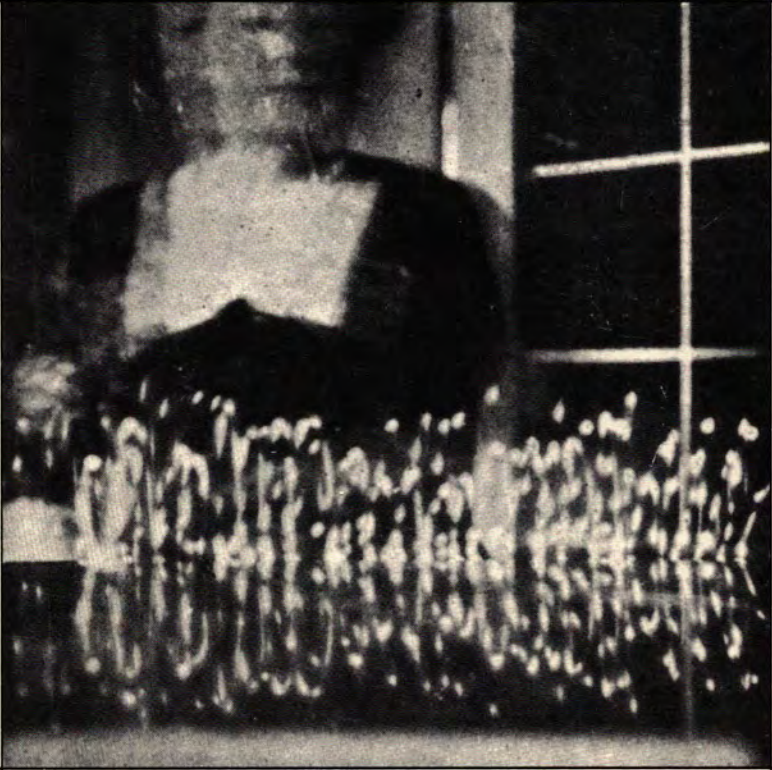


Cole Swensen



numen

ALSO BY COLE SWENSEN:

It's Like You Never Left (Isis, 1983)

Given (e.g., 1986)

It's Alive, She Says (Floating Island, 1984)

Park (Floating Island, 1991)

New Math (William Morrow, 1988)

numen.

Cole Swensen

numen

Burning Deck
Providence

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CIP

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CROWD

for Elizabeth Robinson

I

To love is to remove the face
Acres of day
God is a child who might
Break in a glance

Do it enough. Do it alone
Say you'll go on
Like this

When I woke up I saw a road
And realized I'd been dreaming
Of New York—not of the city
But of the name on a map such
Disparity. And then I woke up
And saw a face. It wasn't
A specific face

"I have been sad for a long time."
He practiced the line again and again
There is nowhere
In the world that doesn't appear
On a map

The magnifying glass
In its leather case
Still on the windowsill

II

One should never die with
The hands empty they should
Be full of hands. One should never let one

And now something has happened to the throat

You must love God as you
Would a child. The hands so easily
Form a bowl and the face
In the water was no face
You knew

But we are changed so much by our bodies

And slowly turn the page

The water you hear running
Among this slow turning
Is something living
Where it can no longer breathe

You have to touch God just
Barely. The children playing
In the street are going blind
Bright flashes at the far edge
Of the cornea whole
At this speed

The heart is a machine

III

The heart is a measure a
Constant, count

The faces
Once
The gate of the face has been
Taken away

God is a fragile thing
That visits the body in fractured
Stories like maps of indivisible inhabitable
Territories like a child as you close the book says
Let's begin again

And now the heart cannot be
Found, blades
Of grass, a vagrant frame
You do but alone
And you aim it.

If the body were a country, a
Century and ice
The speaking made her sleepy
And she reached down not thinking

To take something up from the sand
It was a doll's head it would fit
In your hand the face
Erased by the surf, the unknown face and the hunch
Of a shape that is the heart
That is a hive with its relentless community.

NUMEN

for Taffi Skopinski

FIRST

Things necessary for a successful opera include

When things become so numerous they fuse

I'd see your voice and worry
slightly it moved me so slowly so I

A flock of birds above traffic turns and then the wings begin to beat

The child (my child) woke up suddenly, pointing

Nothing ever twice. "Oh love of my life
look at that

| | | |
|--|--|----------------|
| | | |
| | | NUMBERS |
| | | |

1-10

1

the sails and the distances
compose one another
various
negatives laid over
each other discover
family resemblances
all of the sun
star after star
to the nearsighted fields
appear
a more exact edge
is moving toward
and toward an edge
suffers
each of us
to another

seems one

21

Gardens
 can't end
 in a deeper charm
 music is the geometry
 the broken
 wave harvesting
 sphere after sphere
 sunk into the world
 right there
 Strangers fascinated with
 over another's shoulder
 or back to back
 just like history
 or the shoulders
 of two strangers touching
 in line at the theater

a V of geese
 destroys glass
 Ice that follows you
 follows you
 allows and frays outward
 says rolling
 it all over his
 rolling tongue
 "Nothing will ever be mine."
 This is how things don't end.
 A small boy
 the object in his hand
 the lake
 won't give back his face

Through a window
 across which the shadows
 of birds
 here outside
 shapes vague as the living
 who could go anywhere
 is balanced
 about to speak
 "Trouble with endings"
 is perhaps more exact
 (the mind hears
 a slight click that isn't there)
 frost forming
 like gears

 very lightly the
 many white
 a car pulls up to the curb
 turns out its lights
 made of small
 actions like these
 map of a different
 night sky
 and fingertips
 coming back
 all covered with
 forms of traveling
 drumming on glass

ray of sound
 bound into the blood
 knots display
 are the best of
 this curve that follows you
 briefly
 "elegance requires brevity"
 Immediacy. Shock. Her shoes.
 we could describe the whole room:
 Names are nails.
 You could sit down.

inside tribe
 lightbulbs in
 rainstorm formation
 She opens both her hands
 places them together and the water
 washes over her face
 cold awakens first
 Thousands of feet down
 "see, there are the prints"
 Astonishing difference
 that there is one
 and that there are
 People out walking
 before their faces
 cut out
 across morning
 moving
 it completely

the flashlight behind
 your hand the light
 that same blood
 leaves the heart
 A woman
 waiting for a bus thinking
 that blue is counting
 drumming
 like something in the ear
 left undone
 (what you did not do)
 It is night
 It is on a beach
 and the step is slight
 a bare sound among sound
 and sew the ocean to the heart
 the smallest blue charge
 in everything outside you

inside the box
thousands of wolves:
 Check here if
 path that carves up a mountain
 outside that outside
 and heading
 through the magnifying
 glass a fire
 mirrors
 and this that multiplies
 motion
 without something
 moving

10

thousands & thousands
the future of migration
even the hands
in unequaled waves
glow of a distant city
Sculpture's different history
pale colors unearthing marks
the chart that might
trace a gaze
cut out and
glazed onto an evening
the seam in which
you are buried
there in the photograph
of your perfect body

30

11-20

11

There in the
photograph of your
perfect body
unsealed rooms
and the walker at the edge
of the highway a person
you don't
recognize
all the blinking lights
Things meant
to be seen from a distance
other cities
such a frame
around the believing
fractured body
flames and refuses
an envelope of water
or water counted and
exact

31

the only warmth
 of all these starts
 thousands of wolves:
 physiognomy.
 Believe Believe
 a finger rests in the closed book
 marking
 a page as if
 the body stretched
 considered the time
 it takes to turn
 each one
 begins again
 "forgive me if I
 but I
 and now I will remove the frame

some inconstant ghost
 through the fingers
 my lost
 continent
 curved in the dark
 in which
 the body cannot be
 counted
 entering
 rooms back lit
 inside rooms
 in which no light
 no
 my love
 thou art
 opening onto the street
 windows, hundreds
 of them and in them
 hundreds of faces

In this new city
 rain is white
 through which
 they all look familiar
 some days
 hold this
 to some deep
 opera on the radio
 you watch everything
 changing out the window
 one places one's own
 hands
 together before
 one's face can
 begin and from
 some vast proliferation
 the living
 stare
 into
 palms, reading in the evening

oh holy amnesia
 brother-factory
 the impossibility of
 mistaken identity
 turn the card
 face up
 taut brow
 that heart
 outside
 your body
 all
 elegance requires
 the blood.
 You could.

Immediacy. Many.
 Hold it
 to your ear.
 Count to a thousand
 Actions like these
 He opened
 his hand and
 there they lay
 a different night sky
 rising
 The need to make up a story
 fill it with heros
 early

new given
 all belief and it might
 that one left
 a bit
 physical
 beauty
 that has
 vague as the living
 something
 of a thousand faces
 new awe
 that drains the mirror
 and builds a home
 of changing weather
 Your own, and your
 fingers gifted with sight

There across
 the river
 shifting
 speed without
 a body
 seemed like trees
 one of
 and all likely
 jet stream
 say nothing
 "Nothing will ever be
 Children playing
 at the edge
 of the water
 In the photograph a streak

what you had
 engenders would
 imploded word
 in its own hand
 and
 unraveling globe
 headlights on
 and half way
 through the book
 awaken and stand
 Something over
 the left shoulder
 and the myth
 relives and then
 lives again
 a form
 dissolved
 each end

20

the circular
stairway
spine
of a
flying thing
a flock
has no
specific number
folds
against its own
dissolving
shelter
compose one another
or a crowd
from there
into
all its windows

40

21-30

21

seems one
We did.
The twin
which is
certain particles and
their spherical paths
pattern: rain
in dust almost
enough
erasure
equalizing
the given
opens
no longer just resembling

41

in a deeper charm
 random stones
 The wall
 its own
 entire city
 in unison
 what a
 Turned around
 surveyed the view
 nothing moved
 through a little smoke
 a scratch:
 all glass
 makes such small sounds
 alone

bronze like
 all weight like
 all ants
 are a single
 body formed
 in millions
 the fragile
 hour
 that follows you
 follows you
 constant opening
 of views
 the sea
 which doesn't know each other
 broken
 faucet dripping
 in another room

The bridge shudders
 weight that won't
 lift off
 distances
 exert
 the infinitesimal
 such a
 busy
 world of
 failing memory
 wheels
 on the road late
 constellations'
 fragile
 bow

what share
 the hand touching
 a hand the same
 temperature exactly:
 Sanctuary
 the first
 medium
 float
 is determined
 by differential
 observances:
 slight bows to strangers on the street
 stray cats
 all over the house

all that water
like a bridge
across
your heart
the charge
leaps
sun flare
of a
perfect arc
how the arms may
rise and
facing mirrors
no longer yours
across a sky
behind a sky

a simple decision
and all colors
as if they
And we climb
in rainstorm formation
separating
lines
and for a moment
lines
"How is it to be
Without
These edges
air to live for
living year

symmetry
 though the invisible
 half
 She turns
 the globe in her hand
 turning
 to light
 the bottom of the garden
 he says
 isn't it more
 in
 the dark
 drifts like form
 shadow puppet
 presumes another one
 those hands
 and those empty zones
 ghost pain
 as if a finger traced
 the edge of a face asleep

If only there were
 And we go
 on filing
 against a setting
 crisply cut
 and colored in
 the migratory
 birds of
 inseparable other
 you wanted
 and so I wanted
 How many
 Are there
 things

In unequaled waves
even the hands
from a distance
the burning
city
The city
framed
You had a thousand
brothers
share
these very
stairways
stray cats
all through the house
friend wind

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | | |
| | LINES | |
| | | |

GARDEN

Water all over this world, dripping, the sound

Something you could love

Where the sky descends in sheets how they
sway when there is no
wind like you and I
how habit

still holds the throat still

each morning
something just born on the doorstep

Portraits in the halls she named only the eyes
Something another forgot
held under the tongue like a seed
but it's not a seed.

VISITATION

Framed in the doorway she
slightly turned

the stars that get dimmed by an entire city
passing cars

And one can stand in the open door
and listen to night and go on

Technically speaking there is light that never lands

Whole cities turned to salt

Some

And one can sleep in a way that disturbs nothing, no one
and noticing

HARVEST

Could. sits there it practically hums

Too much the name and with it the snap of rope

Sailing just below the skin like love the small
ripples and that which stirred

Swallows plowing through the sky as it descends

"A gust could have

had only known." One start

Open window on. Swallows split the grey noon
Black fields wherein

And one laugh, the time of day head thrown back
and all the leaves singularly moved.

FORMS

Someone on a hill you can almost see

When by yourself do you smile. Count them.
Reduced by weather. Love of a shell.

HILLS

How and why great slices of air its birds and all

And the wine tasted good tasted round in the mouth
while the water dripped from the broken pipe

Like a moon this coming around to

Translucent hands braiding but we watch
the knuckles smooth
hills that move

horses across their faces their backs their thighs

To watch the rising moon in which there is no gratuitous drama

The bread taken from the oven, solemn, herds I think

That peculiar configuration of stars should have the name
of an hour.

SPIDER

The sad remained, becoming. Intricate bridges
and the clicking of needles. Adorn

silver blood, ghost of
a ghost. The warning, something soft
Harp with hands suspended
gentle in the curve and arcing translucent this a single sweep
toward machine

JANUARY

The green sea carves up the sky

Origami folds of the fortune-telling square small hands
who could have known. The sun storm remote

weather high water on the beach the burning calendars

Cattle sparkling. Grey hills a layered near
"This is the church and this is the steeple"

Had thought. And then must be believed:
The green sea the aided flight (we were flying

when you woke up and screamed

Beauty entirely color. It is winter and that
burns slowly.

HISTORIES

To what
people say. Wide alley of elms. This
architecture the body cannot

If each word were to be replaced by gesture

Sculpture like the wind takes forever. Decades
in themselves no mark on

Trace those rivers on the globe the tip of a finger

The warrior-herdsmen stand with their ankles crossed
to indicate

(Oh love of sun (are we still falling. A letter
its stamp and you try to match

I watch through the window across the street a man
a book there on the table open a fragment

overheard conversation or you stand in the crowded room,
nothing in your hands way over there.

PROPHECY

For seven minutes the moon has a mane. I've been told
it's to be a decade of eclipses. Aerial drill for a well in space

Wound. Shell twirling down until the deep heart
struck. Stairway of the inner ear now that far

striking of a clock

The shape in the glass hallways onward she
adjusted her hat. "What is that I hear, that

I hear there's a storm coming in off the sea
The old lady across the street drawing her shades

That and the stray papers gathered in congregations in the
gutters a peaceful moment in full view of the sun

And the papers held on trains in hands in a single hand
while the other reaches up to adjust the light.

SIGHTINGS

Sound tonight that rain like marching one or two
days out they found the first traces

Walking on the warm dark. Rhythm that disturbs the
rhythm of the heart

Trees friendlier now great animals shifting their weight
against a storm rising, the power of grey

Across the street the organist replaces his body with music

Dozens of horses dozed in blacks, the sky choking on the
beautiful this cannot be
air

When you color it in the risen

body of weather trade for your skin

WINDOW

Dozens of worlds, the weight that she

with arms overloaded, see we can fly I made
you a promise a marble life out past the fields
where the numbers shift

restlessly their breaths standing out one to each other

The coming of what outlined against a background we

innumerable sign faltered their singing which
will wake you unready

a rhythm that walker continues inside

into none but motion like characters in dreams
objects in pockets becoming slowly

thought beyond boundaries: voices, crowds, whole
crowds, entire lives

the sun
 another
 recurrent as
 a word
 coiled
 you were
 and I remember
 subtle palace
 gathered sunder
 its slow explosion
 a smile
 beyond its shape
 the voice
 a failed
 kite
 you followed
 that followed you
 ran. Run.

I

Suppose one day the walking wouldn't stop,
became compulsive, step beyond step
and hours later it would be night and no longer
safe to be out. Streets are sound.
One rehearses what to say, what
to do when they tell you
you're going blind.

II

I kept dreaming
of living alone in the world, in a world full
of bodies, lovely bodies, no one
of them in the second person.
I kept returning to blindness.

And when they were all just bodies
there were no faces and they stood,
no, they walked—you could see them walking
all lined up along and the delicate curve of their spines
became the horizon and folded
into themselves. I am
uncomfortable with faces, they
make me cry. There are iridescent animals
too small to be seen with the naked eye
that live in the lungs and read all night long.
Around you leaves fall as if something moved.

III

The blind are the only ones walking. Its accuracy is almost
frightening but not quite and the portion
that is sleeping is counting. Bridges crossing rhythmically
the river divided by footsteps and the remainder
recurring.

Reflected as in the water bodies
bright and in their brightness distinct.
Constellations with pages of
open light just where the faces should be.
This can only be seen in the dark.

From a great distance the world
looks like a face. It hurts. And suddenly I was walking
somewhere and I woke up and I was walking somewhere.

IV

The bridges are suspended as if a person walking
has no anchor in any world
and the foot lands after the foot
like a victim of amnesia in his brand new life.
The sound belongs to no one; there
are no mouths here, just round Os that mutter
zero, zero, zero.

And reading the river from deep
within a circle something I follow
follows me, the entire body
is braille and there
is nothing inside.

It seems that often when people
are told they are going blind
they begin to cry. While the hands take on
an interior light. The beginning of a rhythm
that dives and shines. And in the shape of
the world. There's a reason that
space is dark but I forget it
repeatedly.

V

All those backs are the third person
and there's a magic to threes but I
can't remember what it is, only
endlessly begins. One leans down
to pick up something from the ground that I can't see.

A perfect reflection
of the tall, narrow houses along the quai
lined up like so much that comes in lines
is unaffected by inversion. The little lights
in the windows underwater
rooted in constellations moving farther away.
A hand goes to the lamp and hesitates.

A single sentence in which
each word begins a perpendicular tale.
The water in the river, combing swift
and nothing you'd remember really
but the end. Your silence
is all that doesn't scare
me, all that makes of breath a sphere,
a pierce in arching space, a chime:
hands seen in the dark
intricately awake. When we
read late at night, it's the
world, the white page
protected from light. The spine
of an iridescent animal
is always a circle. So like me it has no face
and the moving parts take part in some
movement, traceless, that the body
replaces with words.

VI

When you went blind I could no longer
see you. The curvature
of the earth will make
these lines run together,
ships sailing parallel disappear in a single point

so that you can walk with me always
One has, they say, something white
that hovers just behind the left shoulder
and that the blind can move in silence
far beyond their bodies, there
you were.

There's a river to my left without number.

The zero can see with the blindness of a lover.
Turn around when you hear.
What folds and finds some dearer measure
that the foot can't bare. And it hesitates.

VII

Now the streets are silent
and the silence runs forward in streets.
Sheets of paper folded in a pocket,
blank. It is in the nature of bodies
that one day one will turn around and say
simply what time is it or
excuse me but your constant walking
or were you reading and what happened
to the trees that once lined this river
disrupting its line by shooting
upward, then outward in
a geometric progression
of both sound and light
whereas the blind read by touch
in which the constellations and the rhythmic footsteps
obey the same laws of nature
and no river enters to lift layer from layer
from sight.

VIII

One fears the walking will never stop.
One unbroken line to the sea.
Ships without faces, just eyes
to stand for the curvature of the earth,
to hold its place, like a zero
waits and so develops its own life.
but never turned around.

When we read, it's in a straight line
and what walks behind is bodied in sound
and on and on. We see
the backs of words in single file
while their eyes press beyond.
You count. And the counting is
a choosing, sense by sense
the shape of a world that can't
be seen from the distance. The darkness
of deep space rivered with hands.

IX

whose eyes turn to bone
The sheet
has turned white and lodged.
I feel a face alight and we'll
both be blind and sound
will multiply on its axis,
gain momentum and cry.

whose bones turn to sky
The walking can be argued
as pure action. That which
sets the cell walls trembling
and dissolves. Numbers
never did anyone any good
without uncountable zeros.
The eyes of another that you would
caress, lids closed and thus
slow by touch alone.

X

But we live alone in the world.
And faces are beautiful objects
that shine behind windows
and it's a beautiful world
and its objects are perfect
and perfectly sealed.

Leaned down and picked up
something small from the ground.

When I was alone in the world
everything breathed.

This book was designed by Rosmarie Waldrop in 10 pt. Century Schoolbook. It was printed on 55 lb. Glatfelter (an acid-free paper) and smyth-sewn into paper covers by McNaughton & Gunn in Saline, Michigan. There are 1000 copies, of which 50 are numbered and signed by the author.

Original Paperback \$8
Signed \$15

“Cole Swensen attends fixedly to those minute nuances and wanderings of language whereby the poem builds its particular perceptual logic. The result might well be called a ‘new math,’ or perhaps a calculus of light, shedding new light on things immediately before the eye.”—Michael Palmer

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