & they begin to talk  
 the way that birds talk  
 feathers that the wind is blowing swirl across the square  
 we sit in paradise & pass a ball between us  
 papers at our feet  
 then when it's time to leave we walk around a corner climb the little  
 flight of stairs & hear them following  
 the rush of music from a distant time a woman's voice becoming  
 regular the words emerging low & high relentless openings processions  
 & it's picasso in the lead a little man with hairy shoulders he has  
 stripped down to his running shorts like frank o'hara both of them now

stars for minneola prep both now declare their love of evil

with apollinaire here too his head no bigger than a thumbnail  
flanked by gertrude stein eyes like a crazy doll's & someone looking like  
my father max jacob wrapped in a monk's brown cloak down which his  
body disappears

here in a world where there are only little people phantoms where the  
sky is not a sky the earth is shrinking daily under silver plastic disappearing  
slipping through my hands like balls in a pachinko parlor eyes revolving  
like red lights

to end here in la république with all the other dead the hungry  
ghosts under our windows a soup kitchen for the dead the ones who run  
the ones who squat now on the grass

they speak our frailty the doom built into life decomposition chaos  
anarchy *confusion worse confounded* helter skelter squalor

out of whack & out of order out of kilter out of money out of time  
& out of place & out of breath & out of work & out of hope & out of  
power

because the men who come to us though dead are just like us & stare  
at us like fallen princes

*we welcome you to death* they say their looks dividing us in two

the numbers dance again behind our eyes

the circles break

the man holding a clock up to his ear will count the silence

every day is summer

what was once alive is gone

& what has yet to be alive

is also gone

Paris

August/September 1997

[From *A Paradise of Poets*, New Directions, 1999]

## PERORATION FOR A LOST TOWN

[May 1988]: "On this road thou camest ..."

[1]

What will I tell you sweet town?  
 that the sickness is still in you  
 that the dead continue to die  
 there is no end to the dying?  
 for this the departed would have had an answer:  
 a wedding in a graveyard  
 for you sweet town  
 they would have spoken they who are no longer among us  
 & would have shown forth in their splendor  
 would have danced pellmell  
 over your stones sweet town  
 the living & the dead together pebbles  
 would have dropped like pebbles  
 from their fingers no like gold like roses  
 like every corny proposition  
 fathers or uncles ever gave us they gave us  
 to call your image back to life  
 sweet town their voices twittering  
 like bats over your little houses  
 is this the sound then that the breath makes  
 in its final gasp that the dead make  
 having lived a whole life under water  
 now coming up for air, to find themselves  
 in poland in the empty field  
 bathers who had their bodies torn apart  
 & ran from you their long guts  
 hanging, searching the forgotten woods  
 for houses & the consolation  
 that death brings children in a circle  
 dancing without tongues the meadow that had once stood open  
 shut in remembrance now sweet town  
 the screams of the cousins carried by the wind  
 lost in the gentile cities

in the old men's dreams of you  
 each night sweet town who rise up from their beds  
 like children bellowing their words  
 stuck in their beards like honey  
 who drift up brok street past the russian church  
 the doctor's house beside it heavy  
 & whitebricked in the dream who glide above  
 napoleon square o little orchards little park  
 where lovers once walked with lovers children  
 still capture fishes in thy little pond  
 its surfaces still green with algae  
 o sounds of church bells--bimbom--through the frozen air  
 that call forth death o death o pale photographer  
 o photos of the sweet town rubbed with blood  
 o of its streets the photographs its vanished folk  
 o wanderers who wandered o bodies of the distant dead who stayed  
 o faces o dimming images lost smiles o girls embracing girls  
 in deathless photographs o life receding  
 into images of life you beautiful & pure sweet town  
 I summon & I summon thee to answer

[2]

I have come here looking for the bone of my grandfather (I said). Day-  
 light had intervened. The town was no more empty as we walked its  
 length. Then the old man spat--gently--through his beard. I have come  
 here looking for the bone of my son. (Had someone reported a breath of  
 life under his houses--a movement within the soil like worms & cater-  
 pillars?) Tell the Poles that they should come to me. I am a baker & a  
 child. I have no one to take me from this darkness.

Then he asked--or was  
 it I who asked or asked *for* him?--were there once Jews here? Yes, they  
 told us, yes they were sure there were, though there was no one here who  
 could remember. What was a Jew like? they asked. (The eye torn from  
 its socket hung against his cheek.) Did he have hair like this? they asked.  
 How did he talk--or did he? Was a Jew tall or short? In what ways did  
 he celebrate the Lord's day? (A rancid smell of scorched flesh choked  
 us.) Is it true that Jews come sometimes in the night & spoil the cows'

milk? Some of us have seen them in the meadows--beyond the pond. Long gowns they wear & have no faces. Their women have sharp pointed breasts with large black hairs around the nipples. At night they weep. (Heads forced in the bowls until their faces ran with excrement.) No one is certain still if they exist. (Plants frozen at the bottom of a lake, its surface covered by thick ice.)

They spoke & paused. Spoke & paused again. If there was a history they couldn't find it-- or a map. The cemetery they knew was gone, the dead dispersed. (On summer days the children digging in the marketplace might come across a bone.) And the shops? we asked. The stalls? The honey people? Vanished, vanished in the earth, they said. The red names & the flower names. The pink names. (There was a people once, they said, we called the old believers. A people with black beards & eyes like shrivelled raisins. Out of the earth they came & lived among us. When they walked their bodies bent like yours & scraped the ground. They had six fingers on each hand. Their old men had the touch of women when we rubbed against them. One day they dug a hole and went back into the earth. They live there to this day.)

The village pump you spoke about still stands back of the city hall (they told us). The rest was all a dream.

[3]

[by gematria]

a wheel  
dyed red

an apparition

set apart

out of the furnace

Ostrov-Mazowieck  
Poland/1988

[From *Triptych*, New Directions, 2007]

ROMANTIC DADAS: FOUR POEMS FROM  
A BOOK OF CONCEALMENTS

[From *Concealments & Caprichos*, Black Widow Press, 2010]

ROMANTIC DADAS

*for Jeffrey Robinson*

A late night party  
where Romantic Dadas  
cut a rug too iridescent  
to resist  
our smug caresses.  
How will we begin  
addressing them,  
by name or by a face  
that turns away from you  
unseen, leaves scarce  
a trace behind.  
*Mister Novalis,  
or if that isn't  
your real name,  
drop it right now  
& try another.*  
He is too determined,  
too far below  
his average height  
for anyone to count.  
Aside from which  
there are the odors  
of the women  
who surround him,  
so many that the walls begin  
to press his skull.  
He has to break away  
to make an outcry  
in the name of Dada.  
*I & I & I are left  
without a place  
ulterior to place,  
to run or hide.*

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE LYRIC VOICE

*for Scott McLean*

He will keep writing,  
will he not,  
as you will.  
A pressure like a finger  
builds inside  
his chest  
& travels upward,  
somewhere between  
the trachea  
& glottis,  
pushes the fold aside  
& breaks.  
Imagined speech.  
It is the same for everything  
we say we think we know  
the speaker but the speaker  
escapes our observation.  
It is this concealment  
that reveals  
the truth of poetry  
no less authoratative  
than the other  
in full gusto.  
*From the direction of his voice,  
an absence & a grief,  
his profile is a kind of blue.*  
The footfall of a wanderer  
crosses the open field  
in daylight.  
Let the *spirit* rise  
until it's *mind*,  
the untranslated,  
untranslatable,  
in which the lyric voice  
resides mind's matter  
& its coming forth  
by day.



THE MOON INSANE & FEEBLE

Loony moon, whose babies  
suck a ring,  
how many look to you  
or look beyond you?  
Little dolls, like  
clockwork, pumping  
air & beckoning,  
are what the man pretends  
to cherish. Halfway  
up the stairs,  
the window brings him  
to the sky,  
the sky to where  
*the moon*  
*insane & feeble*  
*hides a white* (P.B. Shelley)  
*& shapeless mass.*  
Pleasure that should be his  
escapes him,  
he is always  
in purusit,  
always the distant runner.  
A flock of moons,  
the leaden weight  
of butterflies  
oppresses him.  
To wait there,  
dewy eyed,  
to write the final line,  
how long before  
life breaks,  
before what's written  
fades from sight.  
A song sounds  
in the mind  
& quavers:

Cold is hot  
(he cries)  
but hot  
is never cold.

A DEEP ROMANTIC CHASM

*for Michael McClure*

A deep romantic chasm  
beckons him it leaves no time  
to hide from light  
in spite of circumstances,  
& the way the street  
flows like a stream  
from no source,  
nowhere. *This season  
with its birds  
newly arrived,  
the first one on a fence,  
mortal as you,  
a harbinger of days to come.*  
Another word,  
a false return,  
the spoken still unspoken  
carries us off.  
The cavern of the universe  
widens each morning.  
*My head fills up with dew,*  
the father writes,  
having no home but where  
his shadow leads him.  
*In greasy shirtsleeves, heavy  
lids, blotched faces,*  
the men pursue  
a trail of tears,  
unbuttoned captive  
to a dream,  
a starless galaxy,  
the deeper sky  
a field of images  
measureless & mindless,  
absent their god.

BLANCO: THREE VARIATIONS ON A THEME BY OCTAVIO PAZ

BLANCO 1: A VARIATION ON A THEME IN SEVEN SEGMENTS BY OCTAVIO PAZ

1. white as the land looks | the vultures | white also | circle above | each one a soul | glows white | on horizon | or on page
2. the land is the land | it is white | thunderheads cover it | drumbeats | joining the land | & the sky
3. sky receptive to thunder | drumbeats to sky | white to colors | faces to eyes | sand turning white | like the sky
4. green is also | a color | like flesh | stung by thorns | my body | or yours | sparks a rage | like a drumbeat | violent | mineral | white
5. uproots trees | marks the land | like a body | shattered by lightning | the word | once proclaimed | white turns yellow
6. those who beat | on a waterdrum | spines tightly pressed | to a wall | & the drumbeat | spreads violet ash | on the sky | a sun glowing white
7. language | a desert | pink everywhere | seeds in your mouth | like white crows | & more drumbeats | a flute | turns everything white

21.i.10

BLANCO 2: A VARIATION ON A THEME IN FIVE SEGMENTS BY OCTAVIO PAZ

1. A clarity | of all the senses | lingers | leaving on the mouth & face | a white precipitation | sculptures crystal-thin | blank space | translucent whirlpools
2. Is it a pilgrimage | that brings us | dancing in a ring | into a forest | where our thoughts | are white | the only signs | our steps | that break the silence

3. Green would be better | a slim defile | through which we pass | an archipelago | the shadow of a syllable | a white reflection

4. Is it red | or is it blue | this dazzlement | that blinds us | numbers | dancing in the void | like *things* | a final clarity | no longer white

5. Thoughts fade | winds cease | forgetfulness erases truth | there is a deeper music in the words we speak | yellow isn't white | & amethyst | is just a color

24.ii.10

BLANCO 3: A VARIATION ON A THEME IN NINE SEGMENTS BY OCTAVIO PAZ

1. Presentiment & penumbra | hide the river | where the sand | still white | buries a palm | a pike emerging | skewers our vowels | as we speak

2. Blood fills the mouth | the chest counts anxious minutes | as the dead might | undulations | of a copper lamp | high overhead | casting a shadow

3. Transparency in daylight | where a river | seeks a river | poles apart | the consonants feel heavy | water vanishes | the drought starts up

4. The Spanish centuries | remain anonymous | against my forehead | silt | obscures a castle | coal burns yellow | patience ends | a white confusion | covers all

5. What does the vase hold? | blood & bones | not flowers | the sad reality of words | a language of atonement | silences & syllables | white as this dust

6. No further clarity | than this | no histories or hieroglyphs | to guide us | dunes & water all around | conspiracies of light | absent survivors

7. White bones | appeasement hard to find | or patience | when we climb the ladder | mineshafts open up | below | a red hand beckons

8. His source is Mexico | his language set apart from | all the others |  
white on white

9. pulsebeat quickens | on the playing card he holds | a foliage unfolds  
for him | a language no one reads | a river rife with whitecaps | rolling by

25.i.10

FOUR MEDIEVAL SCENES  
for Robert Duncan

[1]

Jesus at a wedding  
waits for us

monkeys with chains around their legs  
surround him

dishes of squabs on table

the strangers come to wash his feet,  
tra la they sing

a boy perched at a window  
blows a trumpet

cherries & pears along the floor

a single fly

a skull rests at his feet,  
a bird over his head

[2]

A VISION OF THE GODDESS, AFTER CRANACH

sage & holy  
she is sharpening a long stick

while on a swing  
a babe sails by

the sky fills up with  
warriors on goats & boars

a sleeping dog

a dish of fruit

a castled landscape

[3]

a man called john,  
much like the others, stands barefoot near a lake  
with swans & boats

I turn away from him  
& wait,  
another year inside my head,  
another cycle

then see him, crying  
from his cauldron,  
sad turks surround him,  
warts on their noses

pouring water on his head

[4]

the priest's hand underneath  
the bishop's robe  
against the rump, the flesh  
envelops him & hides

whatever floats around the dancing  
twitching jesus

on his altar: heads & hands  
tacked onto space



122 Janus Head

a hand holding a switch  
a hand that points

a head propped on a pedestal  
a head in mid-air

separated from the crown,  
the spear, the rattling dice

under the dancer's feet  
a robe in flames

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