

## Elegies & Vacations

*Elegies & Vacations*, Hank Lazer's eleventh book of poetry, is Lazer's fourth large collection of poetry, following *Days* (Lavender Ink, 2002), *3 of 10* (Chax Press, 1996), and *Doublespace: Poems 1971–1989* (Segue, 1992). A noted critic, Lazer's two-volume *Opposing Poetries* (Northwestern University Press) appeared in 1996. With Charles Bernstein, Lazer edits the Modern and Contemporary Poetics Series for the University of Alabama, where Lazer is Assistant Vice President and Professor of English.



# Elegies & Vacations

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*To Jake Berry, Jon Berry, and Wayne Sides*



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Cover photo by Wayne Sides – “The Prophet” – Birmingham, Alabama (1977). Reprinted with permission of the photographer.



“to what are we ancestral”

do they speak within me

now that they are dead

they *were* here    what *are*

they to me    & what *were* they

couldn't they have been

nearly anyone telling those

stories    they made

a claim on me    i carried

forward their stories    i pledged

to do so    & so

took up this calling of words

i did it with their ear

nonnative to this language

& i unaccustomed to

this genre    & the people of it

## Portrait

Who can say what the day may mean in its  
parqueted intricacy, its lacquered imperviousness, which, as we know,

was

built upon a subflooring overly susceptible to dry rot, an  
odd name for a fungus brought about by excessive moisture,  
which in due course severely cracked and damaged the beams  
and joists which were supposed to hold up the whole  
goddamned shooting match. The work world proves and reproves  
itself inhospitable to language play, a memorandum too strait-laced

clime

for your slavic improvisation, "The Nude Whirled Sinfully." As for  
Suzhou who could say enough about the sycamore-lined streets, the

practical but atouristic canals which so impressed Marco Polo eight  
hundred years ago, though now the translations of his travel  
writings are keyed to different city names and you cannot  
find exactly what he said and prize-winning historians snicker at  
Polo's inconsistencies and amusing ethnocentrism. Sentences stretch  
out this way,

which has become your signatored way, languorous, late nineteenth  
century,

wistful, though a hammock relaxing to the spine and thus  
fit habitation for the englobed meat atop said column, rivers  
or canals, channels in their own right. For those who  
love a complex civic whistling, a tripping hymn in a

minor key, or the few who still sit in the  
museum of intensive reading and savor a beautifully phrased cultural  
estimation bubbled up as personalized rumination, your loquacious  
threnody proves  
to be a sousa music of our time, a wry  
march, with a grin, into the sunset of our national  
decline. Fuses blow, though exactly what such domestic phenomena  
portend  
is anyone's guess. At the dinner table young boys in  
their baseball shirts dawdle over vegetables; young girls ponder barbie  
accessories. A recent dig demonstrates for certain that the remote  
control antedates the development of individual psychology. At some  
point

in the composition, coffee gets replaced as the beverage of  
choice by a single malt scotch, and if the reader  
is alert and quizzical, her own thoughts will shift into  
focus. Once the city was exciting, a place for logarithmic  
extraction and pastoral compensation; now, however, we've been  
convinced we're  
post- all that. If they would clean up the canals  
and paint the stucco homes the mauve the taupe the  
tints of rose the tourists love, then Suzhou and its  
silk, if the townspeople could take on a hospitable swiss-like  
or hawaiian eagerness to please, then fearful busloads of hard

currency would be doled out among rock gardens and rickshaws  
bicycling amidst the dolorous sycamores, and you among them with  
your boyish grin. It is finally then a comfortable and  
even comforting beauty you propose, mostly backward-looking,  
relishing the syrupy  
pageant of temporal transformation, its merciful indistinctness, and  
you  
the professor of its almost inaudible drip. Eccentric personages  
entertain  
us, though the media rein them in, until all become  
fully explicable, if not pitiable, within a picture and one  
page of simple prose. Which makes me want to say  
as my brother-in-law James Odis Parker does, “bite a hog.”

Much slips from view, in your hands felt through the  
reel, a specific drag to what pulls away, eludes apprehension,  
tangible as the soggy tennis ball your dog keeps depositing  
in your hand, and equally resistant to absolute articulation except  
as your exact description of approximation, which becomes our limited  
credo of the knowable, reap as you sew, mixed eloquent  
riff attuning to millennium. It’s inventory day in the jewelry  
store in the mall, and your job, which requires you  
to stay after, is to count the cultured pearls and  
to categorize their various sheens, which you would never consent

to do if you did not have rent and electricity bills to pay and an almost desperate need to live on your own, so you shift from foot to foot and watch the middle-aged man in the shop across the way sell rubber-band powered birds that flap and fly in circles. Even the muzak, trivial and manipulative as it is, can be savored, *if* one has the leisure and the archness coincident with a meta-perspective. That is what is meant by criticism. If the narrative were a little more filled in you could say whether “twist in the wind” meant an

actual body or a color-changing leaf, though either way it’s metaphorical as all get out. Friends come by to say they love you, which is nice, but means there must also be some pressure now to say so. They do love you, and the best elegy is an early one. Who would be foolish enough to ask them as we pass by in our soft-seat compartment and as they go to the fields at dawn driving the yellow buffalo through the turgid earth, are you *happy* living this way, only to encounter an utterly puzzled look, the facial equivalent of

addressee unknown, while we continue to calibrate if not celebrate  
the modulations of our daily moods and the larger more  
glorious denominations of our individual quotients of personal life  
satisfaction.

Frivolous nationalists, forbidden to read the american cultural  
dipstick, consume  
the hourly factoids of how “we” are doing, the electronic  
passion play of the well-informed. Open your lunch box and  
see what mother packed. What makes the walls sweat, and  
shouldn’t the return vents be doing a better job? It  
gets a little close in here. No matter how far  
you wander away you can still hear whispers from the

standard syllabus; as you scribble surreptitiously on the shithouse  
wall,

other words seemingly of equal or greater glory, noble and  
memorable sentiments, bleed through, and you are compelled to read  
them while you are writing. The four cats with wings—  
Harriett, Roger, Thelma, and James—hover over the dumpster, the  
child listens to the story mesmerized, in the distance a  
new generation is inventing a new version of realism, another  
roughening up, which calls quaint the ruminations of a single  
voice at dusk and too painterly the cream cheese smear  
of purple clouds and too gothic the proleptic thunder clap.

# Every Now & Then

5/3/96

is  
an admiration of  
beauty  
what  
we seek  
take succor  
sucker  
from this  
from that  
forensic  
melodic  
product



the flutter  
of  
her hand  
as her white  
suburban  
goes by headed  
for home



speaking of  
contingency  
i miss it

& outside of  
*necessitates*

an initial  
exhilaration  
of thinking

5/4/96

as exactitude  
cuts the mat  
board hard  
frames the de  
limited vista  
*as* exactitude  
*has* exactitude  
if you will  
what is

the flat    the fizz  
the carbonation

of what is

5/19/96

Duncan - *Copy Book entries* - \$10

Bernstein - *The Subject* - \$6

Loss Glazier - *The Parts* - \$5

Joris - *Winnetou* - \$5

Ron - *Xing* - \$6

Spahr - *Testimony* - \$6

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