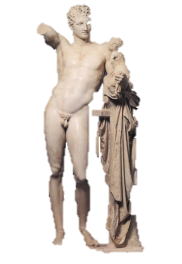
**\* *Caduceus* \***



***Poems for Hermes***

***Arthur Chapin***

*Muse, sing of Hermes, son of Zeus and Maia*…

*—*Homeric Hymn IV

*Mercuri, facunde nepos Atlantis…*

*—*Horace

*The sons of Hermes love to play  
And only do their best when they  
Are told they oughtn’t…*

—Auden, *Under Which Lyre*



***Table of Contents***

FTD*®*  5

Kletic Inventory 6

Priority Mail 7

Hermetic Fib 8

Those Little Reversals 9

On Behalf of the Gods 10

Priam 11

Semele 12

Calypso 13

Caduceus 14

Theseus 15

Marketplace Oracle 16

Stealing Time 17

The Messenger 18

The New Elysian Fields 19

Instant Myth 21

Hermes Psychopompos 22

Orpheus Insufferable 23

Euryidice Incensed 24

Hermaphroditus 25

Orpheus in the City of Dis 26

The Orphan in the Dark 27

His Grand Recital on the Harp 28

The Song of Orpheus 30

Head of Orpheus on the Water 31

Daphne 32

Marsyas 33

The Fortunes of Phaëton 36

The Planet Mercury 38

Antique Mercury 39

Hg 40

Candygram 41

Dr. Hermes 42

Hermes Argeiphontes 43

Atlas 45

Proteus, Menelaus 48

Poem—Tmesis!—of Odysseus 49

Odysseus 50

Epyllia 51

*Strange Gods*

1. Ye Shall Have Other Gods Before Me 52

2. The God Who Was Bored 53

3. Heliogabalus 56

Hermes on a Plinth 59

Gnomics 65

Hermes Trismegistus 66

Liminalia 67

The Sicilian Expedition 69

Constellations 71

The Epilog 72

***FTD®***

Stealing through unsuspecting psyches—

This sprinter in wingèd Nikes—

This highly superior

Courier:

# How does he carry with such rapid, airy

Gestures things so lapidary

Over this granite

Planet?

If he won’t sell the shoes (coquettish,

He’ll tease, *Is that your fetish?*)

The thing to get is his

Pètasus—

The woolen cap or doughboy helmet

(Oh-so hail-fellow-wèll-met!)—

And if you see his

Caduceus,

We’d like that too.—Look for an angle.—

Whatever you can’t wangle

From old Quicksilver

Pilfer.

***Kletic Inventory***



Thief-god, famous in hermeneutic circles,

Inventor of the lyre and father of liars,

Patron of gamblers, travelers, flash-powder miracles—

Smuggler-of-Priam past the Greek watch fires—

###### You with the mythic, mythopoeic look—

Startling, to see your lithe caduceus morph

Into a simple tool, the honest crook

With which you nudge us toward that Stygian wharf

Where Charon rubs three bony digits, frowning—

Conner of texts—wave-skimmer—angel and grifter—

Joke-god—god-in-the-back-of-the-room, class-clowning—

The crux of speech—crepuscular shape-shifter—

The writing and the poem and the reading—

The dreams of sleepers and the quick of metal—

A flowing into quivering solid beading—

Unsettling wherever you may settle—

##### Teacher—bamboozler—anything—nothing—mist—

Glib nephew of Atlas—Zeus’s hustler-and-bustler—

Concealer—Revealer—and—topping the list—

Poet. Musician. Magus. Cattle-rustler.

***Priority Mail***

Before the mind’s eye even opens,

Before the telegraph boys stir,

The sudden inkling Messenger

Brings you the news before it happens.

***Hermetic Fib***

I

Did

Not steal

Your cattle

Or your sheep, Phoebus.

I was at home with my mother.

***Those Little Reversals***

As a baby I made the gods a fine burnt offering.

I wanted to play with fire; piety was my excuse.

I taught your cows to walk backwards, Phoebus. Why accuse

Me of stealing what I was just discreetly borrowing?

In brotherly blood feuds, prophecy foretells a rehearsal.

*Atreus will be king when the sun sets in the east.*

Zeus, at my urging, made that happen. Then came the feast…

To advance the plot of the play, introduce a reversal.

I went to the trouble of starting a war of immortal pathos

For gallantry’s sake: introducing three beautiful goddesses

To a handsome shepherd-prince named Paris… As odd as this

May seem, Eros is older than Death, loveless child of Night.

*****On Behalf of the Gods***

*Don’t shoot the messenger*, I like to joke

When bringing bad news. You, of course, can’t hurt us—

You’re passing shadows, you go up in smoke.

(Whatever shall we do if you desert us?)

***Priam***



I came suddenly to Troy

and found him riding in a wagon

filled with ransom.

He was heading for the enemy’s camp

to beg the body of his son

from the man who had dragged it for hours through the dust.

It was nighttime when I appeared before him

in likeness of a young man with new-grown beard.

# The Greeks not far in the distance

were rubbing their hands over watch fires.

I cloaked him in darkness

and no one saw us pass.

Priam clasped the knees

of his son’s astonished killer,

the hero, who uttered threatening words

at first, but finally saw, in the old man’s grief,

the image of his own—

and together they wept.

The body passed through the Scaean gates.

They performed the rightful obsequies

and the king bade his son farewell.

Hector, tamer of horses, burned on the pyre.

And it would not be long before his father joined him

in the place where the dead forget their dead.

***Semele***



Ecstatically she burns alive.

Something survives

in the womb of the Thunderer’s thigh:

A fetal deity.

# Expect blood-thrilling wine, the brandished

# Thyrsis, anguished

intensities on crests and peaks—

dangerous secrets.

This One for whom the women burn—

Twice-Born

to spark violence of the senses

in the rites of dance:

Hermes presents him freshly swaddled

yo the stern god:

*Father, from mortal Immortal rises:*

*It is Dionysus.*

# ***Calypso***

Skimming the waves

light as a bird

in my golden sandles

A blur in the mirror

of the sea, I convey

the will of the gods

To Calypso on her island:

*Must a goddess so lovely*

*stay here for ever lonely?—*

*His wife, his son his home*.—

The message is: this will be torn

so that that may heal.

So I weave among you,

leaving each a piece

of Fate’s enormous news.



***Caduceus***

The kerykeion, or caduceus,

In ancient times was wielded by the herald

Ushering in the honey-tongued, fresh-faced drug

Rep from, say, far-flung Glaxos, neatly appareled,

With powdered horn from a young, lusty goat;

Or when, at the symposium, courteous

And tactful, he clinked on the libation jug

While the after-dinner speaker cleared his throat.



***Theseus***

*Look closely at your thread,*

*Theseus: it, too, is a labyrinth.*

Enter the Labyrinth once more:

Take up the thread, the rescue mission.

(Why would she let you lose your way?)

These torch-lit halls are echoing

With cries: follow the sounds to where

A carnivore with hornèd head

Lives at the center of the myth

By grazing on the virgin dead.

# A swooping blade, a glassy stare:

You saved the young ones, hero! Bring

Them back into the light of day.

But the myth wills its repetition:

Enter the Labyrinth once more.



***Marketplace Oracle***

*Only a single oracle is recorded for Hermes… The inquirer…*

*placed a coin in the right hand of the god; he then whispered his*

*question into the ear of the statue, and, stopping his own ears,*

*left the market place. The first sound he heard outside was an omen.*

*—*Andrew Lang*, Myth, Ritual and Religion*

Words file across the architrave like stock quotes

On a Dow Jones TV crawl. PRACTICAL OMENS

FOR BUSY PEOPLE. BUY ONE, GET ONE FREE.

(So truth obeys economies of scale?)

You slip the god a drachma and some change.

Hands to your ears, arms bent like amphora handles,

You’re primed for wisdom now. You leave the temple,

You hurry past the stalls, the slaves decrying

The price of olives and libation bowls:

The Stoa shrinks behind you and is gone.

Two men walk by, austere, with chiseled features:

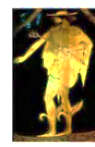
This must be Aristotle; that’s his mentor,

Plato. The former’s pointing to the earth,

The latter to the sky. Unstop your ears:

*Buy low*, says one. The other says, *Sell high*.

***Stealing Time***



A watch falls to the sidewalk in slow motion. A shadow blurs by, palming the timepiece.

We were growing old. We would have grown older.

A lineman high up on a telephone pole looked down at the multicolored dogshit medallions on the pavement below. Dizziness orbited around his head in a cloud of blue gnats and he fell among those countries like Saturn overthrown.

On the other side of town, an angel with five-o’-clock shadow stood under a street lamp, wearing a trench coat and smoking a cigarette. He opened up his coat, revealing the hot gold Rolex.

*I won it*, he claimed, *playing dice with the moon.* He sold it to a passerby.

The divine disc of Aten paused in its revolution around the earth and the weatherman predicted nothing. For once, he got it right. The Rolex in the sky burned out like a Roman candle. Gone, too, was that fine confectionary dusting of stars. Our sleep was fitful in a night without end.

I awoke one Yankee morning with a hangover that consisted of a night sky lousy with stars and bars. They were made of gold, and falling.

They found the watch in a culvert and we were told that the angels had been dead for thousands of years.

A snooze-alarm clock’s tiny trumpet beeped. Sunrise occurred at 6:03 AM. The candy of the moon melted into daylight. We got dressed and hurried off to work.

The angel looked around him and moved on.

***The Messenger***

Long lateral shadow puppets stretch their weariness across the esplanade.

*The Messenger blurs by.*

Hourglass figures stand in studied attitudes of stillness. Inside them, sand is sifting down.

The bottom fills with too much time.

*The Messenger looks at his watch, disappears.*

City of chess pieces arrayed in a million opening gambits: in the blink of an eye

*He weaves you your victories and defeats. Call it a draw.*

There is only one cinema in town. It shows three movies, in the same order:

*Morning’s Matinee. Le Jour du Jour.* That mysterious film noir, *The Night*.

*To the Messenger they are a single still.*

Lovers, or shadows of lovers, are standing hand in hand beside the circular canal.

*Where is the Messenger?*

Ten minutes past de Chirico. In the moonlit piazza a child’s silhouette is motionlessly

playing hoop-and-stick. There are no months, only the moon.

*The Messenger has come and gone.*

***The New Elysian Fields***



The first thing I did was to have

a billion cubic feet of blue sky

lowered into place over the construction site.

Crews with backhoes and steam shovels

installed the bosky groves and tinkling rills.

Mythoturf®, food-coloring green, poulticed

the muddy wounds in the ground.

Orpheus walked through on his way

to the Beautiful Failure, scattering

a few notes from his lyre like spare

change as he passed.

He understood that they were building the poem.

Temples and statues sprang up

where they sowed dragon teeth

like seed money for a college bookstore franchise.

Then they brought in the dead pagans.

Mighty Homer, crossing the field

with his seeing-eye dog.

(They lob Achilles a soft one or two

at batting practice. He manages

a weak pop fly.)

A slow wind-up, then:

HOMER HITS BATTER!

(Umpires are supposed

to be blind, not pitchers!)

That’s Aristotle, in a rare

first edition of himself,

There’s Plato looking spruce in a clean

white chiton (ideal wear for the weather,

set to Periclean Perma-Summer®).

For all eternity

they ambulate the colonnades

debating Free Will versus Fate

and the metaphysics of a place

that is only what *I* say it is.

Now and then they cross paths with

a couple of grounds-maintenance guys

talking baseball.

*You calls it like you sees it.*



*New Elysian Fields, Hoboken, NJ. Site of*

*the first professional baseball game, 1846.*

***Instant Myth***

Running through the meadow

she startles a quickness

and in a lightning-strike

he staggers out of the cave

eyes black from the dazzle

of her vanishing.



***Hermes Psychopompos***

***Shepherd of the Dead***

Cover her eyes. Steal past the dead—their souls

Are still awake—she must not see them—no,

Not yet… They are so weak, their shadows throw

Them on the walls, they have the eyes of moles.

Follow that winding strip—that frozen whirl—

Down to where magma forms a bubbling sod.

Let her trust gravity: it serves the god.

He dwells down there. That heavy heart… Poor girl.

Is that a faint voice echoing: *Daughter, daughter!*

And on her cheek she thinks she feels a breath.

*Come, I will bathe you in the cool, still water.*

It walks beside her now. And she is sad. Oh

Open her eyes, god, she must see the Shadow!

It reaches out for her. It is her death.

*****Orpheus Insufferable***

** *To Hermes Psychopompos*

*They’re breathless with excitement. I live up*

*To my distinguished reputation, filling*

*Their ears with melos, brimming each dry cup.*

*I am a touring star. I get billing.*

*One soft arpeggio: there they are, reliving*

*Trysts under willow trees in summer’s heat.*

*They weep, and (ah, the dead can be so giving!)*

*They lay flowers—wilted flowers—at my feet.*

*These are the scales I practice on the heart.*

*They rise to meet my songs like grass in meadows,*

*And I mow through them with a keen C sharp.*

*It is my Grand Recital on the Harp*

*That wins the prize: the Emperor of Shadows*

*Will pin her like a medal to my art.*



***Eurydice Incensed***

*Having passed the shadowy audition with flying*

*Coloratura singing and eloquent harping*

*On themes so dear to the departed—Grieving*

*In springtime—Death on the eve of the white wedding—*

*Daguerreotypes of dazzled faces fading—giving*

*Them ears composed of nothing but their listening—*

# *Leading me stumbling up a mineshaft twisting*

*Toward that pin-hole radiance thronged by the living,*

*You turn, and I am that startled vanishing*

*You needed to sculpt a frieze of pure departing—*

# *A soft, defeated cry stonily dwindling*

*Into the tragic poem of your regretting*

*It wasn’t to see my face—Or to see me going—*

*Or gone—It was to turn—It was the turning:*

**

***Hermaphroditus***

*Sacred* c*hild of Hermes and Aphrodite, half-siblings,*

*transformed by the nymph Salmacis into—well—a*

*hermaphrodite. (Sacred: set part, cursed or blessed.)*

Sooner or later it was bound to happen.

She gets around, and so do I—and *then* some.

Olympic-class jock, agile, slim and handsome,

I’m on the track to get another lap in

(I’m a god when it comes to track-and-field)

When along comes Cheerleading-Pinup-Queen-

On-the-Half-Shell, Beauty-No-Sooner-Seen-

Than-Loved (under the grandstand, mist-concealed).

The child’s a boy, but incest is perverse:

He comes from swimming half-a-nymph one day,

Wrapped in a towel labeled *His and Hers.*

A marriage made in Heaven? In a way…

There *is* a better half who likes to say,

*Count your blessings*. The other tends to curse.

***Orpheus in the City of Dis***



They’re waiting for you

wherever night vision’s poor:

swindles of perception,

optical disillusion.

Dis: city of deprivatives,

insults, assaults. A puncture

is worth a thousand words.

Retrofit your lyre with trigger and barrel.

Walk fast, shoulders

hunched looking crazy

and mean. Ignore the blurt

of a horn, the squealing wheels,

that gaseous burp wobbling

the manhole cover on

its rim, the down-and-outer

in a cubbyhole sucking

brain damage from a paper bag.

Glide along the wall

like moonlight. Easy.

Descend.

(Should you go back the way you came,

up the subway stairs?) Someone’s

stepping out of the shadows. Look!

She disappears.

******

***The Orphan in the Dark***

*Who am I? Open up the book.*

*I am the orphan in the dark*

*Lamenting, cupping my one spark.*

*How could I help but turn and look?*

*‘Eurydice’, breathes through the cave.*

*A whisper. A hiss. I grope my way*

*Back up into the light of day.*

*There, in the meadow, is her grave.*

*There, the immortal snake that bit her*

*Days, weeks, or was it years ago?*

*‘Eurydice’, whispers the low*

*Wind in the grass, so cool, so bitter.*

*I lay flowers on her grave, and then*

*I rest. I look up at the sky.*

*I sleep, till I hear the wind sigh:*

*“It is time to go down again.”*

******

*****His Grand Recital on the Harp***

It is your audience with the King.

No one alive has seen Hades

But you. Play him your melodies.

Let there be no more vanishing!

One long, thin finger seems to wear

A ring of smouldering almandine.

His crown is a penumbra. Fine

Bone-powder whitens his grey hair.

His throne? A sort of solid smoke.

And next him, Queen Persephone.

Her face is chiseled ebony.

She is wrapped in a shadow-cloak.

How shall your music charm this head

That is a pale cloud in the darkness

Around you? Glooms of rocky starkness

Speak Death. His ring glows Hell-fire red.

Evoke for him the Revelry,

The dancing of young, nimble feet,

A blue sky and the summer’s heat,

Cooled by soft breezes from the sea.

That glimmering figment of a head

Is bowed, and down it seems to sink

In thoughts it swore it would not think

Again. Memories of the dead

Meadows, green spots where once he dallied

With nymphs long-gone, the fountains muddy

Now… From the brown to the black study

His heart is moved. His face is pallid.

He would cry out, but, short of breath,

He wheezes as he grants the boon:

*You, you will sing a different tune*

*To see her die another death.*

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/monteverdi_lasciate2.mp3)

***The Song of Orpheus***

*In the woods, in the forest of*

*My music, ancient animals*

*Breathe. I coax from their cries and calls*

*The hidden harmony I love:*

*The active quiet of bees humming,*

*The rest that is the heaving, grave*

*Sleep of the bear inside his cave,*

*Those little feet on leaves snare-drumming…*

***♫***

*These creatures, ignorant and strong:*

*I lure them from their shrieks and howls*

*Through measured consonants and vowels*

*Into the sacrament of song.*

*I build long staves across their listening*

*Haunted by owls that dream of trees*

*That dream of owls. I fill the breeze*

*With little eighth-notes, blackly glistening.*

*I make a clearing for the moon*

*To see alive the struggling wood*

*In motives snarled, and call it good,*

*Because it lives inside a tune.*

*They are still wild as wind and fire.*

*The fang gleams, and the eyes glow red.*

*But with my music they are fed.*

*They quiver when I touch my lyre.*

***Head of Orpheus on the Water***

Become the note you sing.

Echo of the rising waters.

How the sea’s premonition sounds.

Sing where you will be

with the voice of where you were.

Essential now,

teach the water what water is,

a rashness lost and retrieved

in the mirrors of its motion.

Your voice, Love, is a bodiless honey.

Afloat on a buoyancy that is not hope.

Become the river.

Relax into your delta flats,

work out your intricate metaphors

for a vastness that swallows all qualities.

After the final cadence

your song will sleep in the arms of singing

and the moon’s over the ocean O!



***Daphne***

How long was it secreted

in a soil of possibilities,

the evergreen germ

in you waiting darkly for its chance?

Is it worth the privilege of denial

when the neutral lodges in the grain,

surviving your flesh

like someone else’s bones?



***Marsyas***

In a spasm of pique

she threw it away,

Minerva of the Many Counsels.

Not from a stag

or a red-crowned crane:

from the shin-bones of a human

knotted into a vessel for the voice.

It wasn’t the ligature

or the strain on her lungs

that screwed her face up into shrewdness.

It was the song she couldn’t abide,

the one she awakened where

It sheltered in the hollows

like a sorrowing thing in a cave.

The destitution of that mortal song

cries and is lavish in the ear,

wave on a sea conch,

spindrift, spendthrift, spent.

Ending, and empty at the center,

resonating, for a while,

in the vice of space and time.

And the flute fell to Marsyas.

He was nosing the leaves for berries.

Cleft-foot demi-goat.

Little gamboling man.

And he brought to bear on the bones

his breath, and the history

of his breath—a freight

of dirty jokes and garlic smells.

The flute fell to Marsyas,

whose death lay inside him

like the core of a fruit

forbidden to gods.

If Apollo pulled him from himself,

it was for the secret he hungered to know—

*Where is it happening, the dying in you?*

*I want to taste it.*

Where does it happen?

The secret of the nesting doll

eludes itself. The outside

is what you find in the inmost room.

They pinned his skin to a tree

like a flag.

And the god withdrew.

\*

*Out of the satyr’s bones*

*I make an instrument to sing*

*in memory of those bones*

*when they could sing themselves*

*in flesh-tones, blithe in Arcadian woods;*

*and of the flighty breath*

*that fluted and fluttered there*

*a little fluting in the air*

*once, on a summer’s day.*

***The Fortunes of Phaëton***



O reckless driver of the sun!

How doomed a joy-ride! What a scare

You gave policeman Zeus up there!

This sort of thing just isn’t done.

You cannot simply haul that star

Like a toy wagon on a string

Across the sky, you silly thing!

Driving so powerful a car

Without a license? By no means

Is such a thing permissible.

You will be held responsible,

Sir Phoebus. So your car careens,

Poor lad, knocking things over left

And right. Unwitting arsonist!

You leave in flames, at every twist

And turn, whole landscapes now bereft

Of vegetation; you break all

The traffic rules, and quite refuse

To yield the right-of-way—till Zeus

Steps in and shoots you down: you fall

To earth and land with a loud thud

Even the Underworld can feel;

You struggle to your feet, and reel

Round, and fall dead on the baked mud.



It’s nice to be an open-air

Carriage at times, though, isn’t it?

You ply no whip, you bite no bit:

The driver of the equine pair,

He is the one responsible,

In the law’s eyes, for accidents.

You merely take in the fine scents

Of spring, look spruce, respectable,

Clean, well-kept, elegant and dashing,

On a jaunt through St James’s Park—

And ah, the admiring looks you spark!

Yes, let the horses take the thrashing;

You bask in envy’s tribute-fee

The merely hansom and the trite

Hackney pay you to left and right

As you pass by them haughtily.

How neat a metamorphosis!

The passenger turned vehicle,

The driver, driven—and with skill!

Why didn’t Ovid think of this?

*****The Planet Mercury***

♫

Spinning too close to the Lion’s muzzle—but don’t think

he circles frantically

Like a man engulfed in flames mouthing

the char of his flesh:

He holds himself to the fire and aloof from it,

Janus-faced martyr

To the shadow and the light. Reduced, unflinching,

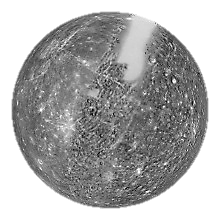
he exists twice over,

Quickest to lead the Dervish dance of planets—

The Child-God owned

A pocketful of tops he twirled into the darkness

on a dare.

***Antique Mercury***

Plunging through midnight—

chopped and channeled

in its black glimmer-coat—

Passing scattergrams

of light scrambling

to connect themselves

Into hilltop cities

dangling

in the dark—

Tinted windows flashing back

these distractions—

mystifying the lookers-in:

Mercury…

No driver,

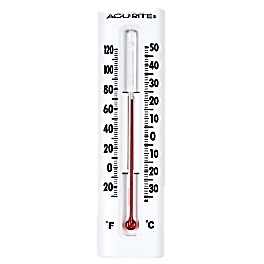
perhaps, but *driven*—

Always arriving at its motions—

bound for the furthest

point of departure—

***Hg***



Hermaphrodite

of the periodic table,

fluent in solidity, cool

metal liquid beading

into silvery

monads in the palm

of your hand.

Rising in sunlight,

excitable blood in a glass

syringe, always

gauging, gauging.

Runner and industrial

run-off, poison

in the felt

hat of the Mad Hatter.

Circling the earth, high

on liquid fuel, paving

space to herald the escape

velocities of brother Apollo.

Shill for a flower.

The essence of these attributes

swirling like clouds

around the central Cloud

that eludes you

eludes you.

I am not I.

I am I’s.

***Candygram***

He looks so suave and personable

In wingtips, standing in the doorway,

Eyes slightly mischievous, but thoughtful.

*Candygram*, is all he says.

“What? No name, no return address?”

He shoots back (in a friendly way):

*I just deliver—I don’t explain*.

And you don’t ask him to. You take

The box, rake off the cellophane,

Lift up the lid, and have a look.

Spell them out: L-O-V-E,

Four letters stamped into the mystery

Of rich, dark chocolate. This is one

Sweet pound of tetragrammaton.

And the dense radiance is such

That you sit down and eat. Not much.

Worm-riddled clod gouged from a grave…

You fall with dreamy lack of haste

And land on a vast pillow of stone

Pock-marked and desolate as the moon.

Figures whiter than a snowdrift,

Souls love or money couldn’t save,

Mouth *Eat, dear*, offering bone paste.

*Baking chocolate, what else?*

He smirks as you exclaim: “Some gift!

It’s Valentine’s, not April Fool’s.”

He laughs at this, and radiantly

Leaves you there, tears in your eyes:

Who could it be but Mercury,

God of messages, ghosts, and lies?

**Dr. Hermes**

None of this seems to bother you, somehow:

It’s so much easier than getting born.

Vague shapes, it’s true, are swirling down the hall.

Hunkering in his hearse, out in the night,

Charon is rudely honking on his horn.

That nurse with snaky ringlets looks a fright.

Ah, but you’re calm, and getting calmer now.

Like trampolines arranged to break a fall:

The sop-to-Cerberus, the prescription lotus,

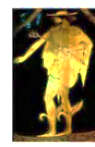
The oxygen mask, for catching your last breath,

And Dr. Hermes there, to walk you through

The Great Transition: *It comes over you*

*In such a gradual way, you hardly notice*

*The slightly chalky aftertaste of Death.*



***Hermes Argeiphontes***

*Slayer of Argus.*

Io: how Heaven’s Queen despised her!

Zeus was clever: he bovinised her.

So Hera must prevent, somehow,

This assignation with a cow.

She hires one Argus as a keeper

(No-Doze, friends call him, Never-Sleeper):

He is panoptic, many-eyed,

Behind, in front and to the side.

But I, who am God’s trusty pimp,

Have found a way around this crimp

She puts in father Zeus’s plans:

I’ll send the beast into a trance.

I’ll flute a tune for Io’s guardian,

A presto, genial, Mozartean.

How grapple with a thing so light?

How can he see that bevy of bright

Grace notes that flutter past his ears

Like ‘angels smiling through their tears’?

The thrilling trills, the highs and lows

Of rippling arpeggios

Replace, as they dance all around,

Each mundane sight with heavenly sound.

Now bit by bit things disappear:

A thorn-bush there, two poplars here,

Like city street-lamps going out—

And to his great relief, no doubt:

The visible’s his one reality,

An ineluctable modality

That bores him, on a hundred screens,

With copies of quaint pastoral scenes.

*It’s time,* he yawns, *these orbs to steep*

*In that sweet blindness they call sleep*—

And into such deep slumber goes

He never feels the fatal blows.

Zeus rolls aside, exhausted, sated.

The look on Io’s face? Frustrated.

For passion dies in brief elation;

Music’s the only consummation.



***Atlas***

A sturdy, simple stevedore

And caryatid, load-bearing column

Of sinew, his face rather solemn,

He has been eons at his chore,

Exerting stolid muscular force.

True, sometimes on him lands a boulder

And he must rub, on the sore shoulder,

(To do this he must first, of course,

Lay down his burden, carefully

And gingerly, upon a table)

Liniments from a jar whose label

Reads ‘AA Hyde & Company,

Spirits of Camphor (Mentholatum)’.

From time to time—for ‘tis no joke—

Heavy his burden feels, his yoke

Uneasy. The enormous Datum

That is the world in which we live

Can’t give itself: It is the gift

Of Atlas, Champion of Up-Lift.

Sometimes there is a bit of ‘give’,

Perhaps in time the Titan’s knees

Develop a tendency to wobble.

His grip grows weak, and should he bobble

That ball… Atlas, be careful, PLEASE!

*And what if he should grow annoyed*

*With us? Though it is large and granite,*

*Couldn’t he just shot-put the planet*

*Into the interstellar void?*

Dears, there’s no cause to be alarmed:

He is, in all, a rather gentle giant.

That’s not to say he is a mental giant,

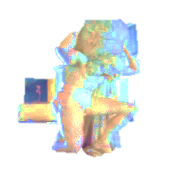
However: more like a beast charmed

By its brute strength and ignorance

Till it believes itself a god.

He meddles, with his brain of sod,

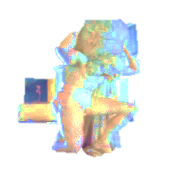
In the greater God’s governance,

And with a porter’s sensibility

Re-stacks the goods of His Creation

In the absence of imagination

And theological credibility.

He upholds, not the world alone,

But all its worldliest views, as well,

The official story that we tell

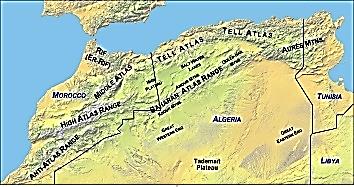
Of sin, and the need to atone,

Till by a Whiggish, slow reform

Through proper channels, necessary

Evils are cured, by ordinary

Means rendering the Good the norm.

Oh what a grueling punishment

For mad rebellion against Zeus!

Your hunch is of so little use,

Huge Quasimodo, stooped and bent.

Earth is so heavy, weary Atlas!

Small wonder if you groan beneath

Her weight, and have to catch your breath

Sometimes: She is a very fat lass.

Imagine she’s a blue balloon,

And you must hold her lightness fast,

Lest off into the starry Vast

She float, just brushing past the moon.



[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/poulenc_mvmts_perpetuels_1.mp3)

♫

***Proteus, Menelaus***

Wing, claw, tooth, tusk… Sunlight will crystallize

That shimmer into a single shape, the real

God’s face. Pinned to himself, he will reveal

Meanings and answers, will be tame and wise.

*This is why you have been condemned to roam*

*The seas: you have offended Zeus. The breach*

#### *Must heal. Perform the rites and you will reach*

*Your Spartan homeland, your Elysian home.*

But in those plush Fields, safe from mortal storms,

The man stays tied to his identity:

*Cuckolded Hero*. Proteus, breaking free,

Escapes into the labyrinth of his forms.

# 

***Poem—Tmesis!—of Ulysses***

In sight of the belovèd shore,

Shouting for joy through spray and foam,

I, nearly—but for the wind!—home,

Am cast upon the deep once more.



# ***Odysseus***

Restored to wife and hearth from years adrift,

You pledge another voyage for the gift.

The god you angered when you maimed his son

Decrees the trespass shall not be undone

Until you reach a distant country and—

Leaving your ship behind you on the sand,

Wagering your weary life far inland, where

No one has ever breathed the salted air—

Do, as the prophet bid you, one deed more,

Planting a lone, propitiating oar.



***Epyllia***

i.

Wrath of the hero

doomed Troy. Sing, Muse, how he cut

   down the horse tamer.

ii.

   Arms went with the man

from Troy to Carthage to Rome.

  (Turnus: to Hades.)

iii.

   Halfway through his life

he climbed up from Hell

   to the beatific stars.

iv.

   Of the mortal fruit

we tasted. Out of Eden

   Michael showed the way.

v.

   Pick through poets' bones

and find the same old story:

*De te fibula.*



***Strange Gods***

I. *Ye Shall Have Other Gods Before Me*

My god is not a jealous sort.

He knows the soul, how it will lust

For other, stranger gods. It must

Have its affairs, however short,

With those exotic Ones, queer fish

Of theological fantasia,

 Goat-shaped, or blue, from pagan Asia,

Adonis-like as one could wish.

And when my god is introduced

To the most recent, does he thunder?

No, with sophisticated wonder

He looks him over, quite amused

By his pretensions, the assininity

Of his demand that I believe

His myth and affirm his naïve

Faith in himself. *What crude divinity*

*Have you picked up this time? Did you*

*Find this one on a sacred mountain,*

*In an old temple, by a fountain?*

He knows that none of them is true.

Your day has come and gone, Dagon.

Your oracles were hard to swallow

Even when the Sybil spoke, Apollo.

And Bacchus left me, for the dawn

Was grey, he found… It ends in boredom,

Like any too-extended tryst,

To be remembered, but not missed.

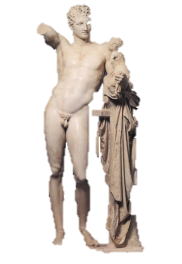
It fades, each flaming scarlet whoredom,

Into the ashes of such fire

As after sunset fadeth in

The west. Ah, the original sin

Is unoriginal desire,

The worship of a store-bought idol!

I tell him new apostasies

I have committed on my knees:

He only yawns at the recital.

He’s heard it all before, you see.

*Do something harder to forgive.*

*Your treacheries grow repetitive.*

*You might as well believe in me.*



II. *The God Who Was Bored*

When there is little to amuse me

I am my own Scheherazade.

I dream up a nice, bored young god

Who tells his faithful, *You confuse me*

*With your pedantic rituals*

*And laws. Do some extravagant thing,*

*Murder, love self-disfiguring,*

*Or your belief in me is false*

*And none will walk the clouds with me.*

And then a trembling man came forth

Thousands of captives from the North

Leading in chains: *All these for thee!*

He cried. *For thee I have betrayed*

*My people into slavery.*

*So much thou signifiest to me,*

*Great Lord!* A maiden kneeled and made

Two rich red lines appear across

Her forearms with a silvery knife.

*Thou knowst how much I loved my life.*

*The more mayst thou enjoy its loss,*

*This life sacred to thee, great Lord!*

And a man turned lead into gold,

And willed it to the god, and sold

Himself for meat—the god was bored.

Salomé cried, before she had

Herself beheaded, *Thou hast tasked me*

*For calling for John’s head, and asked me*

*For mine. In this thou mak’st me glad.*

*[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/strauss_7_veils2.mp3)Would it were thou who held the sword!*

*The mystery of cruelty*

*Is greater than the mystery*

*Of love, even mine for thee, great Lord!*

The sword struck, the head dropped. How greatly

She died, proud in her passionate madness!

But there was not a trace of sadness

In the god’s eyes, so desperately

Sated with stale self-sacrifices,

Those formulaic martyrdoms

Done to the thumping beat of drums

Borrowed from that gauche cult of Isis.

And then there rode by in a hansom

A well-dressed man, holding a cup.

The Dandy drawled, *I give it up,*

*Lime tea, for one whole day, as ransom*

*For any languour, so to speak,*

*You’ve noted in my zeal for ‘thee.’*

*So many engagements, don’t you see.*

*I’ll drop a card on you next week.*

*Oh yes: ‘great Lord.’* The god was thrilled

At such extraordinary cheek:

He had him feted for a week--

And then, of course, he had him killed.

III. *Heliogabalus*

*Assassinated at eighteen years of age.*

A beast to Dio Cassius,

A monstrous mockery of Man

To Gibbon and Herodian:

Tremendous Heliogabalus!

He launched his scandalous reign and life

Outraging Roman piety,

Flouting Vestal virginity

By taking a priestess to wife.

For feasts Rome had not seen his fellow.

Out of the palette of his moods

He chose the colour-schemes of foods:

Blue feasts gave way to green and yellow.

He is, when not yet seventeen,

Already married to a man,

A charioteer far handsomer than

His rivals. The Emperor is keen

As any debutante to dance

The High Priest’s Dance for Senators

Playing audience under threat of force:

He sways in a narcotic trance.

In smoothest silks of gold and blue

He shimmers as he minces. See

How the boy beckons teasingly

With a curled finger, peeping through

The doorway as the sun peeks over

The brightening shoulder of a mountain

Or eyes the glass beads in a fountain:

‘How you must pine to be my lover!’

The other ‘temple prostitutes’

And courtesans are common whores

Compared with him, who is, of course,

Ishtar, when sluttishly it suits

His Syrian soul, which corruscates

With exquisite corruptions of

Divine hermaphroditic love.

He even haunts the Janus gates

For pity, lavishing that love

On gruff Centurions passing by,

And coaxes many a shuddering sigh.

He dares to set himself above

The mortal run, even deprecate

The powers of Venus next to his.

On Hubris follows Nemesis.

O Sacred Beast, you know the fate

Of those in your…especial line:

The head from shoulders rudely rent

And down a river’s current sent,

Trailing a slick as red as wine.



***Hermes on a Plinth***

*Hermes Bearing the Infant*

1. *Dionysus,* by Praxiteles.

Swift god, poised on your marble plinth,

I lose myself in you, and find

My selves, quick-changing masks of mind

In motion. You are my labyrinth.

Athena has her cult, but you,

Supreme god of the Hellenists,

Most *raffiné* of anarchists,

Have not received your proper due.

You are the master and the spark

Of Phoenix-fire inspiration

When image yields to Imagination

The Mysteries hidden in its ark.

To Ruskin you are the great Cloud *In* The Queen of the Air.

Shepherd who veils Athena’s sky,

Weans us from visibility

Till Death comes for us in a shroud.

*You come to life*, facunde

*The truth of dreams, in their obscure* nepos Atlantis*! You speak!*

*Unsure allure, is my demesne,*

*A nether-kingdom, where, between*

*Two truths, the falser is the truer.*

What, is the messenger a liar?

*I am the bringer* and *the news*

*Of some fresh fable to peruse*

*In the Library of Desire.*

*I am the electric currents thought*

*Is made of, their far-flung connexions*

*Flowering out in all directions.*

*I am the hand and the thing wrought.*

How strange to have a mind so rich!

Your lightest jest is infinite;

You are, of course, the soul of wit,

And wit is like the lightning, which,

Writes your mercurial son, Shakespeare,

‘Doth cease to be / Ere one can say

“It lightens”.’ Unities defray

In you, and disparates cohere.

3.

*No other god has quite my rare*

*Olympian temper. In me, Platonic*

*Ideas grow perverse, ironic,*

*Because I juggle them in air.*

*In me are truth and lie compounded.*

*Where I preside, one truth belies*

*Another, contradictories*

*Meet, and their play is free, unbounded.*

A middle-class hallucination

Viewed from the suburbs of perspective,

What is the ‘real’ but a collective

Failure of the Imagination?

**It is a myth composed of myths,

This everyday reality,

This politics, this history…

Over their shattered megaliths

You glide, swift as a skimming bird

Over the waters of a dream.

For things are neither as they seem

Nor otherwise. Then how absurd

To give such credence to the real!

It includes unreality.

To be, to seem to be, to be

Or not to be, fact or ideal:

In essence, are they not the same?

In your eyes, Hermes, it is so.

The truth of dreams is all we know,

Yet these still carry falsehood’s name.

*I fly on moonlit wings, and see*

*The dawn before you mortals do.*

*From me comes Adam’s Dream—comes true,*

*And is a dream again, through me.*

The soul of speed, you take brief rests

En route: these we call *here* and *now*.

Your dreams are real, but we are slow

To realise them, fell arrests

Of day fixate them in a pose

Of daydream, of mere fantasy,

Mystified by the sophistry

Of fact. *But when the night draws close*

*Or leaves us, when crepuscular*

*Or pale auroral charms take hold*

*In opal or vermilion-gold*

*And every* is *is* as it were*,*

*Then we are in Hermetic space.—*

Yet all that’s yours, you steal, sweet thief!

From every Book of Truth, a leaf,

From every pack of lies, the ace.

4.

Lend me the lightness of your wings,

Lord. Make my spirit bold and free

To outrace the perpetually

Receding earliness of things

Back to a time when time is not,

Or weighs as lightly on the bosom

As rose leaves, or an apple blossom,

Or is a dream, a passing thought,

Or is a youth himself: no scythe

In hand, no grizzled beard, no cowl.

A lyrebird is Athena’s owl,

And all is beautiful and blithe.

5.

There is a Country House on high.

A terrace gives on a trim lawn

And by the poplar stands a fawn.

Oh! Isn’t it a lovely Lie?

A boy named Time (blue is his eye)

Is lounging on that endless lawn.

He makes the gestures of a yawn.

‘Oh isn’t it a lovely Lie?’

The lie of this green land we live in

Is fashioned from Time’s timeless dream

Beside the Heraclitean stream;

A lie we live so well even Heaven

Believes it, and consents to *be*

That Country House wherein we say

The perfect lines to keep the play

That briskly-moving, buoyantly,

Charmingly and amazingly

Droll and sensational premiere

Performance of itself poor, dear

Reality’s too dull to be.—

But these are moments, moments only.

Time, with his pale blue eyes, reminds

Us he is Eden’s whore, who finds

Us fools, and leaves us poor and lonely.

6.

*When I let fall an idle wing,*

*Looking around; when I stand still*

*Mid-errand, and from a high hill*

*Admire a meadow and a spring,*

*A vine-clad cave, a shady grove:*

*In that so-brief repose you have*

*Your being. But ah, the wings wave,*

*The moment’s gone, I’m on the move!*

*IMPULSE is my primordial name:*

*‘*Make love to me!’ *The shepherd’s prod.*

*Perhaps the* ‘fiat lux’ *of God?*

‘Die, Love!’ *quicker than fear or shame.*

*Now I must drive you far beneath*

*The earth, with my compulsive crook,*

*Down to where you at last shall look*

*Upon the faceless face of death.*

***Gnomics***

1.

The rod that ripples is a serpent

That straightens and becomes a rod.

Moses relinquishes to Aaron

The voice that spoke with living God.

2.

Tiresias walking in the forest

With a stick parted snake from snake.

# From man, a woman. From a woman

The Man who died for living’s sake.

3.

Brother Apollo gives to Hermes

The double helix and the staff.

Goddess with god engenders gender

Whose self will not be cut in half.

4.

In a secret woodland clearing

Lives the pristine androgyne

Whose wand is trance and transformation,

Quick branch, bright candle and a sign.

***Hermes Trismegistus***

 ***Magus***

The dream of the alchemist

is an ache in the mist.

The corruptible sorcerer

errs to the core,

Hears a babble of bells

when he summons music

with his spells.

# The golden affinities lie

in mineral oblivion.

\*

Inside the changeling

was an angel.

He lived to word

the world.

With a wave of his wand

he assembled dawn.

As soon as he saw

what he was

He wasn’t.

He only wants.

\*

God into goddess

goes. She gets with child.

It lies mute, in a trance,

almost-transmuted

Substance, no sex,

too many sexes: useless excess.

No place for the atavist

from Plato’s primal race:

Hermaphrodite,

living epitaph!

The phallus

erects its obelisk.

The vagina

is a grave.

## ***Liminalia***



The compass needle trembles. He who is lost

Hesitates. You will meet me at the crossroads.

Sorceries of twilight—hourglass granulating,

Sand melting into glass: these are mine.

I read my hoard of secret spells by the stars’ pin-light.

Before Dawn comes to you, she comes to me.

I diced with the moon and won you extra time

To admire the Eternal before you disappear.

I lead you to the less-than-real-abode,

The placeless place. I traffic in your vanishings.

I am the quick of lightning and a thought.

What you call now and here: my little rests.

I take messages from near to far so fast

I confuse Space. Distance thinks it is *here*.

The Real? Look for it at the edge of a far shimmering.

There I have set my boundary stone.

That city you saw in the desert: a mirage?

Perhaps it is the desert that isn’t there.

The tree bursts into itself, blazing like a vision.

It has swallowed the soma of your gaze.

The table of square roots and to dream of a card trick:

I lay them impartially before you.

Take these things into evidence.

Hold them up to the radiance you see by.

You, too, were entered into evidence

When you entered the radiance.

***The Sicilian Expedition***

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 6

A minor god, despite your many aspects,

Essentially good-natured, almost more human

Than divine, and so you had a greater share

In the daily life of the people than the more austere

Or blustering deities, huge in their armor

Or unattainable in their sashed loveliness.

They evoked your name at crossroads—

All of them so haunted, so accursed,

And you had power over the dead

Buried in wait there, in the motionless space

Where flows of traffic pass each other in their haste.

At the entrance to their houses they placed you

On a pedestal. You were the sentry, bluff and phallic,

Cock-blocker of calamity’s approach.

And so it was more than untoward, it was an omen of disaster

When your images were smashed by unknown hands

On the eve of the Sicilian Expedition, as if to ensure

The beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire,

Greatness destroyed by demagogues in the name of that greatness.

And so, no minor god, after all, great Hermes,

But the most faithful and witty companion

Of the Athenians in the time of their ascendancy,

The first to feel the bitterness to come.

At war’s end, as the Spartans dismantled

The city walls, the work was accompanied

By the strains of your beloved instrument.

Citizens wept to hear—ghosting the curt percussion

Of hammer against stone—the sound of flutes playing

Thin, cruel, hieratic music, suitable for a god’s departure.

***Constellations***

*Hermes guides us through the last* Duino Elegy*.*

*\* \* \**

*Even the constellations deceive. —*Sonnets to Orpheus

Beyond the shooting galleries, the shrill laugh,

The gaudy prizes winking from the shelves,

I am that shadowy figure with the staff.

Follow me to the outposts of yourselves.

Above the mist’s rippling handkerchief—

That warm, wept stream—those flocks of sorrow, bleating

Quietly in the dark—stand on this cliff:

Watch as they take their shapes for one last meeting.

You raised them over you on cold, clear nights,

Cast over space a skeletal poetry.

Ah, but the space: it grows and grows. Orion

The Hunter and his glittering prey, the Lion:

Drifting apart now—tattered little kites—

Shedding their names… Irrevocable… Free.

*\*

**\***

The

Epilog

Spoken by

Great Hermes \*

Lords and Ladies

Fresh out of Hades

Go put on your gayiades

Beneath the cool Playiades \*

We lay down our bony burden

Leave things as found profound uncertain

Your good words our only guerdon

Good readers gently draw the curtain \*