

MICHAEL BROEK

The Cloud and the Counterpane

The Cloud 1

citi of never-ending gates
citi of evidence collected in barrels
DNA the 100-year storm left
waterlogged
along Kingsland Avenue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

citi of Sutton Hoo of golden breastplates
punk teeth false hair

citi of candied orange slices & sushi
that preserved that raw that saturated color
inside the steam-mouthed kitchen

citi of birth
documents floating down to Jersey

citi of preserved women
hanging from fat rafters like antique brooms

citi of preserved men
shut inside glass cases on soft black sheets

citi of gods

citi of devils

citi of can't tell the difference.

The Counterpane 1

Here in my bivouac
on the other side of the world

I will write to you
about all the head-sunk people

eyes bowed thick with fear
walking like statistics up
& down the streets & the ones
who turn their faces

& who I misbelieve are you.

I am not sure I know the difference anymore
between this person & that
along Kingsland Avenue
though some point guns & others
kiss me hard on the lips
& I am so glad
we are one of those
kind who point with our mouths
most of the time.

I could say your name
or I could just crawl across your chest
& our thighs would speak the text
lay your head against my neck & come
nameless one
everywhere

London, Mumbai, New York, Shanghai
these species: citis
this genus: citi
slicing off the *y*
no good asking anyway.

You are in another citi & I
am deep here in myself
—less these numbers, less these names & eyes—

but it is the same sky, isn't it?

The Cloud 2

well, there were people not on any maps
but in citis
on the maps

in statisticians' shop drawers
shedding citizens' data onto squared
tile floors
& in the server's ever-spooling numbers

circumnavigating solar systems
since numbers
were light
& seemingly infinite

space
& on Tuesday at 5 p.m. the Milky Way is finite
while at 5:01
there is more, *encore du, encore du*

in bodega storage closets
& police precinct bathrooms
where there loom broomstick endings

fractions

systolic/diastolic

in private club parlors where countries
meet histories written
under invaders' thumbs &

numbers men gobble tables where eyes are
multipliers
citis' fissures, fissions, fractures

. . . the ethics of loving are complex
if this can be called loving at all
the 4:05 p.m. from Newark arrives at Penn not at all . . .

but solidly within dream
nightmare & imagined futures arriving
softly

across bridges leering brightly
in breezeway corners & last-century
elevators

crossing each storey's
horizontal steel
each light-pierced foregone life-line

water-line food-line power-line
line-up
line of defense

graph paper
the Arecibo message:

11
11
11
11
11
01
11
11
01
11
01
11
10
11
11
01
X

double-helix human

the extraterrestrial
signal 6EQUJ5
forwards & backwards WOW!

The Counterpane 2

Your back
is a constellation
is code map & lexicon
leading the way
across & inside
the counterpane. Time
we have wasted
wanting. This
humming of hands
smoothing
tugging
piecing
palming the skin. Take
the batting. Take
the needle
& sew the
we of us between these

crosswise stitches
mating belly on top
of belly halves:
flax duff
wool tips
cotton waste
& rags.

Whatever it takes to be warm.

Whatever it takes to hold together
two horizons pierced

through with light:

Jacob's Ladder
Flying Geese
Monkey Wrench
Crossroads.

Underground
Railroad quilts
signaling what everyone

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desires

kissing—revolution—the gasp—
your hip fastened to mine
unfurled & free.

The Cloud 3

Tal Afar

citi of

blood stars

patterning soldiers' boots

splintered windshield

wheeling about Lt.

_____’s head

firing the warning

shots

flashing

the hand

signaling

“Stop”

the Arecibo message

humans

cringing

in the statistician’s

office corner

Samar

Hassan

officially unrecorded

all these blossoming

terrors

Samar

beauty

exploding citi.

The Counterpane 3

The pattern is here.
The shop is mine.
Hour passed hand along
nape of neckline
fabric which
choosing chooses me—
tools:
scissor, machine, spool
blade & rule.

What happened
last night along the roadway
home?

What happened last
star-splintered year
manning the checkpoint?

Or in that secret tree
split open in the garden?

Pattern is here. That
pattern I wasn't meant
to have. Stitches organizing
sky—constellations
pointing toward futures
I didn't know was there
plural.

P = slow loves
perambulations
of dresses around the garden
market flowers
patterning the day.

Do you have this?
Is there one of these?
What I go finding
is never what I leave
having found—
you.

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Dear shopkeeper
stocker
prophet

I came today
imagining
just where I was going &
you suggested
new ideas.

The Cloud 4

the A train to Far Rockaway was bound
to run over Sunando Sen.

“If I’d smoked a blunt that day, I wouldn’t have pushed him.”
Menendez said.

a universe of subjects
encoded in things

[a dictatorship

of—(preposition) belonging in, composed
in—(preposition) of perpetuity]

once Blake opened his mouth
“all sublimity is founded
on minute discrimination”

object becoming subject
remaining object

Sunando Sen was bound
to fly when the A train to Far Rockaway
arrived.

The Counterpane 4

My head is full of you & the wind
has picked up your scent
bringing you back to me. My head

aches from feeling
& the lights along the sidewalk grow
yellow with their simple being

in the face of all their glassy eyes have seen—
backpacks walking into distance
& shopping carts, carriages & scooters

people too. People not
in cities or on maps—people in each
other's arms. Along the blue black walkway

beside benches crying with sweat
are her & him & dogs
tethered to their masters

sometimes many in the hands of one
walking with his head down.
In my brain today is hurt

I had not known I wanted & wouldn't
give up. I had finished the quilt
so I went down & sat by the smell-less river—

just a frosted gray strip of moon
laid down between cities that see
each other across the river

but do not touch. These quilts
are called crazy. Patches pieced with no
pattern—random except for intent.

The city on the other side of the river looks
like the city on this side of the river.

Except I looked & someone looked back.

The Cloud 5

citi of alleys all *back*
behind the boulevards alley-living
alleys of strays alleys of broken pipes
alleys of rich tenants & porters
alleys of runaways & unconquerables

reading Plato
by nite light

citi in which the philosopher is not wanted
ideal citi
every citi where

“an hour cannot be spent more pleasantly”
than at Harry Hill’s place on 25 East Houston Street

brothel, towers
of shuffled papers, bodies
leaning toward dissolution in water

187 metal slugs or 2,200 gallons of #2 jet fuel

& amortizing memorials advertising grief
because telling always seems
the way

’cept the aliens ain’t listening

citi of broken eyes navigating sidewalk cracks
because placing eyes back in the head means scalding fire

walking the dead man’s route—
the Jornada del Muerto—Manhattan
Oppenheimer quoting the four-thousand-year-old
burn-your-eyes-out texts:

De Civitate Dei.

The Counterpane 5

She walks into the vestibule & leaves
a bomb meant for the ambassador.

She walks into the vestibule & leaves an umbrella
I left at the table

which pattern chooses:
“we’ll see when they carry them out” (Szyborska)

I take the elevator down from 14E
step into open space

such saturated color, light, heat
flicking like a peony—the concentration

required to press my eyes against
her nape like a brave limb of birch

as she retreated into the kitchen
stepped back out again wet & on fire—

exiting the vestibule I
unfurl myself in the rain.

The Cloud 6

a topography of citi reveals
monuments to Babylon
ticking through the pavement—
glass, levers
slaves sleeping upright in dim corners
& tunnels sniffed by rats
stealing gold: pharaoh, mayor, architect
embalmer, saint

atop the thwarting bull Wall Street
a ballerina *en pointe*
a bronze man reading
literature dumped from the Free Library
a card catalog unwritten: occupied

blue horizontal lines, margin at the top
categorizing “citi”:

she “will go out in time, will go out
into time, hiding even her embers” (Duncan)

I love you even as love refuses names
refuses to be named

because it is refugee
my sweet untold ballerina

Hassan.

The Counterpane 6

If the branch is to bear its birds & angles
featherweight leaves & invisible winds
for as long as it is possible to hold anything
then it must make peace with earth
sleep-spot, dirt bed & disassemblage. Swaying

early October toward ice & that clear
lacquering weight, the nuthatch & its love
still hang upside down & that branch bend
might be your crook of arm & sleep while below
that improbable mattress unfolds itself with

warnings, wind signaling too, beaten up
leaves showing their veins.
The nuthatch does not love its mate. Such sloppy
thinking. Nor does the branch care either
dropping here or there onto lives built & lives

spent. Hear the snarling wind its teeth
in a hurricane season biting the hide of time
& you whom I want in my mouth, both your past
self & your future long-haired bark beauty—a soft knoll
I might kern into, forget for a moment this fall.

I want what the many have wanted, my own
failings a nest of reeds holding up the tunnel's mouth.
Reed, water, splash & break, whatever's left
there where earth asks sky its questions
worth the price of bearing.

The Cloud 7

sometimes there is no edge—

just sheets of cloud
statistics underneath, dying in each
other's arms, equations exchanging messages
on the backs of napkins & stars

sometimes there are no clouds—

nothing to cup hands around
color pure & tender-less, a message
reader-less, the cobalt blue bedsheets
crease-less & empty

seven million drops are walking citi
merging into cloud, falling, emptied, collected, rising
again into five-storey walk-ups bleeding

mold the 100-year storm left
documents signaling life
strewn about the apartment & underneath

the coffee cup a note left encoding
the next coming, the next Sutton Hoo
treasure sunk in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, muck—

our unearthing. sometimes genetics
explodes from alien directions
& Samar Hassan crouches

in corners. sometimes, there is
life where none is wanted—
but not in this house. I want

this & this & this, but not all
of these things want to be sewn
together. the pattern counter to plan is love.

The Counterpane 7

Disarmed is a word
dreamt by men who don't
love: what I have to embrace

stricken away & patterning
the landscape's empty floor.

These limbs are weapons & forgers of salt
triggers & lines of sight

stretched across the plane of bed
on the one hand
& nighttime the other

where my enemy might be
myself pointing back, pointing toward

what cannot be stood—
outside the light is daisy, your hair spilled

pillow-wise
wets the edge of my arm
& though I do not think of you, I

dream of you & our coming
into a clearing

holding your arms to your sides in my
embrace out there

under the drone's eye, the sun
lighting the crosshair's eyes its green
undeniable desire.

The Cloud 8

tonight the lights of citi come on for us
or at least this is the story
we tell isn't it because

the citis on the maps are never
the citis on the maps but a border that begs
crossing this night & that remorseless fence

that cold-wet water welcome
drowning in sight of land until "my friend
drag me out" & strangers in white gloves

pound the water out the refugee's chest
turning over coughing dust
from tunnel-low below sedimentary

rock below pressure
below green water oil tankers & cruise ships
swimmers embalmed in their yellow frog suits

fishing bodies from the river
below catatonic skyscrapers staring at their
beautiful skins winking in the river's mirror

below air & stars & void. we dug
another void below it all
& there were souls where everyone knew

they might be hidden but no one
since the last god had thought to see
& then to us it seemed

the bores we made & the souls we had claimed
easing their way out the walls now
& into air

were the crest of it all, everything below
now rock now above then air
transfusing into air

all the ghosts in love with diggers' light.

The Counterpane 8

You are the ship & the sea
I had to leave I never
had to leave—at night the lights
scanning the beach
seemed a new world
& as I crawl between your thighs
placing my nose in your hair
arms wrapped round your back
you are the wave between
me & the shore
I must swim through when the ship
founders, briny grind whirling
sirens & a song signaling
“Stop”—not
heeding the lieutenant’s
glare. There’s a matter of life & death
worth discussing
sure sure the lights are one
a new world
the same old world
I have grown to love
& will ravish
again
you citi
you nameless original (clear blue) smile. All
dissolution lingers too long—
then a yellow
Vespa flies by, two women on the machine
scissor, machine, spool
blade & rule

& we sew.