

## GATHERED UPON THE LANDSCAPE

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### About the Author

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## The Fountain

I

Dart of birds and stroke of wind  
By *La fontaine des Innocents*,  
Where water trickles  
On basins of solid matter.  
Hypnotic the sensorium  
Of the plaza becomes,  
Full of men and animals,  
Each affirming each,  
Splendid entities of the Earth  
Becoming more than real  
Under the sun's lambent light.  
At the center of the square is the fountain,  
Lifted on a pedestal of marble or stone,  
Glorious in ancient age and intricate  
In its statuary of deities,  
Creatures, nymphs. What does it become—  
This sculptured monument in open air—  
In happening gatherings  
Of strangers at its feet?

## II

Derricks and crates, drills and cranes regulate the city's  
Modern arrangement. Their machineries bruise views  
To the sky's azure blue, to build the latest venue  
For consumption—the biggest in Europe, the skeptic locals say—

Erasing a once sacred space now almost no longer there  
For touristic navigation. A new appetite swells  
From mechanisms of machines, and a former civilized order  
Disappears, never again to be seen, in the routines

Of trade. What is imperiled in what is being erected?  
In the plaza square, where the length of silhouettes signifies loss  
Of light, a woman has to find her way out  
Of this maze, this disaster in the making.

But before leaving, she makes a wish,  
Her last coin now lodged deep into the mouth  
Of the water fountain. Still and supine,  
The day dutifully remains.

## III

Between this corner and that distance,  
    This lazy hour and the next,  
The little girl runs after doves  
    That fly and flutter and croon

In the city's busy plaza square.  
    And when she screams in glee  
At the sight of sudden flight, her still-bright heart  
    Worn on her sleeve for everyone

To see, we know her still-young life  
    knows no grief it cannot contain.  
She is not suffering, she is innocent,  
    she is withheld from man's original sin.

She approaches the fountain full  
    To the brim, delighted by birds that bask  
And bathe in cold liquid and sunlight,  
    Her reflection in the pool of water

An evidence of her presence  
    In her surrounding's well-managed decay.  
A smile for what she witnesses—  
    Feathers everywhere, shadow

On the ground, circular motion above her  
    Swift as today's path of sun.

Her joy too contagious  
    To be named, her face lifted

To the sky like a votive request.  
    When she points to a direction  
Too common to be recognized  
    And says, "*Maman, regardez!*"

Her words are codes to what signify possession.  
    And we consider what have caught her attention—  
How they glide and lift, soar and tilt  
    This side of morning—our eyes relearning

The lost beauty of symmetries.  
    Do we owe her an explanation  
For the things she does not know?  
    For what may give, and be given up,

Once she learns, in old age,  
    What can arrive and leave?  
There are no words. This is her relation  
    to the Earth that makes her alive.

## IV

When I tell you to meet me at a point in the city  
Where a fountain lies at the center of a plaza square,  
And I do not intend to extend my instructions further,  
The way I start a letter and end it midway,  
Without proper punctuations or final  
Valedictions, it is my way of telling you *I am lost*.  
*You must not trust me*. There are many fountains, of course,  
And there, too, are countless cities in this corner of the Earth.  
But you insist for an encounter—*to meet eye to eye*,  
*Face to face*—even if the resident flock  
Of birds has already gone tired and left.  
The trust you give me is too much hurt to admit.  
I come from miles away, and my origin is a continent  
Like a fact you have never heard of  
And do not bother to respond to.  
This anonymity drives your desire to own  
What cannot be yours.

I am unknown to you,  
Other to the ordered terrain  
You are accustomed to  
And talk about with pride.  
Treat me with caution,  
Dear stranger. To you my color  
May be a blanket of danger,  
My language, a primitive hunger.  
I have endured cruel weathers.  
So when I tell you your kind  
Is too much for the threshold  
Of my heart, your grace excessive  
For what I can take in,  
I am telling you  
*Turn your back and leave*.

## Meditation

I introduce you  
to the stories  
I have collected in years,  
one uncovering  
the other, each  
confirming each.  
I talk about the dearth  
of pleasure, the permutation  
of grief, the battered  
woman who whispers  
*wilted flowers of my dreams.*  
Almost always I speak  
in terms of excesses,  
like the ominous stretch  
of the walled city,  
like the perennial habit  
of build-and-collapse.  
Today I show you topiaries,  
the projection of steeples  
toward the sky.  
Somewhere, daylight  
on the pavement,  
on the unassuming face  
of a child. I confide in you  
what the skyline amasses  
night and day. Then I point  
to a direction and speak  
of an expanse  
of land, seeds, a shell  
found nearby a dead  
river. Which means  
I am thinking about *grace.*  
Which means I know

about your yearning  
for fields and fish—  
palpable proofs  
of what is not here.  
So when I tell you  
this place is yours,  
as it is mine,  
you must believe me.  
We are gathered  
in the Metro,  
and you must learn  
to say *yes*.



## Passage

*There should be more time like this, to sit and dream.*

*It's as his cousin says:*

*Living—living takes you away from sitting.*

*-Louise Gluck, "Twilight"*

Sunset came early that night, and the sky easily turned into an unusual pitch dark. I parted the curtains of my room, pushed open the large glass window leading to the landscape outside, drew a chair to sit on. It was slow and silent, this process of moving things around. Before me, a partial view of the suburbs of the city in which I study. I took hold of what I saw: houselights warming the horizon, tendrils and vines slithering through walls, a woman peeping through her window at the beck and call of the neighborhood's resident crow. I did not know what I wanted that August summer, countless miles away from home. I turned away, I left, I arrived. The view was a betrayal to the grime of the world that made me. It sustained me, gave me bliss, the scent of wonder that rose from its ground was hard to ignore. Offering itself like an invitation, it was to be had. In those minutes of calm, between the French skyline and myself, something had begun: a connection maybe, a deep reflection on what could be mine. I was a young man then, selfish and impressionable. I was too happy to know betrayal, too hungry to abandon abundance. All I wanted was to be free. *Come in*, the visible world seemed to whisper, and I entered. Who was I to say no?