

Celestial Excursions

An Opera

BY ROBERT ASHLEY

Celestial Excursions
An opera by Robert Ashley

The fear is that we won't go gently or abruptly into that good night. We will hang on in the endurance trials of old age, forever rehearsing in the early morning twilight, fortified by a few hours of faulty sleep, the plot or why there is no plot, the explanations, the why, the lists, the old grievances never to be settled now, the stories never told or passed on, the interruptions, the terrifying proportions, everything larger than it is known to be, distorted in the mirror, and again and again.

Old people are special because they have no future. The future is what to eat for breakfast or where did I leave my shoes. Everything else is in the past. Is this understandable?

So, sometimes old people break the rules. Especially the rules of conversation and being together. They laugh a lot. I mean real full laughter. Did you ever notice that? They break the rules, because, for one reason or another (illness, anger, damage, enough of that, whatever), the rules no longer apply for them. They are alone. Sometimes they are sad. Sometimes they are desperate. Mostly they are brave. Mostly they have given up on the promises of religion – life after death, immortality, etc. Mostly they are concerned with dignity. Living with dignity. And, like all of us, eventually dying with dignity.

But they are still obliged, as human beings, to make sounds. They are obliged to speak, whether or not anyone is listening.

Act I ("Is It Light Yet?") is a series of personal songs, the kind rehearsed in the early morning, every morning, to try to get the story right. These are separated by short bulletins of what some of the rest of the people on earth are up to.

Act II ("Asylum") is a dialogue between four guests at the Assisted Living Facility and the counselor, who is trying to explain to them that the burden they feel, which might seem to be explained in words, is not to be relieved by finding the word of escape, and in fact will never be relieved. Occasionally the guests break into song to relieve the tension.

Act III ("The River Deepens") is a series of reminiscences in a mixture of past and present tense. The importance of the reminiscence is its persistence. Separations never heal. Friendships misused never forgive. A mistake is a mistake forever.

Robert Ashley, 2003

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ACT I: IS IT LIGHT YET?

Just Dwayne

Hey, old man.

I am in the witness protection program.

What's your name?

Dwayne.

I mean, your full name.

Just Dwayne.

Don't you have a last name?

Dwayne.

(Chant) Chorus for Characters

Now, what's your name?

Dwayne. (four)

No, I mean, what is your full name?

Just Dwayne. (two)

Don't you have a last name?

Dwayne. (three)

How many syllables in . . . what's that name?

Dwayne? (five)

Sounds like three, but it means two.

Or we have it mixed up with twaine.

No.

Dwayne. (one)

Characters

A group of so-called fictitious characters
is just as bad as a group of so-called real ones.

They cause arguments among themselves
(and, curiously, among the so-called real ones.)

They fight among themselves.

They have affairs that are kept secret, and those affairs
change the unspoken agreements of the relationships within the group.
You can't trust them at anytime or anywhere to be telling the truth.

The real ones are the same way, so, there's no difference,
except that we are used to the behavior of the real ones.

Or we think we are.

But the unreal ones get by unnoticed.

They get written about and their reasons are taken seriously,
and if they are really old—in the sense of "outdated"—
sometimes there is a question about whether they were real at one time
and somebody just made them unreal.

But generally we take them more or less as they come.

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The real ones can pretend to be the unreal ones, of course.
This is called acting.
No one knows why we do it. It's so stupid.
Among people who don't like it this behavior is called
"the curse of the theater."
That is, for the real ones to pretend to be unreal ones.
But this is just the simplest form.
The real ones can pretend to be other, different real ones.
And those pretend real ones can pretend to be unreal ones.
This is called being an actor.
A common example in another line of work, for instance,
is the example of the conductor leading the orchestra
in a musical performance of a work that was not conceived
by the conductor. (I have seen this.)
Say, the performance was conceived by one Ludwig van Beethoven.
Then the conductor leading the orchestra is pretending to be one
Ludwig van Beethoven. It has to be, however absurd that seems.
Else, where would the conductor get the authority to lead the orchestra
and tell them how the performance is supposed to go?
We see this all the time. You know what I mean?
And you thought the Greeks were barbaric.
Objects are the same way.
I mean big objects as well as small ones.
Objects so big they don't even get the name.
For instance, oceans. Now that's an object.
But even at its size it can't maintain its own identity.
It has to be attached to something else.
The something else is usually human.
To use the example of a big object of importance,
I can't look at the Pacific Ocean without thinking of the person I love.
The person I love "has" the Pacific Ocean.
The whole Pacific Ocean. That's a lot.
Another person "has" Death Valley, and that's an object,
or you could say it's a lack of one.
It's a thing where an object, a big object, used to be apparently.
Another person "has" some of the things I work with.
I can barely keep this for myself, the thing that I am writing with.
I think I need it, like I need a certain kind of privacy in order to work.
But when I don't need it that badly, when I don't need it that badly,
it goes away, or rather, it goes to somebody else.
I have given up on the tables and chairs.
They all belong to somebody else.
For a couple of years I worked with a person who is gone now.
We were really close.

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We did a lot of things together and we laughed a lot.
But he never got the things.
He got a small piece of Chinatown, but that's not too important.
What's important is he drank at least a gallon of iced coffee every day.
He taught me to drink iced coffee. So, he's got iced coffee.
I can't drink a glass of iced coffee without thinking of this person,
and that's a lot.
We could get into smaller things or just parts of things,
but we don't have to. I just wanted to give you the idea.
As long as we are on the subject I should remark on something
even more mysterious. My consciousness, to use a phrase.
When I talk to myself, or even when I just try to say something—
an idea, like right now—I am always addressing someone.
I usually know exactly who that person is.
There's no point in me naming any person. The person changes.
And probably you wouldn't know any of the persons anyway.
But it's not abstract, like you might think.
What do you call those things attached to all objects?
Ghosts? No. Of course not.

Alcohol

Th' Doctor said,
One example is hypoglycemia. That means low blood sugar that
can contribute to the cycle of addiction in alcoholics.
Th' Doctor said,
Studies have shown that up to 90 percent of alcoholics have
some degree of hypoglycemia.
Th' Doctor said,
Cravings for sugar can be interpreted as
a craving for alcohol.
Th' Doctor said,
Hypoglycemia is one of four special types that
can contribute to addiction to alcohol.
Th' Doctor said,
Alcohol-allergic is another. In this type, the addict has an
allergy to some of the ingredients in alcohol or other foods.
Th' Doctor said,
Through a complex allergic reaction, a craving for alcohol is
triggered by any foods to which the person is allergic.
Th' Doctor said,
The alcohol-allergic person is very likely a binge drinker,
and his or her personality is altered by drinking.
Th' Doctor said,
Another alcohol-addictive type is called "II-A-D-H-T-H-I-Q," which means

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the addict's body breaks down alcohol differently than most people do.

Th' Doctor said,

This person can tolerate high quantities of alcohol.

This type of alcoholic is the victim of a chemical called T-H-I-Q.

Th' Doctor said,

The chemical is manufactured by the brain and
fools the body into stopping production of its own endorphins.

Th' Doctor said,

Cravings then result, and over time the person requires
more and more alcohol to feel normal.

Th' Doctor said,

The final addictive type that leads to alcohol addiction
is affected by essential fatty acids.

Th' Doctor said,

In short, people of this type feel depressed
and use alcohol to feel better.

Th' Doctor said,

The alcohol, however, is actually
helping to cause the depression.

Th' Doctor said,

To break the chains of addiction the center uses multiple therapeutic
methods to help clients end their addictive behavior.

Th' Doctor said,

Among those mindfulness, meditation (also called stress reduction)
and yoga are used frequently.

Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N.

Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N,
it hardly matters anymore,
and probably Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N
wouldn't know or remember
even the distinction, is helped into the van.

Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N,
with a number of other people,
all more or less in his or her condition.

They are leaving the Death's Door Hospital
somewhere in the great Southwest.

Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N, driven to a place
more comfortable up in the mountains,
conditions more like home,
more comfortable
than the Death's Door Hospital.

Not that the Death's Door Hospital
is bad in any way.

I was a lousy husband,
a lousy father
and a drunk.
Yeah, but what did
you do wrong?

I was out there
at a county fair

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It's good, but it's only good for one thing
and, depending on how
that thing works out for you,
you go out one door or the other.
Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N
and his or her companions
went out the door to the van.
Others, I imagine, go out another door.
The mood, of course, is jolly,
almost senselessly gay.
Everybody talks, sometimes,
or, most times all at the same time,
as best they can.
Nobody listens, as best they can.
The driver of the van
is in somewhat better condition, I guess,
and he is more or less responsible,
along with a couple of flight attendants
from the Death's Door Hospital,
to make sure the riders are
comfortable according to information
from the staff of the Death's Door Hospital
about who among the passengers
will need to stop most often
to be carried bodily (of course)
to a roadside toilet facility,
lifted out of his or her seat,
slung over the driver's shoulder and
carried to the little cubicle,
undressed as much as necessary and
instructed to call out when the job is done,
at which time the driver will re-enter
the little cubicle with a damp cloth,
neither too warm nor too cold,
to finish up what cannot be achieved with
the convenient roll of paper
attached to the wall of the little cubicle.
This might be two or three of the passengers,
one after another into the little cubicles,
bodily (of course), but usually it is just one,
the policy of individuality
among the passengers,
still maintained almost intact,
if a little skewed, being, "who, me?"

in some God-forsaken
town in central Texas.
It was in the middle of
August in the middle of
the afternoon.
It's about a hundred
in the shade.

There is a cow in a pen
and there is a pig.
The largest that
they could find.
There is hot dogs,
and there is chili,
and there is Coca Cola
and there is beer.

There is the Army Band
borrowed for this occasion
from the Army.
The Army Band is there
to make march music
or anything
that they can play.

There is the Bob Wills
Western Swing Band
on a stage
made out of plywood.
The Bob Wills Band
is eight or ten guys
standing around
in cowboy suits.
The Bob Wills Band
is waiting to play.
They have done this before.
You don't want to be in
The Bob Wills Band,
because it looks like
hard times.
It looks like hard times
to anybody who
has any common sense.
The members of the band

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As if the efficiency of
the singularity of
the facility
(e.g. "no services for the next
twenty-nine miles"),
the driver's strength and courtesy,
his delicacy and propriety with regard to
the purpose of the large roll of paper
on the wall of the cubicle,
his comforting indifference with regard to
differences among humans
and most of all the brief pleasure of the
damp cloth, neither too warm nor too cold,
were of no consequence to the on-going,
temporary, but vast in human scale,
schedule of keeping the thing going
for our species on this globe,
(circling, we are told, in some kind of space
around the source, now nearer, now farther,
depending on, I guess, the time of year.
There is no agreement on these matters,
except among those kind of people
who think they know it all,
un-grown up college boys and girls,
awed and believing in
the coincidence of numbers)
(but we invented them!)
were of no consequence
to the on-going, temporary,
but vast in human scale,
schedule of us and our things.
Conveniently (a variance on "conveniences"
as the road-sign says
and well-known to the driver
who has made this trip frequently
for the past few years and
knows every bump and curve and
sudden change of scenery
that will bring the "conveniences" into play),
conveniently, the room of small cubicles
and wash bowls and paper towels
is most often connected to—
in fact, architecturally—
a part of a larger matter of conveniences

probably get paid
(if they get paid)
twenty-five dollars each.
They go into town,
then they play at a bar.
And get another
twenty-five dollars.

After drinks and
something to eat,
they will probably make
about ten dollars today.

They might go home
in two weeks or so with
two-hundred dollars each.

One of the songs they play
is called
"Milk Cow Blues."
(I think that's right.)

If you count the hand claps,
they come to
one-hundred sixty-seven,
approximately.

Now it's fifty years later.
There is "Milk Cow Blues"
on the radio.

Written by Kokomo Arnold.
Recorded in
Nashville, Tennessee.

It's not the Bob Wills
Western Swing Band.
But it sound pretty good.
Sounds like everybody
in the band might get a
good night's sleep tonight,
at home.

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that include a baffling variety of
food and drink
(sometimes reflecting in a superficial way
what might be called “ethnic” origins),
which can be purchased and disbursed
to the waiting inhabitants of the van
after their careful consideration of the menu,
read and recited (“I can’t find my glasses”),
amid the shouts and groans and opinions
about good and bad,
legal immigrants
and illegal immigrants,
Jews and Arabs,
French and Germans,
east and west,
rich and poor,
low humidity
and high humidity,
death and taxes,
old jokes not quite
remembered fully
(“well, well, well”),
finally worked out to the
dissatisfaction of everybody,
while the main business in the small cubicles
is being worked out to the
dissatisfaction of everybody,?
including Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. N, of course.

Love Letter, Part I

She asked me to write a love letter.
Something she can hide
in a shoebox in the drawer.
No names, no promises,
just something she can look at
to remind her what the day is for.

Lonely lady, middle of the afternoon.
Lonely lady, come in feeling blue.
Love letter on a paper napkin,
Folded, addressed to you, lonely lady.

How precious you are,
I mean to me.

So, now, everybody
wants to play
“Milk Cow Blues.”
(I think that’s right.)

“Well, I woke up this
morning, look out doors.

I can tell my milk cow
by the way she lows.

If you see my milk cow,
please, send her on home.

I ain’t had no milk and butter
since that cow been gone.

Well, don’t that evening sun
look good going down?

Well, don’t that evening sun
look good going down?

And don’t that bed look
lonesome, when
your love ain’t around?

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How priceless you are,
will always be.
How special you are
no one can see,
but I'll keep it a secret,
I'll keep it a secret,
I'll keep it a secret,
Sincerely, . . .

Bruno, Part 1

He says he's tired of stories.
 He says he longs for "some little language
 such as lovers use, broken words,
 like the shuffling of feet upon the pavement."
You want a cup of coffee?
Should we walk or take a bus?
I don't like shopping.
You don't like standing still
One black and one with milk.
And a powdered doughnut, please.

a noise, a commotion, a clash
of devices, of emblems, of mottos,
of epistles, of sonnets, of epigrams,
of books, of chattering scribbles,
of terminal sweats, of lives consumed,
of cries that deafen the stars,
laments that make Hell's caverns reverberate,
aches that strike the living dumb,
sights that exhaust the pity of the gods,
for those eyes, for those cheeks, for that bosom,
for that white, for that crimson, for that tongue,
for that tooth, for that lip, for that mantle,
that glove, that slipper, that high heel,
that avarice, that giggle, that scorn,
that empty window, that eclipse of the sun,
that hammer, that disgust, that stench,
that sepulcher, that cesspit, that carrion,
that malaria, that uttermost insult
and lapse of nature, that with a surface,
a shadow, a phantasm, a dream,
an enchantment of Circe
plied in the service of reproduction,
should deceive in the matter of beauty;

how precious you are
I mean to me

how priceless you are
will always be

how special you are
no one can see

but I'll keep it a secret
sincerely
lonely lady lonely lady

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which simultaneously comes and goes,
issues and dies, flowers and rots,
and is somewhat beautiful on the outside,
but truly and fixedly contains within
a shipyard, a workshop, a customs house,
a marketplace of every foulness, toxin
and poison that our stepmother nature
has managed to produce:
and once the seed she requires
has been paid out, she often repays it
with a morass, a remorse, a sadness,
a flaccidity, a headache a lassitude,
this and that distemper that are known
to all the world, so that every place
aches bitterly where it itched so sweetly before.

how precious you are
I mean to me

how priceless you are
will always be

how special you are
no one can see

but I'll keep it a secret
sincerely
lonely lady lonely lady

Love Letter, Part II

We're just friends, we usually meet at the bar.
I always say, honey, tell me who you are.
The kids are all grown up, the man's always away,
and everything is coming down around her, day by day.

Lonely lady, middle of the afternoon.
Lonely lady, come in feeling blue.
Love letter on a paper napkin,
Folded, addressed to you, lonely lady.

How precious you are,
I mean to me.
How priceless you are,
will always be.
How special you are
no one can see,
but I'll keep it a secret,
I'll keep it a secret,
I'll keep it a secret,
Sincerely, . . .

Bruno Part II

O may I never come to rue the love
Without which I've no wish for happiness.
Though for it's sake I sacrifice to prove
I've no wish not to wish for its largesse.
Whether the sky be bright, dark, chill, or hot,

how precious you are
how priceless you are
how special you are

how precious you are

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The phoenix is but one and ever true;
No destiny or fate can breach the knot
That even death itself could not undo.
For heart, spirit and soul
No pleasure, liberty or life can render
Such smile, or sustenance, or amity,
As were more sweet,
more gracious,
or more tender
Than the grief, yoke, and deathly toll
I have by nature, will and destiny.

I mean to me

how priceless you are
will always be

how special you are
no one can see

but I'll keep it a secret
sincerely
lonely lady lonely lady

His chief erogenous zone lay inside his head.
Who said that?
I did.
You should take a walk everyday
I can't afford it. And, on a nice day, it scrambles my mind.
Want to go home?
Yeah, I guess it's getting me.
We can take a taxi.
Can I have the check, please?

Subaru

Transcending distant time and space,
the world of stars we see now
is explored by Subaru.

Not the car

Poem by Prince Naruhito
honoring the
telescope, Mauna Kea, Hawaii.

No

No

Subaru means the Pleiades,
Seven Sisters, seen above
at a certain time of year.

No

No

I saw them once in the darkness
of the bayou, darkness so deep there
they don't have cars.

No

No

They say it's coincidence of time and space.
Light-years apart,
they look like they're together.

No

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No There are millions of them, but we see just seven. They're light-years apart, the seven.	No
No Orion, lurking near-by, is waiting for his chance. It'll never happen though.	No
No Transcending distant time and space, the world of stars we see now is explored by Subaru.	No
No Naruhito, he's not so smart. He should have said, just like us. Every night desire, years apart.	No
No Seven Sisters, years apart. Seven chances. Not so smart. Every night desire, years apart.	No
No Transcending distant time and space, the world of stars we see now is explored by Subaru.	No
Not the car	

Raoul

Raoul took the boy's hand
and they walked out onto the balcony of the faculty hotel.
It was dark. The trees were at the other side
of the lawn that started below the balcony
and extended about twenty yards to the wall of the forest.
The forest was a wall of darkness without detail.
Or rather, a kind of black matte surface
with a barely distinguishable striation of vertical lines
describing the topography, as in a painting,
A black painting by some surrealist,
who attached sticks to his work.
And it had the quality of a painting, too,
because the light from the room leading to the balcony
reflected off that surface, as if the surface were arbitrarily
angled to the viewers, Raoul and the boy.
Raoul could imagine the surface being turned slightly
to produce another kind of reflection.

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But neither angle would reveal that the surface was
simply the front edge of the forest.
In the silence of the waiting the boy was unusually
calm and patient, as if he were in control
of what was to happen next, as if willing it.
All of the problems about the clock and the mirror
were seemingly forgotten.
The boy was in control of what was to happen next.
And it happened.
The barely distinguishable sound of the twig breaking in the woods.
Somebody changing their position.
Not carelessly, but at the mercy of the nature of the forest floor.
An oversight. The slightest move to get a better angle.
To get a better view, a better aim. And the twig broke.
Raoul heard it. Raoul waited for the inevitable.
But it didn't come. The twig broke.
Stepped on, not carelessly, by the one Raoul had never seen,
the one hovering in the boy's imagination. Lurking.
The boy had decided to forgive.
The struggle was over. The boy had won. The end.
Or—
Raoul heard it. Raoul waited for the inevitable
And it came. The sharp sound of the rifle
and the sharp blow to the chest.
In this pairing we can never be sure which came first.
Does the bullet travel faster than the sound?
Probably someone knows.
Or certainly Raoul knows,
but science is no help here.
In the memory one comes first,
and then, in the replay, the other.
And then, in the second replay, the first order.
Forever shifting between the mirror and what it sees.
The sound and the sharp blow to the chest.
Raoul was on his back.
Thrown back into the room by the blow.
On his back in a brilliant light.
Then, the sound in his ear.
The boy is speaking to him.
Very close to the ear. The boy is guiding him.
The boy is in control as always.
The boy speaks of the problem of the mirror
and the clock that runs backwards.
The clock whose hands turn counter-clockwise.

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From the days when Raoul was a student
in this most private school for boys.
When Raoul, was tortured with loneliness—
tortured by the unseen and by the seen but unspeakable—
when Raoul had found the clock and taken it back to his room.
Raoul, first, had painted the hands and the face of the clock black.
So that the time was hidden unless the surface was angled slightly.
Then, finally, in utter desperation, he had taken the clock apart.
Carefully at first. Laying out the parts—
each screw, each spring, each ratchet—
on the towel, and committing the pattern to memory,
in order to be able to reassemble the clock.
First, working just at the surface.
Then gradually deeper and deeper,
until the whole of the inside of the clock was on the towel
and the pattern was mastered.
Finally, then, it could be done in an hour.
Finally, then, it could be done in total darkness.
Finally, then, Raoul came to know the clock.
The clock became part of his imagination.
And his imagination of its own accord began transforming the clock.
It is impossible, but not impossible,
without trying and failing,
but simply waiting until it could be done perfectly without trying.
The clock was put back together
so that the hands moved counter-clockwise.
Counter to nature.
And in this way the clock could be read best
by being seen in the mirror.
Don't look at the clock. Look at the mirror.
In the darkness.
But the boy was not prepared.
The boy had studied certain things to mastery.
But the clock and the mirror, finally, blocked his progress.
The clock and the mirror had to go.
It was almost as if agreed upon between them.
And that is why Raoul had gone to the balcony.
To keep his part of the agreement.
Etcetera.
You get the idea.

Goodbye Walnut

December twenty-fifth, nineteen-ninety-three.
I am facing north by northwest.

an early morning dream
an early morning dream

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The scene is an upper-class suburb
on the “west side of Chicago.”
The Chicago skyline
can be seen in the distance on the “left,”
which is eastward.
Between the suburb and the skyline
can be seen Lake Michigan.
 between the suburb
 and the skyline
The suburb is quite swell,
with rolling lawns and
curving, hilly streets, big houses.
Our house is
behind me on the right.
Our house is on a corner.
The peculiar thing about this suburb
is that the streets are made of water,
except the water doesn’t run with gravity.
The water is flat
and tranquil on all planes.
At the curb in front of our house
is parked a raft made out of pieces of
4 by 8, three-quarter inch plywood,
on something that floats.
What that something is can’t be understood.
The raft is very plain.
Nothing except the plywood.
Out of our house
comes our adopted daughter, Walnut.
Walnut is an American Indian
with a face that is exactly
the face seen on a nickel.
She passes me on the right in profile,
with a kind of halo around her face.
The halo is exactly
the circle of the coin.
In fact, I don’t see her body, only her face.
She gets on the raft in order to leave.
The question of where she is going
is not part of the dream.
Before she pulls away from the curb,
M gives her a snorkel,
in order that she can “have some fun.”
We have decided to break up the family,

an early morning dream
an upper-class suburb
an upper-class suburb

eastward
eastward
eastward

between the suburb
and the skyline
well cared for
well cared for
well cared for
behind me on the right

made of water
like canals
like canals
like canals on all planes
on all planes on all planes
what does that mean?

something that floats
but it is important
very plain
which is untreated
untreated
adopted daughter

exactly
exactly
in profile
a halo
exactly
exactly
exactly
in order to leave
in order to leave

in order to leave
a snorkel
have some fun

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because we discovered that
our house has holes in it.
The holes are small,
about one-inch in diameter,
but they are all over the floors and walls.
When Walnut leaves, I am in the water
up to my shoulders.
I am swimming,
as in the picture of Mao Tse-Tung
swimming,
I am swimming.
The water is deeper
than I am tall.
I say, "Goodbye, Walnut."
The moment is so sad
that I want to cry.
Then, then
I say then
to myself,
"You should write screen-plays."

we discovered that

all over the floors and walls.
when Walnut leaves
swimming
swimming
swimming
swimming
is deeper
is deeper

so sad
I want to cry

then

Celestial Excursions

ACT II: ASYLUM

The List

I have to make a list of all the reasons
to want to tell all, because I am not a poet.

Asylum

Very nice. Now, what is the problem?

Ah . . .

The problem . . . ?

Asylum.

Asylum?

Asylum.

What?

Asylum.

You said that.

Yes.

Asylum.

Yes.

Do you know what the word means?

Yes.

Asylum from what?

We do not know.

You do not know.

We do not know.

You want asylum.

Yes.

Say it in a simple way.

We are prisoners.

You are prisoners of whom?

It is hard to explain.

What does that mean?

We cannot leave.

Speak simply.

We cannot leave.

What is stopping you?

Something inside.

Something inside?

Something inside.

What is that something?

We need to find the right word.

Yes, you do.

The word is determination.

Determination to do what?

Celestial Excursions

Not to do what
Determination to be what?
Not to be what.
Not to be what?
Determination imposed as if from the outside.
Can you give the outside a name?
O and O.
O and O?
It means One and Only.
One and Only?
We think that's what it means.
Who is he?
O and O is not a he.
Who is she?
O and O is not a she.
O and O is . . . ?
Determination imposed as if from the outside.
What?
Determination imposed as if from the outside.
O and O is . . . ?
We have shortened it to simply, O.
Give me more information, please.
We saw a movie.
On TV?
Yes, on TV.
A comedy?
The camera is looking over the left shoulder of a man with a gun in his
right hand. The gun is pointed at a man sitting across the desk.
It's not a comedy.
The gun is pointed at his face. The man with the gun,
or somebody, says,
Do you think people with black skin are better dancers than you are?
It's not a comedy.
The man across the desk hesitates a moment. Then he says, No.
The man with the gun says,
Do you think silly gay people should be tortured in public?
The man across the desk hesitates a moment. Then he says, No.
It's not a comedy.
The man with the gun says,
Do you think daffy dames are lower than dogs on the street?
The man across the desk hesitates a moment. Then he says, No.
Hesitates is the key word.
The man with the gun pulls the trigger.
The face of the man across the desk disappears in an explosion of blood.

Celestial Excursions

The man with the gun says, He was lying.
Somebody comes in and washes the wall with a hose.
Somebody washes the lens of the camera.
He who hesitates . . .
Another man comes in and sits in the chair across the desk.
Same thing again.
After about ten of these, somebody, off-camera, says, this is going to
take a long time.
The man with the gun says, I have a long time. It has to be done.
How long is the movie?
We left after about an hour.

Depression Adaptation

Manic depression is an ancient adaptation to the rigors of prehistoric life.
Manic, when it's time to hunt. Depressed, when it's time to hibernate.
Hibernation is a time for dreams.
Thus, depression is the mode of the imagination.
Get it?

Asylum

What do you want me to do?
Asylum.
You want asylum . . .
From determination.
Does O know that you are seeking asylum?
Probably.
What do you do when you are there?
Sing. Cook.
No.
Do the dishes.
You mean as you sang a minute ago?
The precise time is twenty seconds, more or less.
But that was pretty. It didn't have dirty words.
None of the songs has dirty words.
What is the complaint?
We cannot explain.
You sing. You eat.
Yes.
You do the dishes.
Yes.
You want to get away.
Yes.
This is not right.
Maybe.

Celestial Excursions

How did you get out?
 We did not get out.
Sing another song, please.

What About the Kids

What about the kids?
You mean if I don't . . .
What about the kids?
Get a job?
What about the kids?
Inherit some money?
What about the kids?
But we don't have kids
What about my mother?
What about my father?
What about my sister?
What about my brother?
What about my aunts?
What about my uncles?
What about my . . . ?
Okay I'll sell the . . .
silverware, garbage cans, double bed, TV set,
mobile phone, second car, attic room, microwave,
dirty books, rocking chair, wherewithal, silver cup,
fungo bat, garden hose, compact discs, fishing pole,
acid test, come what may, best in show, razor blades,
peace of mind, dental floss, paper weights, fountain pens,
Sunday suit, mental health, who's to know, birthday cake,
handkerchiefs, reading specs, books in print, second base,
weekend pass, double bill, table cloth, napkin rings,
bowie knife, chocolate cake, wishing well, told you so,
dental plan, power pack, gun for hire, dining room,
safety lock, garden shed, combat boots, radio,
time to spare, power book, monkey wrench, kitchenette,
sleepless nights, toilet seat, sewing kit, master plan,
wanderlust, wedding gown, diamond ring, hit and run,
track and field, winter sports, bolt the door, take a hike,
paper clips, cowboy hat, college dorm, mustache wax,
walk the dog, liner notes, coffee pot, standup bar,
dancing shoes, gone for good, no you don't, told you so,
mama's boy, money belt, football star, double dare,
girlie mags, dawn patrol, poker games, TV guide,
candy bars, turnip greens, help yourself, thanks a lot,
money bags, barroom brawls, backup discs, ain't it so,

Celestial Excursions

nursery rhymes, let it be, attitude, wait and see,
look me up, see you soon, table talk, teacher's pet,
walk the plank, rock and roll, take a break, live and learn,
long ago, basket case, time to burn, down and out,
eat and run, fun and games, grab a bite, heavy load,
inch along, jelly roll, kiss and tell, last to know,
mental case, nasty fall, open book, petty cash,
quite a while, ready-made, sweet and low, little joke,
undertow, very good, wonderland, ecstasy,
you should know, yes and no, call in sick, saving grace,
next of kin, cook the books, ante up, let 'em wait,
walk the line, now we know, what the heck, buy the farm,
extra teeth, in a bowl, tuna fish, casserole,

Asylum

That's pretty.

Thank you.

What is the complaint?

We want to be out.

You are out.

No, we are not out.

You are out.

Nor you.

I am out.

No.

And you are here.

You think you are out, but you are not out.

I am out.

You are not out, but you do not know it.

I know what I am saying.

That is what O might say.

What else does O say?

Nothing.

You mean he does not say anything else, or he does not say anything?

O is not a he.

O does not say anything else, or O does not say anything?

Anything.

Anything else, or anything?

Anything.

You are not speaking clearly.

Maybe.

Maybe we could have another song.

Celestial Excursions

The Baguette

The plate was taken away. The heavy door shut. I heard the lock.
I thought to myself, if Beckett wrote in French,
he must have had to have a baguette for breakfast.
You can't write in French after a breakfast of oatmeal.
That is, when Beckett decided to write in French,
he must have known that that decision meant that thereafter
he had to have a baguette for breakfast.
No, I thought to myself, think clearly. This is your chance.
Beckett wanted to have the baguette for breakfast, though he knew this desire would
lead him irrevocably to writing in French.
You can't have the baguette for breakfast and write other than in French.
He chose. It takes courage to be a writer.

Asylum

What are you complaining about?
 Determination.
As if Imposed from the outside. To do what?
 It is not clear.
How can it not be clear?
 It is not clear.
But you all sing together.
 Everybody sings together.
Everybody does not sing together.
 Everybody sings together.
Everybody sings together.
 They try.

I Love That Stuff

Everyday catalogs coming to the door.
I got to keep on buying Got to get some more.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
'Got a Japanese car made in Tennessee.
Victoria's Secret is no secret to me.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
Hardly wait to get off work to see the latest styles.
I know every shop in every mall in thirty miles.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.
Pocket full of credit cards. Right up to the line.
Pay it when you got it and everything is fine.
I love that stuff. I love that stuff.

Celestial Excursions

I love that stuff. I love that stuff.

Asylum

Let us start over again.

Asylum.

Asylum from . . .

determination . . .

as if imposed . . .

from the outside.

So that you will not sing together?

It does not matter.

What does not matter?

That we all sing together.

But you cannot sing together unless you have determination.

Perhaps.

And you do not want to sing together.

We didn't say that.

Show me how you do not sing together.

I Had It and I Lost It

I had it and I lost it.

I hope I come acrossed it.

I could use a little bit right now.

Asylum

That sounded together to me.

You do not listen carefully.

Do it one more time.

Before What?

I never ...

I never did . . .

He never did it . . .

She never did it with a ...

I never did it with a uhhnnnnnn before.

Before what?

Asylum

That was a different song.

The same idea.

I believe you are not speaking correctly.

That is a common accusation.

O says that?

If you are determined to be happy, nothing can be wrong.

Celestial Excursions

What's wrong with that?

 If you are determined to be happy.

Isn't that splitting hairs?

Recent Attendance

Recent attendance, measured,
was considered to be large
by conference standards.
Sure.

Asylum

That's a fact.

 We have come for help.

Sit down or stand up and let us talk this over.

 We are sitting down.

After All the Stuff

After all the stuff that we've been . . .

After all the stuff that we've been . . .

After all the stuff that we've been . . .

After all the stuff that we've been . . .

through,

all I can think about is . . .

all I can think about is . . .

all I can think about is . . .

all I can think about is . . .

you.

Asylum

You sang sitting down.

 There is no difference.

But standing up is better.

 That was in the old days.

Before what?

 Before we came here.

Let me change the subject.

 Thank you.

Where is asylum?

 It is not a place.

Don't tell me it's a state of mind.

 It's a state of mind.

Then, help yourself.

 State of mind is the only thing that cannot be changed.

What can I do?

Celestial Excursions

State of mind is the only thing that cannot be changed.
I am not a doctor.

State of mind is the only thing that cannot be changed.
It's not the only thing

No.
There are things physical.

Yes.
You cannot grow back an arm.
No.

You cannot come back to life.
Everything you say is true.
Then, help yourself.

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.
Did O say that?

State of mind is the only thing that cannot be changed.
Did O say that?
It is the lesson.

Did O say that?
O says, if you are determined to be happy, nothing can be wrong.
So, what's wrong with that?
If you are determined to be happy.
I don't understand.
If, then, is false.
I don't understand.

Ghosts

What I can't reconcile in myself or rationalize or understand
is my belief that there is no life after death with my belief in ghosts.
How many ghosts do you know?

Asylum

That was pretty.
It was not perfect.
It was perfect enough for me.
You do not listen carefully.
Let me change the subject.
Thank you.
Do you do such songs from memory?
Everything is from memory.
No, I mean, do you memorize?
No, we see it.
You mean it is in that little box?
It is in the little box and in the seeds.
Show me, please.

Celestial Excursions

It's Got to Be a Secret

The only thing that counts is what people don't understand.
If you make it so they can understand it,
you are a fool and it's not going to be any good anyway.
It's got to be a secret about yourself and about the world.

Asylum

Show me how the seeds work.

It's Only Fun

It's only fun, if it's against the law.
Otherwise, it's not fun.
It's only funny, if it's against the law.
Otherwise, it's not funny.
It's only poetry, if it's against the law.
Otherwise, it's not poetry.
It's only beautiful, if it's against the law.
Otherwise, it's not beautiful.

Asylum

I do not hear it in the seeds or whatever they are.
 You do not listen carefully.
But they are not all seeds.
 You could call them seeds.
You could call them anything you want.
 We call them seeds.
Show me how the seeds work. . .
 You could call them seeds.
so that I can understand.

I Like Q

I like Q. I like it too.
Q. Don't get uhn . . .
Four sounds for one letter.
Very big. Very important.
Don't, no, give up—
what is that stuff?—no matter what.
What about Albuquerque?
Or Dubuque?
Those are names.
And from another language
And, you never know.
Perhaps that's the answer.

Celestial Excursions

Asylum

I still do not understand.

 You will, eventually.

Do not use that kind of word.

 We apologize.

We are not solving anything.

 We are asking for asylum.

It is my duty to remind you that . . .

 It is not a lot to ask.

I work here.

 It is not a lot to ask.

I work here.

 There is no one else to ask.

Why do you not ask O?

Good Idea

One, if men could pregnant be, the world would be a different place.

Sure!

Two, there would be no wars or strife or suffering

Sure!

Three, it would be a sort of Eden. (No smoking, either!)

Sure!

Four, if they were reasonable, they would agree with me.

Sure!

Asylum

There is a technical problem.

 Explain the problem, please.

You are in an asylum.

 We are in a place.

The place is an asylum.

 Our meaning is different.

This is as much an asylum as can be provided.

 There must be a misunderstanding.

This is as much an asylum as can be provided.

 It would seem that . . .

This is as much an asylum as can be provided.

 If you know about asylum . . .

This is as much an asylum as can be provided.

 You would understand that there is no safety here.

I cannot change the meaning of words.

 Resoluteness. . .

Resoluteness means determination, decision, resolution, resolve.

Celestial Excursions

Yes.

Determination means perception, measurement, judgment.

Yes.

Decision means will, settlement, finding and all that we have discussed.

Yes.

Resolution means spunk, tenacity, firmness, steadfastness.

Yes.

Resolve means intention, will, decision, determination and resolution.

Yes.

We are at the beginning.

Yes.

We have closed the circle of meaning.

Never On Your Mind

You have succeeded in leaving me behind.

What we had together once is . . . uhnnnn

never on your mind.

never on your mind.

never on your mind.

never on your mind.

Asylum

If I understand you . . .

Yes.

you want irresponsibility.

No.

You want the burden to be lighter.

Roughly, that is accurate.

Why do you say roughly?

The statement is in the vernacular.

I think I am beginning to understand.

Thank you.

What you are asking for does not exist.

How is that possible?

You have perhaps, come to expect too much.

But what about the patterns?

There are no patterns, except in dreams for wishes to come true.

The burden, as you spoke of it . . .

It is always the same.

In every pair?

It is always the same.

Black and white?

Yes.

Muslim and Jew?

Celestial Excursions

Yes.

The keeper and the kept?

Yes.

Christian and white?

A mythical brokerage firm.

German and French?

Yes.

Britain and Ireland?

Yes.

The torturer and the tortured?

A rare, borderline case.

Congolese and Belgian?

Yes.

Another, borderline case?

The Congolese are still there.

And the Belgians?

Long gone, back to Belgium.

Old Russia and all of its dominions?

Twenty-five million murdered, when they stopped counting.

Old China and all of its dominions?

Thirty-six million by expert estimation.

The murderer and the murdered?

We cannot know.

Man and woman?

Yes.

Young and old?

Yes.

Rich and poor?

Yes.

The burden is always the same?

Yes.

Black and white?

Yes.

Muslim and Jew?

Yes.

The keeper and the kept?

Yes.

German and French?

Yes.

Britain and Ireland?

Yes.

Old Russia and all of its dominions?

Twenty-five million murdered, when they stopped counting.

Old China and all of its dominions?

Celestial Excursions

Thirty-six million by expert estimation.

The clean and the unclean?

Watch your words.

Man and woman?

Yes.

Young and old?

Yes.

Rich and poor?

Yes.

The burden is always the same?

Yes.

The two parts of the tango?

Yes.

Chippewa and Sioux?

Yes.

Aztec and the sacrificed?

Yes.

The illusioned and the disillusioned?

Yes.

The sober and the not sober?

Yes.

The worker and management?

Yes.

The owner and the owned?

Yes.

The tall and the not tall?

Yes.

The fat and the thin?

Yes.

Impotent and vital?

Yes.

Solemn and gleeful?

Three men, all named Noel, are walking on the beach.

Near shingle, as in the novels?

Yes and no.

Or alongside a simple surf?

There is a mermaid.

Half in, half out?

The English Noel says, . . .

With mixed-caste feelings?

Have you ever been kissed?

To the mermaid?

Yes.

She says?

Celestial Excursions

No. So, the English Noel spends a long time kissing her.
 With mixed-caste feelings.
The Scottish Noel says, . . .
 With ancient religious resentment?
Have you ever been fondled?
 She says?
No. So, the Scottish Noel spends a long time fondling her.
 The fondled part in the imagination is like the north in contour.
The Irish Noel says, . . .
 In the manner of the ancient language.
Have you ever been, ... you know?
 An old and troublesome expression.
No, she says.
 The burden is the same in almost all cases?
He says, . . .
 In a language we can understand.
Well, you are, you know, now, because the tide just went out.
 Is that intended to be funny?
Two cannibals are eating a clown.
 Garni.
One cannibal says to the other, . . .
 In a language we can understand.
Does this taste funny to you?
 Animals and humans?
We cannot know.
 Animals are the problem.
I have never done it with an animal before.
 What is the answer?
Before what?
 The seller and the buyer?
Yes.
 The deceived and the shrewd?
Yes.
 The performer and the audience?
Yes.
 Celebrity and loneliness?
Yes.
 Graceful and clumsy?
Yes.
 Mortal and immortal?
Yes.
 The burden is always the same?
Yes.
 Easterner and westerner?

Celestial Excursions

Yes.

Good and bad?

Yes.

A pariah and a brahmin?

Yes.

Cash and carry?

Yes.

Dead and gone?

Yes.

If looks could kill?

Yes.

Home sweet home?

Yes.

Cream and sugar?

Yes.

Fast and furious?

Yes.

The cautious and the heedless?

Yes.

Left and right?

Yes.

Backward and forward?

Yes.

Night and day?

Yes.

The frightened and the fearless?

Yes.

The upright and the bent?

Yes.

The strong and the weak?

Yes.

Sweet and sour?

Yes.

The burden is always the same?

Yes.

Almost 10 O'clock

It's almost ten o'clock, kids.

It's almost ten o'clock, kids.

It's almost ten o'clock, kids.

Do you know where your mother is?

Asylum

A complicated song.

Celestial Excursions

Ordinary Man

He's just an ordinary man, fool, y'know.

You don't need to understand.

Asylum

Antonym? Synonym?

Yes.

Anthony and Cleopatra?

Yes.

Egyptologists now say that citizens, not slaves, built the pyramids.

With citizens like that, . . .

Yes?

good reason to stay indoors.

Outdoors?

Yes.

If O hears that, we will be punished.

For what?

Frivolity.

And you call this a dream?

Years of Desire

Years of desire.

A moment of madness.

Ladies' choice.

Celestial Excursions

ACT III: The River Deepens

Ozzie Smith

I saw it with my own eyes on TV,
the love was pouring down like rain
Mr. Ozzie Smith, wizard of oz,
the love was pouring down like rain
his last bat in the all-star game.
the love was pouring down like rain
When he came on the field he always did flip.
the love was pouring down like rain
The way he did things was a legend.
the love was pouring down like rain
He said the night before this is the last one.
the love was pouring down like rain
Fifty thousand fans were screaming.
the love was pouring down like rain
Both teams from both sides were on the field.
the love was pouring down like rain
Hats and gloves and everything were flying in the air.
the love was pouring down like rain
Thousands of ball players everywhere were in tears.
the love was pouring down like rain
The TV zoomed in, of course.
the love was pouring down like rain
We stood there at the plate and tipped his hat.
the love was pouring down like rain
Th' umpires walked away. Y'can't stop this.
the love was pouring down like rain
He tipped his hat again two or three times,
the love was pouring down like rain
then he just stood there crying.
the love was pouring down like rain
Ten minutes out of baseball.

He Just

Too old to go dancing,
too old to make money,
too old to be in love,
He Just . . .

Orchestra Introduction to Therapy

Celestial Excursions

Therapy

When I entered therapy, it was a kind of never-never land of exploration.

I'll go see what they say. I'll see why I am sad and what I can do about it

First off, she, the Doctor . . .

an elderly woman hunched over with a thick New York accent
welcomed me . . .

in her southern California home with the rotting lemons
falling like dead mice from the tree out front
and quickly proceeded to the pre-determined...
and woefully over-rated

Rorschach test.

Oh!

Being new at psychology,

dead set on making a good impression

I worked like a dog . . .

on every image that came up
to make sure I said something interesting,
artistic and insightful
so she might not perceive the ordinariness within.

Oh!

At the end of the test, I discovered that . . .

Oh!

I was discovered.

you said this looked like back-to-back Kabuki dancers,
but isn't it really the face of your angry and abusive father?

As a newcomer to the game, I gave in.

and said yes I can't really remember but I do recall before long
I wrote a letter to my family telling them . . .

all the ways in which though my memories were contrary
that possibly they could have been the reason for all my problems.
insecurities doubts and failures

And then the therapist discovered that I had dearly loved my father, who had died,
rather tragically at a young age a short time before
and that I was in the process of mourning him.

because I was fixated on the loss and the love

Quickly, it was suggested

and, by the way, hypnosis is a big deal in these situations
that for me to love him . . .

admire and miss anyone that much, especially your father
must mean

must mean

I had been sexually abused.

throughout your life you are just having a hard time remembering
and I can help you for a fee of course

Celestial Excursions

Soon, I was reading those tracts . . .
 on the abuses women have suffered throughout the ages
and wondering why,
 as a healthy and sane human being
I could not . . .
 recall any incidents
project this on to my familial situation.
 Oh!
Sexually abused . . .? Gosh! Hard as I tried . . .
 never mind
Gosh! And a husband, who's all work and no play left a lot to be desired.
 we know the story
So, I sought help. And, . . .
 never mind
can you imagine,
 we know the story
she said the answer lay in medication.
 we know the story
Medication?
 never mind
I think she mean pills. Anyway, soon, the therapist, who insisted on chain-smoking . . .
 and if you had a problem with it you need more sessions to work it out
was dead from lung cancer, and I was out,
 in the cold cruel cold cruel world undiagnosed
left with only few lame cassette tapes ---
 suggesting a move toward the light
 with every gentle sweep this glowing light
 you move towards your center a place of calm free from the world of concerns
 just follow my light to your center
"You're doing well . . ."
 follow my light with the center of your eyes
 the center of your mind the center of your spirit very nice
"You're doing well . . ."
 and we are moving ever closer toward the light toward the center of our being
And how about this one?
 the center of our time our solar system our universe our soul
"You are moving closer, toward the source of all heat and light.
 it is white and very calm so soothing at the center
And there is only one thing to do. Move toward the light, the fresh light,
 just follow the light to the center of the calm
the fresh air, toward the light, the window open, welcoming.
 it is where we move without intention it is the 'is' of being
Place your self upon the window ledge. Lean out into the light.
 and you move ever closer to the center—

Celestial Excursions

Feel how real it is, how fresh, how friendly and welcoming it is,
 with each gentle cycle of my ever expanding light our center
 where you are moving without intention,
the fresh light, the fresh air, etcetera.
 without restraint and without resistance
You can imagine, from there, what the next suggestion might be.
 with each glimmer of the light you move closer to the center
 to a place of peace and harmony
No wonder people jump out of buildings all the time.
 you're doing well you're doing well you're doing well you're doing well
Oh, goodness, that was a long time ago.
 and you are safe here
And what about the infamous alcohol incident—
 and I have made you safe and you are very thankful to me
 and wish to bring forth great sums of money for keeping you so safe
 so safe and you know this is the best thing to do
Yes, I was interested the vine on that day,
 and I have made you safe at the center of the spiral and for this you are grateful
and, yes, I did slip behind the wheel
and attempt to attend one more mandatory child event,
 and you will bring forth great sums of cash great sums of cash very soon
 you are standing at the top of an immense staircase
but what happened after the arrest—the sensual abuse by the arresting officer,
 above a gloriously beautiful and fragrant garden
the humiliation of the whole ordeal and ...
 breathe deeply and capture the scent of the roses you start to descend
the initiation into the underworld of prostitutes, husband-beaters and petty thieves
 step by step the scent of the jasmine and with each step you are more relaxed
in a bizarre kind of bonding session that evening—
 more open to your senses see the beauty of the garden below
I was quickly connected via mobile phone to a new therapist,
 shimmering dew-drenched emerald leaves glisten
 the soft kiss of a gentle breeze caresses your cheek
who in the wake of my shock and shame, suggested that ...
 a delicious calm drapes upon you
of course I needed help and would I come to her post-haste?
 with each step down you move ever-closer to this calm this heavenly beauty
At which point we would redesign my mind and my life. “Okay?”
 breathing deeper with each step you descend to a world
 more beautiful than you have ever seen a tranquility you have never known
So, within an hour without my say-so whatsoever
 deeper down toward the calm toward the beauty
I was placed in a treatment program.
 down at the center of all beauty all tenderness and beauty

Celestial Excursions

The party on the other end of the “help-line” empathized,
away from pain and care and suffering you are in a place of total calm
and when I sighed said, “Why are you crying?”
total tranquility you are safe this is the place to hide you’re doing well
I sighed again and she said,
you’re doing well you’re doing well
close your eyes and bask in the warmth of the sun
“You most certainly need help, and, by the way, if you don’t go through with the
therapy,
listen to nothing but the sound of my voice
let the sounds of children laughing fall away
as I am a representative of your health care program you should know that
as you concentrate totally on the sound of my voice
we will cancel your coverage immediately.”
and the warmth of the sun caressing your face
Oh, thank you and have a nice day, honey!
your neck your chest your thighs your legs and toes
And then I entered a urine-testing room full of drop-outs, dead beats, drug addicts,
etcetera,
splashing water and the smell of coconut oil
moves from the foreground of your senses
and hated every minute of it and checked out mid-way. Isn’t that a surprise?
receding as you listen to the sound of my voice
and feel the warmth of the sun upon your body
And it just goes on and on. Betrayal, coercion, therapy as punishment,
moving deeper within deeper within deeper within
glowing within glowing within glowing within
the family divided against itself.
you’re doing well you’re doing well you’re doing well
All ethically reprehensible behavior. And the patient?
the warmth of the sun pulls you into your center
“Possibly, you will be open to self-incrimination.
and the world drops away with each breath
Do you pay by check or credit card?”
you are moving ever closer to the center of your being
It’s a double-edged sword.
flowing flowing on your thighs on your body and on your thighs
At best, meaningless, at worst, right, which is really scary. I mean really scary.
moving you ever closer to your center and the world drops away
Oh, goodness, that was a time ago. I wonder if they still do it that way.

The River Deepens

The river deepens when it gets down to the sea, the river deepens.

Celestial Excursions

He Just ...

Drinks n' smokes n' tells old jokes.
They aren't even funny.
He Just . . .

Orchestra Introduction to Nightmare

Nightmare

I think this is a dream.
J is a woman. N and G are men.
J, N, G and I are driving in the of the night along some highway in the Southwest.
These are three of my closest friends.
I am driving. J is in the passenger seat.
N and G are in the back seat, but, because of something peculiar about the car,
they are both leaning forward, well into the front seat.
Our heads are close to one another. Four in a row. J, G, N and me.
We are all very tired and are looking for a place to sleep.
Finally, we come to a casino roadhouse on the left side of the road.
The left side is the south side. We are going west.
The sign says Rooms or Hotel. I don't remember which.
We drive into the parking lot, get out and go to the reception desk.
The place is noisy, gambling machines, pool tables, a bar, lots of people.
The person at the desk, a woman, says there are no rooms available.
We turn to go back to the car, but G has disappeared.
G is a self-proclaimed and very vocal, but very bad, gambler.
We look through the whole place but we can't find him.
We are really exhausted.
I say to N that we should go on, leaving G behind.
When I say this, N gets mad and takes a swing at me.
I duck and swing back in self-defense.
Unbelievably, I hit N and knock him out.
I say to J that we have got to get out of here, quickly,
because when N wakes up, he is going to hurt me. He is stronger than I am.
J and I go back out to the car.
Curiously, it is parked to go forward into the casino parking lot to get out.
I don't remember parking it this way. I take note of this.
J and I get in, and then I understand why N and G were leaning so far forward.
The car is a strange design, with a sloping front like a racing car,
but with a big cubicle area behind the front seats,
which is filled with a lot of pieces of luggage.
The back seat is small, and the whole back-area is packed with luggage, suitcases.
That is why G and N were leaning forward.
I start to drive the car out of the parking lot and back onto the highway.

Celestial Excursions

But the car is almost unsteerable, because the steering ratio is so extreme.
The slightest turn of the steering wheel makes the car veer sharply to the right or left.
(I think this is the opposite of a racing car steering ratio, but I'm not sure it matters.)
Finally, after many minutes and dozens of maneuvers,
moving forward and backward a foot or so at a time,
I get the car to the exit of the parking lot.
The exit is tilted slightly upward to the highway.
At this moment a car pulls up beside us at the exit.
The other car has its windows open.
And we have our windows open.
It is hot and, apparently, our car has no air-conditioning.
There are two guys in the other car.
The car is on our left. It is next to me. I am in the driver's seat.
The guy on the passenger side of the other car says to me, very casually,
looking forward all the time,
"Well, when you have a car like that, that's what you get." They drive away.
I get the car out on the highway, and continue in the same direction we were going,
but the driving is very hard because of the steering ratio.
I am straining to keep the car on the road.
J and I are very tired.
We don't speak to each other.
After a long few miles—ten or twenty—
we come to a ramshackle, desert motel on the right side.
The vacancy light is on and we pull into the parking lot.
This is the middle of the night.
Everything is very difficult, but the desert night is beautiful.
We wake up the woman at the reception desk.
She says she has one room. She asks if we are married.
I could have said, yes. But I answer, "No, but we are old friends,
and we are both happily married, with families, and we can't go another mile,
because we are so exhausted. We just need a place to sleep."
She says will make an exception in this case.
She gives us the key to one of the motel rooms, which is on the second floor.
J and I struggle to the room. We can barely walk, because of the tiredness.
We open the door.
It is a small, old-style motel room with single beds against opposite walls.
The bathroom toilet is on the left.
Between the beds, lying on his back, not bruised or bleeding or anything,
but obviously dead, is G.
I wake up.
I think it was a dream. I hope. I mean, it's not reality.
But it could be something else.
I actually wrote it down, because it scared me so much.
Then I threw it away. But, of course, it wouldn't go away.

Celestial Excursions

I told the story to a friend of mine and said,
Why does one think things like that?
She said, It sounds wish-fulfillment.
Sure.
I've always thought ideas like that—I mean, psychological ideas—were stupid.
But I kept thinking about it. Never having an answer.
Then, I thought about what she said just today.
Then the answer came.
What wish?

The River Deepens

The river deepens when it gets down to the sea, the river deepens.

He Just

th' sun goes down
sits and reads falls asleep
He Just . . .

Orchestra Introduction To Grandmother

Grandmother

I was in college.
 studying music
 you lived at home
I lived at home.
 th' college was nearby
 a few blocks away
It saved some money.
 a lot of money
 studying what
I studied music.
 every year
 what was the job
Learn a new instrument.
 study the fingering
 study the literature
A different instrument.
 different from what
 th' one played already
Every year.
 what does that mean
 y' never get to be good
You get the principles.

Celestial Excursions

that should be valuable
for other music
For another field.
education
th' marching band
Let me see . . .
remember the first year
has to be something
Clarinet,
that sounds exciting
then the second year
Bass violin,
that's very heavy
then the third year
Trumpet,
then the fourth year
try to remember
Voice.
an hour lesson
an hour of chorus
Many years later . . .
after the trumpet
and graduation
I met N.
we became friends
he confided in me
He told me a story.
it had to be earlier
because he was younger
't his grandmother's house . . .
th' conversation
came around to the fact
Somebody next door ...
playing piano
sometimes the trumpet
Was driving her crazy.
it was the trumpet
it's better than drums
Th' solution was drastic.
call the police
call in the army
Burn down the house.
that's really drastic
hardly can blame her

Celestial Excursions

I was the person.
 playing piano
 playing the trumpet
Th' house was my mother's.
 he only found out
 after you met
We were both shocked.
 at the coincidence
 how could it happen
Nobody knew it.
 'cept for his grandmother
 his grandmother knew it
't happened in daytime.
 so it was unknown
 at your mother's house
Th' reason was simple.
 why it happened in daytime
 n' never at night
There was a rule.
 regarding the trumpet
 and the piano
No playing at night.
 not after dinner
 it was called supper
it drove people crazy.
 after a hard day
 just like the grandmother
Th' answer was simple.
 stop playing trumpet
 stop playing piano
I went to the library . . .
 or brought the books home
 what about homework
if I didn't have homework.
 or do it silently
 don't touch the piano
I read the whole library.
 what about music
 y' must be a natural
I don't know about music.
 but y' know about books
 you can't know everything
Th' house was sold.
 she got tired of it

Celestial Excursions

studying music
To preserve her sanity.
 where did she go
 as far as possible
'Course, I didn't know.
 too deep in thought
 thinking about trumpet
There was just an old woman.
 sweeping the sidewalk
 burning the leaves
She wouldn't talk to me.
 what was the reason
 she's probably deaf
Other people moved in.
 don't know what they're in for
 there should be a law
They were younger.
 youngsters like music
 but not the trumpet
They both worked all day.
 that's an advantage
 don't know what they're missing
But there was a problem.
 they don't like trumpet
 no, they worked all day
It was the driveway.
 between the houses
 I think you've got it
He parked his car there.
 what about the garage
 used it for storage
My mother was mad.
 a place for everything
 if you can find it
But there was nothing . . .
 short of car bombing
 assassination
She could do.
 it was his driveway
 it was his car
We didn't talk much.
 not very neighborly
 everyone's busy
I didn't practice.

Celestial Excursions

you mean at night
so much for the trumpet
They didn't have anything . . .
except on weekends
's far as we know
to complain about.
you could have traded
parking for practicing
That solved a problem.
'cept for the problem
th' car in the driveway
I got tired of hearing about . . .
th' car in the driveway
th' car in the driveway
th' car in the driveway.
th' car in the driveway
very musical
And by this time . . .
late in the spring
almost graduation
I was getting . . .
bored with the driveway
bored with the trumpet
to like reading.
it's good sitting down
and late at night
Then something happened.
you can't have everything
where would you put it
Across the street . . .
a well-known location
deep in the suburbs
there was a man,
he was a neighbor
part of the neighborhood
a retired policeman,
or maybe fireman
or sanitation
who sat on his porch . . .
a well-known location
deep in the suburbs
winter and summer.
he was retired
or calling in sick

Celestial Excursions

Watching the traffic.
 you get used to it
 who wants a desk job
One day in the summer . . .
 out on the porch
 late afternoon
He looked down the street . . .
 just a block long
 a slight curve in it
and saw a tornado . . .
 materialize
 out of nowhere
at the end of the block.
 coming right toward him
 grinding and roaring
It was coming too fast . . .
 it's always something
 but he was prepared
to get out of his chair.
 w'out spilling his coffee
 or breaking his leg
When it reached the elm tree,
 n' that was a big one
 before the disease
which was in front of . . .
 on the extension
 Saturday parking
N's grandmother's house,
 but grandma was gone
 you've got new neighbors
it just plucked the tree . . .
 right next to the driveway
 he parked his car
right out of the ground.
 there goes the shade
 th' beautiful elm
It lifted the huge tree . . .
 th' roots and the branches
 th' brand-new birds' nests
ten feet off the ground,
 th' starlings were long gone
 so were the squirrels
and dumped it,
 it just took a few seconds

Celestial Excursions

th' power of nature
and disappeared.
they disappear
it is mysterious
If you've seen a tornado, . . .
or just a picture
but a real one is better
you know what I mean.
they come every summer
I don't want to be there
The man on his porch . . .
froze in his deck-chair
almost swallowed his teeth
knew just what to do.
prayed to the war gods
wished he was indoors
He phoned for help.
no nine-eleven
he had it memorized
Th' fire department.
they were prepared
an' he had connections
And the police.
some of his old friends
he was retired
When the truck got there,
as fast as they could
not a moment too soon
one of the firemen . . .
stopped what he was doing
without taking a beat
went to the house . . .
just on a hunch
it comes with experience
an' pounded the door.
things are starting
to happen fast
A woman came down . . .
down from the bedroom
she opened the door
dressed in a nightgown.
she just got up
something is wrong
Th' fireman said . . .

Celestial Excursions

she was confused
she was embarrassed
he almost fainted,
he was confused
what was she doing there
because of the gas smell.
he had no gas mask
it was back in the truck
When the tree came up,
it was an old one
th' roots were enormous
it tore out the gas lines.
wrapped in the root system
under the house
He told the woman . . .
now the house was
filled with gas
they had to run.
It was going to blow up
at any minute
She said she had to . . .
she was home because
she had a bad cold
change her clothes.
that's why she couldn't
smell the gas
So he just grabbed her . . .
anyway he could
over his shoulder
and started running.
just remember
everyone's watching
He got away safely . . .
'bout fifty feet
from the house
Then it exploded.
he was still running
it knocked them down
Th' house was demolished.
there's not a piece bigger
than a foot square
It blew away . . .
to smithereens
along with the elm tree

Celestial Excursions

half of my mother's house.
 and set the rest
 on fire
When I came home,
 home from college
 later that day
It was all gone.
 nothing was left
 except for the ashes
There was a big crowd.
 in spite of the danger
 in spite of the warnings
And I had to . . .
 there were the newspapers
 of course, the neighbors
persuade the police . . .
 over their caution
 justified, I guess
that I lived there . . .
 as of this morning
 now I live elsewhere
to try to find anything . . .
 that's pretty open
 grasping at straws
that I could save.
 where's the trumpet
 there's the piano
Of course, there wasn't.
 not after that one
 now what
Th' next few months . . .
 it was difficult
 hard to concentrate
I spent . . .
 sometimes just thinking
 shopping for clothes
in meetings with . . .
 gave up piano
 in the new clothes
th' insurance adjuster,
 a learning experience
 about people
who used to be . . .
 in a past life

Celestial Excursions

in th' past tense
my father's friend . . .
got it on paper
call th' company
before he died.
you mean your father
before the fire
Now he said things like, . . .
this has to be technical
th' insurance business
"How do I know that . . .
a classic beginning
a confirmed sceptic
you had a piano?
th' building is leveled
there's no more evidence
n' how do I know it cost . . .
it's getting repetitive
very Socratic
four-hundred dollars?"
very technical
th' insurance business
My gosh!
it's philosophical
get that from music
So, I told N that . . .
I had been thinking
logically
I saved . . .
without stretching it
just a little
his grandmother's life.
that's obvious
th' logic is clear
If I hadn't practiced . . .
piano
an' trumpet
my trumpet lessons . . .
be careful
nature is not
she still would have . . .
working for us
sometimes it seems to
had the house.

Celestial Excursions

we think it is
a common delusion
But at her age . . .
deaf as the woman
with a bad cold
she couldn't have . . .
th' coincidence
seems to mean something
got downstairs.
to be saved
by the fireman
I think this is true.
sounds true to me
or at least obvious
This is a lesson.
what's the lesson
yes, please
Watch out what you wish for.
surely you're kidding
that's not a lesson
My trumpet was gone.
your piano was gone
went up in smoke
But her life was saved.
N's grandmother's life
there's still a question
What's the question?
what books did you read?

The River Deepens

The river deepens when it gets down to the sea, the river deepens.

He Just

wake up in the double dark
dreams are like a movie
He Just . . .

Orchestra Introduction to Yes, I Know

Yes, I Know

She tried to get into the college for two or three years,
but I wouldn't let her in because she didn't have credits.
Actually, it was because she scared me.

Celestial Excursions

I didn't know why at the time, but she scared me.
One semester I decided to enroll the students myself. I don't know why.
As opposed to letting them fill out their schedules
and then arguing with them for taking both Thursday and Friday seminars
for easy credits, since they were the same,
except that on Thursday the students were supposed to talk about their ideas,
and on Friday I was supposed to talk.
So Thursday was a disaster.
They always clammed up, and I wound up talking Thursday and Friday both ---
and Saturday and Sunday, when nobody else was around.
Once you start it's a kind of sickness.
She came in unannounced and I accepted her, thinking I was crazy for doing so.
But now she didn't scare me.
Then the boy from Detroit, who was making a "mechanical" device.
And then another person whose name have forgotten.
And then a woman I had never seen before, a total mystery.
No credits. And I didn't even know her. But I just said yes.
And it was the best Thursday seminar ever.
The one that had scared me talked three or four times
about the culture of her people in San Francisco.
Detroit talked about his ideas for the mechanical device,
which had to be mechanical, because he didn't have any money
and he didn't have the "attitude" for an electronic device.
Then the woman I didn't know anything about,
except she told me that her husband was an engineer
and that he was working for some company in the area designing a bridge.
She told me about some other bridges he had worked on in other places.
I didn't know if I believed her, but it didn't seem to matter.
Everybody had to have a project.
The one that had scared me made a Chinese song.
Detroit made his mechanical device.
I can't remember the third.
The woman whose husband was an engineer, she said,
talked three or four times about the ideas of Gurdjieff.
She got somebody who worked at the school to help her with her project,
which was a long sound, a mix of many pure tones using Gurdjieff proportions.
Not great. Not bad.
At the end of the school year I was in the college coffee shop alone.
She came by and asked if she could sit with me.
We chatted about nothing at all.
Then the woman who had made the Chinese song—she was Chinese—sat down with us.
She said how happy she was to have been accepted in the seminar.
She said that before the seminar weeks she had been troubled for many years
by a ghost that stayed near her left shoulder

Celestial Excursions

and prevented her from being accepted by other people
and prevented her from doing her work.

Then she said to the woman whose husband was an engineer—(sure!)

“You took away the ghost.”

The woman said, “Yes, I know.”

I never saw the woman again.

Higher education.

The River Deepens

The river deepens when it gets down to the sea, the river deepens.