

## *All Poems End with the Word Paradise*

KENNETH GROSS

IT IS A YEAR OR SO ago, during the first weeks of a long autumn. I am reading and rereading a lot of poems, taking up books by impulse and whim rather than a fixed plan, since I am free for a season to wander in them. The words become part of the changing weather. There are late poems of W. B. Yeats and early poems of John Ashbery, posthumously published fragments by John Clare and Emily Dickinson, dense lyric sequences by Seamus Heaney and Geoffrey Hill. With my always struggling Latin and the help of different translators, I read over Horace's odes, texts from imperial Rome which in their immediacy of address and knife-edge shifts of tone can start to sound strangely like Frank O'Hara. In the Pforzheimer Collection, surrounded by rows of gilt leather spines, I reread Keats's odes and Shelley's "Alastor" and "Adonais" in their rather ordinary first editions (though now luxuriously rebound), the plain pages and widely spaced lines lending these long-familiar texts a strange candor, even lightness. I search out a deluxe first printing of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, a poem that is for me a touchstone of the ambitions of lyric voice. In the opening pages is a Walker Evans photo of the Brooklyn Bridge seen from below, the span forming a kind of inverted pyramid or black chalice.

As if to refresh first principles, I look again into the five compact green volumes in the Loeb Classical Library Edition of *The Greek Anthology*, an ancient collection of love poems, epitaphs, epigrams, inscriptions, votives, and curses; it is full of poems in which inanimate objects and the dead are lent voices to challenge the living. In search of childish things—a different kind of first principle—I read traditional lullabies from many different cultures, songs often as wounding as they are comforting, some with words more likely to haunt the parent singer than to put a child to sleep (and yet, one imagines, they do). I study the facsimile of a miniature collection of

nursery rhymes from the mid-eighteenth century, printed in red and black ink with crude woodcuts, including verses I know—"Who did kill Cock Robin?" and "Lady Bird, Lady Bird, / Fly away home"—and some I've never heard, like one that begins "Spit, Cat, Spit, / Your tongue shall be slit."

Still on the track of the child, I look into the papers of Kenneth Koch, preserved at the New York Public Library, searching out poems composed by the young schoolchildren whom Koch, starting in the late 1960s, taught to give shape to their wishes, dreams, and lies, using simple, sometimes surreal, verbal games. Carefully housed in archival boxes are hundreds, even thousands, of poems by students from New York City, also France, Italy, Haiti, and China. They are written in childish hand with pencil or ballpoint pen on scraps of cheap notebook paper, often wild and just as often silly and touchingly ordinary. (Just one instance: "I / feared / my / shadow / but / it / was / nice / to / see / myself / in / fear.") I also find unpublished poems by Koch with titles such as "Teaching Vultures to Write Poetry," "Teaching Rocks to Write Poetry," "Teaching Houses to Write Poetry," "Teaching Romanticism to Write Poetry," "Teaching John Ashbery to Write Poetry"—poems that make fantastic turns on the work of teaching that Koch clearly loved, that touch on ambitions more intimate and mysterious, or translate a sense of the failures of that teaching, his *thwartings*.

Through this maze of reading it is something very basic that I want to find words to describe, answering to something old in myself. Call it poetry's peculiar way of knowing. W. H. Auden spoke of such knowing as "a way of happening, a mouth," an event in which an artifact of words can startle its own author with what he or she has written, making it old and new at once, a fall and a firing. It is something that changes *us* when we read, conveys a sense of life, articulates a possible life, even if impossible—a thing that "calls new powers into being," in Samuel Johnson's words, or that refreshes powers we have lost touch with. This knowledge has a lot to do with a way of listening, with the poem's opening up of the ear to unlikely voices from inside and outside ourselves, or to the strange meetings of such voices. It

lies in how poems make one feel the gifts and the wounds of hearing, inviting the search for “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” within the words we speak, part of how poetic words gain an uncanny life of their own. That way of knowing, that listening, has something to do with survival, with our life in time. It includes a sense of the power of poetic words to survive in time, a real preoccupation for poets who live by the words they speak, who count on words to animate present as well as future life, their imagined immortality. That knowledge also compasses a heightened sense of how words can fail, or fall into silence, even become themselves a form of death, or life-in-death. Connected with these matters is the question of how poetry recovers a sense of early voices, ancient voices, which in modern poetry includes more and more the voices of childhood, things young as well as old, including the child’s ruthless appetite for play and its vexed relation to an idea of innocence—how that innocence itself survives or is lost.

So I read and read through many weeks. In the past I have felt at home in such wandering study, and I do discover old and new threads, even as I am waiting for something that seems looming. But as weeks pass, the work more and more feels distinctly *unthreaded*. Time seems to contract rather than open, since for so long I cannot find a beginning, a place to start writing. The poems lie dead on the page, or half-alive, and my own words become a kind of noise in my head, nothing I can commit myself to. The good space of wandering starts to feel like a labyrinth, a blank: muddled, a bit mad, heartless, even shameful. I can only agree with Liza when she says to me, one dim night, as I sit on our couch in an anxious stupor, “You’re reading too many poems, and too many books about poems.” “Choose five poems,” she says. “Choose one.” Pausing, she asks, “What’s the poem you can’t do without?” It is a question that has no answer and a hundred answers. Then I hear myself saying, with surprise and a little desperateness, before I am fully conscious of the words, “Kubla Khan.”

It is a little like waking up. A shiver goes through me. I have not been thinking about this poem at all. Yet it must be right. Samuel

Taylor Coleridge's poem, "a vision in a dream" as he calls it, written around 1798, is one of the first poems that I had by memory when I was young. I can still feel myself reading it—at eleven or twelve it would have been—though perhaps it was first read to me. I recall the feel of the book, the look of the poem on the page. I remember my twin brother reading it with me. It was an early experience of being enchanted by words I couldn't entirely understand, yet whose inner cadence I could trust, that kept me company, a poem baffling but inexhaustible. So this must be Exhibit A:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
     Down to a sunless sea.  
 So twice five miles of fertile ground  
 With walls and towers were girdled round;  
 And here were gardens bright with sinuous rills  
 Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;  
 And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
 Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
 A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
 By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
 And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
 As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
 A mighty fountain momently was forced:  
 Amid whose swift half-intermitted Burst  
 Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
 Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
 And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
 It flung up momently the sacred river.  
 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
 Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
 Floated midway on the waves;  
 Where was heard the mingled measure  
 From the fountain and the caves.  
 It was a miracle of rare device,  
 A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer  
 In a vision once I saw:  
 It was an Abyssinian maid  
 And on her dulcimer she play'd,  
 Singing of Mount Abora.  
 Could I revive within me  
 Her symphony and song,  
 To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
 That with music loud and long,  
 I would build that dome in air,  
 That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
 And all who heard should see them there,  
 And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
 Weave a circle round him thrice,  
 And close your eyes with holy dread:  
 For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
 And drank the milk of Paradise.

This drew me in early for many reasons. I liked the odd sound of the unknown names “Xanadu” and “Kubla Khan,” of alliterating obscurities such as “Alph” and “Abora” and “Abyssinia”—they called up memories of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” and Edward Lear’s “The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo” (about a creature who lives all alone “on the Coast of Coromandel”), poems which I had

also read. What I liked was a sense of names and letters becoming thing-like, acquiring personality or agency, how the names *made* the poem with all their *x*'s and *a*'s and *k*'s, a network of generative letters. I liked the sound of "dulcimer," knowing it was some kind of musical instrument, though I'd never seen or heard one. And then the poem also changed words that I already did know, or thought I knew. There was the strangeness of the word "shadow" seeming to mean a reflection on the surface of water, and of a surging river called a "fountain," of "device" referring to a miraculous image rather than to some small mechanism. The word "dome" here seemed to name not just a high, spherical roof but a whole realm, a *home* of sorts (though I didn't know the word's source in the Latin *domus*). And how could you *decree* a "dome"? The august warrior-emperor Kubla decreeing that place of pleasure reminded me a little of the sick child who shapes a world with toys and blankets in Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Land of Counterpane," a poem I also read early, though I didn't really know what a counterpane was, and imagined that it had something to do with pain.

My ear was always caught by the movement between different rhythms in "Kubla Khan," calm and rapid, light and grave, delighted and anxious. And there were those resonant rhymes that came at irregular intervals, always unpredictable, some of which seemed oddly not to make a perfect match: *ever* and *river*, *enchanted* and *haunted*, *far* and *war*. And then there was the distant echo of "Xanadu" in "honey-dew" at the end. As much as the sounds of words it was what the words described, the highly active, rapidly changing spaces of the poem, each full of its own weather, its own life, places to enter in imagination, reached by odd leaps of thought and strangely empty of persons: the encircled garden crossed by a chasm full of the violent tumult of dancing rocks, then opening up below into a hidden cave, a hidden, frozen sea within the earth, an inland sea, an Aladdin's cave containing ruin. The poem evoked landscapes I knew from a young age, rocky waterfalls seen during hikes in the Adirondacks, for instance, or stretches of the Long Island shore, where I liked to watch waves surge and break and recede, threads of foam moving slowly

down their backs. But I also had the powerful feeling that the words of the poem hollowed out new spaces in my own head, in my own imagination, that they mapped an unknown geography within my own body, measuring what was yet *measureless*, things near and far, immediate and ancient, appearing and disappearing suddenly, a cosmos and a chaos. Did I hear within *Abyssinian* the word *abyss*, that place which, etymologically (in Bottom's words) "hath no bottom"? Or how the name *Ahora* gestures toward "aboriginal"?

I am now more conscious of how the poem shapes a moving consort of natural and artificial sounds, a particular drama of listening to a "mingled measure" of noise and music. There is the sound of the myriad fountains and sinuous rills, the sound of the river Alph running underground, then the desperate wailing of that nameless woman for her demon or "daemon" (as one manuscript of the poem has it). There is that tumult of the water compared to the violence of work and weather, the sound of threshing and the sound of hailstones, these being linked to the sounds of the earth's own breathing, its "fast thick pants." And then there is the silence of that lifeless ocean, which opens up to the remembered voice and playing of that damsel. But what I *did* feel in those early readings of the poem, I remember vividly, was a sense that these sounds belonged to spaces inside me, to an abyss or vortex in my throat or in my ear, in my chest, my lungs, a place from which I might speak, or a place in which to listen to noise and silence both, empty and full, belonging to a past and a future I did not yet know. The poem showed me caves of voice as well as caves of ice.

"Kubla Khan" was also one of the first poems I knew in which I was caught up by a poet's dramatizing of his own poetic ambitions, his way of speaking about the very poem I was reading, offering a history of its emergence. First there was Coleridge's own prefatory note, his story of having fallen asleep in a remote farmhouse over a book of oriental travels, *Purchas His Pilgrimage* (after taking "an anodyne" we know was opium), composing a long poem in his dream, and then writing the poem down on awakening, only to be interrupted by "a person on business from Porlock," such that he never gets it

back, leaving this fragment “of psychological interest only,” published twenty years later. Then beyond the preface, the poem itself imagines the loss and recovery of a poem, dreams about the poet’s own power of awakening a waking dream in others. In picturing the origins of his song, the poet twists together images of motion suspended and convulsive, images of an alien, even destructive life emerging within and between worlds—it’s a vision of an origin that sits in the middle of things. Reading this was like opening my eyes in the dark.

Two leaps in the poem always caught me, left me with a kind of breathless wonder. One was the moment at the end of the chasm description when the poet suddenly brings back Kubla, not as commanding emperor but as troubled listener, taking in things we both hear and don’t hear, things that might be truth or delusion: “And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!” (I saw Kubla himself floating in the middle of that noisy space.) The other was the moment when the poet switches suddenly from praising that “miracle of strange device” to words about a more personal past—“A damsel with a dulcimer, / In a vision once I saw.” It was partly that an “I” emerges suddenly, for the first time, a nameless “I” that speaks out of the memory of a vision both linked to and unlike the places we’ve been, their kinds of seeing and hearing. The speaker’s “*once I saw*” implies a lost past, though a past whose revived memory would allow the poet to sing into existence the landscape we’ve just seen described. It is as if this landscape had been lost even before you had known it was the poet’s to *be* lost. The dome becomes a tomb, a place of vanished things. The poem’s words hold both promise and doubt, a bargain and a prayer—“*Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song, / To such a deep delight ’twould win me / That with music loud and long, / I would build that dome in air.*” You might think that the poet comes too late to build this dome, that his own powers are not adequate. And yet even so, he rushes to fantasize the *costs* of his success. We are invited to imagine, voiced by the poet himself, the cries of the audience who will witness that as yet unsung song, an audience who will remake the poet as something dangerous, taboo, both there and not there: “And all who heard should see them



there, / And all should cry, Beware! Beware!" These listeners weave their own spell, in horror of what they hear and see—the magic circle seemed woven of the poet's own floating hair; they point to sources of dangerous nourishment that evoke places we've just ourselves been visiting: "For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drank the milk of Paradise." The intense charm of that picture floats over a desolation, a bitterness.

All of this touches on what first drew me to the poem and has stayed with me through many readings, even as I have come to know much more about it. Scholars such as John Livingston Lowes and Kathleen Coburn have shown how "Kubla Khan" conjures a vast array of other poetic texts and imagined landscapes, pieces of things remembered and recombined, other gardens, chasms, and rivers, how it compresses older histories of heaven and hell, creation and destruction, innocence and death—it evokes old wars of the imagination, along with hints of actual wars very present to the poet. I indeed wonder about how this poem, which I took inside myself so early, might have shaped my later readings of its own literary sources, such as *Paradise Lost* or *The Tempest*. Coleridge's task of reweaving his sources is all the more moving given what I now know of a poet whose longing for wholeness was always crossed by a consciousness of broken work and of competing, fragmented, dissipating, and often destructive impulses in himself, a poet who always set himself to trace the complex crossings and interanimations between his outward and inward life, between sensation and imagination, between the movements of his conscious mind and those of his unconscious thoughts.

Coleridge's labyrinthine notebooks, for instance, show us how often in the real landscapes that he wandered through his eye turned to some meadow or hill, some breach of space or expanse of moving water, some arrangement of light and darkness, that showed him a curious double of the visionary chasm of "Kubla Khan." Here is an entry from 1799: "River Greta near its fall into the Tees—Shootings of water threads ~~over~~ down the slope of the huge green stone—The white Eddy-rose that blossom'd up against the stream in the scollop

by fits & starts, obstinate in resurrection—It is the life that we live.” His readiness to be taken over by some natural sight, physically and mentally, also comes through in this entry from 1800, recording another walk: “Ghost of a mountain / the forms seizing my body, as I passed, became realities—I, a Ghost, till I had reconquered my Substance.” By contrast with these visions of the outer landscape, many of the actual dreams that Coleridge transcribes are much *less* like the reveries of “Kubla Khan,” more grotesque and more compressed, more closely embodied, though equally quick of transformation: “Friday Night, Nov. 28 1800, or rather Saturday Morning—a most frightful Dream of a Woman whose features were blended with darkness catching hold of my right eye & attempting to pull it out—I caught hold of her arm fast—a horrid feel—Wordsworth cried out aloud to me hearing my scream—heard his cry & thought it cruel he did not come / but did not wake till his cry was repeated a third time—the Woman’s name Ebon Ebon Thalud—When I awoke my right eyelid swelled—.” Or this: “Sunday Night—4 Feb. 1810—I eat a red Herring for Supper, & had a dreadful night in consequence. Before I fell asleep I had a spectrum of the fish’s backbone which immediately and perceptibly formed itself by lengthening and curving the cross bone threads into a sort of scorpion—with a sense of fright—which doubtless was the sensation which produced it.” Yet these passages do recall “Kubla Khan” in their trying to put into words the poet’s sense of an alien life within and about him, a life closely linked to the pains and needs of his body, though they point to a visceral fear that “Kubla Khan” leaves muted (and which the poetry shows us more directly in the later “Pains of Sleep”).



If these thoughts get at part of why returning to this poem seemed and seems right, there is also something of a different order that I feel now in the poem’s shapings and its claims on me, why it seems I cannot do without it, what it means to write about it.

I have a bad habit of finding in any poem that really absorbs me, if only for a moment, the archetype of all other poems, a kind of

insistent double or shadow of them. It is as if that one poem were simultaneously the only poem and all poems. A single lyric seems to offer an idiosyncratic diagram of a larger, still unknown landscape. So what I cannot do without in “Kubla Khan” just now is how the poem helps me describe the experience of reading other poems. It gives me a way of testing what a single poem can offer by way of truth, resonance, and connection, making it the measure of other poetic reveries, however different. I am reminded of how George Eliot compares certain recognitions to the effect of holding a candle flame up against a polished metal surface, so that its network of minute and random scratches “will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles around that little sun.”

If I look in the mirror of “Kubla Khan,” I find myself wanting to say that *all* poems are composed after having fallen asleep over a book. All poems seek to copy out dreams that will be broken in upon by “a person on business from Porlock.” All poems dream the world for those who read them waking. All poems keep changing the ground of dreaming. All poems are attempts to revive a lost poem or a lost dream of the poem (to borrow a resonant phrase from Peter Cole), a poem that sits over the ground of its own forgetting. All poems seek their own unknown beginnings. All poems start by decreeing circles of stone and end with a call for a circle of words. All poems end with the word “paradise.”

All poems are pleasure domes under threat, sunny spots of greenery that discover darker motions below them. All poems are both a house and what invades the house, places of refuge that become places of exile; they are gardens built over an abyss, over frozen seas—lifeless, ceaseless, sunless, measureless. All poems trace the passage between those different worlds, dwelling within that passage, expanding that threshold. All poems invite their readers to wander in those passages, in the lines that shape those worlds. All poems hollow out within themselves and within their readers spaces at once sacred and profane, savage and holy, inside and outside of time—meeting places of innocence and experience, heaven and hell.

Somewhere in all poems there is an “oh.”

All poems fix their designs in water, they are miraculous devices of sun and ice. The words of all poems are in flight, yet they fly and move within the earth. All poems sound out rhymes that don't quite match, that suggest an *oblique* equation. The names in all poems come almost to nonsense, all poems make a broken acrostic that moves from *x* to *a* and back again.

All poems seek their own double, the singer within the song. In all poems you listen for the place where the poem listens to itself, you listen in solitude for old music, an early singer, along with the murmur of ancestral voices. All poems sound prophecies of war. All poems are enchanted by a mortal's cry for an absent demon. All poems lead us into a chasm full of dancing rocks, the channel for a river that breaks rocks and breaks *against* rocks, a measureless river that in falling bursts up "at once and ever," keeping time, the strangest kind of water clock. All poems have a storm in their throats.

All poems feed on strange food, sweet and bitter, nourishing or poisonous or both, they feed on their own lost dreams, dreams they offer to feed their hearers in turn. All poems promise their hearers to turn what is heard into what can be seen, including their own flashing eyes. All poems at the end call forth the cries of those who fear them, fearer-hearers who in turn weave spells around the poems, shutting their eyes to those other eyes.

All poems are broken-off fragments that are perfectly finished, fractions that are wholes or keep faith with a lost whole, circling back on themselves. All poems exist in the space between rumination and ruination—each poem is a temple containing ruins. All poems show you the creations of a mortal god, emperor and child.

All poems were almost never published, and then printed as "of psychological interest only."

In all poems I wonder, wander, stumble, and return with bafflement, with what keeps nagging at my ear until I can read the poem again or commit it to memory, or find it in my head even without having tried to remember it. All poems I read first when I was young. All poems I shared with my brother. All poems I found in that old blue cloth-covered book.

All poems end with the word “paradise.”

There is something silly in such *alls*, I know. It can seem a willful and forced game, if not mindlessly self-generating. The word *all* can evoke poverty and limitation as much as wholeness or sufficiency—one hears the poverty hovering even in the high promise of Keats’s urn: “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, that is all / You know on earth and all you need to know.” And certainly in Nietzsche’s “human, all too human.” Coleridge writes in a notebook in 1803: “There is no all in creation—It is composed of infinites,” infinites we yet only know as fragments. To say “all” can indeed sound not just poor but bludgeoning, totalitarian, or tautological, emptily apocalyptic (“all poems” is not so different from “no poems”) or paranoid (“And all should cry, Beware! Beware!"). To speak of “all poems” as I’ve done might only mean that one poem had somehow destroyed all other poems, or pushed them away in a kind of provincialism or childish need.

Still, these *alls* help me know better what “Kubla Khan” asks or promises, its play with possibility, how close I can get to it, though the game raises as many questions as it answers. One dilemma is that while they heighten the stakes of this particular poem, those *alls* yet make louder in my mind the voices of *other* poems that I cannot do without, poems that clamor for attention, that also ask to be the measure of all. It is against these poems that I would need to measure this way of taking up “Kubla Khan,” granting them the same momentary centrality.

I think of these poems almost at random, in my head they are anonymous I know them so well, how quickly each can come to the center of things. There is that poem about a guilty soul meeting divine love, Love which takes the form of a welcoming innkeeper—a lyric by George Herbert. There is that sonnet in which human love is addressed as “Lust,” an “expense of spirit in a waste of shame...savage, extreme, rude, cruel,” as if Lust were for a moment a picture of the muse. There is that poem by Thomas Wyatt where the speaker complains of certain nameless creatures, “They flee from me that

sometime did me seek," and yet says of one happy memory that "It was no dream: I lay broad waking." There is that poem which gives us the vision of a bell tower destroyed by its own shadowy bell ringers, a ruin that yet becomes the birthplace of the poet who, in compensation, "builds, within, a tower that is not stone," a tower formed rather by "visible wings of silence sown / In azure circles, widening as they dip // The matrix of the heart."

And Walter de la Mare's "The Listeners," a poem I loved when young and that still sends shivers through me: a solitary traveler knocks at the door of a house in a forest, crying "Is there anybody there?" Nobody answers, "only a host of phantom listeners / That dwelt in the lone house then / Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight / To that voice from the world of men."

There is that Yeats poem about a dead warrior, "violent and famous," who finds himself walking among the ghosts of cowards, spirits who invite him to make his life "much sweeter" by sewing for himself a shroud, and then singing over it. The poem ends: "They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds." How is *that* an image of how all poems sing, or of the place in which they sing? What in Kubla's chaotic vision is like that of the poet who gazes in terror at a tiger, interrogating its origins and the terror of its maker, making up its terror as he looks and talks? How do Coleridge's vexed images of poetic survival match with those of the poet who imagines her life and poetry as a loaded gun carried about by another, something that has "the power to kill, / Without - the power to die -"? How would you place Coleridge's vision of the poem's dangerous, delicious food against that poem in which the poet asks to be forgiven for having eaten all the plums in the icebox, "so sweet / and so cold"? How does Coleridge's emblem of the poem's "miracle of rare device"—"That sunny dome! those caves of ice!"—resonate with that poem of Susan Howe's which figures poetry as black ice, glare ice, an all-but-invisible film on which we may dangerously skid and lose control in our search for truth?

What in the disappearing dreams of "Kubla Khan" is like the "dream song" John Berryman wrote for sad Henry, weighed down by

remembering a dream of violence, who must reassure himself when he awakes that

never did Henry, as he thought he did,  
end anyone and hacks her body up  
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.  
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.  
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.  
Nobody is ever missing.

And lastly, what is it in “Kubla Khan”—perhaps it is “the milk of Paradise”—that resonates most with the memory poem of James Merrill, where a lonely child assembles a jigsaw puzzle that finally forms a romantic painting of a Bedouin camp, a painting that is also the image of a marriage. This poem ends with a reverie on missing puzzle pieces, lost notes, lost words and books, lost names, buried truths, things lost in translation, and also things revived, built in air:

But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation  
And every bit of us is lost in it  
(Or found—I wander through the ruin of S  
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)  
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,  
Color of context, imperceptibly  
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste  
To shade and fiber, milk and memory.



No one poem is enough for a day, no one day is enough for a poem. Yet as I sit here early on a winter's morning (there is snow on the ground, today the morning sky is white gray, yesterday it showed mauve at the horizon—more than a year has passed since the fall when I started to write these pages), the sense of a shaped possibility in these poems seems for the moment a thing miraculously given, a sufficient gift, even a necessary gift. The gift of the poem asks that I find a way to use it, to take it up. It asks me to make something of

that poem, to stake something on it, placing the words of the poem up against some other piece of experience, another word or dream, another question, another fear, another face, another object, another absence, another trick of light. Poems are not perfectly useless, yet just how to use them is something I am never sure of; it always changes, you keep on having to reimagine just what is necessary about them, what it is they affirm directly and what they show through shadows. (When did I learn that shadows on snow are blue?)



