

# BREATHS' BURIALS

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Poems by Gustaf Sobin





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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

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**ON THE FRAGILITY OF IDOLS**  
**AS IF WRITTEN IN A BOOK OF GLASS**

*for Sarah & Charlie*

. . . as if written  
in a  
book of glass, read

of so  
many sunken  
numbers, eyes

fluttering like  
fish at  
the

base of  
the  
world. there, what-

ever issued, only  
re-  
entered, in-

extricable as  
wind, but  
viscous,

ballasted, the  
heart as  
if walking on its

head. was there a  
way, asked  
the word of the

word? memory  
flooded, and lust  
too

sudden, counted corals,  
rep-  
licated beads, while the

breath, hesitant,  
hung be-  
tween syllables.

---

## ODE ON THE ELABORATION OF INTERVAL

. . . the same wave  
that  
fed, once, on its own  
unraveling, all mica now, and  
schist. ground heart, the

dark organs  
of

image. had gradually  
emerged, come  
crawling  
from under, gathering—in my  
crossed arms—my very  
own

shoulders. planks and  
clapboard, our  
quick

identifications, each thing  
so  
indissociably it-  
self, self-  
imbued.

even air, the air e-  
bullient, the  
ac-

cessibility, now, of  
all matter, those  
massive  
ap-

propriations. (worked only  
for the  
disparate, that part—the dark slip  
of muscle, the fanned shadow  
of lashes—which had  
no



equivalence. which held, held  
us, just

---

out of  
reach).

was, it  
would seem, like a running curtain,  
nearly a  
world. (there were, we knew, no  
others).

out, onto the  
windy stage of  
our landscapes, would wheel clouds,  
trundle

en-  
tire cartloads of  
replica gods, too, in *trompe l'oeil*, the  
whole  
spectacle of the

pre-  
empted. nothing's  
too far, it  
would seem, if—in flaking—it

re-  
flect. if, spoken,  
re-

sound.

whereby 'would,'  
'might,' the lost  
panoply  
of the conditional. yes, that even  
here, within the  
lens

of my own  
breath, 'you' —of  
all  
words, the very  
first—might, at last, issue. be

blown

---

over the  
bright pages. brought  
to that luster, those shadows, these  
rocks that glisten  
in the very  
lee  
of their own saying. to where, that  
is, sub-

stance it-  
self

might substantiate.

(no, it's  
not me, now,  
who's being illusive, but the overwhelming  
im-  
mediacy of each  
vacated instant. the surfeit

of so  
much  
scuttled letter).

be sign and  
its ef-

fluence, the draft of your  
scarf, as—al-

ready—it  
enters interval. there, just  
over the  
ocean's  
grey echo, gather buttercup  
and rue, bindweed and gentian. give to  
each—each instance—its

own  
measure. for breath

against breath, it's  
through the words we'd  
accede: phrase

you  
initiate, and I—in diastole—pursue.

---

## FOURTEEN IRISES FOR J.L.

there, blossoming once again, like blown  
goblets, the irises in their annual  
ovulations. yes, emptiness, at  
last, enveloped, inscribed. is there anything, indeed, but  
emptiness? but emptiness, at last, en-  
veloped? inscribed?

. . . one color  
follows upon another like  
polyphonic voices: last week, violet, and  
this, a rubbed mahogany, freckled rose, recalling  
worlds—voices—you've never known.

. . . like so  
many stubby paintbrushes, they  
burst—turbaned—into splashed  
panels, running murals (a breath as  
if perishing in the  
very exercise of its scales).

no, it's not the irises that  
return, each spring, but  
ourselves. ourselves—cyclical—who've entered the  
sign, and stoop, now, before  
them: tenuous altars to our own  
tenuous passage.

all irises, finally,  
kaleido-  
scopic; with each  
in-  
finitesimal turn, a  
fresh

conceit. god-  
blossom, lightning-

root, verb on which,  
germinal, the  
air it-

self's as if

ir-  
idized.

---

like those glazed, involuted tissues on their tall, unwavering stems, we, too, as if perch, alighting—as we have—amongst phonemes, polyphones: what tell us, each instant, to our fingertips.

came late. even later, now, *la langue d'oc* having all but vanished, remained the irises, the troubadours' lightning roses, blue as thunder in the dark thunder's *dissoulucioun*.

where dew slips,  
icy  
pearl, from its

petal, the  
tall stalk

scarce-  
ly trembles. . . .

irises, really, are nothing more than the frozen frames of an otherwise invisible drift, our relentless elision past. what they—heraldic, voluptuous—would arrest.

how each of these blossoms—these volutes—lapping ogival, inscribe a void. oh ours, that hollow, that heart, that inherent omission: doom blooming from the rhizomes up.

drafted, the petals get blown, now, across paper. their deep scrolls, rolled tabernacles, little more than scribbled deposits. chimeric hoards.

(*gothic*)

death, and these,

~~our ever~~

---

more  
ephemeral re-

sponses, their  
fluttering  
chalices (faience  
the

skull dreamt. . . ).

. . . way that the irises drift, now, be-  
neath yours. current in which—wind-  
barges—they'd enter, perhaps, your  
very dreams. there, before dissolving (so much  
grammatical particle) might billow. writhe vibrant.

a white chair, its legs caught  
in tall stalks  
of white iris, was what, finally,  
remained. monologue in which, abandoned  
to those immensities, each  
of us murmur.

## PSALMODIC

knelt there, in that  
knuckle of  
rock. nothing's  
less than the word, brittle  
as

crumbs, not  
even the wind, what's  
rising—gentian—just now,  
be-

fore you.

## TRANSPARENT ITINERARIES: 1991

were no origins (so we were told), only ends.

nowhere, really, to reach except those occasional places in which, sometimes, we'd orchestrate those  
ends. set their emptiness—in measured bars, volutes, ellipses—to sound.

those hill villages, for instance, each autumn, weeks after they'd been abandoned,

still, after so much depredation, an ocherous rose.

language, making metaphor as it does out of a fundamen- tally metaphoric existence, has—at least—the power of its double negations.

'you,' it would seem, more *place*, at first, than *person*, (there, for example, where the shadows—in foaming—as if seethed).

existing, as we did, in so much myriad reflection.

—flamboyant shell—

nearer, certainly, you would have  
vanished; further, we'd  
never have known  
that—for hours at a time—we'd  
had the same name.

otherwise, endless as the air itself. as wind, the consis- tency of soot.

only the glint, you said, wasn't incidental. only the glint, occasionally, glowed (or seemed to).

'seemed to,' I repeat, observing—thus—that spent usage.

—you, who'd always been just an instant earlier—

within your gaze, would  
turn; in your long fingers,  
root.

composed, as we are, of creases. of creases and append- ages. or so, at least, we'd assumed.

oh, how many hallucinated cells within a single, predeter- mined body.

. . . the mirage of how many rocks . . .

where a distance—once—preserved us.

kept us primed—as if essential—within its invisible quiver.

(what, awakened, the organs first rose toward).

its icons invested with breath: *our breath*. what held us—for so long—out of reach of our own dismantling.

flexed interval.

what, with each new appropriation, had only receded. had nearly vanished, now, into an 'already-after- worn tokens; gutted sums.

'seeking to conquer a larger liberty, man,' according to Melville, had but extended 'the empire of necessity.'

... in which, not even gagged, a gratuity of sounds ...

would wrestle in  
~~these shadows for that~~  
light, that  
luster, for those  
blown drops driven—incandescent—past so  
much extinguished  
mirror.

as if cupped, irrecuperable.

an alcove in air!

where, otherwise, had gone on vanishing in the very midst of so much acquisition: at the very heart of  
its heavily compressed metals.

*mother of no one, as  
woman you  
enter, occupy nothing, but stand, water-  
slick in the midst of these pitted  
whispers, no one's, once  
again.*

## ANGUISH & METAPHOR

only in air  
do the knots dissolve, only  
without, with-  
in, in the echoing

organs, dis-  
perse. earth in-

verted, a life as if passed  
a-  
mongst its  
attributes, you'd rise,  
rise as

I'd plummet, your hair—in-  
volved—harden, just  
there, where

I'd  
vanish.

## TRACING A THIRST

*for E.F.*

called it: tracing a  
thirst, the poem  
as it

---

sluices a  
passage; with each,  
dry

utterance, edges  
towards its  
own

ob-  
fuscated source. no,  
not the

world, the  
world's, but,  
per-

haps, its  
very  
postulate. what the

winds  
would lap, and the  
tongue,

ultimately,  
muscle: breath, like  
so

many  
empty bubbles, brought  
to

that pleated lip.

## **THE VILLAS OF ANDREA PALLADIO**

there, once again, at the  
world's  
very edge, you're  
pointing out palaces, aren't  
you? tapping

at that viscous  
glass, holding them, the



*im-*

---

*memorable*, at the  
tip

of your lacquered  
nail. there, just there, where the  
barge pivots, seems to  
station in the  
midst

of its own vapors. 'see  
it?' you

ask. I see  
your lacquered nail, its  
wavering  
reflection, follow it

across  
those stalled waters. *pier, pilaster,*  
*fronton*, the pure scale

of so much  
hal-

lucinary mass. (not even a  
hedgerow to break  
the

effect, not even  
a stray dog, the ragged line of  
its  
leash).

null, in so  
many  
numbers, isn't this  
what you mean? this, that's  
meant? blown  
mirrors, the void in

which, turgid, our  
viscera

would glow? among the  
room,  
rooms, the

words empty—spacious—enough to

---

withhold us? isn't  
this, that's  
nothing, what the  
cells—wedging—would jam?

billows about you, a  
scarf of  
clouds, pigeons. yes, a sudden  
air  
of apparent be-

wilderment. tell, tell  
me to my-

self, before even  
you  
get swept  
into that wash of sounds, the lagoon,  
al-

ready, in a  
sputter  
of tugs, marked by so

many rigorously  
a-  
ligned pilings. yes, before  
our own breath hardens  
a-

bout its very  
words, and our bodies, once again,  
beat

against the  
muslin of their veiled reflections.

## **ON THE NATURE OF THE ICONIC**

what bursts in the very moment of bursting is image.

its bunched chimera.

even though, immediately after, she'd as if begun gathering together her every gesture; as if collecting  
—once again—the scattered, grey blades of her gaze.

accumulating—as you'd put it—diaphanous.

just there, where the curtains ripple, each time, through the draft of their own deafness.

neither this side, nor that.

---

(of what, indeed, knew no end, no depth, no dimensions whatsoever, but—being verbless—existed in  
an underworld entirely its own).

a well of shadows—you might have written—surrounded by a garland of splashing leaves.

by the gloss of so much apparent matter.

while she—steadily—as if thinned into focus.

(fixed rays of her earrings; what she'd just fastened, sapphire).

muscled, luminous.

as if such signs (in an uninterrupted emission of signs) might only have erupted out of the  
disarticulated. its depths.

cast in so much counterpart.

she, as if reconstituting that white memory to which you'd otherwise have had no access.

miming its exact outlines, its deepest cleavages.

toying, thus, with those immemorial losses, thoroughly unaware, in so doing, of the magnitude of such  
provocation.

the tips of her fingers, that very instant, running nimble over her glowing cheeks; adjusting here,  
there, the slightest wires of that all-too-perfect dissemblance.

like notes, struck vibrant, off some dismantled instrument.

yes, just then, as her each feature converged, grew limpid,

the circumstantial, absolute.

oh, all the meanings, values, irrefutable definitions we'd given ourselves.

the alphabets. the blown letters of how many driven alphabets.

(within which, notwithstanding, had adored).

as she stood there, now, her name changing with the light, the shadows, the time of day: pure replicas  
of the otherwise obliterated,

as if the door alone might be altar. our very last.

and the moment itself, sacrificial.

## IDIOM

no work, now,  
for the living, had risen on so  
many scuttled  
images. euphoria, a  
form

of despair, spoke  
only

to the mouth, shoving

'clouds'

---

between its teeth, slipping 'mineral.'

"still there?"

would

ask, as if the lips, alone,

might sprout, break florescent

into their

own

abolished

idiom.

## NACRE

dawn, and the ground as

if slipping

from under-

neath the brittle sheath of its stars:

all those

in-

nate in-

stabilities. what the 'given,' each

time, took. told us (just as you'd

tell your-

self) that the body's

bundled, the nerves knotted

about something far too slight, e-

vanescent, to

utter. lay it, then, in the

interstice: *between* the

be-

tween, oh all

that e-

laborate scroll, the white

letter of

protracted allusion: the

name alone of the figure you'd glow in,

nacreous, now, in the

flagellated rays of

its nimbus.

# THE DEATH OF FLASH-BACK

---

no, not even those  
wind-  
pitted belfries, their quarried rectangles scooped  
into so  
many minuscule  
alveoli, no, not even they, now,  
would receive  
notice. faster, the

instant as  
if ob-

literates its own  
passage, feeds  
us

on its fresh  
vacuities. arms, shoulders, teeth: *these*, after  
all, were our  
last

possessions. were what  
we'd

wager  
against that  
very sleekness. for enveloped, the  
breath, occasionally, still went under. took us

into the  
heavy folds of  
its mirrors: there, where  
beds, carpets, armchairs stood, like

salvage itself,  
within its rippling pleats. wedged, would

lie there, our gazes  
blown, while our lives, as  
if

voided, flew  
over.

### LINES FROM PIETRO LONGHI

". . . and the floor by the girl, rendered darker."

P.L., 13 May 1749

for Beatrice & Beatrice

. . . here, sheets  
of music  
have as if  
    fluttered onto the  
vermillion  
table, where the  
three  
musicians, squinting,  
inter-  
pret whatever bars  
that they  
can.

... in the midst  
of so much  
black  
crinoline, she's  
curtsying  
be-  
fore the  
beige lady, the  
tip  
of whose fan  
poses circumspect  
a-  
gainst an  
intransigent chin.

. . . here, only  
empty  
gesture, infatuated  
deed. with the  
brief  
sweep of  
a hand, he's  
showing her

towards the tall,  
~~chocolate-~~  
brown volumes, his  
eyes, all the  
while, fixed  
upon the  
deep  
heave of her bosom.

. . . with fans  
like black  
scallop  
half-  
covering their  
face, they  
traffic in  
whispers (the  
thin  
lascivious hiss  
of so  
much strict  
*con-*  
*fidenze*).

. . . appears twice in  
the same  
painting (she, even  
creamier in the  
oval  
portrait that  
Longhi, just to the  
left, executes,  
his  
brush, that  
very  
instant, lingering  
a-  
gainst the gold fold  
of her  
lid).

staring into a  
future that they'd  
never see, these  
svelte  
extortionists, masked

as-  
trotologi.

---

she's reading her  
own  
wretched fortune  
into the  
palm  
of the plump  
*bellezza*, who's  
gazing—for  
her  
part—into the  
deep  
reaches of some  
pale  
arborescent decor.

. . . the tiny dogs  
in the paintings of  
Pietro  
Longhi are  
no less ornamental  
than his  
sitters. most  
wear  
ribbons, usually  
cerulean, sometimes  
cold  
rose.

. . . against a  
floor, lacquered  
black, the  
scattered  
flotilla of their  
narrow,  
ivory-  
white slippers,  
each set, it would  
seem, at  
some critical, pre-  
determined  
angle.

behind the



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