

# 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*.

