

forbidden places

in all the forbidden places
like round the corner
and too far up the block
and up and down the you'll fall from it fire escape
and across the bad boy bad girl rooftops
of fertile pigeons and antenna thieves

through the sinister shadows of subway stations
and beware of dogs junkies
and the drunken super
basements
through the unexplored side streets of childhood
my mind wanders

that musk of the living
and dying tenement compels me
the gloom of alley and airshaft
the glow of sunlight on brick
i must navigate asphalt rivers
i must trek the broken glass

graffitied mainland to reach
the cement heart of the interior
and i will not return
i am the great explorer forever lost
in the concrete wilderness
i will discover america

flowering in the rubble

a moon full and cold

there was a moon full and cold
and i was a child in the big wide
unwonderable world
kept safe by my parents and warm
while the radiator with its ancient scales
of cracked paint hissed like a tame dragon

through the green forests
and brown fields of footworn linoleum
plastic soldiers advanced from their beachhead
to conquer the living room or to die in glorious battle
cowboys and indians skirmished at fort apache
alien spacecraft landed and robots ran amok

gallant knights with british accents
rode forth from castle walls to great adventure
fighting firebreathing worms and other strange creatures
so the countryside would be safe for travelers
and a child might sleep in bed and fear no harm
there was no gore just valor and victory and i

was general or prince or hero
anything is possible in the moonlight
this is the moon that shone over stalingrad
when death oozed through the rubble
this is the moon that glowed over the balcony
when romeo swore his love and juliet was enchanted

a leafless lifeless moon amid the tarpaper sky
which rose above the rooftops which shrouded our souls
shining white beyond empty streets and unlit windows
beyond unseen sleepers and reason and dream
a moon bright and distant
as a future as a friend as a life beyond the immediate

i pressed my nose to the windowpane and saw the moon
looming over lovers and battlefields
i wanted to sit forever in its light

to drink in the heavens to drown in wonder
ecstatic and enraptured
sated and thirsting for more

the fearless loveless bloodless moon
beyond the who and what and where of the sun's despair
its stark chill beckoned unanswerable

just another new york city subway near death experience

116th street and lexington avenue
three of us in the subway car
like some underground golgotha
when mister death walks in
not looking too kindly
we are not feeling immortal today
he is six feet tall he is five feet wide
he can sit anywhere he wants
but he stands right over me
cold eyes solemn mouth
in one hand a thick belt
dangles like a scythe
(the other holds the commuter strap
for proper balance because giants
do not like to tumble before their prey)
as the train rocks along
like the history of western civilization
which is irrelevant at this moment
of imminent doom
his eyes do not blink
his mouth does not smile
(i have lost my sense of humor
and all other sensation)
that immense hand
that mysterious belt
dangling in my peripheral vision
like a glimpse of heaven beyond pain
i cannot speak
i cannot run
the enormous gray clad arm
moves and the belt
taps my knee
taps my knee three times
his eyes do not move
i do not move
nor think nor feel
i have transcended
humanity in a subway tunnel beneath spanish harlem

and he walks off
to the next passenger
and taps his knee
three times then on to the next
three times and there are only three passengers
so he lumbers into the next car
searching for knees
and i feel like sir gawain released by the green knight
introspective and glad to be alive
i am young and i have learned
that experience is not unique
that the inevitable is
sometimes avoidable though i don't know how
and that for a mere fifteen cent token i can wander
forever searching for the man who taps knees
but when a voice says *shoot boy it was just another*
new york city subway near death experience
i remember that i was going to play basketball and maybe
talk to some girls afterwards though i am
a lousy shot and terribly
socially awkward

washington comes to visit

he arrives at grandma's house
just off cypress avenue
but nana does not serve him a bowl of her soup
and poppop does not offer him a hand-rolled cigar
and dad does not take his picture
because they are not home
it is 1781 and even their home is not there
but the british are
and washington is scouting enemy positions
so the redcoats welcome him
with cannon fire
from harlem and randall's island and nearby ships
but the general
continues his visit and goes
to the shoe shine parlor on brook avenue
uncle al does not give him a free shine
mom and aunt jean are not standing in the doorway
aunt helen is not watching from her window
and grandfather does not run out
into 138th street as he does
to welcome roosevelt's motorcade
he shines the cops' shoes
so they let him shake
the hand of the beloved f.d.r.
but washington is not yet president
and the shoe shine parlor and 138th street
and cypress avenue and brook avenue are not there
though the millbrook is and so is the mill
and muskets fire and cannons roar
it is noisy as the fourth of july
and washington plans to attack manhattan
and bring peace and quiet to the neighborhood
but he marches to yorktown instead
and the rest is history

al

his father was a bootblack
and he is a bootblack
shining shoes with graceful movements
a faint smile beneath his moustache
while big band music plays on the ancient radio

and when the brushes dance
over the leather he leans
slightly like a man
gently holding the waist of a woman
in a prohibition era ballroom

p.s. 43

jonas bronck elementary school
he settled in paradise
on the east bank of the harlem river
divinely guided to a virgin forest
of unlimited opportunity
that needed only an industrious hand
to make it the most beautiful
region in the world he claimed
but we grew up on streets without trees
and we gathered in the auditorium to watch
space flights on a black and white television
the stage had a mural
of the purchase of the bronx
guys in tight black suits and long white stockings
and some sachem outside a longhouse
the suits were not spandex
and the longhouse was not made
of barclay-barclite fiberglass panels
and just beyond the panorama
maybe some old lenape was saying
there goes the neighborhood
they are letting the whites in
they do not even speak the language
is that real money or are these guys just
a couple of broke tulip farmers with counterfeit wampum
when a launch was delayed we watched reruns
of *my little margie*
then it was back to the space race
because america must beat russia to the moon
so the commies would not invade the bronx
and we stockpiled tanks and troops in europe
and we saved the world for democracy
though we could not save the neighborhood
from drugs and crime
and in our kindergarten classroom
midnight vandals threw the teacher's coffee into the aquarium
the goldfish was floating belly up in the morning
no one talked us through our sadness and fear

it was a tough school
if you barfed in the cafeteria you had to clean it up yourself
which led to more barfing
you cleaned and barfed till you barfed no more
and there was nothing more to clean
then you went to class or went home
my mother had her own memories
of this educational institution
where teachers put clothes hangers
inside kids' shirts to encourage good posture
and criticized mom because her parents spoke italian
and not good english
so when they sent letters home in spanish
which neither she nor i could read
she shared her disgruntlement at the main office
but the next letter came again in spanish
and she returned again and again
she was quite good at expressing disgruntlement
in perfect bronx english
most of us were not bilingual but we were quick learners
in kindergarten we were not taught the alphabet
but the first grade teacher assumed we knew it
we learned this is the way life would always be
full of irony and incongruity and strange paintings
and of love and disgruntlement and rebellion
in third grade i became enamored
with a leopard skin coat
there was a redhead inside it
i don't remember her name
but what a coat
when they painted the doors pink
and put a DO NOT TOUCH sign on the wall
how could i resist
shoving my hat into the wet paint
they would not arrest me for it
they would not send me to the principal
the redhead would not be impressed
even my mother would not yell
at something so absurd
it was like the rich taking money from the poor
it was like going to the moon while the world was dying

it was like sending troops to vietnam
it was like arsonists burning tenements
even when the slumlords did not pay them
it was like writing poetry
instead of working on wall street
it was like jonas settling the bronx
and thinking he could improve paradise
it was because there was a sign
saying not to
it was because the tenements
were crumbling and the trees had vanished
and john wayne had killed all the indians
except for a few token sidekicks
it was because
it was there
and i had a hat
and the paint was wet
and i was a stupid kid
with a pink hat
receiving a great education
in america

the tire man

nixon is rising and the yankees are falling
and i am walking to my political science class
i walk up the hill and down the hill
and a long way along fordham road
in my adolescent oblivion
and i stop
when a tire rolls across the sidewalk
i do not drive but i am a good pedestrian
i yield to rolling tires
even those not attached to cars
another tire follows it
and another
i see a tire lying on the ground
and the man in the back of a truck
drops a tire straight down so it hits
in just the right spot and rolls
across the sidewalk and up the ramp
to be caught and loaded onto the dock
they do not teach this in college so i watch
i cannot explain the vectors involved nor the probability
of repeatedly dropping a tire onto the exact spot
to give it sufficient momentum and an accurate path
i left the engineering program to become an english major
so the poetic beauty of it is enough for me
there are a few sliders and curves but the tires
always get to where they are going
and when the show is over i go to class
where tests are being returned and the professor says
i gave you 35 points for putting your name on the paper
because it is good to know your name
so how can one of you get a 42
i do not know who got the bad score
and i do not know the name
of the tire man
just another nondescript earning an honest living
he will never run for president
he will never pitch for the yankees
but there are no spitballs

and he throws a perfect game

triborough bridge: suspension

the
sky
road rises
quickly above green
shores and gray waters
from astoria to wards island from anchorage to massive anchorage
graceful cables curve
sturdy
blue
arches
crowned
with art deco lanterns
atop steel towers that aspire to heaven above the turbulent hell gate
bearing the stress of humanity
festooning the night
with man
made
stars

triborough bridge: stasis

where is everybody going
the best part of this bridge is the middle
between here and there
between above and below
between all the points
on the invisible compass
of our existence
between scylla and charybdis
to the east the solemn frown
of the railroad bridge over the bucolic hell gate
to the west the land of opportunity and misfortune
the magnificent skyline
a forest of penthouse and project
where the homeless home in the shadows
humanity is beautiful from a distance
the landfills bloom with green growth
frivolous waves drown the effluence
of the money mad world
to the north the sewage treatment plant
that will never make us clean
and the manhattan psychiatric hospital
and the center for the criminally insane
and the abandoned asylum
where inmates laughed at pedestrians
as they walked across the sky
in the longago days of carefree strolls
before random violence
before muggings in broad daylight
the happy people of wards island
picnic beneath trees
to the south children splash
in the clear blue water of astoria pool
imagining that they are sharks
or whales or submarines
imagining that summer will never end
reality is such an imposition
like the grim stone of the war memorial
just beyond their youthful laughter

and above restless clouds drive by
on their ceaseless commute
below there is bedlam and mayhem and the tides
swirl over suicides and shipwrecks
but here in the middle there is peace
there is stasis
there is the music
of wind murmuring through cables
why must every polluted river be crossed
here words are invisible
and the past is no more
the future is but the loss of the present
leap to the sky
not to fly
jump to the water
never to swim again
walk ashore
to live and die in the eternal city
where the meek await to inherit
what is left of the earth
o the hovering the hovering

triborough bridge: genesis

in the beginning there was the land and the water
the water separated the mainland from the islands
and moles said *may there be a great bridge*
to join the islands to the islands and the islands to the mainland
it was good and moles said
may there be roads and highways that lead to the great bridge
that joins the islands to the islands and the islands to the mainland
it was good and moles said
may there be parks and playgrounds
for the people in the cars that drive
on the roads and highways that lead to the great bridge
that joins the islands to the islands and the islands to mainland
it was good and moles said
may there be money to build the great bridge
and the roads and highways and parks and playgrounds
and behold there was money
the nation went to work and it was good
the steel industry lit its furnaces and factories reopened
loggers logged and sawmills sawed
railroads hauled lumber across the continent
laborers constructed wooden frames and poured cement
barges ferried girders over the water and towers rose
cables were wound and anchored
the deck suspended and the roadway paved
the great bridge joined the islands to the islands
and the islands to the mainland
there were parks and parkways and the president
came for the opening ceremony
and the people came and rushed to be first
to pay the toll and cross the great bridge
and more people came to pay the toll
more people and more money
money that could be used to build more bridges
and it was all good
but moles did not rest

triborough bridge: kinesis

an automobile vortex
where three bridges meet
twelve directions of traffic
twenty-two lanes that do not intersect
cars can go from here to there to another there
this is america and there are tolls
to pay and toll booths to collect the money
and police to collect those who do not pay the toll
but we kids are oblivious to the wonders of engineering
and we have no money to give to trolls
we run and scream and fight monsters
in the cement towers of the bronx span
we want to ascend the spooky staircase
and explore the walkway to manhattan
but mommy herds us to the playground on randall's island
where she can sit in the shade and talk to the matron
while the cars whirl overhead
and harry sits on his hill
a small patch of grass bordered by an access ramp
beneath the grand junction
where the harlem span meets the viaduct
harry in his undershirt
drinking his quart of beer hidden in a brown paper bag
basking in the sun and alone in the quiet
he does not build bridges
he does not have a car
he works hard and dies in poverty
they give his ashes to the winds
and he intersects
with everywhere in the great universe
as cars speed by
and the commuters take no notice

the banks of brook avenue

and brook avenue runs
straight through the crooked world
from railroad yard
north to the meat market
and curves and disappears
into the heart of the bronx
where tenements burn and die
and stare black eyed and hollow
like the dead waiting for the soul to rise
and america flies to the moon
and america drops bombs
and america makes war on crime and drugs
but brook avenue never ends
the old mill stream flows long buried
in the great sewer beneath the great street
of the great borough of the bronx
where founding fathers sleep
beneath the shadows of saint ann's church
and indian villages deconstruct
beneath abandoned factories
and the belgian paving stones on which horses clopped
lie beneath the asphalt where automobiles drift
from the bronx kill to the american mainland
and the millbrook housing projects rise to the heavens
above tarpaper roofs where pigeons and junkies
forget their way home
and the brook babbles beneath the surface
and the brook finds its way through the underworld
to the ocean that brings
immigrants to the new continent
they build skyscrapers and railroads
they fight wars and they play baseball
they make money and move to the grand concourse
they make more money and move to the suburbs
or they remain impoverished and searching
for brook avenue grass for brook avenue women
for a steady man for a steady job

for the ship that sails to paradise
the winters are cold in unheated apartments
fire hydrants flood the summer streets with toddlers
and on the banks of brook avenue i see
the world as it is
and the sun beats down
and the bootblacks toil and sweat drops from their brows
and the bootblacks beat beauty into old shoes
and the bootblacks earn a living one dollar at a time
in america where we vote for our kings
and the police beat whom they wish
and the strong beat the weak
and the women walk to store to church to playground
and the children play beneath shady tenements
where boughs of streetlights
do not dance in the wind
and the children laugh and the children cry
on the banks of brook avenue
and the sun sets and the night rises
and the pool hall grows smoky and serious
and the children dream and the children have nightmares
and the darkness of heaven and the darkness of civilization
and the sighs of the lonely and the sighs of lovers
are indistinguishable
on the banks of brook avenue
where childhood is idyllic
and the world could not be more beautiful