

A Letter from the Nineteenth District to Peter Culley  
(a review of *Hammertown* in verse)

The winter seemed so long this year and the pavement  
a mile deep plunged to sewers Roman  
where a seed pearl from my garnet ring  
rolled then stopped. No beach. I missed  
the idea of a wooden house, I missed the house  
also. I missed poignant sheds and alleys narrow  
roughly paved, as you said, the ad-hoc  
rivulets that snake past dumpsters. Why  
do we begin with a season? Rain sounds better  
through wood. I read Napoleon  
caused the card catalogue and I thought of you.  
I must research this, return  
with a report.

Meanwhile, not knowing thoroughly yet  
the customs of exchange, I buy fish  
awkwardly, as the market erupts to Spring. Dear Pete  
what is chaos? (since I've been reading Epicurus I ask)  
There's a story—apocryphal perhaps—  
that as a youth he asked, went unanswered  
by his tutor, then tipped to physics  
as other youth confer to sex. I use this word  
humbly for once, as would a natural scientist.

(even as I write this  
the fluid of inattention  
weeps a deep  
mauve. It's no place  
for a blackbird)

the hawkers calling  
*Sony, Sony* across Maghreb melons mounded pyramidal  
and tempters jabbing sugar dripping hunks  
towards our small budgets as flecked beans spill  
to scarlet radish heaps near flags  
of ample spriggy underpants: simply to describe  
the world is impractical and right.

Well Sir, at night the empty market skeletal  
sketches itself across Place de Joinville. Like  
a drawing by Klee, the galvanized awning posts  
glow among black plane trunks. I learned  
from Carol last week that planes are sycamores. Diseased  
this year, rotting from the heart out, so the oldest  
were one cold day tagged and by next morning gone. How odd  
to wake to chainsaws in Paris! The sawdust heaps  
of Hammertown perfumed briefly  
our modest street, and I felt pity briefly  
gazing at the pithy stumps  
outside the *Ecole Maternelle*. It was nostalgia in the classic sense  
naming a condition of horticultural distress, not some sentiment  
of Literature and habit. At noon the clatter of school lunch

drifts articulate over traffic and the scarlet posters  
demand a Europe Sociale  
not only economic: “This is the Moment  
To Confirm our Refusal of Liberalism Decisively.” The streets  
of the Nineteenth District  
are a frieze of exile  
among which I take a place  
near the Korean Laundromat  
at the Guimard metropolitan gate  
of Crimée station.

Well sir, when I read Hammertown  
I think of Ashbery’s *Convex Mirror*, browse a little there  
(did I tell you that at our wedding we read “Into the Blue”?)  
then turn my thoughts to Wordsworth. But  
having none on my scant shelf (my referents  
on the other continent remain) I find instead  
The Biographia of his wilder friend, and skim  
pleasurably there with my morning tea.  
These books splay still  
on the patterned yoga carpet. Beside *The Climax Forest*  
my dog sleeps, and twitching,  
dreams. Those other men are real  
as Farrell or Davies and like them flicker  
phrase and diction in the texture of your work, friends  
co-joining thought to alter some its progress.  
We cause change by such conveyance

I believe, by mutual craft, and swerve not revolution. Coleridge says  
Shoemakers make good poems and philosophers.  
Your diction's peripatetic. I'll stroll  
with it and this way my nostalgia quench  
for an entire spring afternoon  
attended by your thrumming compilations.

I am sorry to hear  
there was no general strike  
In our province.  
Oh—I thought you should know  
in '68 the boulevard tree-grates  
worked as shields  
against police—thus the horticulture  
of swerve.

I'm glad to see that "House is a Feeling"  
is printed here.  
I have the compact disc  
you burned in 2001  
in an edition of three, giving me  
the third. Its stuttered syntax helps me write  
as perhaps you also were inspired  
one short winter day  
when rain blurred the dusk  
and music fogged the windows.  
How is Daph? What new books has she

from Malaspina offered?  
I have joined no library though I intend to.  
I thought of you again when scanning some review—  
how words fall in Oppen's late verse  
like particles, as if extracted from earlier prolixity  
like a culinary essence. I refer to "Snake Eyes"  
of course. Or did you use Mallarmean dice  
to build your nubby syllabics? And yes I chuckled  
when Kevin rubbed up Rousseauesque  
against Monseigneur Montaigne's tight suit. Tell me Pete,  
what is the minimum? That  
you use a word like "wee"  
simply pleases me.

As in a velvet painting, you lay your strokes on attitudinal black  
—sedge, rust, bees, pearly silver, pea-green shit—  
their melancholic backdrop  
works a sexual ping  
into the ornament. It's kitsch  
yet earnest stuttered, knowing doubt and relapse.  
Is this Methodist  
or borrowed French? Well sir? Whence this word  
tumescient?  
(Knuckles of Wordsworth  
Beasties of Olson  
Bunting's plantlets  
stuck in your teeth—

What are you  
but baroque  
or mannerist?)

You told me in mornings the ladies of England  
come powder-scented from their tubs to town  
melting your opened heart  
as we wondered colonial  
in the streets of Cambridge  
What about Veronica Forrest Thomson?  
How I miss that creamy book  
still back Canada, pulsing its violet powers. Miss Thomson  
knew emulation  
as a critical reduction  
of adoration—T.S. Wittgenstein and all  
brewed up with King Derrida Lear.  
We drank beer with those pale poets  
(well, usually I had wine)  
being exotic for them in a Western  
sense. Despair won't take us. Do you  
write Drew?  
I think of the tubs of the ladies of England  
When a stranger's sudden scent  
inadvertent greets me  
in the courteous evening metro. Hello  
Pete, it's 4:23 pm and "Clean-Up Woman"  
plays on the stereo while the boulevard

trees sparkle  
and the men on shaded benches confer  
gesturing to the boulevard sky  
when I go to the open window  
to see the blackbird sing.

Epicurus wrote to Herodotus  
“there is an infinite number of worlds.”  
To this view I closely adhere  
though my sensations perceive and describe  
just the one  
chaotically. Through screen of opinion.  
others quietly and agreeably prefer.  
Epicurus says because the bodies  
of things are infinite, so are worlds  
though they do not pertain to us.  
I find this idea calming Pete  
as scented powders, oddish pigments, these syllables  
which outside, lightly in the dusk, limitless  
Remix.

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