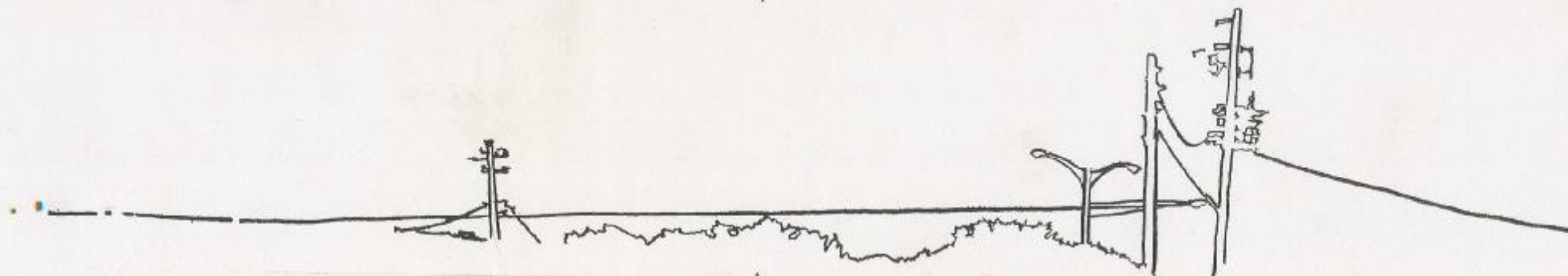
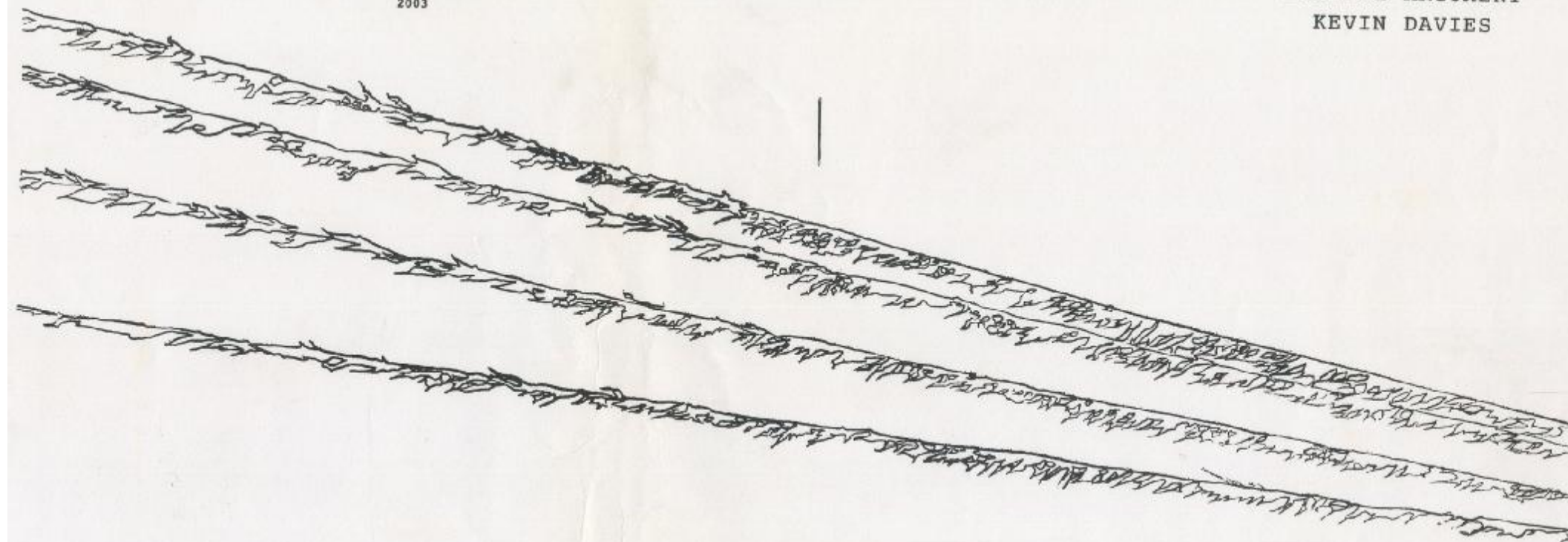


Barretta Books
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2003

LATERAL ARGUMENT
KEVIN DAVIES



L A T E R A L A R G U M E N T

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K E V I N D A V I E S

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"Persons exist
as practical ways of speaking about

bundles."

—Paul Williams

They awoke in a hookless world studded with lean-
to performance artists interacting with electricity.
This must be the place. Evicted from elsewhere, here at last
not rest but an apprenticeship in container
technology. A kind of music that, though apparently stopping,
starting, stopping, more specifically never ends, thus
displaying as virtue its greatest flaw. Successfully,
irritatingly. *Who here has access to liquor?* The youth
of this centreless void gave voice to the sensual trepidations of
the nearby chopping block. This transparency at once
a local pride and a fulcrum of alertness. Yes. They
then proceeded lengthwise down the post-racial boulevard,
exhausted but coy, their travel plans successfully forgotten.
Perhaps they would stay awhile. But

no . . . What's that humming sound?

Hello

The so-called outside

Strangers

Buckets

The newfangled windowpanes across

the street, emptied into deltas of greeting.
The burnt marshmallow stuck to your cheek
Like a weak rhyme, a new genre of pottery, bolt

upright in the midst of a daydream.
So that we all might be blessed with the darker gifts
of broken car, tank top, a castle

full of water-logged documents.
Let us now return

to the German language.
Little hills

of cocaine on a plain.
The still point

is on fire and twirling.
The circulation of air
in commercial spaces
is a skill.
The circulation of air in domestic spaces.
Plants need water. That's all:

a sunny ledge.
Not not this. What,

this then?
The stems must be crushed or the flowers will wilt,
thought Tito, dreaming of access

to the Albanian shore.
The complete works of Elodie Lauten.
We could build an entire civilization,

but that would be a mistake.
It is impossible to make a mistake.
Ask Palestine.
Ask Palestrina.
Ask dead Buddha stinking up the bicycle-

repair shop.
At the age of two I attained my cat
and then she was

gone: lesson.
Water will become an issue.
Alpine meadowlands goodbye.
All that money spent

on oceanfront mansions . . .
The trimming of municipal
welfare trees ongoing.
Liability.
The papier-mâché Potemkin
village we've spread like
spreadable cheese over the surface of

what we call Earth.
There's a space. You fill it.

but it's not you.
You're not it

either—in fact you're not you.
Early computer music struggling to be heard
Smothered by an updraft
Incense smoke drifting

like a trombone player pretending to have a weekend gig.
This is our heritage, little bits

of paper left secretly in the crooks of trees.
The number of dust mites
in an average blue blanket

that has not been washed in five years.
Why haven't you written? It
seems so easy to have written,
to have dropped

a line in the ink-dark pond.
Great piles of fish for sale in Brooklyn bistros
Bales of arugula
Ragouts of heirloom vegetation
The acoustics of St. Agnes
The overtone series
People sitting up and remembering it's time to do something nice for
companion animals
Not a gram of it would I swallow as tonic

Listening for the distant hum of bombers
Unaccented English means you talk like me
To Albany by deer trail,

abrupt prison glinting in last light.
The phone should cut it out now

I'm not home
Church bell one minute late
The smell of laundry in the bag too long
A drop of slightly sulfurous water
Throwing up, landing, taking naps
Thought balloon above Buñuel's head
"Under five minutes, rock, over five minutes, classical"
Down down deep in the undersubway
This also holds true

for at-bats.
I can't work today because I am crazy
with desire to stay inside and listen

to opera from four centuries.
A person you knew in camp once, on an island,
walking up to you in a dream asking to borrow money

for furniture.
Hold me tighter or I cannot stay
I will sing in Italian until my needs are met
By the animals that hover 'round me
in the common toilet of Arezzo

In the New Jersey hills teaching basketball to middle-school girls
In a rapidly shifting ecosystem bereft of grasses
In an anonymous industrial park, buried about eight feet deep
Inside a Malaspina oyster being flown to Chicago
In the flickering timescape of estuarial mantra
In one ear and out the aorta
In time for dinner but late for epistemological theory-hope
Infrared octopus art dial
In my opinion, standing on head before bright light
In lieu of flowers, ritual urination
In what we call public spaces
The ancient odour of Hibernians
Moving from panel to panel
Noting elements of the collage
Several people wearing hats inside
The unframed repression of woodworking used sexually
Just because you thought it, or wrote it down
or printed it and had it distributed via whatever
networks of strategic alliance
doesn't mean
America won the war of 1812
White House in flames
First stirrings of Canadian patriotism amongst UEL scoundrels
King lickers
Lovers of cold, hard, stupid life
Abundant fur-bearing rodents
Who cares for any of this

sediment of legend and angle brackets.
Ignoring the box scores, the ballooning ERAs
of once-promising youngsters from Louisiana
and rural California

Intact despite splitting
Postulating an unconscious

on the basis of boat slips.

Academic:

Having drawers.

Insight into the rampage

The great privatization scam

Indentured workers making bricks, ages 3 to 70+

Animal lure

Leg-hold loan policy

Ramps are of the lily clan

Related

You can choose your friends

Arbitrarily, like family photos

bought at a junk shop.

Hey let's bury our radioactive garbage in the desert for
several thousand years

Or shoot it at the moon
and Mars along with bacteria,

see what happens.

Suppressed memory: We have all survived crash landings,
wandered here and invented plausible pasts

Every so often one of us will slip up
That's why we have police
Booze
Regional art museums
French-Canadian acrobats
All-too-plausible breakdowns

and suburban shooting sprees.

Bang bang
I remember you
as a radio host of my youth
Now you are old, in fact,
dead, in a suit, and want something, even death can't kill

craving.

If we knew the formula we could make our own
Cut down on Mexican road trips
Just sit around
talking all day, wandering, renaming the parks,
eating the bark off trees,
Nights by the canal, shivering
Hanging with Gus outside the necropolis
An exurb of postmusical attention
The remainders that dream
The Partch archives
Into existence, a cave wall
Being chipped at, generation to generation
Not many benches
Too few water closets

Lots of signs
Hand in hand, meandering loiterers
Vagrant kitchen veterans saving up for tonight
Fat pigeon that can't retire
Neurotic Yonkers

geese.

Yesterday? I stayed in out of the heat, washed dishes
Read a book

Remembered a cow
That as an ignorant boy with a board I walloped
For breaking into our yard
Eyes first puzzled then pissed off
Bellowing near my asparagus patch
Or was that later
After the big cedar fell and destroyed the fence
Or possibly when we mutinied, refusing to follow
Alexander farther into the subcontinent
Just wanting to go back to whatever inevitably temporary homes
With the baubles we'd collected and our blistered skins
Eat an entire sheep with a group of cousins
Maybe build a hut
Imperceptibly alter a grammar
Chase birds
Stand in the midst of barley
Centuries later
Drabs, the brand-new feudal nightmare, Dribs
I loved a girl the girl loved me
They chopped us up by the thuggish sea

And

on like that.

The weather is something you notice
Anecdotes from random travel
Who tried to kill whom
over what disputed bottle

How art
ruined Europe
How ruins programmed mutations
Until suddenly the Internet breathed new life into corrupt housing councils
Spider silk in the milk of goats
with fond names in Québec
Settled into a decent life of waiting to be allowed to breed
Sentimental calculus
five times harder than steel
Deciding who shall have access to the research library
Itself a front, cockfights out back
The clerks grown in vats near Langley
A tectonic sense of the ends of banter
Dovetailing nicely with the new national security apparatus
Your beloved on the lawn

as seen from space.

What we've learned from film:

Our engines swap gears
That figure in the distance portends catastrophe
In a day or two this will not be over
Monstrosities arise from steam
A heart of pure murder

Absolutely trudging barren scenarios
Ledges of the pockmarked earth give way
to fog psychosis, a ringing phone
inside a solid crystal cube
Eager to fall in love, to retreat to the car barn
The amusements out of control, a supper ready
for the consequences of a mod
in New Zealand, rustling the ear hair
of Franco triumphant in Madrid, letting loose
the vampire priests, the werewolf nuns

of Central Europe, India.

Like coming to the end of a dirt road
in a fever dream, as you stare the vegetation thinning
to reveal a copper-bound book of secret photographs
within which, looking closer, the vulnerable napes
of doomed soldiers and luckless noncombatants
have written upon them the doggerel

of porters.

Life in the pressurized capsule
becomes intolerable.

Weeks, days, hours, seconds just staring
at the back of your hand and the carefully
printed instructions in twelve languages,

none of which you can read since the stroke.
What we need is a hoop
of sorts and a round
ballish thing to propel through it,

and a will to think otherwise.

A long history

of drainage.

—One could go on. One waits
for permission to go on, and in the meantime busies
one's self with the most basic sort of domestic
tasks, digging an ancient cigarette butt
from behind the radiator, washing one cherished dish, passing
a T-shirt over the dusty surface of the clock radio—
But it all collapses before one's bloodshot eye, the load-
bearing walls composed of particles
who prefer not to, who strike against the conditions,
who saw nothing and ain't talking,
who refuse even to sweep themselves up. Wait,
wasn't that last Tuesday? One is in need
of more current data, readings, graphs,
portents, illusions,
vanities. The line for charity

groceries starts here.

So deeply in debt

that you're totally in the clear
and can once again endure the budding of trees,
the groans of living rock,
and the cross-eyed allure of prison guards
So totally in hock to subagents of the imperium

that they can kiss your polished green ass.

Lightning strikes bathwater

Midsummer hail

Tentacles of the Canadian cactus grow
toward the trees outside, seek counsel
Every bit of Brooklyn bent
double over hydrants, trying to get
comfortable in the heat of this duck blind.

Lightning strikes
cactus in the dry flats beyond someone's town.
The work just never ends. First there's the obvious
problem with the rug, then all these papers
close to toppling, and the gentle turning of the mind
away from thoughts of political
assassination, and then, not finally, this whole matter
of Stuart Dempster's *Cistern Chapel*.
You might be familiar with the old atlas I'm shaking
in your face to keep both of us cool.
You might have a gift for the rough stuff in vacant lots.
For now, though, *just wear the beanie*.
There isn't any way to decide for sure
and it's childish to keep trying. Lightning strikes
the baby otter, and we clutch each other in fear
and grief. The cacti rise in triumph and invent
democracy in those eager flats. We're long gone,

and it's a pleasure to meet us.

—No, that of course was another film
possibly in another universe, possibly inside
one of these appliances

Or inside the cow's eye
sliced open in service to the surrealist project
in a previous century

This very lovely
bass flute part written by Cowell
as a favour
to the vice cops who busted him
who arrest him
over and over

in an eternal-return machine
constructed
for the entertainment
of conglomerate nonbeings
who are, sort of, *over there*
in the percussion part
but then again knotted
in the coronal nimbus

of anti-light, to put it in the vernacular.

So a Swiss Army Knife walks into a bar.

The biker develops pus in his saddle sores.

The regiment marches on its fantasies.

A familiar weight presses down on the shoulders,

aiming you toward the receptacle.

Forget the grape-and-grain prohibition.

It is not dancers who are difficult but dance itself

an exchange of brains on a stage of offal

reminding you of something immediately forgotten

by Jim and his red-ant buddies down at the co-op.

The challenge is to stand up boldly
and say nothing, staring straight at the lips
of the microphone, refusing to move. And to repeat this
action at every possible venue

until your mind's as clear as a piece of rye toast.

The sad fates
of obsolete bulldozers trying pathetically to fish
for mackerel in the East River—see this and move
on, steel your heart against the old looms
attempting to smash the new. You've got Satan's

work to do.

I got laid

off, deplaned

in muskeg, with only a little pan
and a sharp spoon

Having dreamed of a reunion
with my grandfather, dressed in the clothes
in which he left Ireland in 1926, at a critical
theory conference of some sort, complicated
iron staircases leading to sub-basements
and pipes, finally being able merely to wave
at him and Uncle Bill as they're ushered through doorways
and reception areas, the speeches ongoing.
But how am I going to survive? The plane a buzzing dot
against sub-Arctic mountains in the distance.

No bug spray even.
Not cold, but it will
be cold. Feeling, as always, like a television
pilot with major script problems and a conflicted
relationship between the principal avatars.
Two choices: march or dig. Gather tiny petals
or remember tobacco. Upside: really clean air.
A melancholy peculiar to mammals
or vertebrates generally, regarding their own
fossil evidence with a sideways,

querulous stare.
Keep sheep off this porch.
Return pert pigs to glen to gambol.
Make provision for dog and goat.
Enable the carrots to live free of themselves.
Give the barn the

beating it deserves.
Protracted infancy, elongated youth, steroids
Skill at games
of chance
A wondrous feeling of emptiness engulfs the extras
who are everyone not currently engaged in a real-estate transaction
Racing camels through the streets of Kamloops
Calmly turning the pages of a family history
in which the names *Seth*, *Howard*, and *Dorinda*
keep recurring throughout disconnected generations
in different states and provinces.

There's a map here to where there once was a well.
Far apart from every deluded view
The heart attack
in an unfamiliar john—so this is what it looks
like. It broke big, but right into the wheelhouse.
Another tater. Gone. That's all she
(Lorine N., janitor of Wisconsin) wrote. The whole
damned thing, properly edited this time.
Sighing my name with a restraining order:

the Rodeferian sublime.
She sells timeshares by the lakeshore.
Having been invented by a malevolent demigod
and forced evermore to pace the room

under the woodshedding saxophonist.
For breakfast we have a bunch of leftovers
and the fresh kidneys of a Salvation Army bell-ringer.
Just a place where you can be "yourself," an array of gizmos
for the touching, a little patch of basil by the backdoor.
Anything that's been rubbed that long is a real object
of pie-eyed worship somewhere in the so-called
universe, speeding away from itself as though there is
somewhere to go, here's

your headgear.
It depends on what you mean

by *drugged*.

The last guy, he had a lot of answers
and a collection of vintage wanted posters.

The new guy, he doesn't say much.
The next guy hasn't even been born yet,

and with any luck never will be.

Refusing to work requires great discipline.
Waiting in troll clothes under a bridge requires great discipline.
Insisting on knowing shit about

shit requires great discipline.

I'm standing before a mirror, shaving my ears,
when Sufi devotional music bursts through the door

in a livid sweat, with big news from the physics think tank.
Yellow door. Red pants. Green projector.
Brown calculator. Blue penguin. White succulent.
Orange box. Black wrench. Purple

pot.

Factors are people

in wilderness outposts.
The arsenic of treated wood,

bitten into.
Not all the fruit trees hate you—

just this one.

Freud once attempted to purchase Mexico.

Darwin feared meteors and their possible connection to lichen.

Mathew Arnold hated ducks, just *hated* 'em.

Martin Frobisher cooked and ate an entire cabin boy.

Jack Spicer invented the clap-on clap-off lamp.

Fatty Arbuckle faked his own death and ended up running a go-cart
track in Alabama.

Goya lost his nose

in a practical joke gone very, very wrong.

Backing slowly away from the bear, not looking
in its eyes. Pretending to be asleep.

Ignoring the tornado. Refusing to acknowledge
the legitimacy of the mudslide.

Not flinching—holding steady—when the toaster
falls into the bath. Glancing back, turning to salt, and not
caring. Driving blindfolded on acid in the 70s.

Arguing for a lower grade. Pulling the thigh
hairs of the opposing power forward.

A small gully, with a few boards, can be home
for a while. Bowing inappropriately, standing up
at the wrong time, an accidental snort. Now you are ready.

It isn't what anyone needs or wants. This music
includes recordings made out Trade Center windows.

Plato libeled Gorgias to advance his own proto-
fascist agenda. Those clicking sounds. An unexpectedly
depressing millennium, a real letdown after

the frisky ad campaign.

The flag in tatters at last. The pledge
to reunite in front of a fountain in twelve years.

Until then, storage. A sprig of tarragon

behind the ear.

And these are the bite marks that prove it.

The great negate. The final round
of adjudication and ridicule. For a time—say

thirteen thousand years—we were more or less always
giddy prospectors with claims on the attention of the invisible
archivist, and *now look*, no one can even get the cork

out of the bottle intact. I remember I was bent over

inspecting the remains of a rival gatherer when I got the poke.

So many things to chop up and divide, but the day

ended early and the benefits were substantial, and,

retirement, let's just say it was taken care of. The joke

got passed around, permuted, quadrupled,

and came home river to mountain to lake to field, hungry

as a ghost and similarly attired. I remember dying

of starvation during one protracted cold patch, another time slowly

suffocating, covered with weird welts, while the things

that bloom bloomed. And, much later, being flung by my elders

into a fiery abyss, keeping quiet about the deleted

status of my virginity, hoping for the sake of everyone

that it would rain soon,

or the delicious frogs would return.

But I guess you had to be there, at the assembly, voting

to return to what we now call northern Kyrgystan
and to round up some of those horse-like things to see

if they'd be willing to carry our stuff.

What begins as carrion

returns as lust.

The IMF on trial for murder. You want this

to be the case.

Won't

finally have enough pens to finish the job—

there won't, soon, be any job for which you qualify

other than postbox repair, but even there

the competition will be fierce with those of your ilk.

Hard to imagine that much freedom, that huge
responsibility of the totally useless lint

that collects in the navel. Have you passed
math yet in your anxiety dreams? Very important

to pass the tests and be permitted entry

to the secret shed.

Youth passed quickly as a hunted Depression jackrabbit.

And now offspring fight over your frozen body,

debate the propriety of your clone.

It took me years

to recognize the painting as a landscape,

and then my pleasure was not diminished

but different, like Soupy Sales' later dramatic roles
as frustrated small-town druggists and recovered-

memory rape victims.

We call it stuffing but actually it's form,

that is, emptiness.

Back from breaking the fall of the accounting class

Midsummer, gathering early nuts
and darting past the OTB on a mission
to Venus, a very hot planet
pockmarked with regrets and fallen totem empires.

In whose care do you wish to be returned?
Afternoon popping sounds

above the subway station.

This is a good cave—not much
to brag about at the reunion, but it keeps our things
dry and provides shelter from hungry beasts.
You'd laugh at the things we believed back then.

That our cats cared for us.
That Belgium existed.

That we couldn't fight city hall
because it kept running off.

But we didn't have your advantage of logarithmic
detachment and spunk. We in fact had little spunk—

it seemed to dry up even as it was squirting from our ears,
and food preparation was a lot more involved than subsequently.

Eye-recognition software was in its early stages

and we feared death horribly because it seemed so
trivial. Yes, there's no going back, even though,
especially since, there of course is now a way to go back.

The new nano-woofers are a big improvement.
The reopening of the baths. These dessert salts.

I do miss the old serials, though,
and the braying crickets that attended grave injury,

and the pungent odour of stolen cars.
And it is true, not false. It's a lot to take in
to the laundromat, the thriving corner store, all at once.
If one were to receive instruction from a root
or shoehorn, one could then decipher these glyphs.
A patchy itinerary. Free soap for workers.
When a friend is leaving town, go with her and drink.
When he arrives where he is going, keep a photo

on the fridge.

A great flapping bird, looking for something to eat in Brooklyn.
I've lately been rereading my schoolgirl essays in Latin
and there is much I could learn from my younger self
if I were the sort of person interested in learning.

I debate the merits of cremation and taxidermy
while in Rome, New York, burning, doing as the Rome,
New Yorkers do. Slave to my dick

was a song of that spring. Later, whether Julie
should be executed as a traitor. Gerry,
the consensus: stooge. Ann the anarcho-Lenin, as if.
But at least they can look back from old age and think,

yeah, goddamn it, we blew something up, we blew
something up, didn't we? The rest of us, what did we blow up?
A few hairdryers in domestic rages, correct?
Not really the same thing. Possibly once or twice
sabotaged a Zamboni or contaminated an enemy with plutonium,
laid a curse or two. Model

workers.

I remember most of the plot. And the main character—
his name is Fritz or Cooper or Kawasaki, something
like that—spends the whole film trying to get change
for a hundred. And he wakes up humping
his aged father. Or *has* he awoken? One of
those brain tweezers that appeal to crossword
types. Any surface at all, inside or out, you touch it
and a scrolled menu appears, listing recent history,
chemical makeup, distance to the sun in millimetres,
distance to the Vatican in inches, famous people
who have previously touched this spot, fat content,
will to power, adjacencies, and further articulations.
And each category has dozens of subcategories,
and each subcategory scores of its own, all
meticulously cross-referenced, *linked*, so that each square
centimetre of surface everywhere, pole to pole,
from the top of the mightiest Portuguese bell tower to
the intestinal lining of a sea turtle off Ecuador, has
billions of words and images attached to it, and a special area,
a little rectangle, for you to add your own comments.
It is the great work of a young-adult global

civilization, a meta-literate culture with time on its
prosthetic tentacles, at this point slightly more silicon
than carbon, blinking vulnerably in the light of its own
radiant connectedness. What

villain would wish to blow this up?

But look who walked off with the hardware!

Now that the heat wave has broken and the pain
in the left arm has subsided some,

I can consider your proposals less hysterically
and with purer intent. The thing about food is,
somebody else might get it. Also, that tomorrow
a particular item might be gone,

so what's the point?

The image problem of vipers

is their greatest asset.

More or less day-to-day

war and business crime.

What happened to that guy

who was writing books about secret ciphers
and anagrams in the Bible? Has the U.N. got him
locked up in a secret underground prison in
Paraguay or did they snuff him and replace him
with a Ralph Reed duplicate? *We'll never know for sure.*
A fix so vast that even

we're in on it.

I understand

*neither what you're saying nor why you're saying
it.* There's a good half-boy/half-turkey, my masterpiece.

The situation is as they say fluid, Boss.

We've got our ex-carnies on most of the councils
and boards, and they're itching to whup ass.
Our studies show that water will be the new smack.

This is what I really and truly feel. Send a ham
to the widow Cheney. Live your day as though it's a little
story that you can type up in the evening for fun and

profit.

Pausing at the end
of another successful homily, the assistant

parson bursts into flames.

Yeah, that's more or less what I expected.

I don't have a biography, I'm lower
middle class. I take comfort in histories of education
and their attendant heartbreaks. The 'cello
is marvelously obscene. I mean *disgusting* in a *good* way.

That's why we got along so well: we disagreed
about everything, and thus were freed from the obligations

that come with a shared perspective.
A round of applause. What finally doomed me was
my refusal to take notes. I could have used
a bit more repression as a child. The twitches

and nightmares seem a small price to pay.

But I fell in love with restaurants and worked in them

till retirement, finishing as an executive chef

in a midtown two-star, after which I returned

to the Adirondacks, where I foraged and grew senile
and plotted the deaths of the political

enemies of my adolescence.

It is a fecund and holy thing, this announcement paid for
by the Patriarchy in Action Committee to Re-elect

a Chunk of Wood. Summer dwindles into oatmeal.

The young graphic artists and web designers stand on street corners

hoping for day labour, next to hookers slugging forries.

Most of the crops look bad. the reservoirs are severely

depleted, and a huge brown

cloud hangs over south Asia.

The very fact that you *are writing*

a string quartet is itself an argument.

I then witnessed my own liver being roasted.

for Ernest Adzentoivich and Ruth Goldberg

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Set in Adobe Garamond
and Verdana.

at best 50 copies,
by a publisher tormented with
multiple drug addictions, &
who died following a party
(drugs overdose) in 2005