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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., *Opening*, pen and ink, 1980.

THE MESSAGE

Dry September weekday morning,
time indolence equates to sin,
I was outside, eyes closed over coffee
thinking some things I think when
a grasshopper flew in a certain fury
arcing off the desiccating asters
and affixed itself sharply to my upper lip,
returning startle with a compound stare
a ceaseless green on green.

Buttoned in its urgent grip
words came as plain as under
a falconed pigeon's ring
or in a half-corked bottle;
surely the heart of sadness is this knowing:
each embarks a gulf alone, each with
his fractured bit of seeing and a need
but not the tools to tell.

Brian Hubbell

Five Poems on Etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn

TWENTY SELF PORTRAITS

The hair seems sometimes
more detailed than life,
etched strand by strand.
Larger than life, that's it –

For a frown, a frowse;
wild curls for shadow.

There he is, there again.

He's looking for something new:
a hat, sword, feather,
but the nose is always
B flat in the key of C.

And one thing more, the eyes,
like faces we've all made
for mirrors, smile or sneer –
however turned the skull,
the eyes can't help showing
how much it costs to see.

THE RAT POISON PEDDLER (THE RAT CATCHER), 1632

Here's a peasant with a tub fixed to a tall stick,
dead rats hung from it, and more improbably,
live ones, one on his shoulder, one atop the tub.
He has a tall hat, too. A sword hangs from his side.

His helper, perhaps a dwarf, holds a wire cage,
and the turbaned householder reaches out from his door
a coin or two. A broken barrel decorates the foreground.
The village and trees recede delicately behind.

The shoulder rat (a pet or half-poisoned?)
has the only sweet face in this tableau,
and from under the wooden arch that caps the doorway –
darkness, the smell of onions, damp stone, ashes.

CHRIST AWAKENING THE APOSTLES
ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES
(DRAWING, c. 1648-49)

Christ's in the center standing
in a robe that's left unshaded.
The darkness is all for Peter
who has been drawn over with sticky lines
as if wrapped by a prudent spider.
He's tangled in his dreams, can't attend.

The others are also slow to wake.
It's jagged where they are.
Their open eyes see nothing.
Christ says what he says. There's
a tree, a garden wall behind him,
figures stirring: these lines are drawn in haste.

**DEATH APPEARING TO A WEDDED COUPLE
FROM AN OPEN GRAVE**

Death's got on his best bones.
The couple have their backs to us,
but they are shocked, stunned.

This is the sort of thing
that's bound to happen

when on your wedding day
you say, "Honey, let's you and me
go check out that open grave."

A MAN MAKING WATER

Here's a full length portrait,
a fat man with a tall hat
and a basket strapped to his back.

He's got his thing in his left hand,
and he's making a concentrated whiz.
Taking account of the vertical format,
he's making water perilously close
to his shoe . . . bowlegged, baggy trousers,
feet turned out, thoughtful, practiced.

A little treasure, this, no bigger
than a playing card – the diagonal
from top left basket through the stream
splashing inches from his toe
at bottom right charms the eye – no need
to worry he can't lean that far
without falling on his back.
He'd cry, "It's bigger than it looks.
Art alone has unbalanced me."

NOTES FROM EAGLE ISLAND

1.

The trouble was the trouble
always faced in paradise – so much

other

and, how to enter?

2.

The mailboat captain rows us
from his anchored ferry to a cusp
of sand at shore

where you and I and our ballast
of cartons are hoisted
overboard.

He shouts at us, into wind,
pushes out before I hear
his warning.

So, already it's us
pitted against the incoming tide –
rushed lugging what we belong to
off the beach to the door
of the farmhouse

up through sea-cliffs, hedges
of sea-rose, purple thistle,
grass waist-high.

3.

Imagine, instructions.

There's a sheaf on the kitchen table.

Uncovering the well, where the kerosene's shelved,
a pencilled sketch of countless paths.

How rain rattles from the roof
down to fill the cellar cistern.

What not to bury... what to bury... what to burn...
what not to burn.

Didn't it all appear more
frivolous from the mainland?

Every window but one here's
hawking its version
of field-ridge-sea-shoals-sky.

We have come to unmoor ourselves
from ourselves – spend days stuttering,
Beautiful, Beautiful,
as if each rationed that one word.

4.

Cornered in this vastness, you can
unpack.

But pressed between books,
wrapped in the folds
of towels, sleeves and socks,

are stowaways:
your every-grief worth brooding over.

5.

I'm forging fellowship wherever I can,
with the broken door –

its torn screen flaps, upper sash barely hinged,
knocked clattering with every passage.

On the sill of a window, that midnight-blue creamer
hand-painted with orange dahlias around the rim
where a hairline crack begins
running down through to the bottom.

It can't hold on to anything for long.

There is too much to hold, but as if there isn't
enough, we waste no time, revert
on our very first walk to longing –
croon to see the island through falling snow,
plotting over obstacles to the next
possible trip back here.

The book says, awe is always some blend
of beauty and terror, making sensible
how we invented gods
for chaperones –
because before you can paste eyes,
making faces, on everything here
to look back at you,
it's all sheets draped over shining mirrors.

6.

Our eyes are nomads, but as I pace this beach
mine are fixed on the few inches surrounding each step,
homing in on something I'll only know
when I see it –

like those left homeless after a hurricane
hunt for any recognizable scrap in the rubble,
some thing to vouch for who they are.

From that schooner in the distance,
I could be a knick-knack orphaned on a shelf of sand,
a stiffpointed doll that blinks.

You could only use the word *peaceful*
if you weren't looking.

Simply standing still here at the edge,
your bare feet can be taken
from out beneath you,
burrowed with each departing wave
deeper, then deeper.

7.

All afternoon, the festering argument
between the sea and the shore,
surf clobbering the cliffs.

How gradually you can begin to believe
you belong here.

The tide turns its back
on a bed of glistening stones: islands
whittled to miniatures.

Concessions are strewn every day
along a newly drawn margin.

8.

Hiking all day the periphery of the island,
I can't help but fall into seeing
for both of us –

threading every brush with the sublime
into a rosary of details
to carry back to you,

assembling companionship
like this on the spot

the way we stake vines or heavy-headed
blossoms in the garden
to keep them from snapping at the stem
under the weight of what alone
is unbearable.

This is why Adam and undoubtedly
Eve began to name things. Not to conquer –
but to bear what paradise suggested to each
in the other's absence.

So they could tell each other.

9.

Monks head. Ink berry.
I am trying to see only one thing at a time –
the preponderance of that single image
throughout the woods: one tall pine
fallen into the arms of another.

10.

Seams open in the sky and the sun puts down
rays around us like tent poles.

I say, there must be a name for this.
You say, *godlight*.

The clouds are blues unfurling blues
on paler blues – and

this is how it might look,
the deepening of a trail of thought.

Blues unfurling blues on paler blues
translucent as the powder of moths' wings.

11.

From a dirt road cutting
through a field
at the heart of the island,
I think I've discovered
one renegade Chinese poppy
full-open in a meadow
of summer grasses.

Then, its petals disperse –
flying up and off
into a hundred specks
of tangerine.

The monarchs are migrating,
convening here to feed
on the whitened pedestals
of blossoming valerian.
Our eyes are known for this.
For making mistakes.

12.

The only reason for my ungainly plunge
was -

you made it look possible,
your body shouting up for me

to imagine past the cold
of the cove
to weightlessness.

13.

Moon as scimitar. The hour of last light.
I scavenge for the revelation
lurking in every form.

The darkening woods calls you to declare
what you believe in. I took the wrong trail
at the crossroad.

My body is torn between the fear of being
lost, and the work of finding my way home --
between the impulse to run and the impulse to kneel.

14.

A ship with coal-gray sails
inches into view across that tightrope,
the horizon.

You say, *Let it stand
for the grace of darkness.*

I say, *The sky is falling.*

As the rips in the ozone widen –
what will become of what we know
as light? As color?

It's the somber woman in that fresco
dressed in black
critics have argued over
for centuries. Who is she?

I say, *She knows what's coming.*

You say, *That ship's become the vanishing point.*

15.

We find what is most urgent to find
in the dream

where you are on your knees
on the beach somewhere behind me
holding up wedges of tumbled sea-glass
as if they were the chipped
points of stars,

worshipping only the light
that passes through them
as I work my way out
to the head of the bluff carrying
nothing but that question –

*Who says we're entitled
to refuge?*

Surf smacks the stone-face
shattering a clear bottle
into a flume of many-colored pieces.

And
every loss is not betrayal.

That's when I let go of the invisible
guard rail, the one I've been
gripped to all my life,
edging back with both hands
free to tell you.

16.

We are children of these accidental, but
nevertheless, communions.

The loon wakes me. Sound of one voice
and another that answers,
tremolo saturating the August air
for miles.

I haul myself up, wooden bucket full
from the well.

On neighboring islands, others
are drawing themselves
half-willingly from sleep

to hear the wailing of birds, a calling
we have no choice but to share in the night,
blackened as the glass chimney
on the kerosene lamp, the wick
gone too long untrimmed.

17.

Our friend's child said, *We are all underwater
and the angels are fishing for us.*

And what are they using for bait?

He said, *Birds.*

18.

In that small cradle of a boat
we wait scanning the surface in silence,

as if keeping some appointment we once made.

We are hungry for something larger
than the sighting of seals inside
the sighting of seals.

That first head emerges – crowning
dark clump of clay still dripping wet
from the hands of the maker.

Then, the language of eyes locked to eyes.
Our first language.

And all of us, fingerprints.

19.

All week, that unsettling odor we can't locate
but something's rotten in paradise.

Where the pans are stored in the kitchen pantry
we find what's left of a dead vole
under the lid of the lobster pot
and look at each other – ungenerously.

That's why the body doesn't just get tossed,
together we feel obliged
to make the time for ceremony.

We bury it in the woods behind the house
on top of a mound, the way Bedouins
interred their dead, to be closer to heaven.

20.

Sprawled at dawn in the adirondack chair beside
the house, I'm waiting for the sun to lift up
at the opposite side of this island, casing a strip
of first light on a shoal out in the bay
before making the ever-slow crossing toward us –
sweeping tide, with no intention of stopping
at the tideline – up the beach, ledges,
reaching my cold bare outstretched feet.

When my ankles are taken, so are the stones
we arranged yesterday in a ring on the grass.
A crow paddles air overhead as light's cupped
to kneecaps.

When the heat settles above my thighs in the pool
of my lap, it makes a mirror out of the window
to the room where you're still sleeping.

Light splashed, a shawl drawn across bare shoulders,
and the wings of an opened notebook
on the weathered table.

I once knew someone who would say, *So –
what's the point? So what?*

So, I'm always braced for this question.

The point is – grace is indiscriminate. Or,
sensual pleasure has its own brand of intelligence.

The point is, anticipation. Or, light is shed
gratuitously on the wing, the body, the chair.

When my hips were taken, two cormorants flew
in tandem with each other and their shadows.

The point is – I made nothing more of it.

Or how everything can be moving unself-consciously
through light, while you sit outside that rim
in the chilled observing shadow.

The point is bees dive into the opened mouths
of roses, noisy as infants to the nipple
and the moon's a bleached sand dollar
still swaddled in ample blue.

Contingencies.

The point is, light gathers up the dispossessed
and soon I have to move or this heat will be
too much for me.

Or, well, what is it *you* worship?

The point is a stony ledge with an ever-changing
face.

21.

Once a day the herring gull rises in a chute of air
above these ledges and drops its sea urchin
over and over again. Every day, to get to the meat,
it shatters Aristotle's lantern.

22.

No one would believe how we went on
praying for that fog, that emblem of soured
vacations on the summer coast of Maine.

We needed a reprieve from our
record-breaking stretch of perfect weather,
the daily demands that we relate or not
to every surface and its reflection
and its shadow.

It wasn't only the chill it would bring,
justifying a fire in the wood stove.

I knew we shouldn't want this
but we did

– all foreground, a world
where everything out of reach
had to be taken on faith
still existed.

Raking clams on the mud flats of low tide,
I turn as if hearing the fog bank approach.

It rolls in thick across the Penobscot,
baptising blindly, even more even-handedly
than light.

23.

Slack-water. The sea performing its impersonation
of quiet. Unruffled acres turning the color
of mulled red wine.

All day the light hangs as if evenly dissolved
in a solution of air, then falls at dusk
from the sky out of its mysterious suspension.

We watch the sun shrink toward the horizon,
rayed nimbus hovering just above the head of a saint.

It floats for an indisputably long time in a nest
of spruce on the facing island, opaque
and tiny as a porch light. Then appears to disappear.

We turn away toward what one of us absent-mindedly
refers to as *home*. We say, *It's all over*.

But the sun rises again for seconds, thrown up
for an encore, hesitant as anyone who has trouble
saying goodbyes.

24.

The book says, *The self is no mystery,*
the mystery is that there is
something for us to stand on.

The stone embedded
in the dirt path
shifts beneath my foot.

From the bluff at the end of this road,
the mainland's a decoy
in the distance we'd fallen for.

25.

Wanting to surprise you the way the sun did,
throw doubt on what we call endings,

I left you packing alone in the house
knowing you'd forgive me later,

and snuck out down the path to the lighthouse
where I found what I was looking for,
but also the unexpected – those raspberries
we thought wouldn't ripen until after we'd left,
fat and dropping almost uncoaxed.

I stuffed my mouth with that sweet-tart fruit,
and my jacket pockets with what

I'd come for – handfuls of sea-rose petals
that gave themselves up as easily.

On the way back, I met the snake in the road
slithering through its own unmoving curves
off into the brush.

This is why I was late and you were already
loading the boat when I got there, too busy sighing
about leaving to mention it.

26.

Half-way out that bay to the mainland, I was too busy
too, brimming with that uncomplicated affection
it's only possible to feel saying goodbye
to a place. Busy forgetting, until I caught
my hands stained from fruit the color of roses,
and pulled them out, squandering
roses into wind toward the island dwindling
behind us. So I surprised myself too –
petals swirling and landing on the surface water,
swooping at the boat like gulls trailing fish trawls,
petals blown with spray back up at us, planting
badges on our sleeves and pasting
kisses to that look of disbelief on your face
that says both, *How do we come by such pain,*
and *How do we come by such pleasure?* It was a kind of toast,
wasn't it – grace spoken at the end of one meal
and the beginning of what we hope might be another?
We're like the shipwrecked in that story, who wait
and wait for the message that doesn't come,
then comes, from a great blue heron
who could mean anything calling down to them,
Hold fast. Hold fast. There's more.

L. R. Berger