

Max Wickert

# SERENADES



Gelasius Wirth, *Landscape*

*Note: This is the complete cycle, not a selection. The "Elegy," originally written separately, was later slightly revised to form an epilogue to the series.*

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1

We two are contained by nothing not even this palpable darkness  
Where horns are forgiving us flutes are like bones expectantly still  
And violins are presenting vast night to us in a tiny casket  
We press It between us when we embrace we feel it when we kiss  
Each other's eyes and are not ungrateful for our little present  
Galaxies rustle faintly multitudinous in it and over  
The small blue pearl of its earth animal presences echo  
Their infinitesimal crotchets of yearning through hollow dark  
The violins making a gift of it to us in a tiny casket  
There the hairy hands of the violators the heels of the clumsy  
Suffer ecstatic reduction becoming transparent and frail  
There cruel man stares at his sky with a rush of elegiac feeling  
And dreams of terrific disclosures indefinitely withheld  
Flutes expectantly still like his bones the horns forgiving him:  
Never again will we waken to silence never again  
Hear other than this fading impartial inward singing  
"I am a palpable darkness: You two are contained by nothing."

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,  
NY: Outriders, 1972)

Muted measures lift slab after slab from hollowly gorgeous  
Night *trala* their single refrain discards the romance  
Of epitaphs our great tablets of law are tumbled aside  
With sober inquisitive canons *trarira trala* the bricks  
Of our comfort already crumble near a trampled dancing-floor  
And music's cool contemptuous wisdom whistling digs *trala*  
In the disenchanting ground *trala* casting up our cheap  
Plaster bas-reliefs of *trala* an idyll of mercy  
An allegory of sublime chastisement with easy instruments  
Our mysterious obelisks are felled our pyramids are  
Unpiled *trala* Where are our '*je-ne-sais-quois*' *trala*  
our sweet ineffable *tra* our *la* intimations of *li* . . .  
A pitiless unison turns the last stone to find beneath it  
Ourselves blind white worms left suddenly in morning silence  
Our spontaneity destroyed by our knowledge of what is required

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,  
NY: Outriders, 1972)

Night stretches all her wires tight to lure the sightless  
Heirs of wretchedness here or there or another place  
Strings of silver or steel singing pass from stars  
To tipped grasses tie frost to tree-bark transfix the apples  
With woms or steadily pull at the ring in the nostrils of  
A patient white bull the moon: night organizes courts  
Of desire where all things squirm or thrill at appointed centers  
The bat secure at the place of the moth the moth rejoicing  
In a mansion of little flames the flame ringing a last faint  
Vibration of venom and honeycomb: night has tuned her wires  
Precisely has strung them through the ears of her blinded  
inheritors is making them yearning for justice try to guess  
At the one the final direction by piercing melodies crossing  
Recrossing turning their heads this way or that: they know  
Their eyes no longer avail in the magical night they listen  
For the seat of the harpist themselves musical with regret  
That it beckons from no place that two ears are not enough

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

There while in unromantic branches assembled the air  
Unobeyed now sings the counsels of her end he leads her out  
Reluctant to hear the refusal of leaves again she allows  
His tugging her toward his own significance in the darkness  
In May-time one voice can be taken for another she smiles  
Brave at his easy merging with the chorus of general talk  
"Ah!" he is waving his arms and "Ah!" she has caught his drift  
For him the abandon of storm is meaning but she understands  
How wisdom is wind except for a trembling in what hangs on  
In the leaves that cry: "Don't let him think on autumn nor the moon  
Come out to illumine what shivers gray under judgment here  
Don't let him remember why winter winds more silently move  
Let us all sing to fill him with the grief he will need one day  
When he sees the breeze read destruction in a flutter of her blouse."

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

“Ladies and gentlemen,” overwrought cries the moon, “I want  
I want . . . “ but he can't conclude he makes a Byronic gesture  
Pacing spoiled boy his palace with antediluvian frown  
Among the moist-eyed lovers abstracted murmurs rise  
The midnight having tried too hard for tone resigns  
Stars sit in dismayed committees and stare their minutes over  
While ardor already seizes the reins with easy inaptitude  
By two o'clock the winds are thick with unassimilated  
Sighs the commerce of kissing taking an unhealthy turn  
The traffic of hands in dalliance almost routinely theatrical  
Ladies and gentlemen take good stock of your naked bodies  
Do not allow too much currency to protestation for now  
The darkness is no longer governed in your private interest  
Your whole wealth a dumb figure asleep in your arms  
And by four the dew will begin to pluck its weak guitar  
The cheap sparrows to advertise a narrow sunrise

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,  
NY: Outriders, 1972)

In the plenitude of twelve o'clock the strawberry blood surmises  
Ecstasies of spilling and galaxies are whelming the blackness  
In transcendental frauds the consolations of metaphysical  
Malice outspeed the nimblest afflatus of vulgar happiness  
And gaiety rides her dogcart into the pulsing quasars  
Before formulations of clemency opened the curtains of tears  
Night has stood in the pit darting a lovely scorn and long after  
The echoes of yearning cease in the source a great sanity  
Will gently open her violent book and read a single  
Uncoded word *Enough!* O midnight your mothers offer  
Their virtues to the stars and spill their milk in your storms  
Your myriad nebulae transform their infanticides into hymns  
And the black iridescence of plague adorns your maidenly pallors  
Only I your bastard beg for morning on earth for a cold light  
An insomniac staring with electrical aspect into his mirror  
To find there the face of art in all its potential stupidity

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972) and in *Poems Since When* (1988)

Now leeks are greening under starlight and glacial ridges flow  
To fill a gentian stratosphere with elfin ghosts of water  
My littleness is wheeling above an alpine dream of your face:  
Sideways from corners of your shrewd closed eyes the wrinkles  
Weave slow laces of lady-wisdom your parted mouth breathes  
Like a chasm from innocent moist lungs rhythmic to smash and lungs  
Of frangible pulses it is Sunday in your spine though the moon's  
Diplomacy still matters in your blood while shambling he wanes  
Feeble in ultramarine profundities of shattered stars:  
If gnats flew alone mountain-high exalted in the salt night  
If they saw your pastoral shape so enormously disposed on a slope  
As I do and understood how ice melting and pungencies of pale green  
Assimilate your hair and your harmonious futures and if  
They outlived the chill to settle at your side in morrowing sun  
Sniffing the fragrances of your unbecoming dream their chorus  
Would retrieve from the tides of the night something I never will  
Who can only remember what I have been told: *She is asleep*

--written 1971, published in *Buffalo News* (September 22, 1972)

Radiance of your body will reach my eyes but now you lie  
Naked in pitch black as though your frailty had outlawed pity  
Above these clouds the stars in their pride of completed lives  
Probably strut the eternal kids in their quotidian fashion  
Making game of the hearts they steal to their gravity making marriages  
Of all to all in their consummate abodes thank heaven a blanket  
Of unspent rain can hide their stark regard and hallow  
The thrill of darkness torn from startled shadow in the dark  
And it is you love you alone whom now I turn to  
Alone to bring home to you stern axioms of perished stars  
For all nocturnal feelings are versions of panic: still  
I want to speak dimply to you but is it simple to cry  
I love your life which is half done your endurance in divorces  
Your having borne issue who also will cease and your terror  
Of the heart steeling itself for the end of your delight my delight?

--written 1971, published in *Poems Since When* (1988)

The whole day wasted shifting ground appeasing you with pledges  
Now the air is posting a chilling message to my newest address:  
'Nothing is enough take leave of your senses promise her nothing'  
Again the beacons of departure have begun to solicit the evening  
And the horizon's old cincture yields to their older astral fret  
Empty as boats that strain at their moorings the images of desire  
Tear against their origins and drift abandoned in cold: You  
Whose loving once harnessed my love are hard to find in that dark  
Where syllable by syllable my oaths return to encumber me confessions  
Declarations cloy my passage and the words the worlds of my vows  
Are all too much: Only your ultimate future flagged  
With your name flares austerely from beyond the Milky Way  
All other names of desire are beguiling lies I will promise  
Nothing: Here is the hand of an idiot on your mortal skin  
Here my unpledging mouth looks to yours for the gift of silence  
These my five senses are lost in your pitiless fugitive sense  
Only your present body saves mine from being inconsolable  
Later I fall benighted into nothing between your legs  
And nothing is enough as fall together senseless into sleep  
Should dawn remember to restore our girding firmament I  
Calling back my former senses will fumble to unhasp the chain  
Of desire and find no more than a leash of lovely longing

--written 1971, unpublished



I have no desire either to explain or accuse.  
After all interpretation after discomforting  
intimations of shared petulance time overtakes me  
with a rage for utopias, even utopias  
that accede to your degradation

There the unlikely  
cocksure lover nursing his knowledge of the perfect face  
smiles on yours despite what failings he has marked on it  
I can be dazzled by seas of desolation when I  
enjoy the vantage point of the moon of my perfection

The voyager craves a novelty that will no longer  
surprise him flees from the irritations of your household  
where each hour a new strangeness stuns and renders him guilty  
flees your smiling gravity toward an inner straitness  
and after him the multitudes yearn.

He has forsaken  
whom before he instructed to feel a necessity  
for him alone and he does not remember whether he  
has quarreled or been quarreled with by your ravaged frailty  
and can no longer distinguish a strangeness from a flaw.

Lady! call him back from accident to coincidence  
and forgive us for inventing him, show us all the path  
to a knowledge not of faults but of our complicity  
and forgive me for what I become among these others  
then free yourself.

You still speak as one who belongs to me.  
Your damaged recurrence is not yet irretrievably  
altered so long as you but sleep and a single tree stands  
I alone while yet your breath comes am your bridegroom who learns  
to let human enterprise cease before your beauty dies.

--written 1972, unpublished