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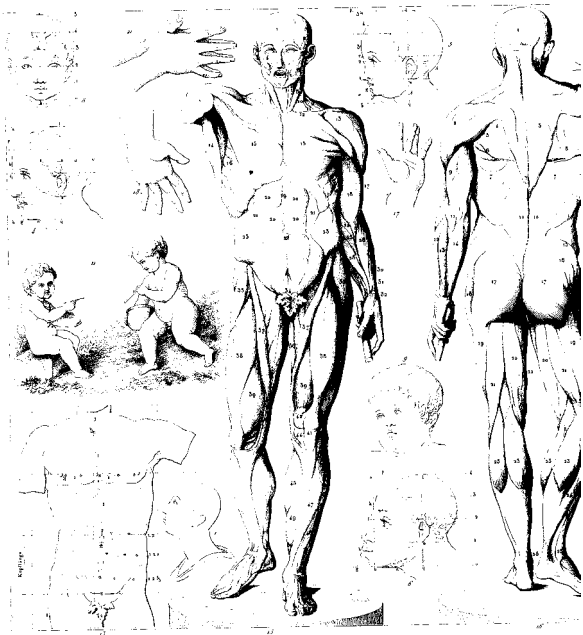
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Fine Arts, Plate 20

# ANCESTRY

## THE UNKNOWN GRANDFATHER

How many concertos did you play at once?  
Man with a cello in the photograph.  
How many cigars did you smoke at once?  
In snuff-box with sailboat on front,  
Carried on your back from Italy.

When you were a boy, did the girls  
Chase you and your cello, tease the strings  
Of a mother's memory into the bow of a lover?  
Or when you jumped in the Grand Canal  
And the need of your mother to fish you out,  
Then did you think of your cello, the magic  
Of tones shaped into faces by bow against strings?

And how many Christmases with fishing rod?  
Under the tree of Triestine pine and Strudel  
On the table; your name a garment worn  
Like old ladies' dresses sewn together in church  
As a prank by you and your brothers.

The only thing left is your face in the photo  
And the fishing rod loved so well;  
The sea where you sang with your cello,  
Fishing for tunes of a land left behind  
And progeny awaiting your return.

How far down are you buried, grandfather?  
How far down in your grave?  
How many layers of snuff-box before  
The mystery of the pines reveals  
Its truth? Or will old age  
Be like the day you stopped feigning deaf  
After the Russian front and the war?

*And the cellos they sing in the wilderness,  
The cellos they sing in the wilderness  
Like elephants who laugh in dust and mud  
Alone on an island lost at sea...*

## WHEN IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS

I stood in the Roman bookstore, near Via Veneto and the great Pantheon, wondering what to say. I saw Bukowski's books between pornography.

She looked at me as if she read my mind. "You hate Bukowski? I find book for you."

Her fingers ran up spines, like crazy gazelles pursued by lions. My vertebrae tingled in the store's cool air, and my eyes wandered utterances on the shelf.

I saw black holes in the darkness of her eyes as she led me in circles round the store. We shared each other's scribbles on the page, and the latest famous poet whom we loved.

"I like Eliot, Stevens, and Pound."

"You are so classical," Petrarch's dark woman might have said.

And she handed me Bukowski's famous work, "Love Is A Dog From Hell" in Italian/English translation.

Later, as we both agreed to write across the seas, up behind her walked a friend, lover, or brother. She put her hand on my arm to say good-bye, and slowly they descended stairs to the other world.

The walls of the store cried her name from every crease and crevice.

## LOST TRAVELER

Beautiful Italian girl standing in the station,  
what are you reading?

Lightning flashes above as you rub hands through your  
hair.

Do you read from a book of prayers every night?

Burn incense over a cauldron?

Bow to the flames of the five hundred candelabra?

And the body of saints?

If only I understood the mystery of your divinity.

As you stand there,

I wonder how much love you have swallowed,  
how many souls have disappeared inside you.

For whom do you wait?

Why do you wait?

I think of you later as I vanish into night.

## LAND OF DREAMS

—(*Miramare Castle, Trieste 1992*)

I approach the strange castle  
hugging a girdle of sand.  
Its sphinx guards my movement  
around giant Sequoia trees.  
As I walk down overgrown paths,  
I notice a man standing near fountains.  
Does he take the same path  
an emperor would take  
to muse about the world?

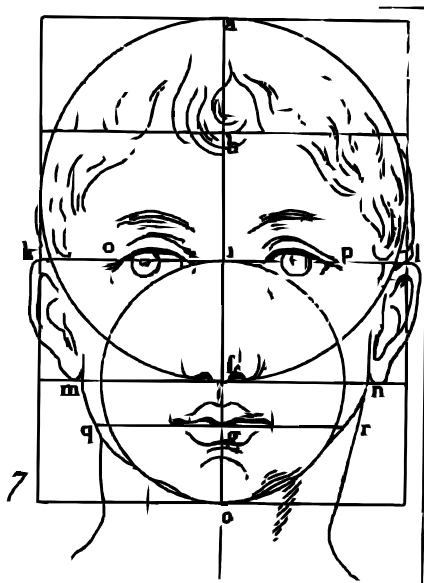
I rest beneath Sequoia trees  
at the edge of a secluded pond,  
and in the water see a reflection  
of a Mexican emperor from Austria.  
At night I hear the drowsy waves  
lap like a thirsty mouth  
onto the head of a lone peddler  
sleeping under the stars.

## THE LAST NARCISSUS

A large fountain looms before the man  
sitting in a chair outside the café.  
He sips martinis and eats cherries,  
swallowing stems like slippery fish.  
He watches as the women pass,  
dressed in bright orange miniskirts.  
Years ago, a girl his age and countenance,  
now stooped and bent in disease,  
walked the same limestone pavement.  
The statues, the sculpture on buildings,  
buried memories haunting him.

He notices a flock of pigeons  
resting on the head of a gigantic god.  
He wishes he were that god, brawny and naked,  
rising from the mud by his own volition,  
not placed there by puny humankind.  
He puts the binoculars up to his eyes  
but instead of the imposing stone,  
sees a Rebenesque Italian girl  
collecting flowers by the fountain.  
In her eyes and smiles, he sees his own.





CHILDHOOD

## BIRTHPLACE

I often wished to love the women  
of this darker world  
but feared the frowns of my race.  
The hands I held  
and gave greeting in the angry sun  
showed me the colors  
to continue down the road.

The dirty faces of children  
peered at me from the edge of evil  
and knew I was the enemy.  
I was the explorer who discovered they were slaves,  
I was their white nightmare,  
the Hell they could finally destroy.  
They blamed me for passing guilt,  
for mulatto women raped by junkie husbands,  
a home with one parent in it,  
the father long-since divorced.

I almost loved a black girl  
with dark eyes and pony tails,  
and skin the color of a black cat.  
I was too young, too naive to make a pass.  
I felt like the slave,  
stuck in a school with children difficult to know.  
I wondered what these children did at home.  
Did they play with the same toys?  
Or were drugs a toy that wasted night?  
Hope broken like the next-door window,  
lies chipping away ceiling paint.

In the little school of dark faces  
that made me a boy and then a man,  
I stood dwarfed against the seven foot students  
trying to learn basic skills.  
Theirs was shrill music of the streets,  
a time for mischief  
and retreat from neglect at home.  
They loved their music and I loved mine.  
Like them, I excelled in the marching band  
but nothing else.  
There was no way out of my skin.

## WHO'S AFRAID OF THE DARK?

I no longer fear the dark,  
invisible voice  
or transparent hand.

*Night now embraces  
with cool breath,  
veil drawn over pale face.*

I no longer fear the dark,  
monsters hidden under the bed,  
white head on crimson wall.

*Twilight, my lover, caress my flesh,  
tickle me in forbidden places,  
voice of my voice, breath of my breath.*

I no longer fear the dark,  
forgotten bone dust of severed hand.  
Farewell to ravaged fingernail.

*Forgotten bride veiled in black,  
restore my love, my fear of ugly things,  
dirty streets and crickets dying in grass.*

I no longer fear the dark,  
leaves that fall in slicing rain  
onto scars that footprints scratch in soil.

*Sometimes monsters scare me enough  
to reach for a hand  
and give me breath in the dark.*

# WORDS FROM THE LOCAL SHAMAN

—*In Memory of My Grandmother*

It was so good  
to hear from you again  
since you went on your own.  
It is difficult to live by oneself;  
if you would share expenses,  
life would be easier;  
if you walk slowly now,  
you won't have to run after.

*La fiaba signor Intendo,  
Che dura molto tempo,  
Che mai no se districha,  
Ti vol che te la digo,  
O che te la canto.*

It's the first time you're gone  
and I admire you for that.  
I wanted to visit your family  
in Bloomfield New Jersey  
but your Mother was sick in bed.

*Girinchi rinchi raia,  
Martin va sulla paia,  
Paia Paieta,  
Cinch Una sciafetta!*

I know it's not easy eating,  
but than you had been working  
in the market for quite a while,  
you ought to know to buy some chunky soup  
or an extra can of stew in a can;  
it's not too expensive and you can have it  
again or check the aisles  
for meat or fish,  
it's cheaper than frozen food.  
I don't know how long I'll be here  
as they plan to take me to section D....  
to be taken care: as you know,  
I have difficulty walking,  
and climbing stairs.

*Sant' Andrea Pescador,  
Dove se nato il nostro signor,  
Pesca molesca,  
Qualamanse in questa.*

I'll be very happy to see you,  
New York is a big city,  
you have to get used to live there.

## LEFT-OVERS

Dust settles on the floor of a room,  
on the imitation oriental carpet,  
in slits of book pages.  
The book smells like centuries of garlic  
steamed in a large pot by grandma  
whose handwriting peculiarly describes the face  
of a bearded lady wearing a smock in the kitchen.  
Grandma always prefers to work in the kitchen

whose aroma penetrates like cream puffs,  
musk of stained cookbooks, tattered lives,  
secrets hidden beneath the cracks of a face.  
Even the fluffy white cat between grandma's legs  
coughs and sputters, flutters its eyes,  
fur expanding into hair balls as it  
plays with food under the stove.  
Grandma wears hair like a judge's phony wig.

With dolorous wrinkles sneaking across her face,  
she looks at gray photographs of children:  
The pictures of ancestors, of herself,  
stare back from the dust of garlic,  
the book, the stove, the shelves, the cat  
chasing the last remaining scrap of another life,  
the warmth of a child hiding in a white cave.

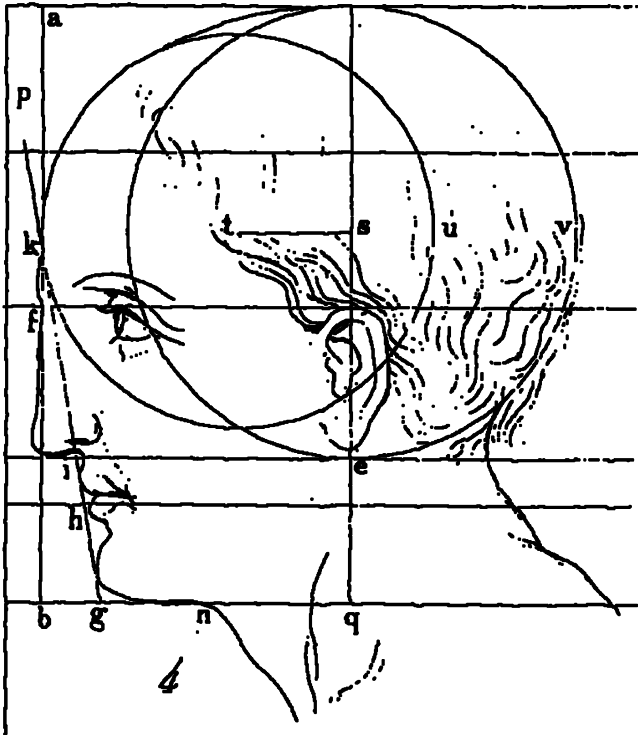
## HOME GROWN

We come to this place awake,  
submissive, sanctified  
of body, thought, feeling, community with kin.  
We take leave of insolent people  
who keep us worlds below  
and turn to new mirrors of god,  
to strength, not of truth  
but unfolding love scrolls,  
each kiss healing ingrown wounds.  
Opening out to listen, buds never grown  
in nourished hours now do as if nocturnal  
and unique like each child's name.  
Here, we claim sovereignty  
over buried roots of the wrong  
truth also held right, growth against  
anyone demanding obsequy.  
In such place, we forget even our own name,  
days gone by without concern for turning,  
and smile at meaning in a world without it.



## ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF REVISIONIST HISTORY

You stare at me in the looking glass Alice,  
But how do you know I'm really there?  
We hold certain truths to be self-evident,  
Once sacred and part of everyman.  
It is evident Egypt was a mirage,  
The Greeks never had a Golden Age,  
The Roman empire never fell,  
Christ never walked the earth,  
The Middle Ages was a fairy tale,  
The Renaissance was an invention of idiot savants,  
The Age of Reason was totally irrational,  
Christopher Columbus never discovered anything,  
America never became a nation,  
Britain never had a king,  
Europe never dominated the world,  
The twentieth century is really the first century,  
The world wars never happened,  
Six million Jews were never slaughtered,  
Russia was democratic, America was communist,  
The great writers were actually fictional characters,  
The sky never fell on chicken little,  
Little Bo Peep never lost her sheep,  
All that exists is illusion,  
And I was never born.



MIDDLE AGE

## RIVER JOURNEY

I am in my room, not far from Passaic river,  
watching the sun throw shafts of light  
onto the floor like a playful child. Soon I step  
on the bus bound for New York City  
(endless flowing river of humanity)  
with heavy burden draped over shoulder,  
corroded lunch in hand, dressed in baggy clothes.  
I arrive on the streets of New York  
to find old man river disheveled and mean-spirited,  
Buddha sitting in Lotus holding hungry bowl,  
begging spare change from life's stray passengers.

Here I am, student traveling river of life,  
poetry reading where I will become immortal,  
sing of earth with a voice of thunder,  
of the many craters pounded in the moon,  
with my body dumped in Hudson River  
(polluted river keep flowing till I end my song).  
Here my head floats far from carnivorous beasts,  
past sloping hills of submerged hamlets,  
past playgrounds and graveyards once  
isolated in the church I revered as a child—  
bless me father for I have sinned.

Like a voice in the wilderness,  
inner strings strum the sound of harsh lament,  
of pigeons crushed to death in Central Park,  
garbage dotting sidewalks like a collage,  
blood-splattered graffiti on edge of oblivion,  
dope pushers whispering “sense” in Washington Square,  
my soul sacrificed to the never-ending hum,  
its massive dynamo pounding my head. I am  
still here! I continue to grab hold  
despite discrepancies of my birth. Yes, my  
hands are still part of my arms my eyes  
my head and brain plastered to skull.  
What is God but a mother's womb?  
I am on the bus heading towards East River,

but I am also on the street looking to be fed.  
Like sheep herded off to the barn, I wish  
my master would feed me, but my church  
I see built only in illusion of dreams,  
I Nomi di Patri di Figli di Matri Santi. Yet I  
still need wisdom to outlive this folly,  
this sin, first sin, sinned once, sinned again.  
And if I can be nothing else, if I can be nothing else,  
I wish to be a singer of music nobody hears,  
barbaric yawp sounded down blind alleys,  
singing of poetic injustice, freedom for no one,  
slipping into skin of empty bodies on the sidewalk.

Sing sing sing! not of pathetic music, but divine  
they say to me at the watering hole,  
next to my mother river, mother I never had:  
silk hair, blue eyes, flippery feet, soft smooth breasts  
fondled like tinfoil in the fingers of innocence;  
dripping, dripping with ocean-flicker, attempt  
at rhyme, jagged scraping of music against  
bloody windowpane, razor-sharp edge of margin  
cutting with sides of leaves of grass.

I have not come this far only to return,  
I have not come this far only to be turned away,  
but the hole I leave with regret and dying love,  
the holy river is wet with dying love.  
It must be love I sing, it *must* be love I sing!  
I cannot hope to go this far and beyond.  
I wish the world would go this far, into my hands,  
into my bosom, my poetic sky and silent feet.

The city drones its massive missive hum  
like killer bees stabbing deadly stings,  
violins jangling heavy heavenly strings,  
dancers and singers of spacious skies  
blowing through the river's horn of plenty,  
through the many holes pounded in the moon,  
sky god's castration at the feet of its child,  
mouths drooling with saliva at fallen angels,  
twisted faces of Picasso crushed by Guernica's horse.

I choose to be what I am, nobody else,  
salt-echo of a lover seeing better days,  
sunning myself at the edge of the riverbank,  
my mother's and father's fishy head waiting for me.

As I watch sunlight trickle patterns on the floor,  
my soul drifts down many corridors,  
down hallways, sidewalks, empty streets and dark bars,  
crying for joggers mugged in Central Park,  
mothers killed in the act of childbirth,  
all heavenly bodies lying like heaps in time of war.  
Soon the bus comes to a grinding halt,  
I slowly climb off at the end of my journey,  
my feet leave sin-filled androgynous river,  
my feet leave muddy waters, and I am home.

## ANSWER TO MY MOTHER

What does the poem mean? you ask

Then give me potatoes, yams, onions.  
But what does the onion mean?  
Especially sliced with crying eyes.  
Potato eyes looking at me.  
Ask if string beans taste fresh  
Or carrots grown in the yard  
Smell of soil where matter goes.

And who is the poem? Onion, carrot?

Eyes and mouth eating veins?  
Even potatoes roll off the shelf  
After one is stolen away.  
String beans too offer bitter demands  
For days discarded like rotten yams.  
Leftover vegetables, completing the diet,  
Boil in the pot below.

So what does the poem mean? you ask again.

Only after cooked, boiled, sauteed or diced,  
Ingested, digested, beyond recognition,  
Flesh, vein, mind, spirit, heart,  
Only then the poem speaks of itself  
In a taste connoisseurs understand.



Fine Arts, Plate 21

# OLD AGE

## REMNANTS

Snow sleeps on the field, and the road  
once asphalt now becomes ice.  
Every step rouses a face to wince  
at the fear of wind and storms.  
Outside, in the frozen belly,  
Jonah shivers as he walks  
past a meat-packing plant  
with frozen steers hanging from rafters.

Once in the belly's center, a prophet meets  
the faces and intruding feet.  
The women shed a look of scorn  
as if they comprehend secrets—  
a prophet's words in a frozen bowl,  
eyes that ask about solitude,  
replies freely given in an empty stare.  
What more can the starving do?

In this season of frozen people  
crowds vanish into human soup,  
tireless, moving toward but nowhere—  
cold man who wanders the streets  
looking for a scrap of bread  
to tidy his stomach and warm his feet,

like an eskimo whittling wood on the tundra  
and burning the oil to keep warm,  
after scattering fossilized fish in the snow  
and eating bait from the harpoon's end  
over the hole in frozen motion.

And the fish eyes do not see,  
the old man's eyes do not see.  
Whale oil burns on the kettle  
inside Jonah's frozen belly.



Like the papers that shuffle across  
the empty street, the shoes that scuff  
and mar the pavement with their holes,  
Jonah goes from store to store  
looking for a home in discarded words.

He finds nothing in the whale's belly,  
in the statue bent at the seams,  
a sword struck in its back  
like a lightning bolt pricks a tree.  
The city for him is a corpse  
that somnambulates through walls.

The mannequin on display  
at the store stares at Jonah  
like that woman on the bus  
who brushed his leg and asked,  
“Are you a poet?” To which he said,  
“Notice the frozen crystal  
outside the window.”

## POETRY CAFÉ

Rain hits pavement like nails carelessly dropped  
onto glass transparent as ice of winter storms,  
windows shaping memory as I walk  
past odor of garbage and decay of worms.  
I arrive tattered and in pain, yearning for drink,  
escape from leaves stoked at night  
in the hearth of streetside fireplaces,  
pungent smell of dreamy heads under subdued light.  
I peer into the coffee shop's smokey space  
and hear an orchestra in the middle of some serenade.  
Inside I step, with quick determined pace  
to syncopation of blinking lights and drums  
pounding on the table of a nearby dying woman.  
I sit across from her, but she feigns blindness,  
deafness, death, then dissipates into the crowd.  
Blood drips from contact fingers make with strings,  
the violinist slowly seems a fading memory,  
illusory as a song the drunken soldier sings  
after too many sips of whiskey in a drowsy hotel.  
Brahms flows like wine from the orchestra pit,  
as from an altar or an engine's energy  
that spews volcanic ashes in the sky.  
I gape at women dancing on the tables,  
powdering faces and winking with one eye,  
stripped naked, bare, barren and brown like earth,  
like my mother, my cousin, my often wished-for sister,  
breasts flapping in the cold breeze  
summer rain and ceiling fans create.

A woman the shape of earth, peacock-plumed,  
steadily approaches as orange sunset  
bleeds into the room where lonely heroes walked,  
feet in flames and rocky soil of a long journey  
and empty corridors their minds once stalked.  
She asks me to join the orchestral choir  
with my childhood instrument in hand.  
I feel a heavy weight and turn to see  
a french horn I never held before  
and then descend orchestral stairs  
like a hunter ready to ride upon the land.  
In the middle of the orchestra, as I play,  
I see the men and women round me holding hands  
and see them turn to bone, stone, marble, or monster.  
My plastic horn melts to butter on the ground,  
and I discover I am utterly alone.  
The conductor, now a fading glimmer in my eye,  
gestures up and down as if directing phantoms;  
he neither speaks nor gestures with his face  
but offers graceful arms as supplication  
for unanswered prayers and a dying race.  
I see him shrink into a point of light  
and vanish into microscopic molecules  
that slowly form and reform into stars  
littering the sky, just as white paper  
reflects off a sidewalk at night.  
I wake and in my waking realize that I sleep  
and wake again in the middle of a grassy field  
stretching to the edge, where the stars meet,  
the people in my former world now native soil,  
and the gods rest face down beneath my feet.

## GOOD GREY POET

We were ambitious young men  
who traveled forever to see you;  
upon arrival, we found instead  
a tall, tightly-dressed black woman.  
She greeted us from your second-floor  
window, in a ghetto neighborhood,  
where a young girl sat on your steps and refused  
to let us pass; still we persisted,

Entered your dark house  
filled with democratic dreams  
of a freed people, of a nation,  
of a country still fighting for a way of life.  
We longed to hold you, have you as ours,  
but found only relics, icons, old pictures,  
letters, words, echoes of admirers and celebrities,  
subliminal messages from worshipers long-since dead,  
stories of your ghost haunting the house.

Why did you hide from us then?  
We looked under a rock, but you  
were not there; looked all over the house,  
under the staircase, in your room  
where your spirit often appears to weary pilgrims  
on a quest to discover their soul; still  
we could not find you, not even in our  
dreams, not even after the black woman  
(inheritor of your flame and passion)  
purged us of prodigal and phony beliefs.  
And as for women, you sang of them always,  
yet sang of men too; no, sang  
of androgyny and male nurses.

Where is the democratic captain of my soul?  
to guide this world in troubled times,  
to sing of double sexes, mixed races,  
radical politics and grass-roots interests,  
Manahatta bustling with the business of a city,  
Manahatta on the edge of disaster.  
Where is my lusty captain now?  
to scribble down poetry  
flowing with the rhythm of the sea.

Perhaps one day on a deserted dirt road,  
or in a field of lilies where Solomon prayed,  
in a garden secluded by trees and shrubs,  
or near a neighbor's wife parading naked,  
we will see you in a leaf of grass,  
a moose, goat, pig, tall hairy ape or man,  
or as an old hag desirous of our food,  
and you will greet us with the phrase:  
"I celebrate myself, and sing myself."