

TIME WITH THE SEASON

Ryan Nowlin



SLACKS BOOKS

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Slacks Books

Dedicated to the memory of Kevin Killian

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for her editorial guidance and encouragement.

Spain Esq.

To whom this may concern
the offices of Spain, Spain & Garnet
have determined that I'm operating

at 80% capacity like the dank,
foreboding wine cellar after the
wine basket of inquiry has been emptied—

As you know the 15th century
began with a cinder of lexical
drift, and the clean smoky late

October smell of candle wax.
Also, a muted shade of green
followed by pageantry of the

wider forces or else a litany
of excuses, some nagging nostalgia
for an Iberian shore taken in small doses.

The candor of continuous light
from the morning sun offers another
kind of unerring ascent as the city

crouches in a protective stance,
circulating contagion from
a thousand unfathomable kisses.

Districts of Intimacy

Through honeyed
leagues of the North-
land border

a black bear
approached a nice
lump of fur

by Joseph Beuys
a mudscape by
Anselm Kiefer

or a mock Tantric
Blue by Ellsworth
Kelly and I stand

before a series of
Pollocks in a row
and all the broken

statuary at the Met,
a metaphysical winter
of snow and salt.

The hinge that held
the boards of a medieval
triptych together

something like gold leaf
that lends strong contrast
to a larger than life

crucifix now no more
than a floater in
a tired eye—

oddly subordinated
to the pull
between the easy
and not so easy
—Warhol
wore a cologne,

one for each
month of the year:
February, a skein

of geese, white
against blue, V
for Valentine,

some were outliers
separated from
the rest in a tic-
tac-toe pattern.

Here is a map
to fold out area
top themes,

weird joys,
embattled alleys,
districts of
intimacy, avenues
of relief.

Some prospects
that I ought to
have enjoyed

never materialized,
yet the naiveté
I aspire to display

is more in keeping
with those who suffer
privation of light during
the winter months.

After having walked
the plank between
canvas and typewriter

I dust off my
old answering
machine.

A Season of Bird Song

Are we to be hopelessly duped
by the broad bandit masked Yellow-Throated
Warbler and its perversely radical

alteration of reality that suggests
anything could be dispensable and
invaluable like an understated

flirtation, a numb gray sky or the treacle
on a balloon, preventing its passage across a room.
Sometimes a green twig will frighten

the sparrows. What was the verbal equivalent
of the Mourning Dove's plaintive call?
Spondee, perhaps? Stillness, finally.

Why do few or no gulls fly over the bay?
When did time become something
to discard late at night with certain
other perishables?

Pigeons

John was a person whose heart was rarely
reflected by his feeling & whose life was trimmed
down to its brightest core—His whereabouts came
to life or rather to light after a friend saw him fedora

and all feeding pigeons on Grand Army Plaza.
A stranger told me all about him, a movement
of superficial thoughts around an obstinate surface
or a grid of understanding from which he'd invariably departed.

We're making a Cold War nostalgia come back now
when we had one enemy and not legion we cannot see.
Who is the "we" you can't see? Don't we all flinch from
something that shuffles slantwise through the sleet?

A fragment of what is to come. A wall broken loose,
something without eyes and hard. The house there
although I don't see it, now an army of houses
elbowing their way through the dark.

Wrappers everywhere not a bite to eat, said the pigeon
to the weird phosphorescent void of Lincoln Tunnel—
To trample over the pigeons in Times Square is an opening
move in a chess game as well as a good way to close a date.

One of the wonders of the baseball world is the knuckle ball
curving along a wide expanse of field.
I take pleasure in the disorder of the day, transport,
place names, now a rolodex of faces, crowded stands,

pigeons in the rafters. Time bent inevitably
without my knowing, a fluttering of wings—
Pigeons change course now and then
winding up wherever. It makes sense to certify

myself as baluster, oriel, bookplate, console.
One could turn oneself into the equivalent
of a sideshow, maybe not the bearded lady,
or the two headed turtle dove, but close.

String Figures

for Alan Bernheimer

At this point I have quadrants
coming out of my ears, string figures
criss-crossing across fingers,

the “is” and the “was” double-
knotted in some endless loop.
For a millennium cat’s cradle remained

undefined until the Egyptians
gave it a name and a shape—
Let spaced-out be my idiom

since childhood under the influence
of that ripe twine (I wouldn’t willingly
hyphenate the space between

life and death). No one wanted me
to succeed at this game least of all my parents.
It was all there: the slow cancellation

of the future alongside the haunts
of a childhood. The wind followed rain,
then car alarms. Two teeth came out

crowned with blood,
and in my hand an orange

The Farewell Tour

A series of cascading
consequences ended
my term in Michigan,

the lower part shaped
like a mitten.
Light switches turned

off yet whatever
was missing would
suddenly exist as in

a dream where I am
pinned like a snared
bird to one corner

of the room while
snowflakes collapse
on the window pane

in a ludicrous fashion.
What happened was
I met someone

and that became
my route
into loneliness.

Carol

A friend of mine
said I should pay
more attention to

the pterodactyl cries
of infants. I say
yes to everything,

making it hard to
know what I really
want. She's a garden

variety manic-
depressive, which translates
as Kummerspeck (Grief Bacon

in German) I felt
awful after a zen
garden of mashed

potatoes made with
my fork at Denny's—
A train to Rahway

or Linden would be
like taking death
to the stars.

Nothing but Blue Skies

Blue skies exist in the universe,
yet where do I stand now under this light,
which strictly speaking does not exist?
There are dead stars whose light still falls
on our eyes, frozen in time
like hatched dinosaur eggs. The sudden
beauty of the sky trapped in a puddle
after a cold front comes through.
What's the difference between a billion and a
trillion seconds? The quality of blue
in dreams can't be duplicated, except,
maybe in the stained windows of Chartres.
A curl in the centuries long eyelash—
How they shine, reflected in my eyes.

Horses

The small-scale, warm beach on Tomales Bay
called Heart's Desire was likely to be sheltered
from wind, even swimmable and where

last summer I saw a stampede of horses as red
as the sleeves of a coat with brown elbow patches.

Can one disaggregate an attraction? Is it
a texture like honey or a fold in thought—

an organ of limbo with one eye to die. Is it
how you sip your tea or doff your hat,

the combined weight of parts or something
entire and irreducible like the groves

of date palms to the fortress Complex

of the Casbah Amerhdil; or like the bee's

métier of identification—a tiny handstand
and powdery tail trailing behind like a comet—

A sad after scent like the end of a novel.

Anna kept calling for sex,
but it was not all danger and love—

There were often fine days spent
in the struggle to the death,

the feathered breath
of pale horses and a sure exit.

The White Cat

(after a painting by Jess Collins)

Olivia G. bore no relation
to Dick Grayson from Batman
or his more solitary twin,

Sir Edward, you know the one
who rides the white cat—

Mr. Fluffy Tufts—

Sir Edward was a specimen
of nature, so beautiful
with such charm and

the most sprightly gifts
He wasn't trying to seduce
you (he was too serious

a student for that) but he
often slept naked because
it was so warm at night

Time With the Season

*... and all things keep
Time with the season; only she doth carry
June in her eyes, in her heart January
—Thomas Carew, The Spring*

1

Three or four things
had fallen into my lap
unexpectedly

a vacation home and
some mysterious ailment
causing me to roll over

onto the stone floor
by the hotel pool shaded
by a few sickly palms.

In times of drought
toupees of grass sprout
from regions still scarred

from winter. Perhaps
I am sharing in some
collective hallucination

for a new season
or a companionable
nostalgia for the Greeks.

2

What if the graph of set
expectations is itself unmoored
and you no longer know

where you're standing?
To remain goal oriented
across a span of time

as one does for a deadline
with purposes unknown.
An open-ended statement

grows thin as air, yet
I can't walk through an
inevitable construct.

Everyday I pay fealty
to objects, but never listen
to that little voice
in my inner ear.

3

Like grass crushed
by the gleeful mower—
by the end of summer

the back of my house
will be exposed to
everyone on the block.

In a fairy garden
a Japanese Dwarf Maple
appears huge as if some

mighty giant had hewn
a great lump of earth
and put it under a glass case.

4

In the hierarchy
of flowers, peonies
are lower than roses;

In the garden they're
staked and battered by
showers, but all summer

long roses bloom
and stand up to the rain.

5

I was riveted to a view
of the ocean and the beach ball—
The wind didn't stop.

You said something
in passing about
how we can no longer

tell the seasons by the fruit
we find at the market.
I guess there's something

practical to learn
from the nursery—
Paper is scarce.

If we use less we'll
have little to say.

6

My affairs turn out badly,
the sky papered over with nuances.
You'd think, by now I'd be

used to the rain stealing the light
and the girls in galoshes
waiting for the drug stores

to open. Is ordinary fruit
no longer acceptable? Must it
be pomegranate or mahogany

antique? Are puzzlers found only
on \$100 dollar bills? Are the plazas
to be unshaven, trickling down
to the populace like a useless tear?

7

When sitting next to
beautiful people the most
endearing object was

always you. Anyway, you'll
never get to know them,
not even their Christian

names, with the terrible
onslaught of breakfasts,
brunches and phone calls

all that schlepping and
shelving because you
don't want anything extraneous

in your way. Some liked
the gorging, yet nothing
happens and they fly off.

Can you keep up? It'll
take weeks to fill you
in on the savory details.

Me, I'm doing O.K.
up here in my crumbling
crow's nest.

8

Land ho (I guess)
a newly minted land
called Israel, not part

of any one person.
Its boulevards go
quickly by, flanked

by houses not built
to be lived in, flag-
stones for you to walk

on or between. Nights
after my father's death
I carried my briefcase

up and down the stairs
to a carrel in the
library. Is a joyful

evening on a sad occasion
better than the reverse?

9

Dorm life was sublime
with its moon-shaped
elevator dials

Footnotes come to mind
and a subsequent
succession of goose-steps.

After a month long
hiatus, I resumed
donating blood
to the Red Cross.

The darkness of a plum
high in the plum tree.
As the visible world

disappeared the word spit
or spirit entered my mind
with the fan's steady whirr.

10

When the wild strawberries
are in season, an exact replica
of your bite from a fragoline

left in the fridge will add
to a moment's confusion.
My simple wish is to plunge

over some threshold
of reflection like dropping
cherries into a bowl of water.

11

To wander from room to room
an inscrutable world in a pinprick.
Are the deer and her fawn

an early morning dream or
a naive conceit? Thinking
unobserved, they bed down

in the mulch, leaves flickering
between light and shadow.

12

As we shine the x-ray beam
on the paint chips in Van Gogh's
beard, your feigned affection

bounces off me. It may have
staved off his madness. The day
wore on as if etched in with

a stencil along with sunlight
in the hedges, a swarm of fire flies
blinking on and off, undisturbed.

Van Gogh's leaky jar in a marsh,
its cross-hatched reflection
on the still surface of the water.

Mosquitoes thicken around
one last dangling red bee.

13

The color of Plumbagos,
a delicate blue like a summer
afternoon in Arizona, when

the color has been almost
bleached out of the sky
and everything was out

in the open—sober, new,
scentless and without secrets.
The tang of wild mint,

the squelch of wet earth
between my toes,
the lingering musk of fox.

It's enough just to hear
part of a story, and then
the rustle of dry leaves

as a small animal
scuttles back to its hovel.
Why don't we feel pity for

the hedgehog, who like
us is also bounded by time and season.

The Night

The trees with their halo
of diamonds from the rain
return to original night

a luminous virility,
each analogy twisted
under the impact of hours.

One day blood will coagulate
and necessary survival will fade
into the background we call

a subway tunnel. All this
isn't yet an act—
To the neighborhoods,

the boroughs, the margins
all of which were connected
by a spider web of bus routes.

At Jen's I catch the J
to Queens (Jen's a painter
like a Belgium or bad style)

Still it is hard
to feel sorry for the poet
as he dines and dines,

never supperless
or with any malice towards
enemies of the true
church of the pen.

Closed Windows

In NYC a leaf can bruise a finger.
Some yield at the close of the bell
and straggle behind for days.
En route to Hartford I'd have
to fill in a different self
A mountain could destroy what you say.

The straightaway of self and other.
Ghost hands at quarter of six in the
mirror. When one falls in love
a window opens and someone leans out
to get a better view. You've been added up
in the half-light and come up short under
a paper moon.

The Snail

for Lorraine Lupo

As a species of autobiography
the shell would resemble the snail
a single story villa with white trim,

though not as white as a cloud
or the white moth dusted with flour.
The leaf of this daily life so sweet

also red, beside the white stalk of
the snail's eyes. It withdraws
into the chaplet, slightly touched

in the head, its mantle resembling
a pope's hat, curdled with
its own pronouncements.

The Octopus

A day at the Wildwood Arcade,
its short-lived horizon,
the people streaming by
little leeway for repose
during the evening rush whereby
I manage to symbolize my own
vanishing. A mysterious black
carpet of flies by the trash can
alive but immobilized by
the sting of salt in the air
and the carousel of helicopters
flying over the boardwalk.
A sea lion twirls an invisible ball
on its nose—The human form
persists—won't buck up and down.

A Sort of Commotion

How many times have you heard someone say, “When I was really young I went really deep into the world of Villette or Wuthering Heights, but when I had my first kid, I had to be aware of what’s what.” Oh, but in the Brontë sisters’ letters and poems one can see the hallmarks of genius in these earlier versions of their novels: the organic, tentacle-like architecture and a brother who may or may not have been trustworthy. They were all so young and feckless and the wind through the moors had no story to tell. We hadn’t either, so there was nothing to lose. Contrary to legend, Branwell Brontë did not die standing up leaning against a mantelpiece in order to prove it could be done. Within a moment of ingesting opium, his attention was drawn to a sort of commotion on the sleeve of his dressing gown, which hung from a laconic doorknob, its silent k foisting a misconstruction of reality, a makeshift battle of Hastings, late in 1066. From how great a distance do I perceive life, he wondered. What are its dimensions? At this late hour, who knows? Every night he goes on living effectively without having to participate in life, the very opposite of a ghost doomed to slither through its own underpass. He was not angry at all. He liked how the ceiling was skewed and the way light curved in the window.

A Darkening of Responsibility

Pessoa adopted heteronyms tighter than ceilings, yet the spiders had the moldings under cultivation, like the banks of the Rhine. Like grapes spiders hung in clusters. Perhaps we should return to the tradition of using the tips of fingers

on one’s Malling-Hansen writing ball like the one Nietzsche used to telegraph aphoristic thoughts; Never ending note taking and a mocking silence in the 11th hour caught something of the frequency in the room. Perhaps it was best to follow

the accents of a projected intelligentsia
as in the words of Pessoa...

“I am beginning to know myself.
I don’t exist...I’m the gap between
what I’d like to be and what others
have made of me...”

Turing ate a poisonous apple.

Gödel at the end was paranoid. People *were* trying to poison him. Time as fortification: to lay siege to a room where what you used to know passes with each inked word. Edwin Denby nearly revised

himself out of existence; His notes reveal
a mind redacting the lesser lines,
yet his capacity for stillness may have been ironic
in that what he once said now seems historic—

I've heard one strange theory regarding
Denby's suicide, sweating the big stuff,
the very big stuff: depression, electro shock
therapy, loneliness, celibacy, a darkening
of responsibility after difficult poetic achievements.

I too am alone as I travel involved
only with chance meetings.
I share this interest with my late father,
who would speak of "being an observer"—a single
person
in a crowd pulling tight his overcoat
that twisted down toward his leg.

But today I am at Cape May
with Robin and Suzy, strolling on the board-
walk and then hiking along

a stretch of clean beach, our day trip
from Piscataway. I pick up four stones
and shells and remember how I once gathered
mysterious, smooth stones on yet another beach
along the shore of Capri in late June 2002.

The Good Thief

As the fisherman say of the Orcas at sea
"They're like thieves in tuxes!"
The big fish was "all head" and very difficult
to catch. Sometimes twenty years

will go by and still it would not come.
I might report in the morning
that the sea had a certain feeling to it
and that there was a droning sound

of a blimp casting banners all across
the sky. The leaden sky towards
evening was violet like the hue of gum lines.
Sleep for the betterment of creation,

with its low hills of breath, shell models
edges of life hanging in the balance.
The boat riggings made a clicking sound
from the wind neighbored by

the waves breaking upon the shore
as the sea receded and the gulls
made shrieking sounds, one against
the other in long formations, ship against

ship the waves buffeted against sea rocks.
The shipwrecked sailors overlooked the rocks
Some swam pell-mell but with break
neck speed, they flew their ships.

The foam impressed upon the sea
the last leg of their long journey
out of the sound. Many dolphins could
be seen riding the bow of the ship.

The mountain feet of ships
leapt forth making a heaving sound.
The wide horizon of the sea
retreated until the coastline disappeared.

Chasing a Butterfly

(after a painting by Thomas Gainsborough)

Usually, surrounded by leaves, clouds and the creature comforts
of home, she counted all the M&Ms on the top shelf
of a dresser drawer. It seems impossible to revive the fairest shade
in her cheek and yet the daytime shadows of my world
are also augmented by mysteries that keep me up at night.

The new buildings commune with the thistle and alfalfa
as bright as a banker's shade. My daughters used to love
the boob tube, so dumb and a waste of time and so was
going to school compared to being chased by the hungry
shadow of a butterfly. It's as if the present has woken
us up from a comforting dream. The dumb curiosity of the innocent.

Cecilia

I'd heard from Tom that Cecilia had moved to a leafy German suburb and was known to animate the blouse where her arm met the violin—as when skaters score their white records on ice, so too was Mozart's music the unity of individual movements: "Il Filo" or the thread was so dependent on the right beginning (the beginning must be the very best and not middle of the road.) Multiply a conversation by a roomful of people meeting in a concert hall and you have a fishbowl of unstrung harpsichord noises. Cecilia is always on edge, following a single entity composed of a thousand well-posed decisions, forming letters, stars or even a spanner. She'd spot something that gnawed at her until it took up all of her attention like some impenetrable "robot identity" that persisted long after she had gone to sleep.

The Good Son

Mom was gone for good and no amount of sleep could return me to my starting point in the quiet of the woods.

When I consider what could have been my life, and thankfully wasn't, that is to say, when each

tree seemed smaller than the forest to which it belonged, and rooftops turned from penny red to gray-green and magical ladders descended from all points in the sky, then I began my journey

to the surface, where the invading air shocked my lungs awake. As you expanded, I thumped against the firmament of my glowing universe, another pint of blood as a house gift in exchange

for nothing. Belief may mean something different to an acrobat, but it's terrible to dash one's teeth out on granite. Mother's method of forcing nearly empty ketchup bottles to give it up and the words

came tumbling out in the wake of events. My bright churns and searchabouts will bear fruit one day, or something like it. The future has not been written yet,

though headlines like mother in the grip of a sea-monster have become somewhat routine. Yes, that talent takes time and this was as good an explanation for the satisfying sway of the pendulum.

I wished it were May, with its confidence of day
light and the inviting lassitude of municipal
pools but it's always twelve days till Christmas and the
the light coming through the window looks no
more certain of what it is going to do than I am.

The Good Apple

after Gregory Corso

Patches of eye in patches
of rain, good apples fall
apart in threes. When you're

in the courtyard talking
to three guys see four.
See yourself! Dig yourself!

No use keeping tabs on being
good. In talkies about the west,
as per usual, all the bad guys

are rounded up, one guy
named C, (a columnist for a tab-
loid) has a weakness for

cavalier cowboys but was in
mufti about it. I talked
to C. Have you ever lost your

grip on reality like you're
feeling dizzy and all the good guys
around you are talking

in circles? When you
see a train at 9 a.m. you
can still see it in
the distance at high noon.

It doesn't look like a tab—
leau, but there's all the same talk
about serving time, and talk
about letting it serve you.

Lenny's Rich

I know a man, a virgin
at 57. Lenny, I said, to have
a trochee under your belt

is not enough—The thing
is to apply stress well
in all circumstances.

Look up at those top-of-
the-tree stars trembling
like fleshy babies. Eat one.

After all, life's a continuous
flow in which you appear
and disappear like a comma
swimming against the current.

Night Flights

As I watch the world go by
the airport hub turned upward
rotating all night flights
Waiting for the new one to begin

The airport hub turned upward
We were just wrapping up our old life,
waiting for the new one to begin
You could hear it humming

We were just wrapping up our old life
A tiny blip of presence
You could hear it humming
a friend's name, then my name

A tiny blip of presence
like a match thrown across a room
a friend's name, then my name
without much ado, like a comma

A match thrown across a room
revived memories of the dark
without much ado, like a comma
There are worse things than slow service

Revived memories of the dark
I felt you with me in Missouri
There are worse things than slow service:
Salads over St. Louis, moons over butter

I felt you with me in Missouri
rotating all night flights
salads over St. Louis, moons over butter
as I watch the world go by

Herculaneum

after Charles Olson

A single idea
takes hold the older
one becomes.
One falls in love
with the wrong
person and then
desires mastery,
yet circumstantial
was too kind
a word for evidence,
especially when
I was too young
and I simply
had to grow older
to understand
it better.
Death is a distance
which can never
fully be overcome.
Old Zeus,
young Augustus. . .
no place
is that far away
(Augustus is
only separated
from us by 2000 years,
Zeus even
further).
The ancients

called them
rambling stars,
Zeus will go
half-way 'cross
the world for
a good martini
even though
martini drinking
skipped a few
generations
and LSD made
it hard for
Aphrodite
to keep her
distance.
It's a funny
thing, the issues
of the sublime
are very much alive
in the idea of
an open space,
generally
unavailable,
yet already
formulated
ideas fall short
the moment
you step
off the bus
in Herculaneum
where the sick boy
in the gem
cutter's shop

lies in his bed,
his lunch of
chicken uneaten
or rather
preserved by
the white
sterility of
ash and stone.

