

The Ghost
of
Congress Street



Selected Poems

Michael Palma

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This

This is a half romantic age.
We make our monsters on the page
And wait for all the trees to fall
But we're not really scared at all.

We sit up in our beds alone
Listening for the telephone,
Wishing we were loved, but knowing
Just which way the wind is blowing.

Whatever shall we do, we two?
I wish I knew. I wish I knew.
A little madness more or less
Would take our minds off things, I guess.

Your Lefthanded Lover

Your lefthanded lover,
What else can he do
But sit in a dark house
And think about you?

Telephones taunt him,
Doorbells demand,
But he just keeps sitting,
A book in his hand.

You sit on a hot beach,
The sunshine drips down,
You think of your lover
Alone in the town.

Your lefthanded lover
Has subways to ride,
Watching his bare breath
Condensing inside.

The big ones are jawing,
The typewriters clack,
He sees them, he gives them
The breadth of his back.

You lie on smooth linen,
The air sweats perfume,
You think of your lover
Alone in his room.

Your lefthanded lover
Does all that he can
To keep his mind far from
Your righthanded man.

While roads wander onward
He lies back to sleep
And lets others save
What nobody can keep.

And some women whisper
And some women ache
For a lefthanded lover
Who gives what you take.

O Careless Love

O careless love, who made with me
A spread of summer in the grass.

Our fingers wandered greedily
To tease assurance from the night.

The clocks run backward as we pass,
I wave to you in last year's light.

The unappeasing earth revolves,
It moves and moves. And we remain.

Why do we want to be ourselves?
Why do we try so hard to be?

And then the rain, the wall of rain
Where now you start to hide from me.

In a Dismal Time

In a dismal time, a time like any other,
In days of losses, losers take to the streets.
I take to the streets, a motley to the view.
The broken ones accost me everywhere.
Some have lost all. And all I've lost is you.

In the corners of your house the silence beats.
You stitch your pieties for ready wear,
And wanting is the short way to go mad.
Wanting, these days, is all we do together,
And all I've lost is what I never had.

An Evening Out

The longed-for night is here at last.
The tickets posted months before
Are handed over at the door,
And we proceed to wriggle past
A spread of seven hundred souls
Filling a bright and massive hall.
Houselights and conversations fall.
A liquid piano line unrolls,
Met by a stab of violins.
Some press their fingertips and stare,
Some bow their heads as if in prayer.
And very soon my mind begins
To slide, my thoughts begin to run
Down thorny paths and twisting slopes—
Today's mistakes, tomorrow's hopes,
The could have been and should have done,
The wasted and the waiting years—
Until my consciousness loops round
To fix once more upon the sound
That breaks and shimmers in my ears.
I start to listen, passionately
Awaiting when it will have passed
So that I may begin at last
To savor it in memory.

Ray Charles at the Copa

He stands in shadow, waiting to go on,
Alone inside his mind as mother care
Sits aching in his muscles. Spotlights flare,
The trumpets call his name, his frown is gone.

He hovers at the piano, reaches out
And like a woman it is one with him,
Rippling in his rhythms. Spotlights dim.
He hunches down into his edging shout.

He strains for every wound on every skin
Until they open out along his flesh,
Ripe and sparkling. The ripped pieces mesh
Into a mouth that sucks the darkness in.

He moans and rocks, the piano rocks and screams,
Soul flares its fingers and the body dreams.

Let Me Take You Down

(Home for disturbed children)

Turn out your eyes but never see,
Don't ever lock the door on me,
You've got enough hot privacy
Up in your head where I can't be.
Stay in there, it's deep and black.
One step forward, one step back.

I'll pull you out of bed at eight,
Put bars across the garden gate.
Get your shoes on, don't be late.
Ready? Now sit there and wait.
Put my garbage in your sack.
Two steps forward, two steps back.

Come out come out, but never play,
Snatch a quick spoonful of day.
Passers stare but never say,
Get their fill and look away.
Hop home across the railroad track,
Three steps forward, three steps back.

Hide inside your bed all night,
Watch out for the hungry light.
Keep your tiny world locked tight,
Never find out which one's right.
Take it all, you can't attack.
One step forward, one step back.

Read Carefully Before Using

Respect the setters of standards, the justifiers,
Whose reasons are the same as their desires.
Esteem the droves who are doing as they should,
Who look upon their works and find them good.
Value the ones whose consciences uphold them,
Whose fluffed, upholstered memories enfold them.
Honor the hosts who can't help how they feel:
Thought is no substitute for honest zeal.

Admire the plump and sleek who are warm with knowing
That hell awaits the wicked, whose list is growing.
Cherish the cherubs who cheerfully admit
They are here for a reason, and know the reason too.
Envy the swarms who can't smell their own shit:
There's a whole lot more of it than there is of you.

Not All the Blood of Goats

*"Not all the blood of goats
Shall for my sins atone..."*

He followed after women as
It's done by one who feels he has
Been nudged by some great master plan
That plumps the destiny of man.
He was the kind that fell in love
Piecemeal: he lay dreaming of
One woman's smile, another's eyes,
Another's arabesques and sighs,
Another's legs, another's song
Whose melody had made him long.
But being sensible he knew
This sort of thing would never do.
He put a hood upon his head.
He spoke as little as the dead.
He fingered beads excitedly.
He nailed desire to a tree.
He ate black bread and stinking stew.
But two red eyes were eating too.
In the light they were Christ-size.
In the night they were the eyes
Of a woman who with toes uncurled
Had kissed him halfway round the world.
And being sensible he knew
This sort of thing would never do.
He ran to gatherings of wise
Young men with irritated eyes

Who closed their circles with a twist
That told him he would not be missed.
He ran to gatherings of old
Disgruntled men who sat and told
How they had been respected once,
And wiped their hands on their shirtfronts.
They drove him out again with stares
That said his sorrows cheapened theirs.
He went into the crowded street
And offered to wash any feet
That needed washing or did not,
And begged the chance to kiss the blot
Of any human who believed.
But scorn was all that he received.
He strayed into the thoroughfare
Where traffic was its thickest, where
He threatened God he would stand still
Upon that very spot until
He heard God whisper in his ear,
And consequently did not hear
The truck that knocked him neatly flat.
He lay a while, and then he sat,
Stood up, shook hands, then said good day
And smiled contritely, walked away,
Head mercifully cleansed of sense,
And never knew the difference.

In the Afternoon

A woman, heavy-thighed,
Spreads darkness to the day,
To him. He slips inside
And slips away
From everything that lurks
In absolute disguise,
From all eternal works.
When they arise,
He chastened and uncurled,
She thoughtful, they are freed
To choose from all this world,
Choose what they need.

Give Us This Day

Another blonde is hacked to bits,
Another peace talk goes to hell.

In letters indignation throbs,
In op-ed columns pundits warn.

One page of three-named wealthy brides:
One has a chubby, pleasant face.

Some creeps give Orphan Annie fits,
Some crooks have Tracy down a well.

Now stars align: Avoid new jobs,
Now love lies waiting to be born.

And on the back page someone slides
Forever into second base.

October 1968

Leaves fall from trees, obeying older laws.
A brilliant bowl of sunlight ruminates.
In Minnesota musing sits and waits
The totem we pushed forward in our cause.
The others still weave garlands from the straws.
One shows his crimson neck and freely hates.
The oily favorite booms through ghost debates
With sweating straw men, managing applause.
The other one recirculates the saws
Of humanness, and prays the bully fates
Won't pull apart his building blocks of states.
We follow this one, but with swollen craws.

The nights turn breezy, chillier. The smell
Of coming ice drifts inland from the bay
Where splintered yachts begin to slip away.
I walk outside in shirtsleeves, and I dwell
On choice of prisons. Wear the leper's bell
Around my neck, or kiss the martyr's gray?
Showing his wounds in Oregon today,
My candidate could see me in my cell
But won't unlock it for me. What the hell
Did I expect? What did I want to say?
Our gates aren't pearly, and our angels pray
For bully pleasures and beg us not to tell.

After Thoreau

The mass of men lead lives
Of quiet desperation.
For every one who strives
When misery arrives,
Ten shrivel in frustration.

The blood proposes riot.
For each one pricked to try it,
Scores mutter, and let pass.
More desperately quiet
Grow the lives that men amass.

All indications show where
All pathways bring them nowhere.
Too schooled to suffer needs,
How quietly men go where
Their desperation leads.

Near Closing Time

“My father was a worthless piece of shit,”
He said to me, and everybody else
In earshot, or perhaps to none of us.
“He never praised a goddamn thing I did.
While all my friends got patted on the head
By *their* dads every time they took a piss,
The only thing I got was explanations,
For my own good, of how I’d fucked things up.
Dad. Daddy. I can hardly say the words.
They sound like something from another language.”
He took another drag, and held it in
So long you’d almost think it was a joint,
Then slowly he blew out the little bit
His lungs hadn’t had the chance to suck up yet.
“He got his load on every Friday night,
And every Saturday he took me down
To the basement, and he beat me till I screamed.
At night I pull my belt out of my pants,
And every single time I do, I hear
The jingle and the swish and I still feel
His buckle biting at my legs and back.
He always said it was the only way
To make sure that I wouldn’t turn out bad.
When he first started in, the only thing
That I had ever done wrong was get born,
But then I started thinking, if I had
To take a beating, then I might as well
Make sure it was for something, after all.

So I ran wild, and he just hit me harder.”
Without a word, the bartender came by
And set another scotch in front of him.
After the fourth, he hadn’t bothered asking.
“Live and let live, that’s what I always say.
I lived it up, got lit, because it was
The only way that I could let him live.
And by the time he died it was too late
To learn to make it any other way.
One time when he was feeling fatherly,
He talked about his old man, and he told me
He made him wash the car on Saturdays
Instead of letting him go to the movies.
He even had the face to call his father
That lousy son of a bitch in front of me.
When I was seventeen I joined the army,
Right in the middle of a goddamn war,
Just so that I could put ten thousand miles
Between me and that bastard. There I was,
Getting shot at every day, and sending home
My money for safekeeping. There he was,
Ass on a barstool, drinking every penny.
I guess you’d say it was my fault, for being
Stupid enough to think he would do different.”
He didn’t wait for me to disagree.
“Somebody treated that way, you must think
“He’d make damn certain he would never be
Responsible for making anyone
Suffer the way he’d suffered. So you’d think.”
He lit another one, and shook his head.
“When I see people with their kids, it makes me
Glad that the parents treat them right—by *right*

I mean no hitting and no nasty names.
But all the same, it makes me angry too.
What did they do that they deserve to be
Treated so much better than I was?
You know, I always wanted to have kids.
I thought I'd be a good dad. But I knew,
Whenever I got angry or upset,
I had this rotten thing inside of me
That took me over, made me want to hurt
Whatever was near, whatever I could reach.
So I knew I could never take the chance.
I think I hate him most of all for that.”
He took some bills out of his jacket pocket
And put them on the bar without a glance.
He felt his pocket for his keys, stood up
And turned, and turned back, and sat down again.
“I think I'll have just one more. How about you?”

A Wretch Like Me

The priests were virgin-born, of sainted mothers,
Like all of us. We moved within mysteries
That none but the depraved could wish to unravel.
We were the people, but everyone knew someone
Whose soul the inscrutable all-loving God
Had chosen to leave in darkness. We knew better
Than to hate the lost. The right response was pity.
We might preach to them if we wished, but never debate.
They could only hurt us, who couldn't help themselves
But were still somehow to blame for their perdition.

When mass was done, I shrugged out of my cassock
And dragged the full sacks from the collection baskets
Up to the second floor of the rectory,
Where the shirtsleeved priests sat in a semicircle
Watching a loud machine swallow up the coins,
Spinning them, spitting them into their separate chutes
Of nickels, dimes, quarters, totaling all the while.
Thick sauce, cigars, rye whisky, Cadillacs
Plugged the manhole of the unacknowledgeable
Sewer that boiled at the bottom of the soul.

The nuns were saints, electing to live untainted
By something, whatever it was, that everyone knew
Only the wicked wanted. Whacking us with
Stiff rulers was not what they wanted. It was for us,
Building up moral callus, a carapace,
Preparing us for the predatory world,
Installing internal meters that would keep
A constant tally of the soul's account.

My father's nickels fetched tomorrow's papers,
The *News* and *Mirror*, sized for bathroom scanning,
At the same corner candy store every night.
On the front page I saw the murdered king
Of Iraq. He was only twenty-three years old,
Making him ten the year that I was born
And Roosevelt, Mussolini, and Hitler died.
President Eisenhower sent the marines
To Lebanon, and I waited for the war.
On the front page I saw the squinty grin
Of Charles Starkweather and the brassy ripeness
Of the girl whose family they had shot and stabbed,
And eight more strewn across the low, flat land.
He looked like someone who'd do anything
And she looked just like someone who would let him.
He'd been born and bred for the electric chair.

A man lay on the ground at a gas station
Under a sheet, with his bloody head uncovered.
A crowd was gathered, but nobody moved.
They looked like a photograph on the front page,
But this was real. I saw it on the street.
My father at the wheel and my mother beside him
Told the three of us in the back seat, "He's asleep,"
And suddenly they were a little smaller.

And I, a priestling, blotting up the faith
One and immutable, who one day had found
A playing card in the gutter, on its face
A photographed woman grinning up at me
(Who'd been so innocent at ten that passing
An open bathroom door I'd asked my cousin
Why she had bothered sitting just to pee),
Her gaping mysteries grinning garishly,

And cast it from me—I lay on the couch one night
When my parents weren't home, and rubbed and moved,
Seeing my friend's older sister in her ripeness,
Until I shuddered, shocked by the spurting wetness.
When my fingers showed me that it wasn't blood,
My soul grew cold with another, deeper terror.
I'm going to hell, my mind said in an instant,
Even before the stickiness grew cold.

Home Town

None of us born here: farmers long ago
Made way for the accountants and for us,
For houses in the meadows, roads that meet
At angles nearly right, and left their dead,
With births and deaths encouragingly spread,
In a churchyard on a main street called Main Street.
In summer a wall of green around the house,
In winter a high and thriving wall of snow,
In spring a spreading husband on each lawn,
In fall the crisp of woodsmoke in the air.
Old barns that light the sky with bidden flames,
Raised ranches facing peeled and gaunt antiques.
Some teenage wreckage every several weeks
On narrow roads with numbers for their names.
Low roofs, high trees, a wide sky everywhere,
And some dead thing beside the road each dawn.

When in April

In memory of Nolan Fallahay

There was a teacher of the company
Who make up the fat world, and such was he
That I was always glad to take my seat
Among the young who gathered at his feet,
For he was often merry in his prime
And fed us well on argument and rhyme.
He'd never bow his head at Shakespeare's name,
But lit instead a Canterbury flame.
"Quem quaeritis?" came from his lips each day,
Then "What is the young man trying to say?"
Would follow, and if any dared reply,
"What else?" he'd roar, so none could bull him by.
When someone spoke, no matter on what note,
He had some turned remark that he could quote,
And what was the connection, none could tell,
But all agreed he said it very well.
His clothing stopped in 1944,
His reading several centuries before.
With hawklike nose, a frame erect and thin,
A cigarette as constant as his chin,
All angles, and his hair the merest fuzz,
A Sherlock Holmes with a crewcut he was.
He would regale us ever and again
By speaking mockingly of famous men,
Or say, while smiling sweetly as a flower,
"As I once said to General Eisenhower..."
In God's good words he always did believe,

But wore it in his work, not on his sleeve.
An honest man in a dishonest age,
He saved his blackest bile and loudest rage
For all those foolish bastards who insist
Their reeking nether regions must be kissed.
The world revolved, he followed his career,
And fewer sat before him every year.
He could not go the way that others went
But clung to what he'd dreamed was permanent
Till he, who had so happily begun,
Was glad as any when his course was done.
He left his stage, and left behind a name
That carried less and less to those who came
To clog the corridors where he had walked.
In rooms that once vibrated when he talked
I still can see him curling round his book,
Laughing at God knows what until he shook,
Coughing and choking till he had to sit,
As folly danced much faster than his wit.

Portrait with Mirrors

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is my pursuit, now I have lost the name
Of action, and must trace how I became
A shadow man, a thing of tags and patches
Carving the classics into snack-sized snatches,
Rictus rigidifying as he watches
The young ones splash in the genetic pool,
It's who I am the one and only rule
Of life or art these days, when any fool
May look into his heart and write, it seems.
I have wept at the uncoupling of my dreams.
I have measured out my life with freshman themes.

The Ghost of Congress Street

Anne Longfellow Pierce
In her long whispering gown
Glides through her handsome house
In the heart of Portland town,
Over the flowered carpets,
Along the narrow halls,
Past nieces in gold frames
Smiling from the walls,
Up to the high windows
That looked down to the sea
When all the sky was open
And days moved gracefully.

A young and loving husband
Taken so long ago,
Her marriage a still moment
In the remorseless flow,
She came back home forever,
To gather a slow peace,
To tidy and to nourish,
To ease each one's release,
To thread the days together,
And most of all to be
Sister to the most famous
Man of the century.

Bread rises on the fire,
The gentle hours chime,
Laundry fills the boiler
As in grandfather's time,
The city rises higher,
Thick wires clot the sky,
But still the summer casements
Bring the seagulls' cry
To Anne Longfellow Pierce,
Who will not live to see
Henry's laurels nibbled
By the mice of history.

Anne Longfellow Pierce,
Licensed by City Hall
To live just as she chooses,
Uses the last of all
Portland's backyard privies
Till, when her time is done,
With all the calendars crying
Nineteen Hundred One,
She gives her body over,
She sets her spirit free
To fill the footworn hallways
In still serenity.

“Oh to Break Through”

*It is too late
for any change
but death.
I am I.*

—Robert Hayden

Dignified,
Unsatisfied,
His eyes caressed the world
He fought to see.
Born halfway blind,
Spinning his fate
From a many-selving spirit,
Turned from every corner,
How long must he wait?
It is too late.

He took the taunts,
Stared down the shouts
Of those who flaunted
Soul-shaped badges
In a holy zeal
To deride, to range
Through a world gone rotten
For the strident,
For the strange,
For any change.

Rooted nowhere
But in the soil
Of the one soul,
Walking the earth
With a stranger's name,
Fallen from his birth,
He turned whatever came
To hard beauty, and no force
Could freeze his mouth
But death.

The prizes and praise
They clamor to scatter
Over his memory
Fashion new ways
To obscurity.
Still it will not die,
Though sorrow's dust is spread,
The soft mouth
With its stubborn cry:
I am I.

Air of Lost Connections

(January 1988)

*At forty-five
what next, what next?
At every corner
I meet my Father,
my age, still alive....*
—Robert Lowell

Sky rich with bright blue emptiness,
The ice-glazed hillside gathers the hard sun
And flings the glare against the window glass.
The day is fresh. The times are fresh with styles
Your fevered dreams could not foresee.
You tilted at a flagrant enemy,
Now airy presidential smiles
Settle like stone. The empire pokes along.
My students with wind-burnished faces come
To be examined on your poetry.

Old flames, old puritans, old statues of
Your colonel stiff with virtue, freakish mercies,
The cold Maine mornings and the boiling nights,
The violence and the curdled love—
They write it out for me. What can they know
At twenty? Twenty years ago
In the still center of the days of rage,
To my smiling suave professor
(Now in his sixties, cored with cancer)
I called you “the Longfellow of our age.”

You are clearer, ten years dead. From school to jail,
Family to fame, you walked from cell to cell.
The world was personal. You moved,
Married, talked to, lived with, loved
No one but writers. Nothing was real until
It was a poem, Hawthorne and Baudelaire
Truer than the flitting ghosts you saw
Around you. Impatient, awkward, inexact,
Your pen pricked facts. You strove to like yourself,
And saw a man too like yourself.

Heads down, my twenty students scribble,
Their faces knotted to unriddle
The life you wrote. The thighs inside their jeans
Straining with confidence, how do they understand
That we lose and are afraid? Behind the tired
Bewildered face, you lusted after honor,
Astride the bronze steed overmastering all.
You died in love. Amid the sprawl
The triumphs glow, the sad examples lean,
Stark milestones as we cross the frozen land.

The Sixth of June

Your mother always said
It would rain on your wedding day,
Or so you said to me.
A woman I never knew,
Your mother was long dead
Before it came your way,
The day that even you
Thought you'd never live to see,
But she'd called it, just the same.
It was the sixth of June
And down the torrents came.
The day broke wet and dark,
From buildup to release
A perfect Maine monsoon
That washed away the chance
That we would take our vows
In the sunlight, in the park,
Rose garden at high noon.
Well, so much for romance.
Now we'd need to find the house
Of the justice of the peace.
And while the heavens crashed,
I turned around and smashed
My knee into a doorway,
As if to find one more way
To prove our day was trashed,
That nothing would go right,
That we had lost all sense,

That plighting would be plight.
(There are no accidents,
I'd often heard you say.)
By twelve o'clock the day
Had turned magnificent,
Although the park would be
Still spongy with rainwater.
The sky beamed as we went
To the house of the J.P.
And our witnesses, his wife
And their pouty little daughter
Who was straining to go get
Her hair cut. While you primped,
I told him you and I,
Though we had never scrimped,
Still dreamed we'd make our life
In Maine, and he said "Why?"
And then we took our places
Beside the TV set
(At least it wasn't on),
And in their little house
We two at last were one,
Exchanging solemn vows
While the girl kept making faces.
(How many times we've smiled,
And wondered at our status:
Is a ceremony valid
If it's witnessed by a child?
And yet it hardly matters.
Though propriety's a stuff
To turn bright colors pallid,
The times we've had were rough

Enough to keep things wild.)
Then we were on our way,
Driving up the coast
Through the brilliant afternoon,
And though it was for most
Just an ordinary day,
Just a Saturday in June,
The sight of our fine clothes,
You with your bouquet,
I with my boutonniere,
Showed that for us it wasn't,
And from people everywhere,
In the stores in every town,
Came smiles, sometimes a present,
From one a plastic rose,
From one a little book
Full of lovers' sentiment.
Though the sun was going down,
Our skies were growing brighter.
At the cafe where we had
Our wedding feast, they took
One look at us and sent
A bottle of sparkling cider,
Gratis, and wished us well.
Tired but purely glad,
We came to our motel.
However late the hour,
We'd done just as we should,
Though it surely wasn't sin
That had made our living good.
Still, I knew we would begin
Our married life in style

When I saw your feral grin
As you started to devour
My face with its broad smile.
Though we might face a past
And a future of defeats,
It was happiness at last
To our hearts and to our sheets.

Midnight

She lifts her arms above her head
To fix her hair, transfixing me.
I lie and watch her from the bed.
Through daylight's dull intensity,
One of the multitude, she sped
To every place she had to be.
But now the world's pinpointed where
She sits to brush and pin her hair.

The clothes still smelling of the day
Are in the hamper, out of sight.
The windows all are closed to stay
The jumbled noises of the night.
She stands and puts her brush away,
Flesh golden in the candlelight.
The old clock whispers on the shelf,
Talking to no one but itself.

The Ghost of Congress Street

Selected Poems



Michael Palma has published two chapbooks of poetry, *The Egg Shape* and *Antibodies*, and one full-length collection, *A Fortune in Gold*. He edited *New Italian Poets* with Dana Gioia and a volume of translations from Luciano Erba with Alfredo de Palchi. His translations include prize-winning volumes of Guido Gozzano and Diego Valeri with Princeton University Press, as well as books by ten other Italian poets. His *terza rima* translation of Dante's *Inferno* was published by Norton in 2002, and was republished as a Norton Critical Edition in 2007. He lives in Bellows Falls, Vermont.

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