

BEAUTIFUL LIES

OTHER BOOKS BY EDWARD BYRNE

Aporia (1989)

Co-editor with Charles Watts of *The Recovery of the Public World :*

Essays on Poetics in Honour of Robin Blaser (1999)

BEAUTIFUL LIES

Edward Byrne

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for Ann Jones and Frank Jones

CHAPTER ONE

1 The silence of dreams confronts us as we enter this place. *Un ange qui passe*, breathless, at the edge of speech. A few words are spoken, indecipherable, unaccompanied. The pantomime hum of conversation begins again. A quick survey of the room reveals an absence of familiar faces, itself akin to silence. On the wall, a map of the old city. A large photograph of the Ponte Vecchio, from a height to the east. A path is cut carefully through the voices, toward the terrace. After lessons I always feel disappointed. He says you're never what you imagine yourself to be. The man's an optimist. These days that don't mean much. He'll spend his life in the mill. No memories, no responsibilities. Did you see the way she looked at him when he mentioned the castrati? Melancholy music from a single source joins the heat and spices in the air, and spills out into the unmindful evening. *Viola da gamba*. Outside, the light is dim but ample. Wisteria vines climb these old walls, red brick from mountain's edge, colour of dried blood, seen in patches through worn stucco. No buds, no flowers. *Viola d'amore*. A breeze off the mountain brow. Sweet alyssum.

2 The violence of his love attracts me.

No. You say that only to offend. Father's violence is real. The violence you speak of is just a threat embodied in behaviour, something you seem to require.

She turned away to contemplate her sister's rude remarks, to search out an adequate response within the rules of the game. A young man entered the far end of the room. He glanced about as if searching for a companion. The room fell silent. His gaze settled on her for a moment and then deepened. After lessons I always feel disappointed, she said, appearing to change the topic. He says you're never what you imagine yourself to be, but you can never be what you've not imagined.

3 He watched the two women through the open doorway. One of them thrust herself forward repeatedly as she spoke and never seemed to draw back. Her lips formed words into missiles he could almost see, though only mild explosions were audible above the liquid hum of their voices. Her hands gestured outwards abruptly, with no sweep and never an embrace. The other one looked down, away, beyond, but with no air of discomfort. When she spoke she slouched or leaned back with a look of intense inwardness that was concentrated about the eyes and brow. Often her eyes closed for many seconds at a time. When she finished speaking her eyes opened wide with a look of surprise and anticipation. He imagined they were sisters.

4 The imagination is parasitic. It thrives on inattention. There's something unmanly about a form of cognition that proceeds with such indirection. Imagine a thinker whose thoughts always take the path of least resistance, whose goal is not set, whose method is not determined by previous calculation, who is led by such sorceries as random consonance and image, irony and division, and within whose reveries—for that's all they can amount to—the uncontrollable engine of desire is the sole constant. Even the simple novelist knows who his characters are, what they are meant to represent, and what he wants them to accomplish. Thinking is difficult. Most women never learn to think. We dream instead, always beside ourselves, behind or ahead of ourselves. Imagination is only useful when it takes the form of hypothesis, and hypotheses are most often abandoned. One does not cling to them. Music betrays itself when it parts company with mathematics. You labour towards a predetermined end—this foreigner constructs an instrument. The specifications came over with him on the boat.

You're hateful. Hateful. The voice is not the mouth, not the tongue, nor the throat, nor even the breath. The voice is something heard in the silence that precedes articulation. The voice calls to me across a distance attenuated only by the clearest, the sharpest concentration. I imagine myself within this voice, this vault of enunciation. We pursue these notes together, where they await us in his memory, discrete, joined in our expectation. The notes arise within me, from a depth, through a dampness. I am there, then, momentarily, within. Without, he watches my lips, my throat, my breast, like a lover watching the signs of my submission, of my will.

5 Earlier he'd descended the long wooden stairway that begins by the asylum and ends near the reservoir. He'd walked across the damp lawn, over the buried lake. The cold steel sky was, as ever, cloudless, clear, with a nimbus of yellow along the edge of the field, the hard edge of the trees, black now, or darkest green against the industrial glow. A swiftness, as of birds, of swallows, encompassed him where he stood, still for a moment, at centre, then turning, remembering such flight, the oblivion of friendship. Someone came up from the street and then, seeing him there, dropped back. He called out a name. There was no echo. He reached across the table and turned over a glass. He laughed silently, wondering whether he'd spoken aloud. There was no appointment. Or rather, there had been an "assination," but several years earlier. He felt enormously foolish, but happier than he'd felt for days, perhaps for years. He ordered a glass of whisky and told the waiter he was waiting for a friend.

6 Being alone is a condition of residence, in this place, in this time. It's always as if one had never left. The street is empty at first. One's passage is unremarked but never completed. Those without whom this place has no existence have all departed, but their departure is still perceptible, a shadow beneath the streetlight at the corner, the anticipation of an impossible greeting, the suspicion that they walk adjacent streets or pass here at different hours, in different years. Suddenly, as if in response to these speculations, the night is animate with the indifference of strangers, the flicker of hearths and televisions, the rumour of music and voices, real and imagined. Perception is devastated by memory. The street reaches with a thrust into the old neighbourhood with its lunacy and tender reprieves. There on the corner something more fragrant than a kiss was exchanged in the rain. Here by the churchyard a quarrel changed the course of parish history. In this house a mother polishes silverware though her daughter's death has moved the ritual to another calendar. In that house one reads dead philosophers who wrote in German and listens to fugues with attention to their structure. Here two brothers kept secrets from the world and shared their pride. There two sisters fell silent for a week at the end of which one was murdered.

7 Often Florence would sneak into Ethel's bed. She'd fold back the covers, without exposing her sister to the cold and lay herself softly down, then stay a long time on her stomach, unmoving and listening for signs of disturbance in the other's breathing, measuring sleep's depth with the plumb of her attention. She would suffer the chill air between her thighs, on the nape of her neck, then eventually draw the covers back when she felt it safe to do so. In a moment she would breathe a long breath slowly through her nostrils at the entrance to the cave of bedding. From the warmth around Ethel's body she would draw molecules of intimacy. The soap they shared lent a different fragrance to Ethel's skin. The flannel of her nightclothes held a sweet odour of perspiration and flatulence. Her hair had an oily vegetal smell when not washed for several days, which was seldom. Freshly washed it was like dry flowers in a warm breeze. Stillness was a practised art in this household. Florence would breathe quietly beneath her sister's breath until she felt herself reabsorbed in the night she'd wakened from. She'd lay her hand upon her sister's waist or slip it gently under her backside. She'd sleep then, for an hour or so. And in this sleep they shared she'd never dream. This absence of dreams was a family trait that she'd somehow failed to inherit. But the others never knew that she dreamed.

8

On some nights Florence would wander into Ethel's room. She began in sleep, in a dream at times, but the cold bare floor would wake her. At the end of the hallway, she'd pause by the door to listen. A chink of open window allowed a breeze to cross the room. The cold seemed to climb her legs. When she'd measured the depth of her sister's sleep, she'd climb in beside her where once she was welcome. Ethel never moved. She fell asleep easily, never dreamt, and woke up always at the same hour with no residue of sleep. Florence despised her. Her face was flabby when she slept, and it so ill-suited her character, this stupid look and vulgar sucking sound that came with every third or fourth breath. She's a cow. She has slaver on her cheek. She looks like Father. Our laughter has been washed from these durable sheets. Mine has turned cruel and pulls at me from the pit of my stomach. Plexus of laughter and malice. In my earliest dreams she was always there where I wanted to go, waiting impatiently. She carried her hands in a sack, her eyelids were sown shut. Sister of paradox, sister of perpetual night, your death will be a long and pleasant dream.

9 At five o'clock the birds always woke her with their many
voiced imprecations.

10 Leaving the great lawn of the asylum, with its single path that no one follows, its empty chairs amidst elms and aspens, I heard the birds at work in the forest of tangled bushes and brambles below, their boastful songs a prelude to vespers. From the terrace where the stairway begins, a sea of haze spread out across the night, and only spires and smokestacks could be seen. I heard small children laughing somewhere near, as dark and distant voices called them home. Thoughts, too many, too swift to be inscribed, assailed my hapless mind like brilliant stones, as all the laughter and the voices blent, confounding the marvellous and the known. Halfway down the stairs, on the weathered bench where climbers rest, a woman's form took shape in the mist, hands clasped, arms on knees, back bent. Silently she raised her dampened face. Her eyes looked far aside and well beyond, though I stood within the purchase of her gaze. Afraid to speak, but nonetheless quite calm, I sat upon the steps and studied her, a vestige of some epoch long forgot, or presage of an era long deferred. Her lips, once my attention settled there, began to move. The words could not be heard above the rush of rivulets on either side, each employed in vernal counterpoint. The shaping mouth, the quantity of breath, the gestures that bodied forth each thought, made the drowned voice almost articulate. My ravished attention drew me about as if at the edge of a circular stage. The adjustment brought me straight before her, but sequestered now by one of the streams (the other reduced to figuration) I had no deeper sense of her address, although the tenor of her words was clear. Memory, she said, does not deceive the past—what has no heart can never be deceived. Nor can these rooms not entered be recalled. This great plateau, with its endless foliage, is but one of many, randomly placed upon the surface of time with its folds and knots and tears, its curves and rapid slopes. Here

reason's light and the dark of folly are both abandoned. Locutionary passion without bounds retraces these paths between empty and plenary loci. Forgotten, all above us, and beneath the hill remembered spirits wander now in garments of description, rich as cloth cut from bolts of azure speculation, and transparent as whisperings of silk. Above, a delirium that never ceases even in sleep, a great stillness like this fog, a mystery without a crime. Below, this seamless skin of words that limns our thoughts before they stumble on the real. This shuttle pulls the thread of perfect lies, tracing and retracing a flat circuit, always moving wither, but rising, rising, as it figures a pattern of needs, a landscape hatched with intricated lives. Your puzzlement is my pleasure gone to seed. Your passion, your panic, this nostalgia, demotic forms of what I once conceived. You were the imagined form of my delight. You leapt the stream and we forgot ourselves in talk, in the back and forth that joined us. We knew all the ways and every juncture. Every impasse yielded to our logic, and each departure imposed a return. Your busy tongue worried my body, every word a lubric touch, every touch a coarse rejoinder, a provocation, an unresisted entrance, a challenge. My moistened lips took all your babblings, drew your words through the sieve of enchantment, and responded, reconstructing Babel up into the clouds of satisfaction. And now you come only to be rebuked, always late and often by accident. You sit there listening, so attentively, to all my lies and imprecations. This paradise, my friend, accumulates, receives our curiosity, our lust, purges hope of all its desperation, and from time to time, clears a path for us. Such openings are honeyed with memory and sweet expectation, as if the past were innocent of the future's malice. This path abuts another paradise—yes, even as it leads us from our home.

She stopped abruptly and I turned to find my two friends bent forward as if already reading and deeply amused.

11 The tightly spaced blue lines of a Hilroy notebook have accepted this finite procession of endlessly recombined small black letters for over two decades now. The right side of the text meanders down the edge of the page, but rarely do the words need to be broken or cramped, their composition is so practised. The left side is justified, even more firmly controlled, and yet always recedes slightly from the coral pink margin as it descends, unless of course this tendency becomes conscious, in which case it is masked. He sucks the cap of his pen and stares at the page which awaits his caress. He can think of nothing else that receives this particular caress, this rhythmic, repeated stroking with the soft, padded ulnar side of the right hand. This outer skin of writing constitutes an impermeable surface, like silence in a crowded room. Momentary, but absolute, and full of terror. Writing is impossible. And the page says, "Tell me your lies." He imagines that he dreamt of two women, of two sisters talking. He can hardly hear them from where he sits, but he knows that this diabolical conversation has proceeded, unrecorded, since they first learned to speak, and he senses what it would take to close the book on such a dialogue.

12 Those little shouts and groans, they *are* like a song, studied, yes, a music you make to fit his rhythm, a song he seems to push out of you, not draw as you pretend. It's like a beating, like the wand, the loud sobbing that brings it to a halt. You think I don't know how these lies work. And she turned away abruptly as if to spit.

Lies are judged by their effect, her sister said, borrowing an aphorism from Mrs. Elliott, a personality she'd invented to facilitate certain trips away from home. Every song's a lie. He teaches me to sing, convincingly, in languages I cannot speak, words always veiled seductions. But it's the voice, not its supplement, I must rely on if you're to be dissuaded from your views. It's physiognomy is complex, he says, not meant perhaps for speech, which is not a function, after all, but a use. It's easier to imagine song a function, and therefore both anterior to speech and, paradoxically, more useful for our purposes. Song is not thought, as you might argue, nor is it the divination of the voice, but rather it is the voice itself, its source, a going back before thought, from that faint mimicry, that near-speaking that follows thought to the edge of fantasy, back to the jubilant expression that occupies the body wholly, from the dampness between the legs to the dryness behind the eyes.

They laughed then, as they always did, an embrace across the addled air. Their laughter almost choked them. Florence held her hand across her mouth and forced the laughter down. Ethel puffed her cheeks and released it in little trumpet blasts. You know, she said at last, spasmodically, when the words escape you, you make them up. She lifted a tear from her cheek with her fingertip, gazed at it distractedly, and then licked it away.

Florence sipped her wine cautiously. Well, she said, I've tried to teach you to lie. Your truth is so complex it may as well be a lie. Your endless questions empty my experience of all its plenitude. Soon I'm adding to it, if only to ensure its survival. It gets to the point where I'm elaborating events even as they occur! Before long I'll be adding whole verses to *lieder*, not just replacing a few forgotten words! She made a face that Ethel had copied from their mother and which she used on those rare occasions when she wanted to look defenceless and alluring. Like everything else it looked better on Florence.

13 My doubt, gather of old harms, often ends in tenuous branches, still part of the empirical forest, but sad proof of a self trumping itself with the ideal fault of roses.

These women, perpetually glossed, embody the lust of fabulous meanings. Fond illusion escapes from cold blue eyes, dry wellsprings of purity, of sorrow. The other, little breaths as she listens, warm breeze off sand, almost felt at this distance. And they are, wonderfully, like. In fact, no water murmurs in this languorous syncope, stultifying the cool embattled morning with its heat, save that which spills from my flute, drenching the thicket with these sonorities. And the only wind, outside of these two pipes, anxious to expire before it disperses their sound in arid rain, gathers at the still horizon, the visible, serene, artificial breath of inspiration drawn back to the heavens.

The margins of this tranquil pond, plundered by vanity, envy of suns, tacit under flowers of sparks, offer the necessary anecdote. I was gathering hollow reeds, searching for the sturdy but compliant ones, when on the cloudy gold of distant flora, covering marble fountains with its vines, an animal whiteness fluttered to rest, and in the slow prelude where the pipes begin, this flight of cygnets, or naiades, soared, or plunged...

Inert, everything burns in the fallow dawn, without a trace of the artistry displayed in the concerted escape of this surplus of hymen, so desired by the flautist reaching for A sharp, the sound of which awakens me to the primal fervour, upright and singular, beneath a timeless flood of light, like a lily, and with one of you both beside me for clarity.

Everything on earth is obscure.

In addition to this sweet nothing disseminated by a pout, a kiss, which softly redoubles their perfidy, my breast, virgin of proof, displays a mysterious bite, mark of some august tooth. Anyway, who cares. Obviously, a certain arcanum has chosen as repository these great twinned reeds we play under the azure sky, which, diverting to themselves the perplexity of the cheeks, dream, in a long solo, that we delight the beauty of this place with false confusions between itself and our credulous song, and of conjuring away, from the ordinary revery of pure white back or abdomen, traced by my blind gaze, in the high modulations of love, a sonorous, vain and monotonous line.

Try, instrument of flights, malign Syrinx, to flower again on the shallow lake, waiting for apparitions. Me, proud of my clamour, I'm going to talk for a long time about goddesses. By way of idolatrous renderings, lift the veils from their shadow, again and again. Once I've sucked all clarity from the grapes—to banish a regret hindered by artifice—laughing, I'll raise the empty cluster to the summer sky, and, blowing into its luminous skins, eager for drunkenness, I'll gaze through them till nightfall.

Let's fill ourselves with divergent memories. My eyes, darting through reeds, stung each immortal breast, dowsing its fire in the waves, and, with a cry of rage to the forest canopy, the splendid bath of hair disappeared in glittering light, a trembling of precious stones! I rushed up to find, at my feet, interjoined, bruised with a pleasant weariness by their duplicity, these sleeping beauties, wrapped only in their own perilous arms. I lifted them up, without disentangling them, and

carried them off to this rose bank, despised by frivolous umbrage, drawing every perfume from the sunlit air, where our frolic, like the day, could be consumed.

I adore this virgin wrath, ferocious delight, naked affliction slipping away, fleeing my scorched lips, which, like a jagged bolt of lightning, drink the secret horror of the flesh, from the tiny feet of the cold-hearted one, to the burning cheeks of her coy sister, suddenly forsaking innocence, with moist tears of folly, or laughter.

Happy to overcome these treacherous fears, my crime was to divide that dishevelled tuft of kisses the gods had so carefully joined, for I was just about to hide an ardent laugh under the soft creases of the one—holding the other, candid, unblushing now, by a mere finger, hoping to stain her feathery whiteness with her sister's kindling passion—when from my grip, loosened by vague deaths, this prey, this eternal ingrate, freed herself again, showing no pity for the sob that wrenched my drunkenness.

Oh, well, others will lead me to happiness, their tresses leashed to the horns of my brow. Every pomegranate, already purple and ripe, bursts and murmurs with the bees of passion, and my blood, in love with its captor, flows with the eternal swarm of desire. Now, when the forest is tinged with gold and ashes, a feast is celebrated in the dry bower—this mountainside is visited by the goddess herself, digging her rough heels into its clay. A sad sleep falls upon us and the flame dies out. I hold the queen at last! Await certain punishment... But, no, for the soul, empty of words, and this dull heavy body, succumb, at last, to the proud silence of noon, and, with nothing more said, must

sleep now, forgetting blasphemy and veneration, here on the corrupt,
thirsting sand, where I love to lie, alone, mouth open to the effective
star of insobriety.

CHAPTER TWO

1 Everyone noticed Ethel's beauty, but no one remarked on it. There was something in her expression that silenced admiration. And yet this expression redoubled her beauty even while transposing it to a plane where its contemplation was never flattering. Her beauty made others uneasy. It seemed to signal a mentality free of stratagem. Her eyes were steady but seldom fixed on her interlocutor except when approaching the solution to a problem, when trying to convince. Otherwise her visual attention was brief and most often oblique to its object. One had the sense that this avoidance, rather than betraying any aspect of timidity, was an acquired response to others' inability to face the honesty of her gaze. Her father called her Circe.

Florence looked remarkably like Ethel, and yet no one would ever mistake them for each other. The beauty of the younger was the beauty of the elder undone. When stared at or photographed she copied Ethel's expression. She thought it was sublime. The difference was that she fixed this look on her admirer with a candidness that was also feigned. One knew somehow that all her moves would be dependent, though not without snares. She too was unafraid, but unafraid of different things. She was always close to laughter. She was white, but with a rosy tinge. And always damp. Her broad mouth glistened, and one easily imagined that she wore a bit of rouge. Perhaps she moistened her lips with her tongue whenever no one was watching, attentive to the slightest intervals. Her lips were often parted, and sometimes pouty when she was away from all supervision. Her emerald eyes too were large and moist. Her heavy lids closed often in more than a blink, covering for long moments the reflecting darkness of her gaze. Her father called her Calypso.

Ethel had the same broad and shapely mouth, the same deep Cupid's

bow, the same sharp lines and strong underlip. But when closed, her mouth was straight and firm, determined in its silence. Her lips were dry and soft, a colour almost emptied of red like the flesh seen through fingernails. Her eyes were exactly the shape of her sister's, but wider in their openness, more precisely drawn and with a clarity like glass. They were hazel and suited well her faintly sallow complexion.

Both of them did their hair up, of course, but Ethel's was more tightly drawn back. The roundness of her face was thus emphasized, and her ears stuck out giving her a boyish look, which is perhaps what she intended. Florence let only the white lobes of her ears show and on them she hung tiny cameos, always exactly matching the pendant that drew one's gaze to her bosom.

Ethel often wore black, except when her mother could persuade her to wear a more "cheerful" colour. She usually wore something over her throat, a scarf, for instance, tied in such a way as to fall across her chest like a man's wide necktie. Florence always wore white, or something close to white, and exulted in layers and folds.

2 Florence was carried by language. Compelled forward by the wave effect of her own words, she would also at times, not infrequent, be seen to dance upon these waves with an artfulness and precision that could only be called athletic. There is no way of extending this metaphor to encompass Ethel's meticulous talk. Her entrances were never original, but always governed by ends. For her there was ever a point, and anything not to the point could be tolerated only if seen to constitute a detour rather than a vagary. Often even a series of digressions would, under her attentive shepherding, eventually converge again on a general destination that was, seen thus retrospectively, present even over the span of several conversations. Thus the apparent randomness of her sister's discourse was always, at least in Ethel's conception of it, governed by a larger purpose of which Ethel would merely have to remind her from time to time.

3 Is he watching us?

No, I don't think so.

He followed us here.

Hardly. We were here before he arrived. He's waiting for someone.

A woman?

Judging by his forlorn expression.

You mean she's late.

I'd say she's not coming at all.

Is he sketching us?

He's writing, silly.

A letter. To say he was here. He waited. And he'll wait again. Tomorrow.

No, he's describing a world in which her appearance would impeach his sovereign doubt.

God, you sound like Montrose when you talk like that!

Montrose sounds like me.

How can you say that. You hang on his words like an acolyte waiting for benediction.

As always you reverse the order of things. He's a legate bringing me news. His sex allows him entrance where mine excludes me. But his experience is incomplete without the benefit of my understanding. You may think of his compositions as layers of expression which, drawn back repeatedly, reveal the plain evidence of his desire, but I can tell you plainly that, even as you articulate them, his words, rhythmic, plangent to you, manage ideas that begin and end here.

Inside me. Outside you. He tells me your secrets. He thinks you're peculiar. And I don't deny it.

Your cruelty can no longer find me. I'm never where it expects me to be. Your directness is like the shortest distance between two points, always pointless. His indirectness gets him to his destination, but too late to enjoy anyone's company but his own. He thinks to abjure meaning, as if that could ever form the basis of an aesthetic. When he went to Paris he found that his French was so poor the only poets he could talk to were a couple of faded American *ardistes*. And I can assure you, he misunderstood every word they said.

4 Florence turned her head to look at the man on the patio. He was looking too but had no means of sustaining this look once it was met by hers. She wondered again about this familiar circumstance as she turned back to her sister. Was it her expression? She had tried so many. Perhaps what she felt, internally, as a fetching look was really, because of her regard for subtlety, no expression at all, just an illegible stare that turned away admiration like a fogged mirror. This time she had done nothing consciously with her eyes or cheeks, but had concentrated all of her skill on a slackness of the lips. This was not a moue, but a less forceful modulation of the interval between a smile and a frown. His head barely moved in reaction, it had been so slightly turned from the book before him. He began writing again, quickly, without apparent forethought.

5 Astray above a lake or well beneath a web the sky unfolds in
taunts a wickedness of depth he measures then bends against
a ground that pulls and bruises an embrace the escarpment repeats a
shiver a hush of cold breath its woods endure rising savage a wall
against this clean flat artificial space always damp the sun's transit so
brief it glistens never dries and his crossing brief diagonal interrupted
by an impulse to dance upon this emerald stage in flight in widening
circles embarrassed by gravity the demands of solecism overtaken by
the simple impossibility of extending a pause of staying aloft (even
birds eventually exhausted must drop from the sky) wishing he could
stand till dawn without falling into that embrace a single word on his
lips oraison whose meaning he forgets horizon reason oration banner
other words rush in the ground continually rising beneath his feet
toward the fixed stars the wandering stars all rushing away and the
moon's slow passage lights his upturned face (someday it too will drop
exhausted from its orbit surrendering to earth's hold as we must give
up our lunatic struggle) so early the darkness still this time of year
before the clocks are adjusted remembering this is impossible as if it
never happened though it happened only hours ago or years ago with
his cheek against the cold wet grass a world away the gods below the
lunatics above he laughs sips whisky still waiting unsettled by the
recurring thought that his life came imperceptibly to a close some
time ago and continues now only from habit or for the sake of certain
obligations yes another queer thought but what evidence he's begun
speaking of himself in the third person seeing shades these fictive
lovers who repeatedly deceive or these encounters in transfigured time
comic rather than epic in the park between the madhouse and the old
familiar streets obeying the laws of childhood which are laws after all
and which burden the imaginary with consequences only some

of which are real always involve repetition games and truth alike
otherwise would be without rhyme or reason a night filled with words
a lone figure at the far end of the park where a few worn concrete steps
lead down to the street gone in the space of a glance away replaced by
a dozen swallows out of nights embrace who turn and lift taking his
body as a pivot circling close before suddenly disappearing in the
growing darkness

6 In my dream the word “tain” became a common metaphor of loneliness. I always remember my dreams as I descend the stairs in the morning. I never step from the last tread without contemplating the annunciation. Sometimes I see myself reflected in the glass. Startled, virgin. But surprisingly composed. She’s been reading the Comtesse de Die and takes Gabriel for Eros. His suppliance puzzles her. Impossible to say, from where we stand, if he has just spoken or is about to speak. Their silence is sealed in their gaze. The image has no specularly. There’s nothing in the foreground, no flask of oil or vase of irises to attract our eye. No bough of lilies, no rubric or banner of speech to hold it at the surface. Our gaze crosses theirs and comes to rest, too quickly, almost comically, in a distant bit of lake just visible between the trees at the end of a long alley, a square of palest blue where all lines converge, like a hole in the back of the canvass to which everything is drawn. If our eyes then move, it is upward toward the mountains, the sky and that same blue, almost white.

7 Everything is paltry to you. But what do you know, really? I mean what have you done? Have you ever been adored by strangers? Have you ever brought the house down? Yesterday I saw you standing at the bottom of the stairs gazing fixedly, for a stupid length of time, at that cheap reproduction of a cheap religious painting Father bought at some tourist stall. And reading the paper, you're always reading the paper. But you seem incapable of making any distinction between the slaughter of helpless Armenians and some silly desperate girl who put her head on the railway tracks. Have you ever taken shelter in the arms of a warrior, or put forbidden objects in your mouth? You spread a film of dust over everything you touch. You steal all my treasured moments. You provoke my extravagance with your credulity, then wound me with your disbelief.

Experience is not acquired, accumulated and stored up in specie, banked in anecdote. Your narratives, rather, immunize experience. Experience is redoubled in expenditure. Not event, so often told in its occurrence, fended off with anticipation of telling and retelling, but the knowledge that precipitates and informs event. "Telling stories," as Mother says, has always been your sin. You're already telling me, elaborating him in the "treasured moment" of your ecstasy. The experience I envy could never be so simply told. It's hidden from you in the modulations that draw others to your voice. You feel so modern, I know, intoning those tarnished, second hand phrases, echoes from a dying century. Cradled for a moment in their new settings, they show signs of life, smile dimly and begin to speak again. You respond, giving them something perhaps they've never had. But I'm astonished at the transparency of their symbolism, where a door, for example, is always more than a door but never more than a barrier or a point of passage,

never more than a word, never an unheard-of event, an experience created by the dizzying oscillation of meaning. It's as if all they had received from their master was a few precious words, still radiating the reflected light of his polishing, and beyond that they might as well have never cut his pages or attended his lessons. I left the Conservatory with these thoughts—had you noticed me listening in the doorway?—and walked quickly down James Street to the Library. There, sitting in that neglected corner, beneath the dusty rose window, I read again a dozen pages or more of those little yellow books that somehow snuck into our midst. *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*. Twentieth edition, nonetheless! There I discovered something quite amazing, quite unexpected : a woman, and an image, if image is a word capable of expressing the figure I'm about to remark. La Comtesse de Noailles. (Actually, la Comtesse *Mathieu* de Noailles, but I would suppress his proper name just as I've been denied her's.) A nymph addresses the dying faun, her image reflected, unsurprisingly, in his pupils—her body “small and light,” her mouth “straight,” fingers “plump,” her flesh “golden” . . . and then : “*Mes cheveux bleus comme des prunes, / Mes pieds pareils a des miroirs / Et mes deux yeux couleurs de lune . . .*” I can't tell you how angry this made me feel—more than any of your familiar taunts. “Feet like mirrors!” What on *earth* are feet like mirrors? Tell me! And yet I felt something stir, “deep within me” as you would probably say in similar circumstances. Down there, you know, in the place of secret stirrings. No, I'm joking, Flo. It was more like something shifting, up here where nothing ever stirs. A distant recognition, the appeal of this ugly simile, yes, but facing somehow terribly forward, away from even the most refined relationship to meaning as we know it. Something breaks. I feel suddenly so provincial again. And so should you.

8 Make my memory dance among eternal shades, my image fixed in your stilled eyes. Go, tell the thoughtful dead, familiar with my games, that I dream of them here, where I pass, beneath the yews, quick and bright. Tell them of my brow, cinctured with this cloth fillet, of my broad mouth, of my plump fingers that brush the grass and the privet hedge. Tell them of my quick gestures that shift like shadows balancing on countless orchard leaves. Tell them that my eyelids often grow tired and heavy, that in the evening I dance and let the wind disturb my trailing gown, that I fall asleep with my bare arms folded beneath my head, that my flesh is like gold amidst violet veins. Tell them how much it moves you to see my hair the blue of ripe plums, my feet like mirrors and my two moon-coloured eyes. And tell them how often, in the sultry evening, stretched out by cool fountains, I've longed for their love-making, have embraced their empty forms.

CHAPTER THREE

1 Unbound, like that, a ripeness. But loving the dead. My laughable sister, what price? Your mental heat consumes the shabby moths of winter. They want warmth, a touch, not light. My lies, my lying, took me to Syracuse, to Virginia, but never to paradise. My ecstasy itself is a lie. But I've never faked song. In the parlour, even were all eyes on my bodice, I enter a realm where admiration can no longer steal my attributes. Whatever I am then is concentrated in this narrow passage, the abyss that subtends it, almost forgotten, the vault above, a hollowness where concepts dissolve in emotive air, and its issue, wide, gated cave. The singing master gazes always at my lips. All the externality of song is there, in the shapes forced by the smallest parts of words, broken and held, rescued from the banality of speech. There are no lies then.

Your lying doesn't concern me. It's your misuse of eternity. In my letters, your letters, I've invented a kind of truth that far exceeds our hopes. In the barrenness of those relations I've tried to re-establish the modesty that underlies our folly : your open reaching after the body's enslavement to translation ; my investigation of meaning as an inescapable property of substance and hence the paramour of death. I watch you from behind a curtain that veils my fascination *and* my loathing. My letters are your lies, but *in truth* I divest you of experience and raise an image that neither of us can bear. Have I undone myself in the process? Sister, put your hand upon my breast and tell me, does my heart not beat as forcefully as yours?

2 in the stillness broken by the rhythm of his heart in his mouth
another name Inara a taste a scent a note amidst a discord of
odours rising from below a biting rude smell like gunpowder tea and
above that intermixed almost sweet like blood oranges another
fragrance searching for a word like civet like contumely premature
contractions of the heart contumacy a squeezing wet a dream of
swimming like a dream of flying a tongue soft and then hard a singing
voice salt from the body the grass a bed her largeness not ecstasy but
concentration flattened by the downward pull spread out a map a
delay a drawing lifting from the centre toward redemption singing
tasting freely naming by the shores of damaged reference where the
only lies are subtle truth supple telling supplemental lying dreaming
mensongerries and love never mentioned the aggravation of small
pebbles the unevenness of the graded surface imagine her on you
there him under her not in her them at him he imagines I imagine
them here where he arises wet and searches for them I wonder he
thought then where they lie and waiting heard double breath rustle of
skirts brushes such golden darkness such to taste perhaps *buisson* is it
toison such steps on the stair the worn stone entrance his ears quick
red his cheeks rosy his nostrils twitch softness hardens premature
contradictions of the heart tumescence or senescence in which these
memories overwhelm the body's singularity and other parts as
suddenly then grow cold they whiten phalanges bum nose knees and
the field widens the sky hides its little treasures the surrounding
woods pause the night turns demonic the silence is telling brief a
passage broken how could the night fall silent the sky so empty only
the vexing star a whisper and then a roar

4 Your words use your heart as a metronome.

I have always strived toward plain speech.

Striven. You've always striven. Besides, it's nonsense.

What is?

Your clothes are plain ; your speech is seductive. Upward displacement of revelation and concealment. What your words are draped upon determine their general shape, but the cut of the material, the decorations and verbal gestures, bring what's under there, little sister, closer to what we imagine, take it further from what we can know.

5 There is a small form reanimate in nines.

6 There are lapses of time in which nothing that can be measured occurs. That which appeared to be a fissure becomes a seam. In this hapless chronology of errors, a delay may be justly perceived as a pause, a fugue as a yawn. Apologies are needles. I've grown weary of the necessary anecdote, the truth that will not out, the grip of syntax, the familiar face I can't envisage. A missing letter can start a war in the soul. There's an imbalance in our correspondence. The time between sentences is longer than the time between letters. Sitting here alone, a stranger, I recall, in the form of an aphorism, a reported comment of Kojève's. Without bloodshed there is no history. I had to tell you this, in a letter if need be. I began to write, then as now, in a lined notebook. I abandoned myself, in this lettering, on this terrace, like a passenger on a train suspended in that infinite seeming moment when destination begins to recede.

7 There is, however, a dire predictability to the weather, so that the morning sun brings forth no other emotion than the dread of heat. We coax ourselves through the days with little amusement to assist—a ride in the countryside perhaps or, when the Colonel is about, the dull rehearsal of an argument, ever on theological themes, though never of the controversial sort that would strain the nerves of a “child,” which is how he refers to me, or even test the wits of a parson, truth be told. All my time is idle, by any reasonable measure, save the hour spent in choir practice thrice a week, the other spent daily climbing and descending the scales, and the one spent weekly in the choir loft. Miss Elliott’s instruction has become particularly tiresome. Her anecdotes, which once so amused me, grow more tedious with every telling, she varies them so little. I am also—dare I say it?—tired of her piety. Not that I resent her guidance, or that of Colonel Warburton—oh, not at all!—but I do so wish they would display a little more humour and light heartedness in the exercising of it. How can they be so grave when their severest problem in life seems to be finding a fourth for whist, which we play almost every evening, even if we have to enlist the poor, beleaguered maid? Lately, however, we often have the company of that young chorister I told you of, Mr. Baum, a Presbyterian by nature. He has grown even more attentive since he discovered my interest in poetry. He bought me a lady sized fountain pen with a pearl handle and silver nib. I think, Ettie—if you are reading over Mother’s shoulder—it was merely an excuse to touch my hand. He filled it with peacock blue ink and showed me how to hold it, having himself been instructed by the shopkeeper. I am using it now, as you can see. You may already have noticed the improvement in my hand. The words, like the ink, flow more easily, one little niggle after another. Of course, Mother, he knows of my engagement, and, I assure you, we have never passed an

unaccompanied moment. Nor would I care to. Il est très ennuyant. He despises Longfellow for a Catholic rather than a poetaster! Please do not mention any of this to Montrose. Just give him my undying love. And give Father my undiminished love. And the boys my unflappable love. And Gertrude my uncritical love. And Ettie my unenviable love. And keep my undivided love for your own. I do apologize for all my complaints, Dearest. I just wish I could share my boredom with you “in the flesh.” I know it would be eased in your company. I must close this letter now, before I run entirely out of adjectives!

8 You love Prince Amerigo. I love Prince Myshkin. My librarian waits for me every day, I know it. I've tried not to establish a pattern, so as always to take him unawares. I love his inability to withhold his pleasure at my appearance. He stumbles—physically, verbally, emotionally. His cheeks redden in two small patches like those of a clown. His hands tremble. But all so slightly. And he quickly redeploys his excitement in the presentation of some “find.” Today it was a poem by Bliss Carman, an elaboration of a Sapphic fragment. “‘Oleanders’,” Miss Kinraid, “is there a lovelier word in the language?”

He should show you what he hides rather than what he “finds.” His disarray should follow his donations, not precede them. In Richmond a gentleman gave me a gun. A “lady gun” smaller than a pipe. He placed it in my hand like a coin. It was ivory white and the silver of a tarnished dollar. He took it back and filled the chamber. We went into the yard. He showed me how to hold it. Then he cupped his left hand under the heel of my right and placed the other softly on my hip, just below the waist. The discharge was startling even though expected. I laughed. He coughed. Always shoot to kill, he said. The heart is on the left. Stage right.

Their laughter was trained to fall beneath the inarticulate chorus of voices above which only grave notes occasionally rose. They fought it back swiftly once again, fully aware of the danger. Ethel glanced almost stealthily toward the patio. Florence raised her brow interrogatively.

Don't be surprised if he passes us a note.

1 *Sappho : One Hundred Lyrics* by Bliss Carman, published for the Florence Press by Chatto and Windus, St. Martin's Lane, London, 1909, page 27.

He's making tiny perfect sentences.

Yes, he's "elsewhere," indeed. That must be his third whisky. And all before the meal. Inebriation is so unbecoming.

This last sentence was loudly inserted into an accidental silence of the several conversations against which her voice was pitched.

9 as if the adjacent room was reminded by the silence of all its conversations collapsing the spectacle of gestures abrading the hesitations that followed as if history could shout back please please fill me again with the weight of cunning of tactical delay not ghosts just laughter the little cough when whisky first stings the night air bright with electrical wires the hum of magnets fields of bondage fields of repose above the plateau flat above water the foot smooth steps down the hand smoothed rails up syntactical treads pausing in anticipation crossing the lake on foot numbering on fingers with thumb imagining a speaking flooded with numbers without error but full of temptation am I wrong or wronged with rhyme and reason always here at night above the reservoir above the city not a ghost just an infusion a decoction despoiling *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary* for words to please an eduction a simple wish softly noted pressed into the night Toison d'or 1900 or soaked into white sheets *Colibri* by the flower basket on the porch so rarely seen so rare

10 Imagine my surprise, just now, as I was strolling past the back of that small church, only a block or so from here, when, dark abject stirring, I glanced through the myriad interstices of the hedge, a useless screen, and saw, full length, from the awkward flapping of his three cornered hat, to the twitching black shoes protruding from his frock, a clergyman, who, supposing himself hidden from all eyes, was responding to the solicitations of the lawn. It would not, in this situation, have pleased me, and nothing of this sort ever serves a providential purpose, to have brought, with my, albeit complicit, smile, guilty as any hypocrite pretending shock and reaching for a stone from the sidewalk, a blush to the face, hidden by both hands, of this poor man, on top of the one already, undoubtedly, arising from his solitary exercise. A quick, skillful step was required to prevent any distraction being caused by my presence, and, as well, defence against the temptation of a backward glance, the retention of this almost diabolical apparition who continued, in my mind now, to bruise the fresh grass and tiny buds with his flanks, rolling right, then left, then onto his belly, all to obtain a chaste frenzy. Every motion, rubbing his limbs together, flinging them about, tumbling, sliding, ended in satisfaction, even pausing, confounded by the tickling of some stiff flower stem against stockinged calves, within the folds of that unique garment which gives the appearance, if not the certitude, that one is, for oneself, everything, even one's own wife. Solitude, cold silence, seeded in the verdure, perceived by senses more anxious than subtle, you felt the furious snapping of this fabric, as if the night, wrapped away in its folds, was finally released, shaken out, and the dull blows of the rejuvenated frame against the earth. But the energumen had no need to contemplate you. Euphoric, it was sufficient to seek within himself the cause of a pleasure, or a duty, that could

hardly be explained by a simple regression, when faced by a mown field, to the antics of the seminary. The influence of the vernal breath softly dilating the immutable texts inscribed in his flesh, he also, emboldened by this agreeable disturbance of his sterile thought, had come to recognize by this contact with nature, immediate, clean, violent, positive, devoid of all intellect and curiosity, the general good, and candidly, far from the jurisdiction and the constraints of his occupation, from canons, interdictions, censure, tumbled about in the beatitude of his native simplicity, happier than a beast. That, the purpose of his brief outing having been achieved, at once and without pause, the subject of my vision jumped up, shaking off the pistils and wiping off the dewy wetness, and re-entered, unnoticed, the church and the habits of his ministry, I would never dream of denying. But I have the right to neglect this fact entirely. For doesn't my discretion regarding these frolics, at their first appearance, have for compensation the right to fix forever, as the reverie of a passer by, completed to his liking, this image marked with a mysterious seal of modernity, at once baroque and beautiful?

CHAPTER FOUR

1 The blemished moon ignites, in the still pond, glass of faded glory, a glimmer of fire. Everything is sleeping. Alone, exhausted, a night bird modulates, devastated, its impoverished song. The winds no longer vibrate through the wood. The moon has murdered their chorus : but through the grief of foliage rains the embrace of speechless stars. The old voluptuous dream of dying surrounds the pond, drugs the soul of things : the forest, now and then, makes a feeble effort under the furtive shiver of its metamorphoses. Each leaf is effaced in the subtle fog. From the azure rim drops the dew whose crystal substance incrusts, pearl-like, the pistils of the nenuphars floating on the laden water. Nothing emerges from its blackness, not flight, nor wind, nor voice, except when, far off in the woods, in sudden fits, a turbulent stream loosens debris : its echo is affected by the crash of cascades.

2 Impressed or soaked. Never far from intention. Or the angles, the porosity. My short sentences, laying traps. You are my only pendant. Tearful, captured. Your death was meaningful to me, recurred in my thoughts, thinking of you, unburdened, accidental.

Is it the underminer, the place, the music, our silence, Diva, Sister? Curled on the floor, blood red carpet, my last thought your first.

Neither death, yours early, mine late, unannounced, painful, queried or unexpected, curtailed your anger, completed your false promise, nor morning, its cold breath, across the mossy roof, your window, the angry birds, the early trolley and the far bell, the whistle, clouded our embrace, in storm, in misgiving.

Blah and blah. Adjectives chasing after nouns, “breathlessly,” ever “eclipsed,” our “extra-familial” romance, our nocturne. Only the two of us, you, me, after all, and only one, here, after. I can hear your “hollow” hymns from the churchyard. My memory is “sore” with forgetting. Each shot was “qualified.” “Loud.” “Burning.” “Delayed.” “Unkind.” “Merciful.” “Dumb.” “Supernumerary.” My gut aches. So shut up.

3 a wallpaper motif repeated as in memory at intervals at the intersection of logic and demand every third iteration causing a sensation of wonder just above and behind the eyes a careful expedition depending on who in fact was speaking and who between them was addressed who called to the task by the door by the stair by the militant breeze the wisteria like words in motion the curtain disturbed the page unwoven the wrong words rendered who driven forward by the passion truth reveals clothed the event in the rhetorical colour evidence provides the unpleasant meanings testimony coughs up who oh poor dear bleeding sister a chain of events an articulation of engorged moments ending in misrecognition not because we look alike but because the face is precisely what's never seen sublime the view from the brow from the madhouse lawn from the landing the reservoir the bedroom window the roof the piazza drawn down to where language reddens the face with great shame grande vergogna for the lies the body can't hide plain words all made up grande vergogna sarebbe a colui che rimasse cosa sotto veste di figura o di colore rettorico who covers over the thing or colours it the matter in masquerade and then e poi when called upon domandato does not know non sapesse how to strip dinudare these words le sue parole of such clothing da cotal vesta and unmask in guisa ch'avessero true intention verace intendimento who insisted when introduced to the concept that death was a made up thing a means of ending the tale remembered now how odd to be still in this commotion of the dead among us glancing away where the words follow soldiers in a column and your glance away dividing layers of thought into layers of affection above the music attending thinning out nodding blinking trying to find the ladder finding the snake oops gripping the convolute edges of the thing the matter where the breeze of who dissipates carrying a

whiff her song above his music the buccal dance the perfect place the family offers the striangulation that holds us here six lines of sight converging where who and why cross alas out here by the back lane the wood stoves burning the mute hum of voices mixed with smoke and thin tobacco clouds of modern women congregating my cigar burned out my glass empty my thoughts leading me on with their promiscuous chatter carry me off constantly back to a vantage a moment where swallows tease me into confession a corridor an alley where a translation becomes a letter a forfeit a flight where being watched is not being seen there by the vine trellis his quick brown eyes his rude mouth stained with the ash of my burning my smoke working that translation which is to say a crossing an importunity a theft as in literally throwing a stone at a robin to stop its chirp or choosing words which always refer back or down a lexicon a lesson in translation which is to say a blemish a lie

4 I'm sated.

Is there a dessert menu?

Our scribe left without paying the bill.

Just a nod.

In our direction?

No, the waiter.

A tab, perhaps, or a note, sufficient.

For us?

What?

An invitation.

A compliment...an adieu.

At least a regret.

Curious.

Not curious.

An incapacity?

A device.

But insufficient.

Bon voyage, man of simple means.

His loss.

Our punishment.

5 as if death were the dissolution of the binding in logos anticipated mine fluid boring not piercing the oppressive blue darkening not emptying up not finally but ordinary and kind this alertness this finely chiselled concept no one admired my ankle her waist my first idea her tongue my announcement her request his departure as if death were the dispersion of the blinding in logos precipitated sudden as a scolding the words sting flee the words bide across they induce ply along the edge of thought pulled toward reply along along across through replete and open down it is domain and pride calls to repeat the approach of longing and image up by early seen redistributed a simple globe pliant a gurgle a slap such treachery of letters of law like a substance a deep slumber sewn into the hem drawn along the seam and buds of flesh delicate twenty six or twenty one all lists all commands entreaties concepts petty thoughts and apothegms all etcetera bearing forward a relation not a pulsion a vocabulary of nods as if the ache burst its need or taught the hard line broke and can't despair here past knowing eyes bright in the hollow diktat the rictus the stabbing pain from the anus up its grimace or the place of major stress in the line before it breaks or snaps these loose graspings delinquent thoughts in mourning the dreams that follow perhaps are at the place of minor stress where anticipation counters repetition and the music of reason a mishearing also where the dead return our attention unbinds quantities of lyric untie discursive nodes a treatise on the grammar of the dead not broken but extended not about but in a plastic construct not description but laughter a rising torment within pleasing not question and answer but opinion dislodged from responsibility or the grand itch the high note of lament no lamentation please abut id est discontinue a pattern once established a line or circle of friends not here we are our own sustenance and no

one speaks for us for we tug at eternity rhyming without sight uninvited
unencumbered and tending towards listing but listing toward the
unbroken not return but not wanting either this lecture our similarities
our likeness lector rhetor running headlong back within these walls
these hillocks avenues and alleys an absolute singularity alone rain-
soaked at the foot of the stairs by the broken spire its tip like a memory
history's inconsequence like a single gravestone on the church lawn its
incongruence where moments rhyme concepts rhyme and the ictus of
knowing pieces of the necessary of the anecdote untied by subtraction
of the subject toward the object a risking of the absence of the things
of the day the noon whistle the trolley bell the idle prayer the cluster
of notions that precede thought the temptation to kick the limits
imposed by number question how prone how unlikely and why not ask
by what mechanical means by what doctrine by what chance by what
right this early summer breeze through the window chill on her feet
outside the covers this aria through the door ajar a whisper through
lips entr'ouvertes an errant wish a zig zag course from the asylum to
the library and back widdershins or counter to the wisdom of the hour
piebald and scandalous behind time or out of service never called to
account or idiotic an angered curiosity hampered by the effect of lyric
but voiceless

6 In the autumn when the red leaves drop one by one onto the porch. When the sky is blue and the wind is rising cold off the harbour. When open books litter the old oak table. When your small hoarse voice calls to me out of the alphabetic silence, from the top of the stairs, from the Mountain brow, over the rooftops.

I share your distaste. A frivolous spirit, a cheat, I want to infect the climate of all that remains. Because you ask, nay beg, I shall not reply.

If, at this distance, a querulous night beckons. If a glowering tenses my brow, our colloquy, our mutual disregard. If, as you tell me, derision is the quintessence of charm.

I watched you as a termagant watches the price of candles. When you turned in your sleep, I crossed my fingers and imagined paradise without you. Paradise is a place of infinite boredom and unmeasured repose.

7 which is to say unmanned at last punctured and clasped
enucleated fenestrated above all unmothered and unfathered
but listing so punctilious and punctual a ringing the phone forever
which ear pointed stop puncked begin again paradise is hell we don't
know who we are anymore my my no story sorry begin again lets sit
down together and see what we can remember the asylum shut up the
crib yes the Utica crib no the stairway always going down yes nice
detail the flat green by woods by hill yes yes and the ziggy zaggy streets
no the streets criss cross it's we who zig zag the church yard that kiss
those plump little toes don't be naughty and our delight our nights our
indelible nights pausing over meals and refreshments and vices yes
voices we forgot something but we can't remember what it is the bad
landlord no no worse a door opened and the room full of patriots no
no worse mothers and fathers yes begin again sweet tyrant we'll get
there yet not here I had imagined my anger as eternal it is it is you've
just misplaced it forever this is paradise quiet this is where thoughts
are born no where they tend same thing how come there are none
then they've all gone away or not yet arrived same thing oh oh oh
begin again lets agree on everything yes lets agree to agree a double
positive put on your pearly suit and I'll put on mine and we'll invent
the two step begin again toward the unlettered march or spring all
afoot across the field will everything change in that funny way that
makes us laugh yes but we'll make up our own minds oh good a story
but no book and no telling and no tale and no wings and no field

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