Introduction

Bridge, Subway, Carnival
The Poetry of Brooklyn

I. In Brooklyn, In Paradise

Michael Tyrell
and Julia Spicher Kasdorf

> Poor thing.
> To die and never see Brooklyn.
> —Anne Sexton, "Rumplestiltskin"

You furnish your parts toward eternity, / Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul. With "Sun-down Poem" (better known by its later title, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), Whitman ushers in the idea of Brooklyn as a passageway both nautical and spiritual, a route that makes time irrelevant, an artificial construct. Prior to its 1898 incorporation as one of New York City's five boroughs, Brooklyn was an independent city of great size, but Whitman's is the first famous poetic example we have of Brooklyn celebrated in such a grand style, with its distinctness and uniqueness intact, "its beautiful hills" encouraged to stand up beside the "tall masts of Mannahatta." Does he contradict himself? Of course he does; he contains multitudes. When, in the same poem, Whitman insists that "place avails not," he can't help himself from claiming Brooklyn as his own. It's a claim many poets have not been able to resist since.

But long before the place found its way into modern American poetry, it—and all of the earth—was celebrated by the Lenape in a creation myth included here through what is said to be a transla-

tion from the nineteenth century. The land that would eventually be called Brooklyn was part of the vast trade network used by various branches of the Canarsies, who were eventually decimated by disease and driven farther east into Long Island, or west to what is now New Jersey. Although "Canarsie" meant "grassy place" or "fenced-in place," these tribes were known for importing and exporting. (During the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, an immense ancient gorget was excavated, which must have been carried half a continent by foot and boat from copper mines near Lake Superior.) Only traces of the Canarsie communities still remain, and only visionary historians can see them: the great Lenape transportation "hub" that existed one block from what is now the Long Island Rail Road terminal; the old trail that is now Kings Highway; or the grass plants that resemble maize still growing on the Belt Parkway near Bay Ridge, where a vast cornfield once stood. In 1635, Dutch colonists laid out the plans for the group of villages they would call Breukelen, which was later anglicized to Brookland and eventually became Brooklyn. Tradition has long asserted that "Brooklyn" is simply the Dutch term for "broken land," but actually *gebroken landt* (broken land) is a Dutch translation of the Algonquin name for Long Island. The Dutch West India Company chartered The Town of Breukelen in 1646. (A year before, the English had chartered the Town of Gravesend, the only non-Dutch town of the six originals.) The Towns of Flatbush, Flatlands, New Utrecht, and Bushwick followed; they would be joined as Kings County in 1683. The Town of Brooklyn would have to wait until 1834 to become the City of Brooklyn, and then, in 1898, the Borough of Brooklyn. To many, it was a city overshadowed by its larger sister, Manhattan.

If "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" considers the space between Brooklyn and Manhattan, and the idea that these as well as all places and times are intimately connected yet still worlds apart, then Hart Crane's "Bridge" gives us a more condensed but no less complex meditation. His famous "Proem" attributes to John Augustus Roebling's creation—which was still in the future when Whitman rode his ferry—a power "to lend a myth to God." Crane's is a myth working in reverse, a divine belief or explanation arrived at not because a natural phenomenon needs to be understood but because it is a manmade phenomenon that points to

the idea of the divine. Even in the dreary quotidian routine summarized first by the seagull's flight and later the pedestrian's travels across the bridge, Brooklyn emerges as the gateway to America, even to the earth itself. This is no Eden but a mechanical, roughly fashioned haven, a place where paradise is hard-won, invented, Promethean.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Russia's most famous Futurist poet, visited the bridge during the 1920s and extravagantly praised its cables "strung up / to the feet of stars," through which Manhattan's light appears almost homey in the dusk, the rumble of an elevated train reduced to a distant itch. Staggered by the inequities of "the un-united states / of / America," where radio and air travel are within reach of some while others jump from the bridge in desperate want of work, his poem, newly translated for this collection, identifies its own creation with the construction of the bridge—gestures as aesthetic as they are heroic.

The majestic and improbable Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, cost Roebling his life but survives as a monument to his enterprising spirit—not the least of its reasons for becoming such a pervasive presence in American poetry. If we take to heart the British poet Geoffrey Godbert's odd and appealing found poem and collage, which gathers fragments of Roebling's writings to yield a definition of the bridge, then we may say that the builder possessed some insight into his creation's power to inspire. Starting with the technical language of bridge building, its "catenary curve[s]" and "perfect bi-system[s]," Godbert concludes with a dizzying series of constructions: " 'a Hanging Garden, a Pyramid, / an Acropolis, an Atheneaum, / a Bridge.' " There must be tributes that celebrate the Statue of Liberty, the Seattle Needle, the John Hancock Building, but we doubt so many, so varied. An entire anthology of Brooklyn Bridge poems might be possible, and perhaps in the spirit of such poetic significance, every summer the organization Poets House holds a walk across the bridge. At the culmination of the occasion, when the thing has been crossed, the walkers are revived by a public reading of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." It is a rich fulfillment of Whitman's prophecy that "[o]thers will enter the gates of ferry and cross from shore."

A century after Whitman, Marianne Moore's 1960 essay "Brooklyn from Clinton Hill" reminds us that Brooklyn is a "city

of trees" as well as a city of churches. More than one species of tree grows in Brooklyn, as visitors to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden well know. By "trees," Moore could also mean not only arboreal specimens but rich cultural and educational institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum, Erasmus Hall, or even the botanical garden itself, whose cornucopia of plant species has attracted botanists and Brooklynites alike since its 1910 founding. Moore's rapacious view leads us on a tour of nearly every neighborhood, emphasizing the particularity of each. A resident of Brooklyn from 1929 until the late 1960s, Moore wrote of the bridge also, in "Granite and Steel," but we thought her encouragement of the Brooklyn Dodgers (1890–1957) would speak best for her here. The team relocated a coast away, but in "Hometown Piece for Messrs. Alston and Reese," Moore's characteristic fascination with athletes meets her affection for her adopted city. "Brooklyn from Clinton Hill" ends memorably: "I like living here. Brooklyn has given me pleasure, has helped to educate me, has afforded me, in fact, the kind of tame excitement on which I thrive." In another piece that touches upon education, the contemporary poet Jeffrey Harrison finds, in his "Garbage Can in Brooklyn Full of Books," titles by Adler, Hanh, Mill, and Schweitzer—a counterpoint to the borough's lowbrow reputation. And it's no tame excitement that spurs Moore to write to the Dodgers:

> You've got plenty: Jackie Robinson
> and Campy and big Newk, and Dodgerdom again
> watching everything you do. You won last year. Come on.

Because there's more to a bridge than its cables and more to a city than its skyline and baseball teams (as New York's stalwart response to the tragedy of September 11 has demonstrated), many other Brooklyn lives and Brooklyn worlds come alive in the poems written since Whitman and Crane, Moore and Bishop. Each could be said to stand as an invitation to enter a place ingeniously diverse in its cultures and neighborhoods. Broken land, we may say, eclectic palimpsest, a place for which Yeats's lines from "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" might have been written: "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent." Birthplace to Mae West, Edward G. Robinson, Woody Allen, Barbra

Streisand, Bobby Fischer, Lil' Kim; Coney Island; Dreamland; Luna Park; Ebbets Field, the one-time home of the Dodgers (originally called the Brooklyn Bridegrooms); the Navy Yard (closed in 1966, after 150 years of operation but resurrected as an industrial park, and now slated to be the site of an immense television and film studio, which, if completed, will be the largest on the East Coast); the 1776 Battle of Brooklyn; the Brooklyn Academy of Music (opened in 1859); the *Monitor;* Brooklyn College, home of a strong MFA program in creative writing; the Brooklyn Public Library with its branches in each of the sprawling, idiosyncratic neighborhoods, which represent nearly every nationality, religion, and creed, and which, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2003 contained an estimated 2,472,523 people. As a character in Thomas Wolfe's *Death to Morning* said in a fairly accurate approximation of the borough's famous Brooklynese, "It'd take a lifetime to know Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo. And even den, you wouldn't know it all." Wolfe said, too, that only the dead know Brooklyn, and beyond the portion of its geography devoted to cemeteries, perhaps he would have been charmed to know that the first Reformed Dutch Church of the Flatlands was built over an ancient Canarsie burial ground, and that the Dutch buried their dead there as well, mingling the remains of both the natives and the invaders.

Keenly aware of the impossibility of knowing all of the borough, we promised to keep an eye toward the imaginary Brooklyn, Ferlinghetti's "Coney Island of the Mind," the side of the story that natives and visitors tell to say something distinctive about the place, something that may not be strictly true, narrative, moral, fashionable, or just back from the dry cleaner. We chose to include good and great poems that made even fleeting but compelling reference to Brooklyn, or used Brooklyn as a starting line, or considered Brooklyn as a symbolic entity—like Agha Shahid Ali's ghazal imitating Hart Crane, Frank O'Hara's "Ave Maria," and Tony Towle's "The Allegorical Figure of Brooklyn." One Brooklyn is the paradise of Hayden Carruth's hyacinth garden, another the grisly receptacle of Harvey Shapiro's "National Cold Storage Company."

Of course, the Coney Island of the body is here too, in, to name a few examples, Sara Teasdale's desolate aubade and Maggie

Nelson's charming, last-minute excursion to the Mermaid Parade. Like the bridge, the permanent carnival of Coney Island has tattooed itself on the American imagination—if the first is a passageway, then the latter, named for the rabbits the Dutch spotted in the dunes, is the glowing exit, the electrifying escape. Here, Quentin Rowan transplants Prometheus, and Joanna Furhman imports Freud (who actually visited the site, which he believed to be the unconscious of America), though he never gets to see Dreamland because like the Luna Park in Galway Kinnell's poem, it's already burning. Brooklyn is a place as elusive as the Hell Freud imagines.

Appropriately, to get from the bridge to Coney Island, one must often go underground, through the entire spectrum of emotion and culture. Beneath Bath Beach, Bay Ridge, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bensonhurst, Bergen Beach, Boreum Hill, Brighton Beach, Brooklyn Heights, Brownsville, Bushwick, Canarsie, Cobble Hill, Coney Island, Crown Heights, Cypress Hills, Downtown Brooklyn, DUMBO, Dyker Heights, East Flatbush, East New York, Flatbush, Flatlands, Fort Greene, Gerritsen Beach, Gowanus, Gravesend, Greenpoint, Kensington and Parkville, Manhattan Beach, Marine Park, Mill Basin, Park Slope, Prospect Heights, Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, Prospect Park South, Red Hook, Sea Gate, Sheepshead Bay, Sunset Park, Williamsburg, Windsor Terrace, and others.

These neighborhoods, named or unnamed, emerge through the Brooklyn poet's genius for memorable particulars. The Romeo in John Wakeman's beautiful dialogue-poem "Love in Brooklyn" might blow his nose after professing his love to Horowitz, but his trembling fingers suggest an awkward, moving sincerity. In "Sunday Morning Café," Alicia Jo Rabins contemplates desire and beauty among the "mosaic of Sunday papers" at the Tea Lounge in Park Slope. Elsewhere, the Dutch scientist and poet Leo Vroman calls the boom boxes of Sheepshead Bay "black coffins full / of unbearably loud singing," and the speaker in Anthony Lacavaro's "The Old Italian Neighborhood" laments the exhaustion of new parenthood while imagining an evening when God can grant dispensations for video-rental late fees; all the same, the poet passes buildings he believes are inhabited by "angry babies, / so many new and

angry babies anxious to flood / the morning streets." But release is exactly what Frank O'Hara proposes in "Ave Maria": "Mothers of America / let your kids go the movies!" At the movies, the children of America may find their way not only to "glamorous" countries but to "their first sexual experience" at an "apartment . . . in the / Heaven on Earth Bldg / near the Williamsburgh Bridge." Experience, sexual and otherwise, cannot be avoided, O'Hara seems to tell us. Or in the words of the Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky: "[H]e who fears corruption fears life." From Walt Whitman's "Sun-down Poem" to Melissa Beattie-Moss, whose "After Making Love" reminds us of the etymology of the word Brooklyn, as well as the tenuousness of safety and love, here are poems that fearlessly celebrate experience but are keenly aware of the passage of time. Flying a kite in Camden, the aged Whitman in Michael Morse's "Suburbia" can't help remembering the "smoke and mirrors" Brooklyn of his childhood.

When Randall Jones at the Center for American Places invited us to put this anthology together, we made a pact to guard against nostalgia and cloying tribute, the sincere poetry Wilde warned us about. Through the resources at the New York Public Library and the hard work and clever acquisitions of Amanda Kole, via the interlibrary loan department of The Pennsylvania State University, as well as the riches waiting to be found at Poets House and The Academy of American Poets, the borough became to us, through the sheer number of poets for whom it was an occasional or sustaining muse, more than the sum of its neighborhoods. The later labor of tracking and negotiating copyright was managed by poet Cynthia Clem, and the Institute for Arts and Humanities at Penn State granted funds for permissions. Michael J. Runyan and Claudia Rankine provided editorial assistance at the project's hectic conclusion. Finally, at NYU Press, thanks to Puja Telikicherla and Despina Papazoglou Gimbel. Throughout this process, one of our criteria was to present poems that capture the physical place itself, which meant hunting poetic portraits of as many neighborhoods and representative cultures as possible, poems that were not content to stand still, that not just offered "recollection in tranquility" but also juggled life's unwieldy luggage.

Brooklyn has a lively biography recorded in the Brooklyn Historical Society (which was, unfortunately, closed for renovation during the gathering process of this anthology), but often we found ourselves drawn to the histories that had been shuttled from somewhere else: history atop history. In Enid Dame's "Soup," the stubborn, lively cook is also the survivor who reminds us that her recipe is no facile domestic feat—her nourishment is a combination of the Vilna Ghetto and her own steadfast dedication to survival. Just because the soup is made in Brighton Beach decades after the Holocaust, ensures no escape or pat conclusion. Her daughter is overwhelmed by the secrets she's been protected from: "Mama, why didn't you tell me?"

Although food is not explicitly named in George Oppen's "Street," the poem confronts us with a skeletal diagram of hunger and impoverishment. The speaker is an avenue onto himself, a host to the disenfranchised on Bergen Street and a witness to the "real pain" they experience, but the poem's true power is that its stark, malnourished lines circle around a bleak conclusion: there is the expectation of improvement harbored by the innocents on their way to degradation, and there is the speaker whose concept of poverty, which amounts to ineffectual sympathy, can achieve no comfort or cure. Similarly, the speaker's childhood home in Donna Masini's "Getting Out of Where We Came From," is built not on a firm foundation but on a swamp. D. Nurkse, a recent poet laureate of Brooklyn (an office conceived of, and originally occupied by, Norman Rosten), delivers a disturbing portrait of police brutality during the Rudolph Giuliani era. And dating from the early 1970s, from Hutch Waters's chapbook *Africa in Brooklyn,* we found "Unpaid Bills," which together with the aching beauty of June Jordan's "For Michael Angelo Thompson" and Audre Lorde's "Cables to Rage," point to the essential social milestones of that era: feminism, civil rights, and the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts movements.

Broken Land is not a stab at historical redress or reconciliation; we concerned ourselves primarily with lyric poems of the twentieth and post-twentieth century, while also making an attempt to represent some interesting poetic precedents to Whitman. By arranging the poems according to publication date, we concerned ourselves with how the borough has been interpreted and repre-

sented over time. We limited ourselves to work written for the page, rather than for performance or other media. In our present era of widespread conservatism and convenient catchwords like "homeland security," we can take some solace in thriving poetic communities in New York and other places that offer opportunities for voices that take us far afield from the received notions and the distortions of an increasingly technological, mediated, and impersonal language. Contemporary Brooklyn has abounded in reading series and literary venues: each spring, the Brooklyn Poetry Outreach, organized by Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and Brooklyn Poet Laureate Ken Siegelman, gathers amateur and professional poets in an open-mike setting; Brooklyn College's "Day of the Poet," also supported by the Brooklyn Borough President's Office, allows high-school-age poets in the borough to work with experienced teachers, work that culminates in performance and publication. In the past decade, establishments such as Brooklyn Moon, Barbès, Pete's Candy Store, Softskull Press, Hanging Loose Press, Halycon Reading Series, and many others have introduced new voices while showcasing well-known authors. Consider the reading series at Pete's Candy Store: originally an Italian candy store and illegal gambling den, the place is now a chic Williamsburg outlet for emerging and established poets. If you're ever off the Lorimer Street stop on the L line on a Monday night, you must walk past the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to get there. The café is not conspicuous from the outside, but go to the back room, a combination of a vaudeville stage and a railroad room, where you'll find the performance space where, it is said, the illegal gamblers once made their bets.

All good poetry is a gamble, and poems of place don't always pay off. Ezra Pound insisted that it was important that great poems get written, but it was not important who wrote them. Perhaps we can add it's also of no importance *where* they were written. But for a borough that's lived in the shadow of Manhattan and in the more recent shadow of September 11, Brooklyn has produced an astonishing number of poets willing to risk their luck on the place—and if we can count the players at the table, it seems like there's much more to be won before the joint closes.

II. Borough of Churches

Julia Spicher Kasdorf

Heard:
(Lance Henson—
Oklahoma Cheyenne)

How can any self-respecting
Mohawk
live in a place
like this?

Response:
I burn Cedar and Sage
and keep
an eye
on the bridge.

(the final section from
Last Mornings in Brooklyn, Maurice Kenny)

How I came to this place—the Borough, the Bridge, Brighton Beach, this book—is how I came to be a writer, I now believe. My myth of origins, like that of many Americans, goes back to Brooklyn. As a 21-year-old from Pennsylvania, I transferred from a small, Mennonite liberal arts college in Indiana to NYU, having never visited the school. This was 1983, before the East Side dorms, when NYU undergraduates didn't expect much and mostly rode in on the train. I took a room at Menno House, on East 19th Street, a holdover from the days when conscientious objectors fulfilled their 1-W service at Bellevue. From my bed on the third floor, I once lay down and visualized every hard surface between my body and the earth, and wept. Homesick for sky, I'd hop the F train at West Fourth and ride to the sea. In November, in sweaters, I once watched two ancient, ferocious women clad in only their bras and girdles stride out of the surf at Brighton, doubtless dreaming of Odessa.

Much as I hated it, New York held me. Raised in a community that once called itself "the quiet in the land," I needed the City's

noise and loud voices. "Anyone might talk to you in New York, anyone does anything right in your face, everything is in the open, and a poetry adequate to New York is OPEN," Alice Notley wrote with regard to Ted Berrigan's work and what it meant for him to write in the City. Brooklyn could only be more so. Two days after I moved to Fort Greene, as I ushered at a Shakespeare performance in Prospect Park, a thwarted boyfriend stabbed his rival in the groin under the band shell during the show. That was 1985—before Spike moved in and the plywood came off the windows on South Oxford Street. I said, "No thank you," every day to the same man who offered to sell me "smoke" as I climbed up from the G-train. Once I dared a shopkeeper to sell me yams and bananas from the window of his store that fronted for something else. It took a lot of energy to sustain such foolishness. And after a year, I married my sweetheart and moved farther out, to the top of a two-family house on Kermit Place, just off Church Avenue, between Coney Island Avenue and Ocean Parkway.

In "Kensington," a name coined by realtors for a section of old Flatbush, I grew to love Brooklyn—and because of it, New York. Old-timers on the block, nostalgic for the borough's heydays in the 1950s, still raged about the Dodgers' desertion and Robert Moses' foul highway wrecking the landscape. They called Manhattan "the city" and almost never went there except to see "a show" with grandchildren growing up on Long Island. They called us yuppies, although my husband and I taught Catholic school or were students ourselves. Carmine, the butcher, told me he followed in his father's line of work because it gave him a chance to talk with women all day. He lamented the working wife who has no time to cook real food or flirt. He lamented TV dinners and all manner of frozen food. When you ordered a cut of anything, he'd ask how you planned to fix it, and if he didn't approve, he'd offer a better recipe, sometimes thrusting fresh parsley into your hand. His advice: it is more important to buy an expensive bottle of olive oil than an expensive bottle of wine. He once asked me to describe Pennsylvania—which he had never seen and imagined only as "The Poconos"—what did it look like, and was it true that people shot and ate deer there? Although pigs' feet and ears began to appear in his cases, he lamented people from the Islands who drifted up Church Avenue from Flat-

bush. "They eat bones! How can you eat bones?" Afraid of their recipes, unable to converse with those cooks, he fled the neighborhood before I left, moving on to Bay Ridge where, he said, people still eat meat.

In Manhattan, in graduate school, I learned to be cosmopolitan, secular, circumspect, but in Brooklyn everyone seemed marked by tribe and creed, inscribed by the distances they had come. Manhattan demanded a chic hybridity, but the borough of churches was more like the Balkans in the late 1980s and early '90s. Lethal collisions of culture and race erupted in Bensonhurst and Crown Heights, and it was rumored that a true Messiah—from Boro Park, Brooklyn—was dying in an eastside Manhattan hospital, but not forever. For a Mennonite girl whose father grew up in a community so oppositional it still plowed with horses, the place felt like a home, or many homes stuck close together, stinking of foreign foods and strange gods. One year, Good Friday fell on the first night of Passover, and I got swept into the swarm on Church Avenue, everyone shopping and rushing home to cook and pray—except, perhaps, our next-door neighbors, the gracious Chinese family from Burma with a bright, young son named Elvis.

Queens may be the true borough of immigrants, but in my mind, Brooklyn is this: everything and everywhere all at once heading someplace else, dragging whatever is portable from the old place, lucky that most days no one gets killed. Chaotic—beyond certain wealthier sections near the Park and the River. For some of us, Brooklyn remains a place between America and New York City, which is to say the world; for immigrants and émigrés, Brooklyn is the place between the homelands and the United States. Most summer Saturdays, I caught the city bus that glides down Coney Island Avenue through Sabbath-silent Midwood to Brighton, and there found my peace on a noisy, littered beach. Thus my pleasure in discovering Lady Moody, who traveled from Great Britain to colonial Salem seeking religious and personal liberty; finding New England as intolerant as the Old World, she finally settled on a portion of Flatbush Plantation. There she welcomed dissenters—Quakers and Dutch Mennonites among them—in defiance of the Calvinist church. Her house is preserved at Gravesend. It pleases me to think that Mennonites were

on Coney Island before the publication of *Martyr's Mirror,* a seventeenth-century compendium of execution and torture that still functions as a grim emblem of identity and remains the community's most important literary work.

Eight years in Kensington was long enough for me to write and publish a first book of poems—mostly about a valley of reserved people in Pennsylvania—and long enough to find a profession. During my seemingly endless studies at NYU, I met Michael Tyrell, a smart but soft-spoken undergraduate who wore only black and read poems like a shark. I admired his poetry, which seemed more intense and wiser than his years, and recognized a restless edge that suggested he would keep moving. At the same time, I got to know a group of varied and unassuming Brooklyn writers; several of whom are included in this anthology: D. Nurkse, and Enid Dame and Donald Lev of *The Home Planet News,* the venerable literary tabloid devoted to the expression of Jewish, feminist, and politically progressive views. (Only after her death did I learn that Enid Dame—the Brooklyn poet—was born in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, not far from where I grew up.) And I became affiliated with Poetlink, a group of poets that sponsored readings in Brooklyn venues; of these, Steve Hartman and his Pinched Nerve Press come to mind, as do Nancy Bengis Friedman and her workshop, Barbara Elovic, Phyllis Capello, Melody Davis, and Steve Fried. We held a reading to celebrate the borough in a karate studio in Sunset Heights, another in the Picnic House at Prospect Park; invariably, at those events someone would say, "You'll never see something like this in Queens!" Behind our house on Kermit Place, in one unpaved strip, I tended a gaudy bed of flowers, allowing free rein to the tiny magenta petunias that grow wild in Brooklyn; now I think this collection of poems must be a bit like that bed: unruly, eclectic, loud.

In the end, our New Jersey landlord who had grown up in the house sold out to a Pakistani family, and we had to move on in the early 1990s. As for the next place—Luquer Street, on the last block before the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway—I could praise flowers and pampered fig trees, brownstones and big sycamores, and the outrageous Christmas decorations of Carroll Gardens; Italian-speaking grocers who resembled princes in Florentine paintings, shrines on Court Street dedicated to blind Lucy and

the gorgeous black-robed Madonna who was borne through the streets once a year and tipped to bless benefactors' buildings, or the independent video rental with a special section reserved for "Woody, Spike and Jim." But we stayed there for only a couple of years before a job pulled me back to America. What stays with me now from that neighborhood are the pigeons catching late afternoon light on their wings as they circled above Clinton Street every day before vanishing into their rooftop cages, what they call "homing."

A friend told me of a time he was so depressed and dissatisfied with his work that he traveled from his Brooklyn studio to look at a certain wonderful painting at the art museum in Newark, New Jersey. Wandering through the galleries afterward, he came upon a room full of mediocre pictures executed in dated twentieth-century academic style, and on the curator's labels, nearly all carried the same haunting refrain: "born: Vienna, Austria, died: Brooklyn, NY . . . born: Paris, France, died: Brooklyn, NY . . . born: Vilna, Latvia, died: Brooklyn, NY." Then he resolved to change his work and change his life, or at least—so he wouldn't end up "born: Shanghai, China, died: Brooklyn, NY—he decided to move! Of course, mobility comes with money and a little nerve. It takes another kind of nerve to stick around.

On Leaving Brooklyn

1998

After Psalm 137

If I forget thee
let my tongue forget the songs
it sang in this strange land
and my heart forget the secrets
only a stranger can learn.
Borough of churches, borough of crack,
if I forget how ailanthus trees sprout
on the rooftops, how these streets
end in water and light,
let my eyes grow nearsighted.
Let my blood forget
the map of its travels
and my other blood cease
its slow tug toward the sea
if I do not remember,
if I do not always consider thee
my Babylon, my Jerusalem.

III. Exits from Brooklyn

Michael Tyrell

> . . . No cold War, no economic slump
> Could touch us in that Brooklyn; the word itself
> seems holy,
> a Cabalistic lunchbox
> Yawning open for all the world . . .
>
> —Noelle Kocot, "Brooklyn Sestina 1975"

For my first seven years, I had the privilege of living in two cities: Brooklyn and Manhattan. Well, in a sense. My family (a single mother, her parents, and I) lived on Manhattan Avenue in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a short walk from the parish of St. Anthony and St. Alphonsus. From the window that faced Manhattan Avenue, the neighborhood's main drag, I had my earliest view of commerce: Cheap Charlie's Discount Store, Trunz Fish Market, Paris Shoe Store, a catering hall where the cousins had their wedding receptions. (In my extended family, the seventies were all about weddings and funerals; the eighties were just about funerals.)

Greenpoint is known today as the largest Polish community in New York City, but in the late seventies, most of the signs were still in English, though *Apteka* would soon overtake Pharmacy; *Ksiegarnia,* Bookstore. It was probably at that window that I learned to put letters and words together, where the alphabet became more than a series of streets—Ash, Box, Clay, Dupont, Eagle, Freeman, and so on—at the northern tip of the neighborhood.

Before I could read signage or language, my grandmother and mother taught me the art of people-reading: how to spot their friends en route to the bingo or the penny social, because these women wore bright, clean blouses and always seemed weighed down by the burden and joy of bargain-hunting. There were other signals people gave off, signals I could pick up from that view. I learned, for example, to recognize the sluggish, stuttering walk of junkies, who seemed to sleepwalk by day and claim doorways by night.

People, I felt, were easy to read; I had them all figured out by the time I was four years old. People moved; you read them,

which prompted you to wave to them or ignore them. They materialized, they came and went, they vanished into buildings, they emerged and vanished again. Language was different, something that seemed to move and stand still, even stutter and sleepwalk, all at the same time. Odd, for instance, how those sales posters in the discount stores would get barred up after dark, but a sentence my grandmother or mother uttered, about their shopper friends—*Look at them, going out gallivanting*—seemed to hang in the air long after it was said.

As soon as I could grasp the concept, I loved the idea of living on a street called Manhattan that was not part of Manhattan. I marveled at how a place could be changed just by naming it. It was like seeing a ship inside a bottle, a skyline inside a snow globe.

I learned other things from the view. The clock in the tall steeple of St. Anthony and St. Alphonsus taught me how to tell time. This was done best at night, when the glowing clock face stood out like a permanent full moon. When I was very young, I hated watches, no matter what cartoon character showed up on them. What bothered me was the second hand: time jumping almost too fast to count. God seemed to need only an hour hand and a minute hand, so I trusted His method. At night, I wasn't allowed to sit by the street-facing window for very long, so I had to learn my lessons about time quickly, but the two women in my life allowed me to look out the back window, which had a magnificent view of the Twin Towers, at the time only a few years older than I.

After my grandmother and grandfather died, time seemed to speed up. I started wearing watches; teachers and other kids complicated all my neat conclusions about human nature. I went to school and my mother worked, so except for the dog, the apartment was empty most of the day. My mother worked in a dress shop. All her life, she was an expert on two things: clothes and bargains. She could tell you, for example, which top could hide a pregnancy, which five-and-dime would give you the best deal on cigarettes.

It's 1981. It's a spring afternoon, but no leaves have come out yet. It's mild enough for teenagers to practically dry-hump on the benches in McCarren Park, but the weather hasn't fully decided that it's spring yet. There's some smutty snow tucked between the columns of the bank, there are weather forecasters who say there

might be a light snowfall in the next few days. In my mother's shop, the displays are all about the summer, a season people aren't ready to buy.

Business is slow, so my mother gets to go home early. I'm still at school.

When she comes in the apartment, she finds that the dog's locked up in the bathroom, locked up and barking.

In the living room she finds the explanation for the dog's agitation and imprisonment: the lanky man wearing a cross and an I HEART NY T-shirt, she'll say later. They stop and study each other. It's almost as if he's deciding whether he's really a burglar, almost as if she's mulling over whether this is really her apartment anymore, or if she's walked into the wrong one, where this person is the rightful tenant. There are some resemblances between them. She carries a shopping bag full of bargains, clothes bought at a discount at her shop; he carries a shopping bag packed with my grandmother's costume jewelry and our ancient stereo.
The man doesn't say anything. My mother drops her bags and charges.

At the age of nine, my mother was the best fistfighter in her family—she could beat up her brothers because brothers didn't scratch and bite, the way sisters did. At fourteen, my mother told a mother superior to go to hell (and so goodbye, Catholic school); at twenty-five she met the movie star John Garfield, who stepped out of a car in Manhattan and mistook her for someone else; at forty-two she successfully concealed a pregnancy from everyone and never told anyone who the father was. This man is not on the same level as those challenges; this is only a burglar. She drops her bags and charges. She's from Brooklyn, and so she has the confidence that she can kick anyone's ass. No thought about weapons he might be carrying; no worries about what might happen. The women in my family are like this: ass-kickers. They smoke, they curse, they shop, they attack. When my godmother's son told his mother that she was killing him with her incessant smoking, my godmother, my first cousin and a fellow Greenpointer, snapped at him: "These cigarettes are the only thing keeping me from kicking your ass."

My mother was lucky because she was unharmed. The burglar had no weapons. He pushed her aside, fending off her curses and

her fists, but he didn't hurt her. She didn't kick his ass, but she succeeded in getting him running out the front door. Our burglar was so surprised, he left behind the shopping bag which had a smaller bag inside it, his burglar kit—a crowbar, a Phillips screwdriver, a hat to cover his face, a bottle of cheap whiskey maybe to work up his nerve. My mother and the dog chased him down the stairs, but they lost him on the street. Then my mother collared the dog, a brindled pit bull mix, who she said had probably been maced by the burglar. The dog was coming out of his trance and was barking and trembling, ready for a long chase. She said later that she didn't want him to get hit by a car. She started to tremble a bit herself, something she said she noticed when she pulled the dog back into the building. When they reached the top of the stairs, she noticed the lock on the apartment door was broken. Later that day, by the time I'd been picked up at school, my mother's brother, Honeyboy, had come to fix the lock.

But her confidence was broken—invaders could get in, some of our family had been robbed three or four times. Like them, my mother chose flight.

A move to Long Island followed, a decade when Manhattan was no longer the avenue I lived on, and its borough namesake no longer a subway ride away.

Long before I read poems, long before I thought I'd have to write them, I tried to come up with shortcuts back to Brooklyn, or to any metropolitan environment, which usually meant reading every book I could get my hands on and watching every city-related movie and program broadcast on TV. I resolved to get away from a life in Long Island as soon as I had something to say about it. That plan always seemed to revolve around a return to Brooklyn. But my mother and I had no money to waste on trips back to visit the ones who had stayed behind; only funerals earned us those visits.

As far as feeding the imagination, Long Island was no Proustian miracle; the smell of manicured grass was a world removed from the fish-market stink of my first street. I never learned to love what I had—danger abstracted as patches of undeveloped, wooded land, safety concretized as the sign with the big eyeball that said "Neighborhood Watch"—much as the life I thought I could be living in Brooklyn. Long Island felt like a life without a view.

Beyond my own sketchy cache of memories of Brooklyn and my mother's stories of growing up in Greenpoint during the Depression and the Second World War, the iceman, her grandmother the undertaker's assistant, my grandfather the German veteran who fought against the Germans, the house inherited by an aunt from a descendant of Abraham Lincoln's secretary of war, there were those images I glimpsed in popular culture, some of them comic or poignant, that kept me anchored to Brooklyn: Ralph and Alice Kramden's dingy kitchen in Bensonhurst; Cher, in the movie *Moonstruck,* in love kicking a can near the Promenade; other movies, like *On the Waterfront* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn;* and later, most crucially, *Last Exit to Brooklyn,* in both its literary and cinematic forms.

Perhaps no other portrait of Brooklyn compelled me as much as Selby's—it brought me back to the borough, but it terrified me. The characters in it suffered greatly, but no two suffered alike: the teenage prostitute and the unwed mother, the homosexual union organizer and the neighborhood transvestite—no restored locks, no flight, was possible for them. No one in the story ended up happy, few got out alive or sane, but when I read and watched *Last Exit,* I discovered something akin to what I'd discover in poetry a few years later: a view that seemed to be what Brooklyn was, a frame that could contain God, burglars, bargain-hunters, and the complexities of language and pathos themselves. I never once pretended that my own feeling of being stranded (wasn't I only two hours away—and a few elusive dollars—from where I wanted to go?) was on the same level as the gang rape, beatings, riots, and other violence that coursed through the book and film, or even on the same level as my easy judgments made at the window facing Manhattan Avenue. What struck me for the first time was that suffering could be almost lyrical when gracefully, pitilessly expressed, not glossed over or ignored. What I found there was not so much identification but an idea of a place where no character, no matter what his or her fate, could be ignored. I held on to this idea. Of course, I didn't want to imitate those lives, but I was glad to be reminded that they had a right to exist. When I began reading poems at the end of high school and I made my first attempts to write them, I think I asked of poetry an identical intensity. To some degree on both ends, the demand was satisfyingly answered.

It never occurred to me to write a poem about Brooklyn until long after I got to New York University, which predictably proved my best exit from Long Island. There, I met and studied with the encouraging and brilliant Julia Kasdorf, whose poems I admired for many reasons, perhaps most of all their remarkably strong sense of place. It was an element largely absent from my own work, and for a long time I resisted naming the locations of my speakers and environments. What impressed me about Julia's poems was that they seemed exceptional to my prejudice about place; they were firmly located not only in her native Pennsylvania and the Mennonite community into which she was born but also in Brooklyn, her adopted community. They seemed to me neither sentimental nor nostalgic but as subtly incisive as they were musically vibrant; hers was a speaker alert to her surroundings but not narcotized by them.

In my senior year of college, I lived in Brooklyn again, but only briefly, in the house my aunt inherited from the descendant of Lincoln's secretary of war, a house rumored to be haunted. All of it should have proved interesting source material; Julia predicted that I would write good poems about my "homecoming." It would take a year for her prediction to come true, and true to my tendency to write about a place only after I'd left it, it happened in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where I was staying at a retreat for young poets. In the end, only one respectable poem emerged on the subject, a piece about St. Anthony's church (although I forgot to put in the second saint's name—an omission of memory, or an homage to my mother, who still petitions the saint of lost things). It was probably the first poem I wrote where I claimed something of Brooklyn as my own, and it felt, in its own small way, like the most important homecoming of all.

As I write this, it's July 2003 in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, and the fudgesicle truck is jingling down Troutman Street; every day the theme from *The Sting* wanders insistently among the familiar Brooklyn hollers, gushing hydrants, and sirens. Down the block from my railroad apartment, a homemade memorial has been mounted for a twenty-year-old, dead of an overdose. In front of a closed storefront, once the dead guy's favorite hangout, before that a Baptist church, sits an open cardboard box containing Santeria candles and a few loose Newports.

R. I. P. LITO, MY LITTLE NIGGAH, written in white shoe polish, emblazons several windshields. The salon called "Beautyrama" has been closed for months, but the auto parts store known as "Affordable Collision" endures. I have one more day here in Bushwick (which the cheerleaders of gentrification have been calling "East Williamsburg" in the *Voice* ads) where I've been living for eighteen months, one more month in New York until I leave the state for a another writer's retreat, this one in Connecticut.

Like a few Manhattanites I know, unlike no Long Islanders I know, I have no driver's license. Recently, I've been taking lessons to change that—I feel like an overgrown boy who still makes his turns too sharp and honks at pigeons who seem thoroughly used to having the industrial streets of Bushwick all to themselves. My driver's ed. instructor tells me there's no better place to learn how to drive because "you'll never see more aggressive motherfuckers." He said that that was his take on the line from the song "New York, New York," the famous lines that talk about survival in New York, how it prepares you for any place you might go. I want to pass the test most people half my age pass. More than that, I just hope all my collisions are affordable, no exit from Brooklyn my last.

MICHAEL TYRELL

Against Angels

1997

> *Bright souls without a seam.*
> *—Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Angels"*

In the stained glass of St. Anthony's church,
they flew too perfectly, arriving everywhere,
like guests who never decline invitation,
outlasting their welcome, gossips
in gardens, mangers, temples, at any eventful site
where their golden wings would be
superfluous, and Lucifer's example
the notable absence, the reminder
how paradise gets lost every day on earth.
Named for the archangel, I walked
each Sunday under the raised swords
of the seraphs and wondered what bribery,
what innocence could earn the blond hair
and blinding haloes ascending to countries of clouds,
what barter to molt my body
and again touch the body of my father?
The legends of Joan and Sebastian,
the priest insisted: feathers shot from their shoulders,
each became identical,
not in size but character, no true sex,
none desiring touch or favoring
silence over music. And, as I hunted the ceiling
for a proof of their human lives, I found
nothing, not a single arrow, I saw each hovering god
no different than the stone-faced images
guarding local graves, their open hands
not a welcome into light
but a gesture of dismissal,
a rejection of the body that stood against
the wings on those windows,
and the iron bars behind them.