Contents

MUSE 1

THE WHOLE SKY SPARKLING, ALL DIAMONDS

Marvelous Things without Number 5
That Life 8
At Limantour 9
Self-Portrait in Invisible Ink 10
Poem for Gord Downie 12
Early Morning, Upper Bidwell Park 14
Unearned Season 17
André Gregory Said 19
Screenshots: Vanya on 42nd Street 21
Screenshots: Nostalghia 23
The Garden of Earthly Delights 24

THE REPUBLIC FORGETS

A Toast 29
Free Huey P. Newton with Every Purchase 30
Für ALICE 32
Silence and Residue of Waters 34
Zapruder Film Blooper Reel 37
Screenshots: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind 39
Screenshots: No Country for Old Men 40
Screenshots: The Talented Mr. Ripley 41
Next Life 42
All the Mysteries 43
The Poem You Will Not Live to Write 44
Landscape with Ambiguous Symbols 46
LET THEM SEE THE IMAGES THAT ARE DOOMED TO DISAPPEAR

Screenshots: *Being John Malkovich* 51
Screenshots: *Boogie Nights* 52
Screenshots: *Cocksucker Blues* 53
American Beauty 54

THOUGH WE MAY AT TIMES ADMIRE THE BEAUTY OF THEIR WEAPONS

Theses to Be Nailed to the Door of the Last of the Golden Age Motion Picture Palaces, Following the Final Screening 69
Screenshots: *Delicatessen* 72
Screenshots: *A Serious Man* 74
Screenshots: *Certified Copy* 75
Want 77
Fire 78
Postscript to *Fire* 84
Field of Dead Sunflowers 85
The House Committee on Un-American Activities Pauses to Reflect on Its Service to the Country 86

SING THE STRING BENT SKYWARD

Spices 91
Screenshots: *Paterson* 92
Screenshots: *Synecdoche, New York* 93
Screenshots: *Inside Llewyn Davis* 95
Song to be Sung When the Instruments Falter 97
Scordatura 98
The Nightingale 101
The Adventure 102
Odysseus Departing 105

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 109

PUBLICATION CREDITS 111
MARVELOUS THINGS WITHOUT NUMBER

Our duty is to see with the eyes of the gods.
Stéphane Mallarmé

After forty or so summers you kind of get
the idea: the slow deepening of the plum-blue dusk
that offers a backdrop for the stately silhouettes
of disconsolate, sentinel-like telephone poles;
the fading chorus of evening birdsong; the sharp hollow
pong of an aluminum bat making contact
with the ball somewhere off in the distance followed by
the joyful and at the same time somehow mildly
forlorn minor uproar of a clutch of children cheering;
eventless days at the beach, the scorched sand
stinging beneath your feet, the sand in
your clothes and your hair, a relentless ubiquitous
grit that remains undislodged after any
number of showers and shampooings; the familiar
dirt that collects underneath your fingernails
and your hair growing longer; careless
afternoons endured and discharged in the backyard
hammock or a languid folding chair by the lake,
reading Amy Clampitt, reading Rilke;
teenagers playing an eternal game
of Monopoly or Risk that might well be
the very same game they started last summer;
the same hummingbirds taking the same flight paths
back to the endless empty abundance
of the same backyard flowers and feeders . . .
Some friends are renewing their vows, they were married
a decade ago. Some friends are driving
up to one of the casinos on Friday
to hear a tribute band who have modeled themselves
after Led Zeppelin or Journey.
A friend who left for the East Coast two years ago has flown back to Chico to take photos of Mount Lassen exactly one hundred years after its catastrophic eruption. For a while it feels as if everything is a reenactment of something that has already happened: even dumping a skitter of Raisin Bran into a bowl and then pouring milk over it, or sitting on the porch or trying on sneakers takes on the aura of a ritual. Are you trying to deny time and change, to say that death will have no authority here, or are you celebrating the fact that everything is in flux and ungraspable, or is the season doing one or the other of these things for you?

Mornings glow like dreams, like memories, with a radiance that has been lying latent in the earth all night, you can do it again (whatever it is) but you can’t do it over: the beautiful girl, kissed, can’t be un kissed (and who would want that anyway? But you might), and so you repeat, repeat, repeat, feeling rich with existence and time and a kind of exhaustion you have learned to savor; the end of Side B, after all, simply means that you flip the record over and listen to Side A again. And did you say that life would always be this way, or were you told that by someone in the past, and now hang on to that belief in the face of what must be mounting but, for now, still invisible evidence to the contrary? Stay invisible, you say to it, stay, you whisper, stay just as you are, just a little bit longer, which is just another way of telling the story you tell the children every night, how the birds and the rivers remembered the songs even when
the people forgot, and how, when the people
gained the ability to remember,
y they learned the songs again from the birds
and the rivers. The children’s wide, trusting eyes
as you say this, as if what you said was, to use
that phrase we used to like to use, the gospel truth.
It’s only a story, after all. You mean
no harm. No one means any harm. The world
is ancient, full of shades and spirits, not all of them
friendly, and we do with it what we can.
THAT LIFE

And did you think that life (that begins like a fire and consumes
and did you think that life (it unites you with beasts, you hold it in common
that life (given to you freely, but in what dream would you have pursued it
has been a series of standard answers (you put on your shoes and walked
to expected questions (to the city where they said the oracle was
and did you think that life (there is only one, despite the lies of the elders
has haunted you like a lost child (I mean wolves, yes, but also insects and clams
and are you being dramatic (I know you would deny it but you are dancing
or are you (a space is opening up on the inside, that’s where the world is
parsing the words of the oracle (where the world goes, and yes you are dancing
and a space opens up on the inside of the world (yes that’s where you go
and you go (and a space opens up, and the oracle falls into silence
like a child (there is only one, you fall silent, you fall silent then you go
to the city (where the fire and the beasts are, and the city falls into silence
and did you think that life? (and did you think that, life?
AT LIMANTOUR

At the water’s edge you feel the mind of the planet as if entering it from a different direction: the sharp dry blades of the yellow and pale-green beach grasses, the earth’s cover versions of itself, clouds wisping in the thin far-off blue, giving voice to a different music, an alternative tone of thought, and your own memories that for so long have perplexed you fitting at last like jigsaw puzzle pieces into a larger whole, the entire interlocking superstructure something you could not have guessed at but which now seems entirely inevitable. What mad chance it is to be, it is to be here, it is to be an organism with a body that moves and senses, gasping and singing, and about to die if deprived for mere minutes of the elements that sustain you. Despite what you’ve said, the truth is that you do not mind being loved, being seen in public places, being born from the bodies of the predecessor animals, and giving birth, in turn, to other animals, the ones that will move away from you, to wander and graze and soil the landscape. Your destiny is here. If the stars are frozen on their surfaces, not hot, as you have long suspected, nothing changes: the crash of the breaking waves will roll down along the beach to the place where you sit, and then past you, remaining what it was, and the seeds that have gathered together and given themselves your name will not, in the end, refuse their mission. Gasping and singing and sighing. Trembling in the wind, trembling like the brittle shaking grasses. Call it dancing.
yes that’s me
taking half a pill
because I cannot remember
whether I have already
taken one today

so this way
I know I’m wrong
but only a little wrong

and not in which direction

you have done this too
haven’t you?
raise your hand if you have
no
the other one

raise your hand if you know
whereof I speak

raise your hand
if you have ever
asked your readers
to raise their hands
knowing they know
you can’t see them

yes, you are of my tribe
of that we can now be certain
welcome, friend
here I am
living half a life
because I just can’t remember

and this way
I know that I’m dead
but only a little

and not in which direction

welcome, friend
in the glass

at the bottom of the glass

bottomed

boat

are we in this together?
raise your hand if you are
raise your hand if I am
but you’re not

raise your hand if
like me

you know whose ghost you want

to hover over this
POEM FOR GORD DOWNIE

You were always there, singing
from the back of the car
as if you were drunk back there dreaming and singing
while I drove aimlessly about the outskirts
of everybody's hometown
learning where the lovers go after dark
and practicing the names that had been rearranged
reassigned to the sacrosanct dark spaces
that remained underneath the crooked branches of the trees
and you were reconnoitering the impenetrable waters
of that vast silent sound
collectively known
as the collective Canadian unconscious
like someone searching for a drowned diver
or a slipped-off wedding ring.
A nation will watch me die, you sang
from back there, and I believed it the way you believe
something that somebody says in their sleep.
Fireworks by the side of the road, Northern Lights
and harbor lights perpetually enticing,
perpetually retreating, holding themselves
at a constant unbridgeable distance from my
ungovernable eyes. I flailed my way to
a first kiss as your face published itself
on every TV screen in every bar.
Last night I dreamed you were in my kitchen,
or else you are a sled dog on the snowy plain,
nuzzling the furry neck of Kurt Cobain.
Dancing to Schoenberg, drinking Schooner in Lunenburg.
And it was really you, wasn't it, who came paddling
past, really you whose psalms and sonics
sang the stoic poles together? I think now that maybe
we were not a nation until we watched you
sing and die. O Gord, I lift this last round
to the sprawling sound of the gravid growlings
you brought up from those dark waters
and the verses you engraved on the vast white wall
of unmusic that we face but cannot force ourselves to face.
Listen now, that wail from the West’s waste-effaced margins.
Listen now, these foreign shores, these fallen final invitations.
Listen now, this ceaseless silence you have signed and left behind you.
EARLY MORNING, UPPER BIDWELL PARK

The world drawn like a bowstring

as if to test the returned warrior

and the suitors failing in the room
decorated by Penelope's latest unweavings

When God made the world he did it like this

    world-making in the daytime
    world-undoing at night

And it has occurred to me that we might be living

    in one of the undoings

*

Later she told a lie about their bed

    another test
    for the returned wanderer

the man who claimed to have spent
so many nights there

    and so many nights away

to have had so many dreams there
a pair of love-craft traveling side by side

    soft points of contact
    soft points of departure
    soft points of approximate presence
kiss, coo, murmur, softly shift

* 

and then, the ten-year absence
during which news was slow to arrive if it arrived at all

    the night twice as long
    the bed twice as cold

* 

If I were to make a world 
not beginning ex nihilo but with what there is

I think there would be more unmaking than making
not that I would undo

the marvelous spatuletail hummingbird,
the right whale, the sunrise, butter-and-eggs,
the green-blooded skink, the Blanding's turtle

these I would let be
but we agree
there are other phenomena
of more recent, more human origin.

    things put together by bodies

    with eyes and hands like mine.

*
You remember how light our bodies were
when we lifted them into the trees?
How pure the water and the song.
And the unknown sources of water and song.

The little blue butterfly I’ve been watching

    all this time
    has finally settled

on the rock like a whisper, folding its wings
like a hand someone has decided not to play.

    Its shut-up wings, like the sails of a tiny, delicate boat, are pale.

So much more colorful, for whatever reason,
when it’s in the air.
UNEARNED SEASON

copyright, princeton university press. no part of this book may be distributed, posted, or reproduced in any form by digital or mechanical means without prior written permission of the publisher.
and so
you say to yourself
of morning
now and your brain
strawberries
to sing and to do
to sing and aspire to do
to do

no harm done
necessary conditions
the sun just coming up
seized by the odor of
sing and take aim
to sing and to sing and take aim
for once, today,
no harm
ANDRÉ GREGORY SAID

But there is two hard things; that is, to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for, you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

André Gregory said that he wanted to put a human head in a play. From a corpse, that is to say, as a way of making the audience feel that this was real: lives being lived out and brought to an end on this very stage, which all the world’s a, as we know, not merely set and struck to present a passing show. To have us pass it around, fresh death in our hands, to see if we can withstand an art that cleaves so tightly to things as they are, if one can stand another skull so near one’s own, one on, one off,
one live, one not,
one more performance
of the plot
(if one can withstand
its demands) that’s never
quite the same
one night to the next
so there is no question
of owning, but only
of being present,
or rather, of having
been, and the having been
having been followed
by a quick exit
pursued by a fill-in-the-
blank, each actor’s
pursuer uniquely
his, each audience
member dismembered
in her own manner,
death by silence, death
by moonlight,
death by monologue,
what doesn’t kill you
kills another,
what doesn’t kill you
makes you stronger,
what doesn’t kill you
now kills you
tomorrow, takes just
that much longer.
SCREENSHOTS: *VANYA ON 42ND STREET*

The temperature of the water being indiscernible from that of the air so that you can’t tell when you have slipped in and when you are walking about on dry land or whether the man before you is really napping, exhausted by the demands of his acting career, or playing a man who is napping, exhausted by the demands of managing a nineteenth-century estate in agrarian Russia, envisioned by Chekhov, re-envisioned by a man last seen in an upscale New York restaurant, having dinner with a vaguely familiar, somewhat shorter man, both of them burdened with names and stories that are theirs and also are not theirs, both of them performing, both transforming harshness into loveliness, graffiti-gray day into vibrant, pulsing, luminous night, unable to tell, perhaps, when they slip into or back out of their roles in this slow-collapsing, this decomposing, this disappearing theater.
To have no screen between this part he played and him he played it for.

Blue pigment paints mountains and rivers.
A rice cake is painted with powdered rice.

Perhaps in the end, we will find a place, onstage or off, where we can rest.

We shall see the angels. We shall see the whole sky sparkling, all diamonds.
And in conclusion, isn't that just what our life is all about, to get across the empty pool before the candle flickers out?
Because order matters: breakfast, then lunch, then dinner, dessert following the main course; the orgasm, yes, but the foreplay before; old age, yes, but first youth: Dante’s *Divine Comedy* only considered a “comedy” in so far as it ends in Paradise, having first given us a grand tour of the Inferno and then Purgatory, as methodical if not quite so easy as A, B, C; so that, when we look at Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, it matters whether we read it, as readers of English will tend to, from left to right, beginning in Paradise, where Dante’s masterpiece ends, then passing through that ebullient garden bursting with the planet’s abundance of pleasures on the way to that culminating, grotesque, and, one assumes, irrevocable final destination, the grim fate that we, in Dante, climb out of—we, that is, the readers, the viewers, the detached, impartial observers, carrying the passports that permit us safe passage into and out of these unearthly zones, and not, by any means, the internees, those who have been granted, against their will and without their asking (though Dante’s Virgil would have disagreed, insisting that they did, in effect, ask for this, that they did indeed will it) permanent residence status—or whether, in fact, we read it in some other way, as, for example, presenting these three states of being as being suspended
before us all at once, as if,
at any moment, we might slip partially
or even completely into any one of them,
or, for that matter, as if at any moment,
an elemental intrusion from hell or paradise
might erupt, without warning, into our lives—
so that the story is not a tale of causation
(sin leads to hell, light to darkness, delight
to damnation) but rather a manner of grasping
the complexity of our existence, how things
that are opposite, if they do not attract,
at the very least coexist, taking place
in one and the same moment, the disparate
constituents of human life that do not,
as one might have expected, when brought into contact,
annihilate one another, but instead,
by the very force of their contrast, heighten
and strengthen each other. What, other than evil,
could make virtue shine so bright? What, other than
purity and naïve hope, could entice
corruption and despair into bursting forth
to appear so nakedly as what they are?

Because order matters, yes; but our lives
are not orderly. And art, precisely
because it is, feels at times like a mere
detached imitation, yet can also feel
as if it were more like life than life
itself. Which is why, one assumes, we are drawn,
again and again, to the place where the picture
hangs, to stand in its presence, as if
it were only in those moments that we lived.

But we come from elsewhere, and we go elsewhere
when we are done with our looking. That they
are earthly delights, indeed, reminds us
that Dante’s *Commedia*, too, begins
not in hell but on earth: that famous dark wood,
not a garden of delights, not at all, but a kind
of garden nevertheless, and that
an arrival in Paradise might well take
the form, as in that remarkable final
shot of Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, of
a return to Earth, a real Earth or
a reconstructed Earth, an imagined
garden or a painted garden, or simply
the garden where you were born. The leafy
globe, perhaps, that we see when the triptych
is closed. It is the earth that is ours,
and Dante’s cosmic love, though it moves
the stars that track their paths through their skies,
is a leafy thing, a fleshly thing,
a thing of the soil, a thing that demands
to be lived out on this surface, on the face
of this terrestrial sphere, this local
unheavenly orb, this, our planet,
our neighborhood, if, that is
to say, it is to be lived at all.