

Twenty-First Century Flint



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A 2 R I V E R C H A P B O O K B Y
Mary Leonard

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Contents

A Letter to my Mother

Twenty-First Century Flint

The Word for Spring

Silence Is like a Series of Hyphens

Like an Abandoned Bumper Car

When an Old Friend I Happened to Meet

Sweet Cherries

Dominatrix of Pastis

Where You Are when I Am Far Away

A Meditation on the Secret of Life

Thinking Is a Feeling that Passes

Directions For

Against the Wall

In What Tower

Twenty-First Century Flint

A Letter To My Mother

The flowers are white this year—
freesia, lilies—I cannot name
them all but I can name
my hurt. I cannot heal
when each week the wound
opens. I go to see you
but I need to see
without hearing. In sixth grade,
when Sister yelled, I slumped back
to my desk, deaf to the world
and now I must make myself
deaf to you. I must
substitute words. When you say,
I should not be in an institution,
I must hear, I should not be
in the world because this world
is a holding place for dying.
I must not hear blame
and feel guilt. I must say,
*I am sorry you are old. Sorry
your body is failing,* but I cannot
go on this trip right now,
I cannot be pulled under.
I must not hear, *I took care
of my mother and father and
you must, too.* I must believe
I am taking care of you
and this is what I do to care
and then say these words,
*Can you see the three white roses,
the freesia and the flowers
I cannot name? Do you love
the smell, the scent of love
I cannot name and you cannot hear?*

Twenty-First Century Flint

What is underneath
sometimes rises to the surface.
They say in heavy rains
at Treblinka,

bone shards rise with the clover
and in the summer, hornets make their nests
close to the ground

as if to protect the dead
from scavengers.
Learn from history, they say.

Have we ever? And so why
go under. Leave it
like flint for the archaeologists

Let them discover in measured squares,
rinse and sort
and then proclaim, we cannot

find the narrative for these people
who worked in towers
but whose Special Forces rode in flowing robes
across Afghanistan.

Every image sits with me
like a whisper turning into a hiss,
insisting

I stop this, erase my cynicism,
blot out my personal notes,
become tidy,

take control,
 but I don't, can't, even knowing
 at any moment I could be blown out

a window, diving
 toward erasures I don't own.
My fears rise to the surface,

 even if I want to bury them,
 or delete like e-mails,

not wanting them to become something more—

 twenty-first century flint,
 debitage of my place and time.
Bury them. Sprinkle hornets' nests to hiss
 at those who might hold history

 in their hands,
Smoothing it over, saying,
 we could learn from this.

The Word for Spring—En/Ein

Blue divides land from sea and the Dead Sea divides Israel from Jordan and in this composition, acrylic on canvas, Farouk Hosyny, Egyptian, divides with a black slash like a road, a wadi, an en, an ein.

Remarks

I am out of it. We hiked at Ein Gedi
and I held my breath as I climbed up rocks,
focusing on sky, clouds, anything
out of range, but the sun was too close
and my own body betrayed me with dizziness
as if I were both Arab and Jew living on the edge.

I am out of it. We hiked along the black slash of
the wadi and I could feel myself losing balance
as if I were walking on circus stilts across a
divide and the upside down V of my legs, ^, slipped
away like language between enemies.

Wadi—An Arab Word

(Water once ran in this dry riverbed. Now rocks
plummet to a depth of black space.)

En/Ein—Hebrew for spring

Berekha—pool

Ermeq—valley

Gesher—bridge

Ma'yan—spring

Mappal—waterfall

I am out of it. I choke on these words, stumble
over Chalcolithic ruins, wild goats, hydraxes,
ibexes, 6000 years. Saul pursued David here.
The guidebook says, *This is just a mini-tour.*

Gesture

The black slash divides the canvas
but thrusts upward like the trunk of a tree,
rooted in an earth hiding ruin over ruin, and the
blue gesture moves to frame and softens, circling
back like an arm of life. And that small black v
pushes me into the white space of the distant
clouds. A false security.

Language

And conflict is like the code of tic-tac-toe,
pencil marks of x's and o's played to the death
until every space is filled and all that remains is a black slash.

And those V's? I drew birds as V's in first grade,
graceful, small, large, always in black crayon,
pressing them hard, so they could fly
in and out of the birdhouse, the sky, imitating
the language of teachers who reduced birds to V's.

In this composition, the black V is a simple
mark at the center, leading my eye to a white
space, as if to say, for one moment, *can't we see
beyond our histories, fall like brothers into the
clean white of folded clouds?*

Silence Is Like a Series of Hyphens

like the darkness that night camping
along the Mississippi
I thought I was dead, and then
I heard wolves, and I retreated
to the car, to the comfort of plastic
seats, the radio, the flick of the lighter
anything to interrupt the space
like all those empty thoughts we need.

In a photograph from the next day
I am standing on a lavender hill,
a bluff overlooking the river
somewhere in Wisconsin,
looking as if the night before—
the dark silence, the wolves—
had been erased by orchestras.

Like an Abandoned Bumper Car

I spun in circles
yesterday, my turns
hitting unexpected sides.

I was driving on Broadway
but needed to be somewhere
else, somewhere where

I knew the signs.
I was lost in my own
city, adrift in a search

for silver mounds, sea thrifts.
All day I had accomplished
what I hadn't planned.

My list said *wallpaper*
and I flipped through
geometric grids to Art Deco

*I am six. The Rockettes skip and tap,
skip and kick and I kick the rose velvet
seats with my patent leather toes and
I reach across the seashell light for more
jujube beads to eat.*

On paper everything seems
simple,
words become objects:

shades, housepaints, celery, oranges, headphones

Lists do not list
meanderings, the time it takes
between *celery* and *headphones*,

the absences, the substitutions,
the spins and near misses,
the search for stones that skip

When an Old Friend I Happened To Meet

At my sister's funeral, friends
arrived like movie extras and dad sang
Who died? While his child,
at age 47, struck by cancer, lay dead
Caroline died, I said.

I wanted to find myself in the river's wake,
to leave suicide notes with friends
but rose, like Lazarus, and said,
Not yet, even while losing the words to songs,
even knowing my emotions were dead,
even confusing the names of my children.

Then I discovered my own children's
eyes in dad's hazel-blue and I woke
to his movements between life and death,
rocking in doorways, eyes averted from friends
while the radio played *only the good die young*.

I can't show dad how I feel, mother said
so she did not cry but held my children's
hands like life itself, while I heard songs
my sister loved, riding the wake
of pain, holding the arms of a friend
who mumbled the right words about death,

and I gripped him, trying not to be dead
to words, love, anything done or said.
I felt the eyes of friends
waiting, watching me, my children
so I plucked out one daisy from the bouquet, awake,
singing softly, *I was dancing with my darling*, her song—

when an old friend I happened to meet, her song—
meeting this day, Death,
like an old friend, who would pull me into his wake,
using words like *sorry, so sorry*, mouthing
cliches, all those tired words, *remember your children,*
your friends.

But I would say to friends, children,
anyone, on this day of death, *wake up, yes, dance*—singing,
Why not with anyone you happen to meet?

Sweet Cherries

When I brave the cold
 this winter, I will go
to my own attic

to sort and fold,
 sending stuff off
to the thrift shop, but maybe,

holding on
 to one pair of bellbottoms
red, white, and blue—

Sergeant Peppers pants,
 even to wear.

Who am I kidding!

But I can't let go.
 Even she said, one month
before she died,

*Take me home,
 I need to see
my roses, I need*

*to taste,
 one last time,
the sweet cherries.*

Dominatrix of Pastis

Ask me if there's time enough.
As always the cubicle is cramped
with sounds of *When? She said.*

Do I desire *Playboy* erotica,
hitchhiking nude on city streets,
or to be the dominatrix of pastis?

I need busy cafes, a house of hallways,
cluttered with others' kitsch, tchotchkes,
bathrooms without knobs.

Ask me about fantasy
and I'll say the blue of Matisse's Nice,
the man who is, his eyes like Provence,

the Pont-du-Gard on a July afternoon,
the sky over exits on the Auto-Route,
a dry stone hut in fields of lavender.

No place is sacred when it comes
to dreams. As always, what
you have heard is true.

Where You Are when I Am Far Away: A Sonnet

I want to fall
into purple feathers, the black-eyed susans,
any weed that could hold

one rock, gray,
held in my hand. I cradle it
between thumb and forefinger.

one maple leaf,
green—ripped—stained. I do not hold it.

a pine cone like a
feather, like a bird. I am holding it
between thumb and fingers, at the edge.

a spray of green with
red berries. 10 leaves—3 berries—
did I mention the berries were red?

a pine cone like a
feather and I am holding
it at the edge of my hand, as if.

brown—thin—veined leaf
like an old woman's hand.

i am holding
a fine thin pointed stick and I cannot
resist shaking it, threatening no one.

i am held
by the green bud, its pink tip like
a waterlily penis—held.

i hold
a small twig and swirl its magic.

a dirty flower bud,
a picked flower bud—discarded.

i am holding a
dry lily leaf, a green and purple leaf, curled
in upon itself. Its stripes. Its dry life. Immortal.

A Meditation on the Secret Life

for Ron Witt

We move toward names we don't know:
Vaucluse, Tom, Luberon—all secrets
like the farms of lavender we discover
around every bend. We play
games of hide-and-seek
and the language of pastis and lust.

We need to know, to will, to act, to lust
for what we'll never know,
travelling roads not on the maps, our
American accents as secret
as the time and place we play
with reading Petrarch, discovering,

through explication, a language hiding
a man's history, shadows like the stories
of our lives: death, divorce, AIDS—the secrets
we scatter to this group we barely know:
but we don't speak about lust,
only imagining this Laura, all play,

allusions to wrap around ourselves
like the towels and t-shirts we discover
are tents at the Mediterranean, our secret
parts all covered like the known
lives we left, even love
lives hidden for our need for solitude, to play

in Avignon, where every street's a play,
where we treat ourselves
to Fourth of July picnics, Bastille Day—no
time can hold us as we discover
what we really love,
maybe telling in letters or journals—secrets

for those we trust. Only human, we're secretive
to strangers—this group we've played
with for weeks, hiding our lusts,
ourselves
from ever discovering
how we live and how we die, knowing

no way to tell those secrets
except in this discovered world—Provence,
a stage for us and our mad desires.

Thinking Is a Feeling that Passes

Thoughts are like cats chasing tails
and sometimes I bite off
the pound of fur that chokes me,
that speaks louder than any
sadness. My yoga teacher says,
*Notice your thoughts,
do not judge them. Feel
your body.* If I do feel
then I am thinking
about the struggle to move
my pelvis forward, to lift,
but she says, *Make it easy,
like a wave* as I dive forward, touch,
flatten my back, lift, stretch,
lean back, and she says
Sing, 'guide my way on, guide my way on'
and a friend says, *You've finally
found a form for your obsessions.*
I lean forward and push out
my heart center, slump back,
hearing the puffs of air from my nostrils
feeling the rocking, owning a memory
of a rocking horse I never owned,
but I do know the steady sway
of the train into the city,
slowing before the tunnel, finding
its center before the dark.

The fur in my mouth is something
to spit. I have nothing left to notice.

Directions For

1. a pine cone curved like the road to the Hudson
2. a piece of the road, concrete, heavy like a paperweight
3. like the, like a
4. a pink flower
5. like a lilliputian bouquet
6. buds on the end are
7. like a heart, like the paperweight, like the road
8. like a pebble so out of place
9. on this white page
10. like a heart, like the, like the road
11. carving into my heart

like I did as a kid sent out
to play in the gray cold
November mornings,

sent out,
so I backed myself up,
backed up against the brick,

leaning my face into the yellow
square, and if I could
and I did,

I basked in the sun,
holding it all in,
in one straight alleyway,
moving over the gray ground.

In What Tower

Your first e-mail read: don't forget the honeycake
and pomegranates, each seed will be a flower.
What a sweet New Year! The reply said, I cannot make

sense of this. I sit and shake.
Where was J? In what tower?
Your first e-mail read, don't forget the honeycake.

For god's sake,
When will we know? *Maybe within the hour.*
What a sweet New Year! The reply said, *I cannot make,*

or is it find, the argument, but stay.
Planes cannot land. J was in the second tower.
Your first e-mail said, don't forget the honey cake.

He went down 80 flights of stairs and is safe,
standing in the street in a sea of smoke and paper.
What a sweet New Year. The reply said, *I cannot make*

this disappear—the air or fire, imagine the fear—
like slipping inside an alien ship.
Your first e-mail said, don't forget the honey cake.
What a sweet New Year. The reply said, *I cannot make.*

End Matter

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Mark Flowers teaches at Mercersburg Academy. Prior to that he taught at the Savannah College of Art and Design, where he chaired the painting department. He has been the visiting artist at the Sea Island School for the Arts and taught for the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts. He has exhibited work in both the United States and Europe.

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