

An Epistle to John Zorn on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday



Archibald Michiels

I.

They would have liked to black you out.

A Zorn in their flesh,
you were blinding the city,
the apple of their eyes,
moving black knights on squares of snow.

How could he how dare he how did he

Too late, folks –
ever since it started to live,
music has been making moves.

II.

You want it longer?

The idea of a short poem
is relative to ends and means.
In our subject, though,
abundance
is of the essence.

Let the wide river sing
down to the shimmering sea.
There's knowledge in the eel
and knowledge in the whale,
she knows the knotted root at the source
and he the sky-ruminating sea.
Sound leaps and stumbles,
sound wounds.
Sound glories, sound suns expanding,
exploding over the shimmering sea;
sheets of silence
over the sky-ruminating sea.

III.

Let's leave this lion of a sea
and beg

from Francis:
three thorns and a rose
and death as a younger sister
that we may see her grow;

from Jerome:
a strong Latin line,
labials dentals and liquids
that we may kiss, and eat,
and flow.

IV.

We make it shorter
as evenings grow
gathering light that we cannot keep
for want of a *well-wrought urn*.

If we had faith enough and time,
we'd turn to angels
– *el ángel bueno*
para hacernos el alma navegable –
and those who keep the Books,
to see our names
absent, for good.

But as the evening grows
filling its holes with darkness,
the soul is unsure of the color
it should wear.

If there's no music in the spheres,
if they do not
so much as move,

if the stars are dull and mute,

then sound is the reason
to make music more.

V.

Sister Silence
moving in the wards
among white walls
and supine bodies

damnation is a damned word
three damned syllables
in a damned row.

VI.

Neither suffering nor detachment
will bring it nearer;
they are but chosen methods,
soon growing into second nature,
erasing the possibility of choice,
if ever it was there.

They can't bring it nearer.

It stays where it is
and has always been,
undefined ,
uncircumscribed even,

wary or indifferent,
we can't tell.

No point in asking us
what it is.

VII.

Music for a while
in pearls of sound
beguiles,

but soon so soon
bits of harsh prose
propose dispose.

Unfortunate queen

of the orange symphony
of your burning ships

and him standing laughing on the shore,
insignificant,
secure,

your lost love,
the very last sheet
of your score.

VIII.

The one-eyed god guiltily hands in,
as if it were a late assignment,
the mutilated copy
of a mutilated song.

So human is the score,
and human is the word

to heal
and restore.

IX.

Remember that dream you had
– or should have had –
things pleading to be
swung around
that all their faces
– as they were meant to be –
might be seen at once?
And you pleading (you and me)
that surely they would understand:
one side at a time,
the others to wait
in silent order.
Ah, they didn't like that,
did they,
the lazy answer –
the one I always gave,

I wonder about you.

X.

Turner, page turner!

Other ships I have
waiting for the page,
violent ships on a calm sea,
black in their bellies,
white in their sails,
white, still unmistakably white,
in the faces on deck, in the open air.

Past casting a freezing shadow
on the vibrant present,
wasps hovering around the fruit
at a party thrown on the shore.

XI.

Let us go then, you and I,
we have Americas to un-find.

Let us be bold
and native everywhere.

Let us proclaim
darkness and night are lovely,
the *Tyger* as much as the *Lamb*.

It's Man that's bothering us,
us doubting that he and she
can still be taught in time.

XII.

Silent symphony for water and reeds
until a light wind starts to play;
a drizzle joins in unheard
until the leaves begin to drip;
then waiting in the wings,
the morning
sounds
a horn, a bicycle's wheel,
idling;
the proverbial milkman's van
tame now and neighbor to silence;
then kids running to school score-blind,
a raucous jam;
you take them all in,
you Joker.

XIII.

Sounds and syllables have lives of their own,
multiple, splendid, secret,
teeming lives.

What other reason could there be for us
to give them heart bowels and lungs,

to breathe hard
on their lazy adamic clay?

XIV.

So for a time
– out of poverty you claim –
you survived on potatoes.

I'd rather have thought your aim was to join them,
The Potato Eaters and
the implacable beauty of their being there.

You and me,
stepping into the picture,
sitting down at table,
starting to eat.

XV.

*The audience is no part of the community –
your words.*

They leave me in the cold;
care to invite a lost sheep
into the fold?

Rubble *my* words
clog my throat;
the wind bloweth where it listeth,
that must mean I suppose
somewhere out of my depth.

I have no choice
but to carry them around,

the words I mean.

They will have to do, as a community.

XVI.

The Song of Songs?
Shouldn't the prize go
to a Bird?

Cutting through the metaphors
to the deep hard core:

nothing there save
a metaphysics of presence.

So the core is empty:
long live the core!

We fillers,
we are the kings!

XVII.

Giving up is by far
the harder course.

We were made to beat.
We were meant to mean.

We don't like a passive voice.

XVIII.

Let the invitations take flight.

I order words
for the whole table.

Cheap chapbooks.

Then silence.
Then music.

Then Silence.

Then Music.