

STRINGS OF MATH AND CUSTOM

by
Benjamin Gantcher

Beard of Bees Press
Number 97 · June, 2013

Contents

<i>the air comes back all flattery</i>	1
<i>Willow Place</i>	2
<i>They peeled the face off the municipal building</i>	3
<i>The Pages of the Book Are See-Through</i>	4
<i>Self-Portrait of the Ambassador</i>	5
<i>Self-Portrait with Exquisite Fidelity</i>	6
<i>we took our widow to the beach</i>	7
<i>it feels like tattling</i>	8
<i>I wasn't naked but</i>	9
<i>On the Trail of the Book</i>	10
<i>a.</i>	11
<i>b.</i>	12
<i>c.</i>	13
<i>d.</i>	14
<i>e.</i>	15
<i>I, Clodius</i>	16
<i>my dreams replied with steam tunnels</i>	17
<i>O Wyoming!</i>	18

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to the editors of the following journals for publishing, or accepting for publication, poems that appear in this manuscript:

Cousin Corinne's Reminder: Self-Portrait with Exquisite Fidelity, "I wasn't naked but" and a, b, c, d, & e

Dossier (online): On the Trail of the Book

Guernica: "it feels like tattling"

The Saint Ann's Review: Self-Portrait of the Ambassador, "we took our widow to the beach"

Spinning Jenny: The Pages of the Book Are See-Through

the air comes back all flattery
and we fall for it
calling it grace
like the elderly the lindens
prayerful in the mention of sunshine
sloshing around in the film of reverie
on the big glass
beckoning for grace to rise
in us birdsong with its airlift and frittering away
floating in this clear humor it must be a sign
is opalescence on
herringbone wavelets that shifts
under froth bandages
the smaller glee of a harbor in green light
when sails licked with phosphorus are heading home
let us be voicemail
in a cloudman's fancy
the instructions for dinner calling up the kind
hands of the waves
loosening his greaves
of eczema with kukui and ambergris
let us go sliding
out of the dream
the audio lashed to a small raft
nightfall filling the ears of the times

Willow Place

The preppy hombre
carried the sunlight on his shoulder
but didn't speak to it
trotting through the wrestling
signatures of such and such
I have been his age
legible in the rorschach
insensible to the provenance
of flourish or giant
absence of giant Nightingale
with a tweed lid in a cedar
closet The dollar
vans are singing of home
on the Fulton Mall The world has been
resurrected through its furnishings
I will have added
dogwoods leaning close
with some foolishness just when
the sycamores are in the throes
of their holiday

They peeled the face off the municipal building
It was true Lost chambers in the air
of a dented cashbox I saw my chance
in the memory of cubicles one night
when I stopped wanting shapelessly for a while
The sky was violet with a stubborn flush
the mustering stars a fable
Employees out of legend had climbed inside
the ceiling to paint them
I had a dim sense of the myths
and a riverbank where the flowers have throats
and my seconds would catch up in a tizzy
about my credentials
Chest open the building pressed its honeycomb
against the sleep of my children
I planted the materials at hand
miniature notes etched into ambition
and printed on glass cards
sweetness in loose sheets like veils
the long view
irrelevant and noble
Inside the forest of dry wall
the eyes of the constellations like someone's girl
feigning disinterest
I took that as the pole star
& lit out for dawning corridors

The Pages of the Book Are See-Through

My sister hides her treasures in the space behind the stove
where old Lola lost her voice in 1942 and they
can play with her gum wrappers and baby teeth

Self-Portrait of the Ambassador

Of all the wars for your attention that pollinate
the lungs, growing bodhisattva swat teams
so that, like a plant, you turn to greet
some new . . . something,

it is the yellow behind the swallows,
sharp and harried, human as bird,
shaving and smoking and drinking, but on the trapeze!
immune to their own rapture,

the tardy messenger who finds the city
finally and falls against the domes
with a cry that you wish she would hear,
limber empress, rolling in the hay,

it's that yellow that chimes
with the fig tree in the weeds,
a pair of dolls all petticoats and savage tats,
and you reading toy tea leaves

that foresee a breezy summer
but cross-referencing the fenced-in Gowanus,
that obese peccadillo depository
goofy with freshets of seraglio fume

Self-Portrait with Exquisite Fidelity

I want the girl with the crooked face
who looks at you from inside the mirror,
you see yourself at peace and knowing you
so pleases her she beams affection. I want
that girl to walk with me on State Street
and climb the conversation, but don't look down
at the outlandish towers where timid forms
are putting on their fetching clothes
and the ten thousand things are the words
and draw the lace shadows like veils
and white caps that surf the blue mouth of the East
River and scows and animal flowers that flash
inside this mirror of all senses with red lips
I would talk and talk and make a mask of sparks
I would rise off any cushion and hand her into a boat
and watch a long time as she was rowed away

we took our widow to the beach
well she led the way face lifted like a blind girl tasting
a path through currents we couldn't see
groping sands that looked blank to us
it was hard to keep up she blended in
with the tired grasses
wind the colors of accident
sand the color of indifference
and at the shore
the colors of seawater bleeding into her legs
the wind lightening her innards and head the air
draping her with invisible crimson like a lost Romanov
hearing the petition of the offspring
the widow our widow
looked like she was reading
the page she had come for

it feels like tattling
or telling a secret
we're getting tired of the widow
she's still cute you know enigmatic
with her air of holding out a crustacean
in a portrait except lately
it seems she's pretending
I think she senses our disappointment
we're having trouble getting the contact reverie
we got used to
the colors of anyplace she stands
are lingering in her
she blocks the tv
we talk about getting another widow
for her to putter with
but if they reach critical vagueness
and disappear
or vagueness spreads vaguing out the family bonds
scattering us all on the four winds
we never should have taught her how to talk
but her murmuring was promising
there was something almost we could hear a reminder
as if we contrived to see our own dawning
and dimming
we may have prompted her like that horse clever hans
she toes the fringe of the carpet
looks at us toes harder until embarrassed
we pretend it's charades
you're a mare of triton
she's drawn to thresholds and curbs
she calls any scrap of paper
ticket
ticket
what is she turning into
is she still a widow

I wasn't naked but
April dragged her web
across my skin It was blurred
down here as if the nervous pushing new leaves
garbled their intentions at the top of the sky
the magnolia burning
with the arrogance of the favored
I blended in I was able to inhabit every passer-
by I wanted I was
everyone and I
were faintly erased
in the dimly
whispering I was
blurred a shadow of April I was
brimming

On the Trail of the Book

At dawn stanchions
stand at attention
when the pearl
sky with smudges
stretches
The bridge is the zone
of dull shadows
nosing around
the washed out snapshot
where the word *oblivion*
affixes wings
to the paperboy
and the road
is a partisan
smuggling colored thread
inside the cinder
garden The flickering
maiden will unfold
a garment of smoke
and embroider the name
of the air

a.

Your poncho is my poncho. I crave and loathe it
Stand-in of the moment, I and
I are tangled up in strings of math and custom
clank The baby is coming undone
It has the taste of a corporation, if not the rights
Give me a drag of that frame of reference, borrowing
me for a night. June's Phyllis is leaving a snowfall
Named for the sleep of horns
Everything turns into music

b.

Snow is the farm of dreams
white creeps inside of sound, and she would sip a beaker of winter
sleeps white sleep
falling through footprints
among the voices sleep

C.

You forgot Benjamin. He is fucked with grace
the snow farmer
dwarfs spoke to him on the bus—he never called it temerity
the way on his first trip into town a Benjamin will greet
himself in the hard waterfalls
and, hearing an explanation of glass, secretly not give up
rivulets and potholes in my story are teeming with life
the arrow Spring is steaming with arms
like a crowd that jumps to its feet, far away
him and his son, deaf in those hats
their duet leaving the neighborhood

d.

I was making piles
I had to make something
I made the sound of a salamander climbing a red leaf
a song that fills the walls
like stacks of headlines
without these papers I'm an immigrant
in my life
perpetually arriving

e.

The sunlight pledged a soft detergent
I promised to use it. Look to the roof of your eyes
Tightly, said I to your Mollie, bring a mop, and isn't it surprising to make out
the original colors? Yes, they are supremely
wishful, these pinks and opals

In the interim (bewitching) the interim drains away (too bad)
The wastrels were overwritten by the randy
As when snow is arriving to help with the arrangements, the whole place was excited
plump, like pretty bakers, on view after nightfall
tearing at us with their fullness

I, Cloudius

I am not a Cloud, much
That I know of. I do cast a shadow in the Vales and on the Hills
When I need to hear my own voice
A lot of real people don't get on with Daffodils, believing them starchy
Besides the ticktock of the Lake and the trees just
Fluttering, ten percent of me left is breeze

my dreams replied with steam tunnels
my dream pants were not pants
and were very short

In the shadow that falls after your lips let go
of the last word
in the respite of the comma
where I nearly catch you at the new talking
(shadows like old toys
crawling out from underneath mailbox and bicycle
pulling my sleeve

The puny maple in the rock garden leaves a film
in my coffee another message its curled bright hands
are calling out to the wind Don't go
In my cup like the bottom of a well the main leaf is eloquently
defiant

meanwhile an almost dormant swarm of thoughts in winter hats
clink at the foot of the transom with perseverance
they build a temple
for the light is organ pipes
past the trucks on the optimistic ramp is sky
at the corner of Atlantic & Henry
everything turns into music

O Wyoming!

The little red road
hums to itself in the valley
losing the light

the harpsichord of sparrows
shatters in the flawless air
snippets whispering to the brown florets

the presentiment in the stone
keeps me on the ridge
disclosing myself to vastness

and the bare gold laid on hilltops
floods my skull
spilling my ration of will

I am

I am

BENJAMIN GANTCHER'S poetry has appeared in several publications, including *Guernica*, *Cousin Corinne's Reminder*, *Tin House*, *Slate*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and *The Saint Ann's Review*, and is forthcoming in *Spinning Jenny*. His first book, *If a Lettuce*, was a finalist in the National Poetry Series and Bright Hill Press contests. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, a resident at Ucross and Art/Omi's Ledig House, a correspondent for the *Hyde Park Review of Books* and a poetry editor of the online journal *failbetter*.

