

EUGENE O'BRIEN

ALGEBRA OF NIGHT

SEVEN SONGS AND TWO INTERLUDES
FOR VOICE AND PIANO QUARTET

POEMS AND PROGRAM NOTES

ALGEBRA OF NIGHT

I

MOON

Mark Strand

Open the book of evening to the page
where the moon, always the moon, appears

between two clouds, moving so slowly that hours
will seem to have passed before you reach the next page

where the moon, now brighter, lowers a path
to lead you away from what you have known

into those places where what you had wished for happens,
its lone syllable like a sentence poised

at the edge of sense, waiting for you to say its name
once more as you lift your eyes from the page

and close the book, still feeling what it was like
to dwell in that light, that sudden paradise of sound.

2

OLD POSTCARD OF 42ND STREET AT NIGHT

Charles Simic

I'm looking for the mechanical chess player with a red turban. I hear
Pythagoras is there queuing up, and Monsieur Pascal, who hears the silence
inside God's ear.

Eternity and time are the coins it requires, everybody's portion of it,
for a quick glimpse of that everything which is nothing.

Night of the homeless, the sleepless, night of those winding the
watches of their souls, the stopped watches, before the machine with mirrors.

Here's a raised hand covered with dime-store jewels, a hand like "a
five-headed Cerberus," and two eyes opened wide in astonishment.

3

NEW YORK DARK IN AUGUST, SEAWARD

Edwin Denby

New York dark in August, seaward
Creeping breeze, building to building
Old poems by Frank O'Hara
At 3 a.m. I sit reading
Like a blue-black surf rider, shark
Nipping at my Charvet tie, toe-tied
Heart in my mouth—or my New York
At dawn smiling I turn out the light
Inside out like a room in gritty
Gale, features moving fierce or void
Intimate, the lunch hour city
One's own heart eating undestroyed
Complicities of New York speech
Embrace me as I fall asleep

4

INTERLUDE

*Burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night*

5

AVENUE A

Frank O'Hara

We hardly ever see the moon any more
so no wonder
it's so beautiful when we look up suddenly
and there it is gliding broken-faced over the bridges
brilliantly coursing, soft, and a cool wind fans
your hair over your forehead and your memories
of Red Grooms' locomotive landscape
I want some bourbon/you want some oranges/I love the leather
jacket Norman gave me
and the corduroy coat David
gave you, it is more mysterious than spring, the El Greco
heavens breaking open and then reassembling like lions
in a vast tragic veldt
that is far from our small selves and our temporally united
passions in the cathedral of Januaries

(con't.)

everything is too comprehensible
these are my delicate and caressing poems
I suppose there will be more of those others to come, as in the past
so many!
but for now the moon is revealing itself like a pearl
to my equally naked heart

6

LULLABY

W. H. Auden

Lay your sleeping head, my love, Human on my faithless arm; Time and fevers burn away Individual beauty from Thoughtful children, and the grave Proves the child ephemeral: But in my arms till break of day Let the living creature lie, Mortal, guilty, but to me The entirely beautiful.	Certainty, fidelity On the stroke of midnight pass Like vibrations of a bell And fashionable madmen raise Their pedantic boring cry: Every farthing of the cost, All the dreaded cards foretell, Shall be paid, but from this night Not a whisper, not a thought, Not a kiss nor look be lost.
Soul and body have no bounds: To lovers as they lie upon Her tolerant enchanted slope In their ordinary swoon, Grave the vision Venus sends Of supernatural sympathy, Universal love and hope; While an abstract insight wakes Among the glaciers and the rocks The hermit's carnal ecstasy.	Beauty, midnight, vision dies: Let the winds of dawn that blow Softly round your dreaming head Such a day of welcome show Eye and knocking heart may bless, Find the mortal world enough; Noons of dryness find you fed By the involuntary powers, Nights of insult let you pass Watched by every human love.

7

THE MAD SCENE

James Merrill

Again last night I dreamed the dream called Laundry.
 In it, the sheets and towels of a life we were going to share,
 The milk-stiff bibs, the shroud, each rag to be ever
 Trampled or soiled, bled on or groped for blindly,
 Came swooning out of an enormous willow hamper
 Onto moon-marbly boards. We had just met. I watched
 From outer darkness. I had dressed myself in clothes
 Of a new fiber that never stains or wrinkles, never
 Wears thin. The opera house sparkled with tiers
 And tiers of eyes, like mine enlarged by belladonna,
 Trained inward. There I saw the cloud-clot, gust by gust,
 Form, and the lightning bite, and the roan mane unloosen.
 Fingers were running in panic over the flute's nine gates.
 Why did I flinch? I loved you. And in the downpour laughed
 To have us wrung white, gnarled together, one
 Topmost mordent of wisteria,
 As the lean tree burst into grief.

8

INTERLUDE

Of sorrow from the moonstruck darkness

9

A TRUE ACCOUNT OF TALKING
TO THE SUN AT FIRE ISLAND*Frank O'Hara*

The Sun woke me this morning loud
 and clear, saying "Hey! I've been
 trying to wake you up for fifteen
 minutes. Don't be so rude, you are
 only the second poet I've ever chosen
 to speak to personally

so why

aren't you more attentive? If I could
 burn you through the window I would
 to wake you up. I can't hang around
 here all day."

"Sorry, Sun, I stayed
 up late last night talking to Hal."

(con't.)

“When I woke up Mayakovsky he was a lot more prompt” the Sun said petulantly. “Most people are up already waiting to see if I’m going to put in an appearance.”

I tried to apologize “I missed you yesterday.” “That’s better” he said. “I didn’t know you’d come out.” “You may be wondering why I’ve come so close?” “Yes” I said beginning to feel hot wondering if maybe he wasn’t burning me anyway.

“Frankly I wanted to tell you I like your poetry. I see a lot on my rounds and you’re okay. You may not be the greatest thing on earth, but you’re different. Now, I’ve heard some say you’re crazy, they being excessively calm themselves to my mind, and other crazy poets think that you’re a boring reactionary. Not me.

Just keep on like I do and pay no attention. You’ll find that people always will complain about the atmosphere, either too hot or too cold too bright or too dark, days too short or too long.

If you don’t appear at all one day they think you’re lazy or dead. Just keep right on, I like it.

And don’t worry about your lineage poetic or natural. The Sun shines on the jungle, you know, on the tundra the sea, the ghetto. Wherever you were I knew it and saw you moving. I was waiting for you to get to work.

And now that you are making your own days, so to speak, even if no one reads you but me you won’t be depressed. Not everyone can look up, even at me. It hurts their eyes.”

“Oh Sun, I’m so grateful to you!” (con’t.)

“Thanks and remember I’m watching. It’s
easier for me to speak to you out
here. I don’t have to slide down
between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but
you ought to look up more often.

And

always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens
and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt.

Maybe we’ll

speak again in Africa, of which I too
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem
in that brain of yours as my farewell.”

“Sun, don’t go!” I was awake
at last. “No, go I must, they’re calling
me.”

“Who are they?”

Rising he said, “Some
day you’ll know. They’re calling to you
too.” Darkly he rose, and then I slept.

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ALGEBRA OF NIGHT, a cycle of seven songs with two instrumental interludes interspersed, was commissioned by the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music to celebrate its centenary, and was given its premiere in February 2015 by Deanne Meek and the 21st Century Consort at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. The texts are by six poets who lived and wrote in Manhattan at significant periods in their careers or for their entire working lives: W. H. Auden, Edwin Denby, James Merrill, Charles Simic, Mark Strand and—perhaps the quintessential New York poet—Frank O’Hara, who is represented by two poems. Although some of the songs might be able to stand separately on their own, the cycle is meant to be performed as an integral whole.

Several movements are dedicated to friends and members of my family, while others memorialize friends who died before their time during the height of the AIDS plague in this country. The cycle as a whole pays homage to Frank O’Hara; the final stanza of his “Little Elegy for Antonio Machado,” in this context addressed to O’Hara himself, is printed in the score as an epigraph:

*we shall continue to correct all classical revisions
of ourselves as trials of ceremonial worth
and purple excess
improving your soul’s expansion
in the night and developing our own in salt-like praise*

The title is a phrase from a poem by Willis Barnstone: *...and drop my way / to oblivion and algebra of night*. Here I intend (as perhaps Barnstone also intended) the word algebra to suggest a poetry beyond logic and mathematics, and to imply what its Arabic root *al-jabr* connotes, the reassembling and restoration of broken parts. Each song and interlude contributes something of night to this algebra: fragments of sleep, dreams and darkness, of human love and loss, of ultimate things.

1 The setting of Mark Strand’s “Moon” (2006) has two ancestors: the piano accompaniment is indebted to Benjamin Britten’s *Canticle II*; and although my setting makes no overt reference to it, the calm stasis of one of Gabriel Fauré’s last songs, a setting of another poem about the moon (*Diane, Séléné, lune de beau métal*), was at the back of my mind as I composed. The song is dedicated to the memory of my parents.

2 Charles Simic’s prose-poem “Old Postcard of 42nd Street at Night” is taken from his *Dime-Store Alchemy* (1992), a collection of poetry and prose inspired by the surrealist art of Joseph Cornell. My setting commemorates Joe Brainard (1942-1994), one of Frank O’Hara’s friends and artistic collaborators, many of whose found-object collages and constructions are not unlike Cornell’s. For me Simic’s poem evokes a dark clockwork universe, perhaps abandoned—*night of the homeless*—with its references to a chess-playing automaton, run-down watches, a mirrored machine, time, eternity, and *the silence inside God’s ear...*

3 “New York Dark in August, seaward” is part of a group of sonnets that Frank O’Hara’s friend Edwin Denby—poet, librettist and prominent dance critic—wrote in the 1960s. From 1935 until his death at the age of 80 in 1983, Denby lived in a fifth floor walk-up on W. 21st Street in Manhattan, where his next-door neighbors and close friends were the painter

Willem de Kooning and the photographer/filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt. In his introduction to Denby's *Complete Poems*, Ron Padgett characterizes him as a "confirmed night person" who "frequently went for walks alone around his (not particularly safe) New York City neighborhood, sometimes quite late at night, returning home alone to his cats." The musical setting is dedicated to my late friend John Reeves White (1924-1984), scholar, conductor, director of the New York Pro Musica Antiqua in the late 1960s, and a Chelsea resident like Denby.

4 Interlude: *Burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night* The title comes from the third strophe of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1955); the interlude memorializes poet, novelist and essayist Steve Abbott (1943-1992), a classmate from my undergraduate years at the University of Nebraska, and a friend of Ginsberg. Steve is aptly described in the Beat poet's 1966 anti-war lament "Wichita Vortex Sutra" as *a long haired saint with eyeglasses*, driving with Ginsberg from Kansas to Nebraska through a black February night.

5 Names and places dominate the surface of Frank O'Hara's "Avenue A" as they do in so many of his poems. The "you" of the poem is Vincent Warren, who danced with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet and other companies during the years he and O'Hara were together in the late 50s and early 60s, and who inspired some of O'Hara's most beautiful lyric poetry. The musical setting of "Avenue A" is dedicated to him.

The poem's locale is the Lower East Side of Manhattan on or about January 16, 1960, the day it was written. Less than a block from O'Hara's E. 9th Street apartment, Avenue A leads south toward the East River bridges; *Red Grooms' locomotive landscape* refers to Grooms' theatrical construction *The Magic Train Ride* (one of the first "happenings"), performed at the Reuben Gallery on Fourth Avenue the week before January 16 and which O'Hara and Warren attended; *Norman* is the painter Norman Bluhm, one of O'Hara's close friends; and so on. While knowledge of these details is unnecessary for an appreciation of the poem, O'Hara's mention of New York locations, actual events, and the real names of friends lends "Avenue A" the immediacy of his high-octane personality.

6 W. H. Auden's well-known "Lullaby" is more conventional in form than the other poems in the cycle; the trochaic meter is very obvious, almost Elizabethan, but the asymmetrical pattern of rhymes and slant rhymes is subtle and less conventional. Written in 1937 before he emigrated to the United States, revised (and given its title) in New York in 1944, Auden's poem naturally embodies a trans-Atlantic diction somewhat foreign to the cycle's American poetry. The setting is dedicated to my sister Susan.

7 The nightmarish dreamscape of James Merrill's "The Mad Scene" (1962) calls up unsettling images of an opera house, an unnamed but quite identifiable *bel canto* opera, and culminates in the final four lines with the apparent disintegration of a love affair. (The piano interrupts the texture at one point with a very brief but blatant quotation from the opera's best-known aria, in case the clues embedded in the poem fail to reveal its identity.) The musical setting is a memorial to my friend the pianist Frank Wasko (1944-1992), a dedication reflected in the étude-like piano accompaniment. In the ideal, imaginary performance that ran through my head while I composed the song, Frank was the pianist.

8 Interlude: *Of sorrow from the moonstruck darkness* This interlude concludes the center section of the cycle, three poems (O'Hara, Auden and Merrill) that collectively trace, at

least to my mind, the trajectory of a passionate relationship. The title is a phrase from W. H. Auden's 1947 poem "The Duet." The music commemorates my friend John Zeigler (1953-1986), clarinetist in the Omaha and San Francisco Symphony orchestras.

Abandoning the 20th-/21st-century poetry of the songs, the interlude incorporates two quotations from 17th-century musical/literary works that reinforce the sentiment of Auden's words. The brief musical borrowing appears close to the interlude's end: John Dowland's setting of the words *Where nights blacke bird hir sad infamy sings*, quoted (*sans* text) from his famous lute song "Flow My Teares." The literary borrowing, however, is invisible and inaudible to the listener: five lines from John Donne's "Elegie XII," voicelessly intoned by the viola over the course of the interlude. The words are printed beneath the viola staff as though they are being sung:

...come Night,
*Environ me with darknesse, whilst I write:
Shadow that Hell unto me, which alone
I am to suffer when my Love is gone.
Alas the darkest Magick cannot do it...*

9 Frank O'Hara wrote "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" in July 1958 while staying at the summer beach house of his Harvard classmate and friend Hal Fondren, whom he mentions in the poem. He never published it. In July 1966, eight years (almost to the day) after he wrote "A True Account," O'Hara died in an accident on Fire Island at the age of 40, not very far from the house where he wrote the poem. Friend and fellow poet Kenneth Koch discovered it, along with over 700 other unpublished items of poetry and prose, while going through O'Hara's papers later that summer.

As its title and reference to Mayakovsky—one of O'Hara's great heroes—suggest, "A True Account" can be read as a trope on the Russian poet's "An Extraordinary Adventure Which Happened to Me, Vladimir Mayakovsky, One Summer in the Country," written in 1920. In Mayakovsky's poem, however, it's the irascible poet who badgers the sun into a conversation, not the reverse, as in O'Hara. And unlike the Russian poem's exuberant conclusion, the ending of "A True Account" conjures darkness, sleep, and possibly a mysterious summons to something beyond our mortality. The musical setting is dedicated to my partner Lance Towle, whose enthusiasm for Frank O'Hara's poetry many years ago kindled my own.

—Eugene O'Brien

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