THE AQUARIAN FOUNDATION

JEFFREY GRAY

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It was the summer after the summer
of love, the summer
of Sirhan Sirhan

and James Earl Ray, the skies
scented with tear gas
and ectoplasm,

and in the dim vortex
of the clapboard house
next to the A&P,

we channeled apports
from the Other Side:
a lump of sugar, some car
keys, perfume, a pair
of earrings once.
The Aquarians

were mostly elderly, mostly
female, with now
and then a vigorous

white man bussed in
from out of state,
turbaned like Korla Pandit,

pancaked down to his collar,
crafty, flamboyant,
accessorized, like

the TV mentalists-- but maybe
that’s what the real
thing looks like,
I remember thinking. 
There were two women, 
old to us, one shallow

and vain, the other wise 
and quiet, who was guru 
to my cousin, whom

she once told I was the most 
depressed person she’d ever met. I had no hope, she said.

No one else did either 
that I could think of. Waiting 
tables, reading books,

driving taxis—how could we know 
these spirits of princes 
and emperors, never just

clerks or bus boys?
“It is I, the Egyptian King,”
droned vain-and-shallow,

hands on dainty sternum, eyes 
upturned, crepitant
moans issuing from out

the ancient domains. 
We communed with who knew 
what cosmogonic altars,

filtering what signals from 
what clamor, with what portals we thought might open

in the pitch black, among 
the trumpets and the cabinets. 
One night I heard:
Night is a dream and day is a song, something like that. The day is yours when night is spent,
it could have been. It was my mother (d. 1948) singing out of the thick Aquarian
summer, the moon like a streak of grief on the darkened panes.

And I recognized the voice, not distant but familiar: it was the Pharaoh of Egypt.

And I knew: that’s how it comes to us, through these vain, deluded
channels, just as the crowds that throng the temples are those most flawed,
most lacking, most self-serving, most hungry, most moved.

As for the dead, could even they remember who they were, their dust

too faint to sense, their gelatinous photos shrinking in twilight?

Knock once for yes, and two for no: who did they take us for?
I have to coax it back,  
decades later, from  
the vapor and the dusk:

the whispers and the din  
from the Other Side,  
the precious stones and stirrings  
athwart the hincty  
curtains, the little house’s  
coordinates like cross-hairs

for a signal. I saw movies  
that year—Belle  
de Jour, The Innocents,  
The Fox—and they too  
seemed to portend:  
everything did. No one  
knew what was coming.  
But we always assumed  
a signal, if only it was  
the night sky bearing down  
on us that we share  
with the farthest worlds.
Jersey Spring: A Letter

Poison oak bursts
in a bubbly glaze
from my forearms.
A blue hose snakes
hot in the grass.
A window opens
for the first time in eight
months. One tree
out of five is dead.
The living ones
bleed on the air.
In the yard only
bugbane, snakeroot,
that feed on shadow.

I work or dawdle,
I browse old prints.
Outside, acres
of containers stack
up against low
hills one side
of the tracks, smoke-
stacked old factories
the other. Cars
simmer in music, suburbs
drift. Only what
remains outside of me
is true: what most resists
is the old knot of tissue
in-folding, struggling
to start up from
its wild place.
SEATTLE INDUCTION CENTER, 1967

I stayed up two nights
on ephedrine, then took LSD
before catching the bus
to the induction center,
on the waterfront, Alaskan
Way S., under the viaduct,
gone now, they say, not
far from the ferry docks,

where I stood naked in a room
with a hundred other men
abject and shivering
in the gaze of the State,
murky brains and beards
beginning to understand
the role they’d been born
to just moments before.

I faced an ancient chart
whose emblems trembled
in the black air of the apparatus
strapped to my head:

F P to z l p e d
the space between and behind
them endless. I was
skittish of needles

but calmly watched a man draw
my blood. “You used to this,
ain’t you?” he joked.
A young white-smocked
doctor looked at me, then
spoke to me softly, turned
to the phone: “patient actively
hallucinating, I think we…..”

but it had all turned to soup,
accents awash in basins of order,
dissolving orbits. A young troop
led me to the door and swiveled

me sun-ward toward the row
of promising streets and the world
at large, however surveilled,
larger than it would ever be again.

A ball of light spun twenty feet
over my head, gaseous, buzzing,
I looked down from it
to see my body as it glided from

the waterfront, half blossom,
half planet to our little place,
miles away, my body walking
below it, looking up

at me. And then you were
walking beside my body,
looking into its eyes,
my eyes, and neither yours

nor mine saw your death
that lay at that moment
wrapped in a far grey pupa
that would open only

eons ahead on this path,
and mine too, invisible,
had to have lain there coating
with its film everything I saw.

Home, we sat in the dim
light, smoked, drank tea,
watched the afternoon
sink unmonitored and glad

in the gloom of the State,
dissolved in forgiving leaves,
bathed in honest error,
the brain’s muddy water

sloshing in its old wrappings
floating in ditches still, far
off, given our short lives,
unfinished in our wisps,

our damp cocoons, what
shone over us, (what makes
me see it now in clouds
of steam from a kitchen…)

we lay book-dark, moon-hidden,
how can anyone say with what
has passed from then
till now, that time is sweet--

Sophocles said it’s not worth it,
whatever “it” means.
Memory leaches from the cells, like
toxins from the soil, or fluid

from the skull and tissue,
light seeps from the white
preposterous clouds that float
unmoving in front of us.
LAKE OZETTE TO THE SEA

You could say bolus,
aerial view of the dunes,
cliffs where they meet sand,
you could say
dinoflagellate,
bioluminescence,
but you say nothing.
This is not like
your old silence.

You could say be exacting,
be resolute, be patient
be uncompromising,
but you don’t say it now.
Now you can’t remember
(who would remember?)
the roar of that ocean
at the edge of that silence.
HOMILETIC ODE
TO THE EVERLY BROTHERS

It’s 1957 on the Danny Thomas show, you can see
he’s patronizing them, they’re too innocent to know,
with their courtly voices and Platonic hair
belonging to a visionary ‘50s still in the air

a few years later with the English invasion
and their star’s decline. But the fifties weren’t done
till almost ’66, and, as the new thing started up,
the brothers were booking “Bye Bye Love”

nostalgia tours, forging on but out of phase, the
spell of the raw by then become TV paisley
(neither mode was their poetics), and, backed by psychedelic
scrims on Sullivan, they seemed, still young, relics

in their suits and ties and thick hair that predated
the sixties hair and had a different meaning—they must have hated
the whole scene, though they never winced
at the flared pants and Peter Max prints:

none of it was alien but rather a bizarre,
sad torsion of the forces that had come so far
to burst too soon, misunderstood, and even there the purity
of their voices, conceived in a clarity

hard to imagine—from the timbre, effortless,
of Ike Everly’s guitar—soared past the time’s ugliness,
uglier almost than our own, what only color
TV can capture, like an MRI of the squalor

at its heart. Yet out of the wilderness they came,
like Abe Lincoln. Before the split—before they became
strangers for a decade, you still hear it, in spite of the violins,
in “Let it Be Me.” Listen all you boards and syndicates
(Burroughs wrote in ’64)--even at 13 I knew they were the future, despite the fact it’s gone, a sound that grew from Sputnik as much as from rambling men, echoing the future’s shape. Not emotion but oxygen, sowing

in the wind a timbre no longer country but vibrating in the hammered heat of cities, translating pain into pulse. Burroughs said in Denver: “You notice something sucking all the flavor out of food, out of sex?” Consider the tenderness of the instinct to restore it, the smooth scandal of pleasure, the “natural talent”…Chet Atkins loved their soft manners, their harmonies, always bought them coffee and pie in Nashville in the early days. Then Lennon Crosby Stills Simon the Byrds everybody went in search of the sound, seeing it passing and how much would go with it, violins or not; somehow at 13 I saw the memory of that tone is what we’d have, the facts sinking and every sign lassoing what it could in its long arc toward now. The radio told me and the suburban patio parties in summer, and a couple of years later driving north at night, those layers of light seeping out of the woods in search of a name to set against an almost complete unconsciousness, lacking yet the mind-drugs that lay a few years off to hear it unmistakably: the sound of time as it traces its passing, rooted less in Brownie, Kentucky, than in the way we watch things go, the red delay, so that now as they both rush away from us into unknowing, thick with time, the dirt road to the past lies there as it did always, branching intermittently, runnels spilling in the April of language where music made us still, and
where in the skirts of the mountains the sea echoes and a microscopic fold of tissue opens and closes on the surface of the right hemisphere allowing me to propitiate at last tonight this dream of them.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

JEFFREY GRAY’s poetry has appeared in The Atlantic, the Yale Review, PN Review, Lana Turner (forthcoming), TriQuarterly (forthcoming), Western Humanities Review, and others. He is the author of Mastery’s End: Travel and Postwar American Poetry (University of Georgia Press 2005) and of many articles on American and Latin American poetry, in journals such as Callaloo, Contemporary Literature, Chronicle of Higher Education, Profession, and American Poetry Review. Gray is also the English translator of Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s novels The African Shore (Yale University Press 2014) and Chaos, a Fable (Amazon Crossing 2018), and editor or co-editor of several anthologies, including The News from Poems: Essays on the New American Poetry of Engagement (University of Michigan Press, 2016) and The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology (McFarland, 2013). Jeffrey Gray is a professor at Seton Hall University and lives in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and Alghero, Sardinia.
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