THE PLASTER FOREST

by

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Charles Gabel was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He has also lived in Chicago, Illinois, where he studied Classical Civilization at Loyola University. He is the author of the chapbook *Pastoral* (Strange Machine Books, 2011).

ABSTRACT

I write to find the raised scars of the lyre. The Maenads ripped Orpheus limb from limb and Sappho found his head, washed onto the shores of Lesbos, still singing; I find it in the Idaho desert, still singing, but wires tangle out the stumped neck. I have one tattoo, a fragment of Sappho, and I feel its raised letters on my arm most mornings. It reads:

> ἄγι δε χέλυ δια μοι λέγε
> φωνάεσσα δε γίνεω
>
> *yes! radiant lyre, speak to me,*
> *become a voice (trans. Anne Carson)*

This is a lyric scar, inked cuts healed, so perhaps I might know my voice, or perhaps some song crutched through me by the dead. What is this song? Though *lyric*, my poems are without melody. Can my poems then voice a harmony to the physical body? Diacritical, but not meant to *point*, but to vibrate parallel notes to the physical, knowing their insufficiency to *create*, as the word *poem* implies, descendant of the Greek ποιέω, *to make*? No. The lyric holds violence at its core. In *Erotism,* Georges Bataille describes poetry as language approaching transgression. Language that approaches the infinite. Language that approaches death. Can such violence harmonize with our bodies? No. Orpheus must be torn apart.

This kind of violence is central to the following poems, the lacerations and scars, poet's blood spilled on the meadow. Language too must be lacerated, spilled and rebuilt, pieced together strangely to reveal the oracular. Normal syntax cannot reveal the Arcadian pasture. Like Orpheus, like the poet, language must be torn apart.

* * *

In *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rainer Maria Rilke asks: "A god can do it. But will you tell me how/ a man can enter through the lyre's strings?" (trans. Stephen Mitchell). Perhaps this is a rare instance where violence *is* the answer. Orpheus torn to pieces. Transgression upon language. But the question itself reveals another problem: the place of the mythic in relationship to the real. In his asking, Rilke contrasts the *man*, the historical poet, with the *god*, the mythic. Another answer to this sonnet's question is perhaps an elision of the contrasted elements. How does the man, the poet who breathes and walks the earth, sing as Orpheus? As Apollo? The human poet must seep into the mythic.

The lyric self is at once an exercise in the human poet behind the poem as well as a mythic self created by and for the poem. Arthur Rimbaud writes that "*I* is someone else." (trans. Louise Varese). In his poem "The Pattern," Robert Creeley articulates a similar idea: "As soon as/ I speak, I/ speaks." When *I* enters the poem, the poet creates a lyric self, at once composed of the poet themselves as well as myth. It's in the lyric poem that these spaces may meet. Historical Sappho finds the disembodied head of mythic Orpheus. This is the site of the lyric *I,* of the lyric poem.

My lyric *I* is a collage of the dead poets before me; in "The Light the Dead See," Frank Stanford writes that "The dead have told these stories/ To the living." The dead tell me the stories of these poems, and the dead tug me around; I become a funny puppet singing their elegy to find my own voice. Sometimes they sing. Titles, images, entire lines have ghosted over from Virgil, Stanford, Spicer, Dante, Sappho, Rimbaud, and others.

* * *

These poems are inked scars. Tearing and gnashing to build and then to find the mythic, lyric self, lost somewhere between the language and me, its author, lost at the lyric site. Still, where is this lyric site? Arcadia. A poet's pasture lost to never existing. Setting of

The Eclogues, Virgil's iconic pastorals. This is a location invented to mourn its own passing, its own absence. In this sense, the pastoral is closely tied to elegy. Arcadia. This is where the lyric self might sing. Its meadows, its forests, however, are insufficient inventions. The poet has built them. They are plaster. This is the plaster forest. I sing it up out of the earth, a place for the dead to puppet me around.

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Imaginary Elegy

And we rise again in the dawn.
Infinite particles of the divine sun, now
worshipped in the pitches of the night.
~John Wieners

*

imagine these as lyrics
to what truth?
some bold form of you
left to the dark
holy fire a blues
burning away
my image a blues
crossing the good
sky its ghosts
crossing in birdrot
what weather to find above my forest!
O CITY O CITY O CITY
can I cast myself to you?
make my exile *me* and dream
the little birds again
I love you, Beatrice
so I imagine my own elegy
in all its blank stutter I cut
up the song for swallowing
ghosts to swallow in my bourbon
this city casts my deathmask
this city to wander I am the dead
tracing my love onto you and I might be
some HOLY GHOST but not
God—I can't see God anymore
but to reach you

*

sampling melody: knowing
the lyre, its LIGHT
to know that I am drunk
to say *Beatrice*
torn bridle of wind
through ASH
I am built of ASH
and the night

imagine how the sky
plumes grief
imagine me returning home
to find my own body
this song ashes away
like a dream like me
I am the dream left
to BLOOM lilies from its wounds

*

tonight: light is the rot
slipped, folded into your sight
tonight: spoiled moon
we're getting sick below:
our dreams—I need you
to touch me—or the ghost
tucked into my poem tonight
I will try for the horizon
and shake it—ripple
stars and all
their little gods
trust me, Beatrice
to find the image you need
to love me
at least an elegy
this at least
at least syntax chorus
an eddy pulling me

*

lilied dead pinch through my BREATH
neither language nor song to know the moon
cradled in my blood pooling these plaster streets
I am spilled
blood drips over my lost sound
my voice pulling me pulling
hymns this way each is a ghost
the lyre is dead
make me a poet, Beatrice
for I am dead like the Poet
Bathing in Hell
and nobody will touch
these scorched skinny forearms
dab away the ink
from these burns, Beatrice
the ghosts will fuck all around us

and a clump of maggots pop
out my spine—each syllable I write
see it click out my back
birds anymore pussed to leaking
these words for me to still love you
I plume my eyes away in bourbon
love me again—I'm too dead to hurt you
skeleton turned out by walking this city for a lovesong
instead: my elegy rot to pick up and carry
I reach the moon from it and give it to you

*

lilied BREATH: this dead
dead moon spinning
through my blues
here: the forest lilts l-limps
a stutter
again *B-Beatrice*
I beat this name against the sky
to reveal paradise
Virgil's pasture leaks its memories
into me while I wait for the DAWN
on this city this forest holy
sky that holds me
and each of my cuts
BLOOMS
plaster leafy in this night
Beatrice, find me a place
to rest each ghost
BLOOMS
its own cuts to utter
holy recourse from
these horrible stars
their bloody tangle
lifted from me to cradle
that dead moon
tuck it in, Beatrice
while I wait for the DAWN
to touch me

*

SELF-PORTRAIT

Locate *I*
love you
~Robert Creeley

Invocation

I trace a spinning fire to burn
I pull an image from our love
to write with—to touch
I trace on your ribs a wing
and I'm not scared anymore

*

I find death cold in our love
I find image to explain it
here lies a mirror
where I will know my death
know my voice—no voice
but you

the melody wakes

the melody wakes
the dust between the treeline
and the dead fish

is a painting at rest
begin the image swatting out
at the moon this melody made

willfully—tighten
the will *here* and *here*
slip, a bruised melody

at rest in your back
or under your ribs
under your ribs I hold on

let's lift off the bruises
in lines to make a portrait
dashing apart the treeline

brushed on your neck pull
back to the wake of wings
chased across your chest

[witness forms]

witness forms *I*

in paradise: a dead

little poem hedges

up my arm—up

and around to light

up starts of flute

caucused in the trees

up your leg and ripe touch

brushed between *I* and

the ink

[Aoelean]

Aolean summed

to your back I

solve together a

lift of wind—I

traced down tipping like

the sparrow—long

run: your spine

breathing back thrust

some naked snow

on my hands to rest in—

to witness such

pallid wind to try

Poem

the deer wrest from each other
a dust—light cut: my song's buttress

light cut along the curve of *I*
where the lyric drips

deer hooves start at the earth and snow
wicks around me, asks the

shadows it makes:
"I love you?"

earth starts finding
around my wrists

and the booze tills
to my hands *here* and

here sun husks—horrible
strikes dashed frost—on your chest

I place my hand and
lift the poem from it

real naked snow or coupled moons

the dead come down
through the trees to begin

the harvest of my breath
the dead, ready to

brace the slough of the written—
pillowy weirding back to the poet's page

show me
dismissal or padding here

voiced to my middle parts
somewhere between passive selves

the dead flecked back to us
coupled up moons make their own hips

for me, pulled along, the harvested
to land among us

real naked snow
lifted though the water now

cut snow, cut to make
the moon's swallows of meat

ribs pulling down into the trees in
exchange for such witness to write *I*

[the moon starts]

the moon starts here to wrist
up the meadow around your neck
and around like strokes writing my *I*

when I learn to speak: God
my little wind folded up

for a version of the meadow
stretching the dead
 to the portraiture—

they wound (present) speech:

pinned around the letter, around
Virgil—coughing and

coughing and coughing slight earth
taken up like ribs I pull down the moon

[poet builds]

poet builds transhumant Apollo—

and builds a simple

wind on your lip to

utter no tilling to—sight

wills a currency of tug

on skin—slips will

dashed to this

wind utter rims of beer

glass meant

to mirror and slacken

On Portraiture

laced oracle, a suture to *I*

hand and snow and Virgil

elides a tongue

the meadow breaks, breathes

back a bare drip: the song

the oracle lifts the dead

form me—and the dead

I inked out, their lit eyes

like drips of stars left in the water

Self Portrait

I want to believe you
believe me—smug billowing
into the letters. How big again
sotted cuts of snow against my ends

of hair—*it's just hair*.

Do you know what sun spittles
us forth? tight headlights
drag on our hips summon connective
tissue—little stretches undressed on the floor.

It's unto my bloomed double here,
not casual gods kissed back to bend,
and here, just here, a typeset of birds
caught out and snapped back to sing.

Self Portrait #2

Linger of glass shadow
at the bar. In the front seat
drawing on Wyoming—stitched
into the wind, ourselves.

A wind lost in my breath to you.
Write me a fresh smudge to tongue against.

Some cast of Roman plumes
against the snow or lake
or the small puffs,
my breath handed out.

On becoming a poet—designate your eyes.

Orphic drizzle back

on my gutted eyes. Not gutted,
just not just

a frame for the glass shadow.

Self Portrait #3

This is tilling up the sun.
Evidence this tilling up the sun.

Lattice here—sopping.
Watery shoes drip with *you* now
and now.

You by name slicks past; approach
my shy ruin.

Forthcoming of the knotted in
my middle—a single break
in the light, slotting across me,
my glass, onto the poem.

Self Portrait #4

Dear, won't you unsaddle this décor,
kitsch fucked to sound (me) out?

You, show me
my double lamping
around, somewhere
wired across thee
slush song gutter.

Wet melody caught (*passive*)
the ripples of my breath—something

breaking shadow.
Some tough memory of
itself lucked up through *I*.

This is a lucky hunt, but it's just
a camera in my hand.

Self Portrait #5

the glass shadow folds up
washes me
the eyes list inky by
the sowing

pulls of meat to swallow
pulls of deer fur in the water
pulls of moon in the water

brushed again:

triptych on your chest
I touch the pulls
of paint across, a swallowing

Self Portrait #6

Lyric pillowed your breath
around me—weird marks

find my shadow,
long blue mantle of *I* brushing *you*.

Snaps of feathers writing
me to gather all these lines.

The light snapping canvas
snapping the brush of
which *you* touches me.

Self Portrait #7

beer lodged to my wrists
fill out a thick morning at rest

I yoke myself through this
sun, husked onto the water

hushed deer
around us, shy beers,
our Apollo wilt

wrested from a wind
across you—scraps of
my little love something

something—this crass version
dropped my awake—turned
between the ink and where the ink lives

Self Portrait #8

a light from the storm
whistles for you
wrong limps to
a love-shied pasture

smokes a hole in my lips
stuttered to the blankest page
smack of weather
against us—a touch
on your hair is—

that's how to call
my resting point

it's a cast of like marks to arm

and wrist—a diacritical
cast to find me out

[The edge of holy power]

The edge of holy power:
the forest's plaster
inverse redulls my face
to avoid the portrait. It
tills up the sun. A singing
glowed into my hollow parts
in my middle.

WHERE THE INK LIVES (ECLOGUES)

Such syllables flicker out of grass
~Basil Bunting

The Pasture

let my syntax be content

make it a method
of seeing you

let letters pull down sky more literally

puckering of a mouth
before speech becomes
a flower

blooming song
together with image

but—

a word: I see Apollo wilt crass version

is this a worthy emergency?

locate the pasture
locate the ink
pull it from my love

how do you hear me name you?

pronounce again

locate me

(please?)

Eclogue

I lift myself to create this calm,
such spools: your tongue

am I sky-touched—as Virgil's
oaks? reeds and little

games stretched to shepherd
us: lights between the trees,

leveled as a goat song
touched to your hands

I need a sick chorus across
us—sweet drifts

I need your hands in my hair
along a wind I lost, folded

into a book—I live
between the ink and

deer in the snow, lit,
warm brushes of fur against

lit up, a pause
to breathe, breathe

back—hands slipped up my
back, along each breath

Eclogue: Desert Mass

I want to sing a mass
for how the sun husks
the earth and appears
as water

some sun spools on the dirt
candied to earth's lap

I want the desert's
breath on my wrists

now you—reach to touch me

—please?

I pull apart
like a ruin—versions
of birdrot settling
a landscape

a method to un-right
my inky hands naming winds
stuck to the harvest fit for these lands

I'm tilling up the sun

for a drink

notes on a homeland: I live

between the ink and

a real naked hand reaching
up my arm

I am more simple than the desert

After Virgil

I slice a blood blister into
my dream wooing the Orphic
lick

how can I make us
a little closer in here?

if only vision
inked out
on the cold

I have a hand

on the front of your hip it's not
such a baroque tug

let me bathe the storm
leafing across
the plain
lolls around me

sweaty window drifts
to rest
on the morning
where the sparrows tip
they stencil
shy—how?

I sew a poem
into *I*
and the glass
shadow chased makes
a pull for it—no
more poems

salting Virgil

for what?

warm legs
spotty versions of nocturne

I paste together
around your shoulder
my language

bumbles and I count
so bad upon you—
        I'm sorry

some curve
rights me
like the dead use to

the water rill down my hand
to my pocket

what weather!

real naked smudge
on my skin here it is lit
up grass consoled

to me?

how close can we get in here?

a clot of Virgil
sewing up some

dusty blood into
the meadow clog
of flute music concussed
like us

around the poet, alternate

hips of the wind
cuffs us

what ink settles like this
to know your naked feet?

it's a place
to wrest back

from the meadow

Displacement Test

limping pastoral—a work on your cheek
inset like Psyche, not the glove of a vision

no—written to a will of this
is crutched into
touch unbuttoned
into song

then we'll stitch back to song
or sew it up in our mouths

simple missive: I live between the ink and where the ink lives

so sorry said to the mark on your cheek

I say Beatrice send me some songs
and O'Hara grass

then I said I live

between
the ink and where
the ink lives

my way to maybe

my pastoral marks wound to the beer glass river scars

smirks of meadow
dumb meadow
struck fumes in me—how close?

how close can we find each other here?

Rimbaud seasonally slit on my fingers
bashed knuckle wind
to phone
—thuggish wind on the lake

no more poems

almost water

apprehend a refrain
that crows
no—crawls

cold cold limps from a mouth

leaves of moonlight

enter childhood

dearest leaves of moonlight caught in the ripples
of a minnow's eye—don't listen to
that dirty dirty moon

what bad trees tricking around as
if radio were slots of ourselves made the moon

a simpler ink edge

we are evidence
of the moon rippling in
the water to make
little gods appear—you,
pick them up

they're all wet
like the moon does
us

Crass Meadow

wrest the dust from your body

I cleave a poem to the earth

for you—sowing light
spilled beer
on the meadow

a paradise there

I saw it splinter
and swell like water

I lift clotted songs
limp cold now

I lift a light to stain the pasture

Apollo wilt light wilts
radio touching radio to show each chorus

I sing I sing I sing the forest with a little peasant reed

split gum called to song
clotting together my ink

I will make a pasture and
we will see God there

how easy Orpheus works up
your back when I put
my hand between the ink

and where the ink lives

where I crest rust
from my lungs

I dream a winter
where Sappho plucks me back, a lyre

still, trainlight wilts
my crass meadow
tough winds find me
on the water

the snow comes

the snow comes

the snow comes

and I close my eyes
and everyone else is dead

I am an eddy

no more poems

this dusk is blistering
around me and
the meadow

will you come find me here?

when I blister into the dusk
where the ink lives

Split Eclogue

mad wilting all along the grass
it forms lines between each of your ribs

my hands are unbruised
my hands are unbruised

I pull them along your back to start the portrait
I startle all along the poem jaundice

the lyric drips a bruise
and the garden drips

back to me
I want you

to show me how
the coughs of flute music take

you up—and collapse
just like that the letters

lapsed into the deer hooves
it's a simple, it's a touch

your hands into my collar
here, my hands lift

the dead from
me—collapse the

ready eclogue in passing
to splash a bruise to my

hand—to strum along the hooves
and my stumped muscles

I strum along the hooves
cored little melody to touch

with—a split gum
lulled back into my

breath, tucking a moon
into *I*

Eclogue for Beatrice

crumbing dark is a ruin

stomped by the dead

a way for finding the dirt

together of massaging your gray arms

back into my memory—this time, a lung

lengthened to hold you in it

now I can breathe

I can breathe back and my pasture

will find its borders

the blood in my feet knows its grass

dripping sleepy over the earth

a swollen tree grinding out

splinters for my palm

they prick a freshly dead poem

I can't see you, but my blood

still turns to cotton ~~in these woods~~

and a fever soft

a fever can still kill a poet

your soft fingers

can dot bruises on my back

I want to pull them off a chorus:

I find it looped on your ribs

I find it in the grass, bleeding up

to touch me

its memory's soft tugs

on each of my teeth to singing

it is memory's blood the blood

making a rill down my hand

as weather ~~might~~

warm lightning over the desert

rolling lulls before its holy song

~~imagining rain~~

THE PLASTER FOREST

I sweat like the grass and learn
what it means to die.
~Stephen Rodefer

Poem

a memory: my arm wraps your
shoulders to rest
my hand under your hand

now an entire poem takes place
on my stoop with a beer

Virgil cannot bring me to your body again
so he and I have another beer

splash it on the desert
to make a forest grow

I cannot find a moon tonight
no angels or somewhere to move

the shape of a wing
a way to cast my plaster forest

[the plaster trees]

the plaster trees begin

and pull up between my muscles

the boozy storm yet ready—spring

in my breath along its buttress

the tenses blink together

smirk away my form

O how my throat splits

in chorus with the dead—

as the dead—as the weather

skirmishes against us

bulging church into the pitch blue

the holy arching of skin

Reflection: Dawn

word
word
word
song
song
song

this singing creasing earth
when did the open field begin to cry?

the poet asks the trees turn
with weather as weather

I write a swollen chorus becomes
a swollen angel shakes sputters

a new song I am
coughing coughing coughing

when did the open field begin
to cry? the poet asks

breath doesn't rest the trees
swelling song breath

close enough for brush strokes
in the portrait my double

shaking new songs to coughing
spitting the dawn

it is yoked to the river
where my double cannot rest

little dead things

lying on Ohio—am I
a dead poet?

rain reaches down to touch
the plain I see it—clouds

rot and reach to touch I
see the dead things on Ohio

am I a dead poet? I know
how to see blood

on the road there is blood
on the road from the dead

lying on Ohio
things lying on Ohio

[I want to write]

I want to write what I remember
about you: your small ribcage,
warm between my hands—
undressed heat—two passing
celestials—each star spurs blood
out from my shoulders
a blotted poem loops into night
and I know each planet's little hell
your body's naked fire

[this is my missive]

this is my missive:
bright page flipped or a rip
this is what happens: ugly dark
a poem without eyes or muscles
night's hymnal uses sun's light
and this is its prayer
but I can't see anymore
fuck these stars
fuck that bloated moon
there are only pages
and this is how I say "I miss you"

[crisp branch]

crisp branch, a pulling
breath sloughing poem
the wilt lost light
to the forest
along with the bugs small birds
small bones whittle
among my breath
its shy puff to utter
cooling feet slap muck
am I a dead poet?
coin tricks on my
eyes to trap the dead
slog their love
out over the trees
the dead cracked branches
not enough, really
to film to show light

Burial Hymns: Fragments to Orpheus

if Orpheus
I, torn song

*

a hand pulled: dusk's muscles
tugging an elegy out of me

you pull on my hand once

*

tonight we learn how a mouth
might whisper us back to music
steady, lest I tear apart
to singing like before

*

O song, lit up
thrust into my spine—the dead
loping me through the poet

will you sing me that song?

*

another woman will not love this
broken form I sight
is a dead poet holding his wife
to speak

*

to speak light sprung from
wounds toward speaking

*

poet scored from the page
a palimpsest as flesh unsutured
to hang open in love's vision

*

this dream asks *what then?* and I pull

it through the beer and my breath

*

and the road: there Apollo
among the desert grass—I lose the color
by reaching directly at it

the dream ashes away anyway

*

I will close his eyes
with coins and follow
him to Hell

Interlude

~~I trace on your ribs a wing~~
~~and I'm not scared anymore~~

FUCK DEATH

The Plaster City

Virgil leads me from my forest
so with him I build my city
where is this site?

[this city to hold]

this city to hold the ghosts
eyes, splintered
poets to build its plaster walls
this city: already ghosts
they wash its plaster
back to grey like the dead
sky—the weather stops
over us for this burial

[ellipsed]

ellipsed from city walls
I wander to see the reflection
held in its syntax—becoming slack
I cannot sleep here
or divorce reflection
from my image—learning its death
burned overhead into stars
and back onto me

[my exile found]

my exile found as a city

the sky plumes its church

my shy tenses altogether

mirrored and mirrored as stars

echo left by song

trickle punched from the storm

and the storm somehow manages

my syllables soft

into the dirt—wiry lightning

to hang onto

such a finite stranger as image

rots about my exile

plaster buttress

its church skyward

an image I want

an image burnt

an image

[tell me how]

tell me how to mark this city
back—strain it out

my voice is my only tool
I feel it breathing as a spell onto me

wiry stars: each one a spur
burning its scar onto my shoulder

use them to sew together the birdrot
that will lead you more to me

I am the night's funny puppet
O city—come watch the forest

get all toothy see how I pinch blood
out of the liquor and our dreams

ease together pooling a new body
gutted across the pasture

this is my business
for all the desert grasses

their fits in the wind
I am the laurel twisted among them

For Beatrice

angels swell the treeline

foaming together messengers

light in last plumes dusk they pull

from your heels, alternate breaks

through the grass, touching my plaster forest

my plaster forest is seizing fits before the dark

shakes across it, makes a dream

I pull up beer and blood from the river

spill it on the trees to believe they can live

I want to sleep: this drowning

crutched to keep the dead

upright, to hold their heads to see

will you show me God?

now I live in the desert

I dream mad angels sewing winds together

to raise my voice to singing

versions of heaven pressing into my legs

maybe I can lash us to a pretty sunset

my plaster forest—no more poems, I promise

they'll just say "I love you"

weird marks—lines living like ink

where I see you

as if still the poet's to touch

Epilogue

I am the wandering soul, the lover of Beatrice

watch the poem panel out under

rag moon, spittle played through my spleen

let's drive into the desert and die

there we can see water on the road

there we can become folk songs and wilt

as drunken boats saddled into the sand among the birdrot

I am a dead poet lifted by this desert wind

I breathe the desert breathes back

see my pasture, swollen with beer

to water its plaster trees

I see a grave, its dead leaves

to cover me: sloughed winds

I can't hold them

the moon is never sudden through the water

I see dead winds pull lilt waves

what power is it to hold these? winds

yet dead in the sparrow's lung

pull them out—into the light

let death take these birds

and I'll harvest what's left of their song

give it to the dead crutched through me

me through the poet

I want to speak

I want to fall in love again

but some gummy poem

gets stuck in my throat

I fell down in the forest

I felt the grass milk dew from the moon

why can't I?

I am a poet and I will die

to make this forest grow