

**MICHAEL BROEK**

**The Cloud and the Counterpane**

**The Cloud 1**

citi of never-ending gates  
citi of evidence collected in barrels  
DNA the 100-year storm left  
waterlogged  
along Kingsland Avenue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

citi of Sutton Hoo of golden breastplates  
punk teeth false hair

citi of candied orange slices & sushi  
that preserved that raw that saturated color  
inside the steam-mouthed kitchen

citi of birth  
documents floating down to Jersey

citi of preserved women  
hanging from fat rafters like antique brooms

citi of preserved men  
shut inside glass cases on soft black sheets

citi of gods

citi of devils

citi of can't tell the difference.

**The Counterpane 1**

Here in my bivouac  
on the other side of the world

I will write to you  
about all the head-sunk people

eyes bowed thick with fear  
walking like statistics up  
& down the streets & the ones  
who turn their faces

& who I misbelieve are you.

I am not sure I know the difference anymore  
between this person & that  
along Kingsland Avenue  
though some point guns & others  
kiss me hard on the lips  
& I am so glad  
we are one of those  
kind who point with our mouths  
most of the time.

I could say your name  
or I could just crawl across your chest  
& our thighs would speak the text  
lay your head against my neck & come  
nameless one  
everywhere

London, Mumbai, New York, Shanghai  
these species: citis  
this genus: citi  
slicing off the *y*  
no good asking anyway.

You are in another citi & I  
am deep here in myself  
—less these numbers, less these names & eyes—

but it is the same sky, isn't it?

**The Cloud 2**

well, there were people not on any maps  
but in citis  
on the maps

in statisticians' shop drawers  
shedding citizens' data onto squared  
tile floors  
& in the server's ever-spooling numbers

circumnavigating solar systems  
since numbers  
were light  
& seemingly infinite

space  
& on Tuesday at 5 p.m. the Milky Way is finite  
while at 5:01  
there is more, *encore du, encore du*

in bodega storage closets  
& police precinct bathrooms  
where there loom broomstick endings

fractions

systolic/diastolic

in private club parlors where countries  
meet histories written  
under invaders' thumbs &

numbers men gobble tables where eyes are  
multipliers  
citis' fissures, fissions, fractures

. . . the ethics of loving are complex  
if this can be called loving at all  
the 4:05 p.m. from Newark arrives at Penn not at all . . .

but solidly within dream  
nightmare & imagined futures arriving  
softly

across bridges leering brightly  
in breezeway corners & last-century  
elevators

crossing each storey's  
horizontal steel  
each light-pierced foregone life-line

water-line food-line power-line  
line-up  
line of defense

graph paper  
the Arecibo message:

11  
11  
11  
11  
11  
01  
11  
11  
01  
11  
01  
11  
01  
11  
10  
11  
11  
01  
X

double-helix human

the extraterrestrial  
signal 6EQUJ5  
forwards & backwards WOW!

**The Counterpane 2**

Your back  
is a constellation  
is code map & lexicon  
leading the way  
across & inside  
the counterpane. Time  
we have wasted  
wanting. This  
humming of hands  
smoothing  
tugging  
piecing  
palming the skin. Take  
the batting. Take  
the needle  
& sew the  
*we* of us between these

crosswise stitches  
mating belly on top  
of belly halves:  
flax duff  
wool tips  
cotton waste  
& rags.

Whatever it takes to be warm.

Whatever it takes to hold together  
two horizons pierced

through with light:

Jacob's Ladder  
Flying Geese  
Monkey Wrench  
Crossroads.

Underground  
Railroad quilts  
signaling what everyone

desires

kissing—revolution—the gasp—  
your hip fastened to mine  
unfurled & free.

**The Cloud 3**

Tal Afar

citi of

blood stars

patterning soldiers' boots

splintered windshield

wheeling about Lt.

\_\_\_\_\_’s head

firing the warning

shots

flashing

the hand

signaling

“Stop”

the Arecibo message

humans

cringing

in the statistician’s

office corner

Samar

Hassan

officially unrecorded

all these blossoming

terrors

Samar

beauty

exploding citi.

**The Counterpane 3**

The pattern is here.  
The shop is mine.  
Hour passed hand along  
nape of neckline  
fabric which  
choosing chooses me—  
tools:  
scissor, machine, spool  
blade & rule.

What happened  
last night along the roadway  
home?

What happened last  
star-splintered year  
manning the checkpoint?

Or in that secret tree  
split open in the garden?

Pattern is here. That  
pattern I wasn't meant  
to have. Stitches organizing  
sky—constellations  
pointing toward futures  
I didn't know was there  
plural.

P = slow loves  
perambulations  
of dresses around the garden  
market flowers  
patterning the day.

Do you have this?  
Is there one of these?  
What I go finding  
is never what I leave  
having found—  
you.

**MICHAEL BROEK**

Dear shopkeeper  
stocker  
prophet

I came today  
imagining  
just where I was going &  
you suggested  
new ideas.

**The Cloud 4**

the A train to Far Rockaway was bound  
to run over Sunando Sen.

“If I’d smoked a blunt that day, I wouldn’t have pushed him,”  
Menendez said.

a universe of subjects  
encoded in things

[a dictatorship

of—(preposition) belonging in, composed  
in—(preposition) of perpetuity]

once Blake opened his mouth  
“all sublimity is founded  
on minute discrimination”

object becoming subject  
remaining object

Sunando Sen was bound  
to fly when the A train to Far Rockaway  
arrived.

**The Counterpane 4**

My head is full of you & the wind  
has picked up your scent  
bringing you back to me. My head

aches from feeling  
& the lights along the sidewalk grow  
yellow with their simple being

in the face of all their glassy eyes have seen—  
backpacks walking into distance  
& shopping carts, carriages & scooters

people too. People not  
in cities or on maps—people in each  
other's arms. Along the blue black walkway

beside benches crying with sweat  
are her & him & dogs  
tethered to their masters

sometimes many in the hands of one  
walking with his head down.  
In my brain today is hurt

I had not known I wanted & wouldn't  
give up. I had finished the quilt  
so I went down & sat by the smell-less river—

just a frosted gray strip of moon  
laid down between cities that see  
each other across the river

but do not touch. These quilts  
are called crazy. Patches pieced with no  
pattern—random except for intent.

The city on the other side of the river looks  
like the city on this side of the river.

Except I looked & someone looked back.

**The Cloud 5**

citi of alleys all *back*  
behind the boulevards alley-living  
alleys of strays alleys of broken pipes  
alleys of rich tenants & porters  
alleys of runaways & unconquerables

reading Plato  
by nite light

citi in which the philosopher is not wanted  
ideal citi  
every citi where

“an hour cannot be spent more pleasantly”  
than at Harry Hill’s place on 25 East Houston Street

brothel, towers  
of shuffled papers, bodies  
leaning toward dissolution in water

187 metal slugs or 2,200 gallons of #2 jet fuel

& amortizing memorials advertising grief  
because telling always seems  
the way

’cept the aliens ain’t listening

citi of broken eyes navigating sidewalk cracks  
because placing eyes back in the head means scalding fire

walking the dead man’s route—  
the Jornada del Muerto—Manhattan  
Oppenheimer quoting the four-thousand-year-old  
burn-your-eyes-out texts:

*De Civitate Dei.*

**The Counterpane 5**

She walks into the vestibule & leaves  
a bomb meant for the ambassador.

She walks into the vestibule & leaves an umbrella  
I left at the table

which pattern chooses:  
“we’ll see when they carry them out” (Szyborska)

I take the elevator down from 14E  
step into open space

such saturated color, light, heat  
flicking like a peony—the concentration

required to press my eyes against  
her nape like a brave limb of birch

as she retreated into the kitchen  
stepped back out again wet & on fire—

exiting the vestibule I  
unfurl myself in the rain.

**The Cloud 6**

a topography of citi reveals  
monuments to Babylon  
ticking through the pavement—  
glass, levers  
slaves sleeping upright in dim corners  
& tunnels sniffed by rats  
stealing gold: pharaoh, mayor, architect  
embalmer, saint

atop the thwarting bull Wall Street  
a ballerina *en pointe*  
a bronze man reading  
literature dumped from the Free Library  
a card catalog unwritten: occupied

blue horizontal lines, margin at the top  
categorizing “citi”:

she “will go out in time, will go out  
into time, hiding even her embers” (Duncan)

I love you even as love refuses names  
refuses to be named

because it is refugee  
my sweet untold ballerina

Hassan.

**The Counterpane 6**

If the branch is to bear its birds & angles  
featherweight leaves & invisible winds  
for as long as it is possible to hold anything  
then it must make peace with earth  
sleep-spot, dirt bed & disassemblage. Swaying

early October toward ice & that clear  
lacquering weight, the nuthatch & its love  
still hang upside down & that branch bend  
might be your crook of arm & sleep while below  
that improbable mattress unfolds itself with

warnings, wind signaling too, beaten up  
leaves showing their veins.  
The nuthatch does not love its mate. Such sloppy  
thinking. Nor does the branch care either  
dropping here or there onto lives built & lives

spent. Hear the snarling wind its teeth  
in a hurricane season biting the hide of time  
& you whom I want in my mouth, both your past  
self & your future long-haired bark beauty—a soft knoll  
I might kern into, forget for a moment this fall.

I want what the many have wanted, my own  
failings a nest of reeds holding up the tunnel's mouth.  
Reed, water, splash & break, whatever's left  
there where earth asks sky its questions  
worth the price of bearing.

**The Cloud 7**

sometimes there is no edge—

just sheets of cloud  
statistics underneath, dying in each  
other's arms, equations exchanging messages  
on the backs of napkins & stars

sometimes there are no clouds—

nothing to cup hands around  
color pure & tender-less, a message  
reader-less, the cobalt blue bedsheets  
crease-less & empty

seven million drops are walking citi  
merging into cloud, falling, emptied, collected, rising  
again into five-storey walk-ups bleeding

mold the 100-year storm left  
documents signaling life  
strewn about the apartment & underneath

the coffee cup a note left encoding  
the next coming, the next Sutton Hoo  
treasure sunk in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

our unearthing. sometimes genetics  
explodes from alien directions  
& Samar Hassan crouches

in corners. sometimes, there is  
life where none is wanted—  
but not in this house. I want

this & this & this, but not all  
of these things want to be sewn  
together. the pattern counter to plan is love.

**The Counterpane 7**

*Disarmed* is a word  
dreamt by men who don't  
love: what I have to embrace

stricken away & patterning  
the landscape's empty floor.

These limbs are weapons & forgers of salt  
triggers & lines of sight

stretched across the plane of bed  
on the one hand  
& nighttime the other

where my enemy might be  
myself pointing back, pointing toward

what cannot be stood—  
outside the light is daisy, your hair spilled

pillow-wise  
wets the edge of my arm  
& though I do not think of you, I

dream of you & our coming  
into a clearing

holding your arms to your sides in my  
embrace out there

under the drone's eye, the sun  
lighting the crosshair's eyes its green  
undeniable desire.

**The Cloud 8**

tonight the lights of citi come on for us  
or at least this is the story  
we tell isn't it because

the citis on the maps are never  
the citis on the maps but a border that begs  
crossing this night & that remorseless fence

that cold-wet water welcome  
drowning in sight of land until "my friend  
drag me out" & strangers in white gloves

pound the water out the refugee's chest  
turning over coughing dust  
from tunnel-low below sedimentary

rock below pressure  
below green water oil tankers & cruise ships  
swimmers embalmed in their yellow frog suits

fishing bodies from the river  
below catatonic skyscrapers staring at their  
beautiful skins winking in the river's mirror

below air & stars & void. we dug  
another void below it all  
& there were souls where everyone knew

they might be hidden but no one  
since the last god had thought to see  
& then to us it seemed

the bores we made & the souls we had claimed  
easing their way out the walls now  
& into air

were the crest of it all, everything below  
now rock now above then air  
transfusing into air

all the ghosts in love with diggers' light.

**The Counterpane 8**

You are the ship & the sea  
I had to leave I never  
had to leave—at night the lights  
scanning the beach  
seemed a new world  
& as I crawl between your thighs  
placing my nose in your hair  
arms wrapped round your back  
you are the wave between  
me & the shore  
I must swim through when the ship  
founders, briny grind whirling  
sirens & a song signaling  
“Stop”—not  
heeding the lieutenant’s  
glare. There’s a matter of life & death  
worth discussing  
sure sure the lights are one  
a new world  
the same old world  
I have grown to love  
& will ravish  
again  
you citi  
you nameless original (clear blue) smile. All  
dissolution lingers too long—  
then a yellow  
Vespa flies by, two women on the machine  
scissor, machine, spool  
blade & rule  
  
& we sew.