



OR TO BEGIN AGAIN

ANN LAUTERBACH

PENGUIN POETS



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PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

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Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Penguin Books 2009

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Page ix constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Lauterbach, Ann,———.
Or to begin again / Ann Lauterbach.
p. cm.—(Penguin poets)
eISBN : 978-1-101-02920-6
I. Title.
PS3562.A844O7 2009
811'.54—dc22 2008038414

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*For Constance Kaine and Thomas Neurath
In memory of Nikos Stangos*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express her thanks to the editors of the journals in which some of the poems, often in earlier versions, first appeared: *Atlanta Review*, *Bard Papers*, *Conjunctions*, *Da*, *Under Porch*, *GlitterPony*, *No: A Journal of the Arts*, *6x6*. An earlier version of "Nothing to Say" was published by Belladonna Books, #85.

Also: continued gratitude and affection to Paul Slovak at Viking Penguin; and to Lourdes Lopez and Anna Moschkovatis for their generous guidance and help; and to my colleagues and students at Bard College, for providing a buoyant community of inquiry and response.

A NOTE TO THE READER:

When a proper name appears in parenthesis after a title, it often indicates that the poem has been drawn from an encounter; notations written as I walked through an exhibition, or listened to someone give a talk; or from my reading of an essay or poem. Throughout this collection, I am interested in differences between spoken utterance and written text.

I.

The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.

—EMERSON, "CIRCLES"

BIRD (THOREAU)

1.

The great stalks are alert, their
shambles piled: maybe another parade.

An evident gray, a slow march
and legions rudderless; an ordinary flow.

These none of them quite real, none present,
like mischief in a dream: the blue garment, the rusty blade.

Came late or have you come late or are you, you are late
then on into wakened sobriety's itch.

The great stalks move slightly. They press back.
Waiting folds upward into a shape

to be seen later, or not seen, not now, not later.
Take hold of this garment, this was said.

The thrust of these injunctions. *Take hold of the blade.*

2.

Stepping man is stiff in the shade.
Let him be, or chop him down.

At the far side of the miserable hill
an orchestra is rehearsing for the factory's ball.

As usual, a train is near, but there are no feet.
The wheels peel off into global dust

and there is flesh, naked flesh, exposed to it.
Where were you? asks stepping man.

Where are we? you answer, taking shelter.
In the other, invisible mode I glimpsed him

walking away, toward the river, into a meadow.
The head of stepping man is bowed. He

seems to be alone in history, alone in the brush.

3.

Stepping man: cowed, immobile, an
invention of the nude season; an invention of

new arrivals and the one tulip and
beating of the woman with a baseball bat.

He stepped on her face.
Hear these enactments

or forgo them in their temporal settings.
The material of the world? Will?

How the Jesuit and the young woman
might have walked along an avenue in 1960

and then, this long, this far away
in the tangle of the bare, emergent copse.

Stepping man recalls Thoreau and is envious.

4.

Drab us; lonely *sequitur*. Stepping man, distilled,
no more than a fake. Quaint acquisition, no

more than material fiction

to see or not to see. He

cannot look up, and the light
drifts across his shoulders

as the river slinks on to curse
his rigid stride:

New York, Albany, Troy, then
night and the music he might have known.

Stepping man, burning ash, the bird's
quick target—*carries the sky on its back.*

DEAR BLANK

The instant quarantine on its shelf.
Deletion ranged upward, proto-winged,
enough to go on, as if singular.
To then, if it were then
it looks like you are writing a letter
interrupts Knowledge, whose source cannot
be owned. Try not to fall apart.
Try to stay on the case, in case you need to fall
into speech, example, *It looks like you are writing
a letter.* To whom it may concern.
To be then concerned.

And so the unobserved passes through its glass

twilight. Hitched to its seam,
a spectacle tangles with a spider
caught among settings, conquests.
Nowhere does the announcement flair,
nowhere does the exception pertain.
The refrain, its indifference and scorn,
travels into the familiar trace of the already consumed.
Abstraction, the stagnant sign, becomes a wager.

And yet, one wants to say *and yet*,
night will come down over the water
and the train will approach its final destination.
She will turn her attention to leisure—
the good car, the good china, the good rosé.
Some eccentric ground will form under the atmosphere
where the bones lie, where the burned books
nourish the lilac. She will recall a friend's comment,
It looks like you are writing a letter.
Would you like help?

Others escaped. They will not sign their names.
They will stay for a while on a Greek island
while a child is conceived in another country.
She will say that its name must be pronounced
the same in French as in English
in the vicinity of the letter, in the habit of grace,
like, or unlike, the disinterested bird.

And so the generic is elicited from under the hood
along with anything winged, or sudden,
small in its habit and domain.
Witnessing the close, collecting the stuff,
counting the days until
what is pronounced comes into view
as a picture of a criminal or a lover or a child.
Remember? What was the name?
Dear Dick, Dear Pris, Dear Jen, Dear Tom.

ANTS IN THE SUGAR (BLANCHOT/MALLARMÉ)

She puts the beginning into moist stuff, vague
but substantial
among attributes. She puts the beginning in
as thought or as dream
but not to be praised or worked over,
not to be given to enterprise. She puts it in.
Something closes around it.

What then? Tireless, flamboyant sequence. Guards running beside the car
like so many fish tagging a whale's belly,
a girl shines and flips like a coin,
goldfinches loop
among branches of crab apple.

Nature not at all present
and the present not present
at any beginning.

Quickening, surrender,
failure and omission coincident
what rots out a trophy scent
trots out its song
phantom aptitude
for which there is only a parade
moving through its sleeve
bringing the last to the first
parting the ritual valve

coming farther out

into the mere field
one leans back on the field
as if it were a wall

leans asking

Who is at the helm?
Who is leading this astray?
Who is behind the wall?

Who has bagged the plot

has issued forth the command
taken the recipient from the prize
canceled the flight
mocked the apparition of time
as not necessity, not damage, not a call

who nags

exposed to the sky
not to disclose its departure
nor its initial tug

as if it were a wall of light

flipping waves onto our links
as error illumines small white marks
enfolding the circus:
trails of dark ephemera
hasty attachment to the real.

2.

Baffled: where is the beginning, how will it open?
Not to anyone, a daisy or the various
floods over and above
the diaristic song
zones of retrieval

masked onto names

to say *hurry now hurry*
from the rude gaps of wind
cloistered by the throat

the vigilant stem

arousal from stupor lifting its head
to be silenced and to begin again

rhythmic shelter *hello*
echoes
hello

Who and who is listening?

Provision gripped
loosened from its tether
most narrow abatement

along the slope of the sound's appraisal
what was heard

in the sanctity of the inner ear: w/ a/ e/ r

we
are
we
wear
we
war
echo

so feeble as to be
enchanted

if it were to return as itself
if it were to respond

that which repeats

I told you so
at risk of beginning

as if stepping across a bridge
where there is no bridge

sending a note
when there is nothing of note.

3.

Ants in the sugar.
I am waiting to calm down.
Ants in the sugar.
I am hoping to exit this stratum.

Who is that man walking along the road?
Who is that young girl in the pink dress?
Ants in the sugar.

4.

Foregrounding a static molecule.
Spectral instant.
Maybe something is arrested, maybe
an elemental marker but not as yet present.
Could wander away? Could be at last lost?
The steps, the path,

filtered through the single static molecule,
did they come through passages of debt,
coming back across the field, avoiding the story?
Through the blue glass and across the nodding limbs,
dragging its shadow but staggering nevertheless:
accurate zombie with a license to foretell.

Logic in ordinary garb approaches.
Not dissimilar to a job offer, or a court decision.
Also not a simple ordinance or sequence
on the lap, in the garden, after the initial hurrah.
Moon quest arrives in late twilight; moon quest
announces another go-round under the tutelage of sound,
ever sweet, ever persuasive in rendition.
The moon and the piano in accord,
as if distilled from smoke, a
pale yellow suspended in a pale blue.
Some darker visual incidents, some stray sounds.
Nature not present. Moon not present, not as moon.

5.

Feed the acid-loving plants.
Imagine the future.
Ants in the sugar.
That craft might collide with being, being
with others. That the blood might inhale toxins.

These, others: for example, the *this* or the *that*.
That she would withdraw, and the thing
would stink. That the body would exaggerate its claims
with its routines, its vitamins, its hurt ensemble.
That the cat would die in her arms.
That they would rush to the river to see the sunset.
That the dead girl's father would offer stones for the cairn.
That the instant would contain precision.
That the iris could be a definition.
That the shape of things to come would take another shape.
That the invention of the end is linguistic.

INDICTMENT WITHOUT SUBJECT

From the bourgeoisie tribe an aspect of looking.
The near settles in.
The near is rejected by the bourgeoisie tribe.
The bourgeoisie tribe
settles among its kinsmen
and adds to itself.

It watches the wasp struggle in bleach.
It erects implausible glass.
It brings into view the hanging man.
It enjoys the spectacle.
It copies out the printed day.

The bourgeoisie tribe makes babies.
The babies cry *I want*.
The babies cry *more*.
This is how it learns to count.

The roses are already in the fire.
The despot has been abased.
The shelter has been committed to film.
Weathers have reduced the population of herring.
Statements are made from
statements that have been made.
It, the tribe, is small among acts,
invisible from the erased horizon.
The sky is purring, engorged.
Steel has been seen to melt.
Steel with the strength of mutants and despots
has been seen to melt.
The articulating angel mauls the insentient thing.

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