

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RED

A Novel in Verse

ANNE CARSON

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RED MEAT:
WHAT DIFFERENCE
DID
STESICHOROS MAKE?

*I like the feeling of words doing
as they want to do and as they have to do.*

GERTRUDE STEIN

HE CAME after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet. Born about 650 B.C. on the north coast of Sicily in a city called Himera, he lived among refugees who spoke a mixed dialect of Chalcidian and Doric. A refugee population is hungry for language and aware that anything can happen. Words bounce. Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do. Stesichoros' words were collected in twenty-six books of which there remain to us a dozen or so titles and several collections of fragments. Not much is known about his working life (except the famous story that he was struck blind by Helen; see Appendixes A, B, C). He seems to have had a great popular success.

How did the critics regard him? Many ancient praises adhere to his name. "Most Homeric of the lyric poets," says Longinus. "Makes those old stories new," says Suidas. "Driven by a craving for change," says Dionysios of Halikarnassos. "What a sweet genius in the use of adjectives!" adds Hermogenes. Here we touch the core of the question "What difference did Stesichoros make?" A comparison may be useful. When Gertrude Stein had to sum up Picasso she said, "This one was working." So say of Stesichoros, "This one was making adjectives."

What is an adjective? Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else. The word *adjective* (*epitheton* in Greek) is itself an adjective meaning "placed on top," "added," "appended," "imported," "foreign." Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being.

Of course there are several different ways to be. In the world of the Homeric epic, for example, being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition. When Homer mentions blood, blood is *black*. When women appear, women are *neat-ankled* or *glancing*. Poseidon always has *the blue eyebrows of Poseidon*. Gods' laughter is *unquenchable*. Human knees are *quick*. The sea is *unwearying*. Death is *bad*. Cowards' livers are *white*. Homer's epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption. There is a passion in it but what kind of passion? "Consumption is not a passion for substances but a passion for the code," says Baudrillard.

So into the still surface of this code Stesichoros was born. And Stesichoros was studying the surface restlessly. It leaned away from him. He went closer. It stopped. "Passion for substances" seems a good description of that moment. For no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the latches.

Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*. Or a river being *root silver*. Or a child *bruiseless*. Or hell *as deep as the sun is high*. Or Herakles *ordeal strong*. Or a planet *middle night stuck*. Or an insomniac *outside the joy*. Or killings *cream black*. Some substances proved more complex. To Helen of Troy, for example, was attached an adjectival tradition of whoredom already old by the time Homer used it. When Stesichoros unlatched her epithet from Helen there flowed out such a light as may have blinded him for a moment. This is a big question, the question of the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen (see Appendixes A, B), although generally regarded as unanswerable (but see Appendix C).

A more tractable example is Geryon. Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long lyric poem in dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure. Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive, which go by the name *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter") in standard editions. They tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an adjective meaning simply "The Red Place") quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle. There were many different ways to tell a story like this.

Herakles was an important Greek hero and the elimination of Geryon constituted one of His celebrated Labors. If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from Geryon's own experience. We see his red boy's life and his little dog. A scene of wild appeal from his mother, which breaks off. Interspersed shots of Herakles approaching over the sea. A flash of the gods in heaven pointing to Geryon's doom. The battle itself. The moment when everything goes suddenly slow and Herakles' arrow divides Geryon's skull. We see Herakles kill the little dog with His famous club.

But that is enough proemium. You can answer for yourself the question "What difference did Stesichoros make?" by considering his masterpiece. Some of its principal fragments are below. If you find the text difficult, you are not alone. Time has dealt harshly with Stesichoros. No passage longer than thirty lines is quoted from him and papyrus scraps (still being found: the most recent fragments were recovered from cartonnage in Egypt in 1977) withhold as much as they tell. The whole corpus of the fragments of Stesichoros in the original Greek has been published thirteen times so far by different editors, beginning with Bergk in 1882. No edition is exactly the same as any other in its contents or its ordering of the contents. Bergk says the history of a text is like a long caress. However that may be, the fragments of the *Geryoneis* itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces

and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box. "Believe me for meat and for myself," as Gertrude Stein says. Here. Shake.

*How do we feel the story
of a life? How do we
make it its order?*

RED MEAT: FRAGMENTS OF STESICHOROS

I. GERYON

Geryon was a monster everything about him was red
Put his snout out of the covers in the morning it was red
How stiff the red landscape where his cattle scraped against
Their hobbles in the red wind
Burrowed himself down in the red dawn jelly of Geryon's
Dream

Geryon's dream began red then slipped out of the vat and ran
Upsail broke silver shot up through his roots like a pup

Secret pup At the front end of another red day

II. MEANWHILE HE CAME

Across the salt knobs it was Him
Knew about the homegold
Had sighted red smoke above the red spires

III. GERYON'S PARENTS

If you persist in wearing your mask at the supper table
Well Goodnight Then they said and drove him up
Those hemorrhaging stairs to the hot dry Arms
To the ticking red taxi of the incubus
Don't want to go want to stay Downstairs and read

IV. GERYON'S DEATH BEGINS

Geryon walked the red length of his mind and answered No
It was murder And torn to see the cattle lay
All these darlings said Geryon And now me

V. GERYON'S REVERSIBLE DESTINY

His mother saw it mothers are like that
Trust me she said Engineer of his softness
You don't have to make up your mind right away
Behind her red right cheek Geryon could see
Coil of the hot plate starting to glow

VI. MEANWHILE IN HEAVEN

Athena was looking down through the floor
Of the glass-bottomed boat Athena pointed
Zeus looked *Him*

VII. GERYON'S WEEKEND

Later well later they left the bar went back to the centaur's
Place the centaur had a cup made out of a skull Holding three
Measures of wine Holding it he drank Come over here you can
Bring your drink if you're afraid to come alone The centaur
Patted the sofa beside him Reddish yellow small alive animal
Not a bee moved up Geryon's spine on the inside

VIII. GERYON'S FATHER

A quiet root may know how to holler He liked to
Suck words Here is an almighty one he would say
After days of standing in the doorway
NIGHTBOLLSNORTED

IX. GERYON'S WAR RECORD

Geryon lay on the ground covering his ears The sound
Of the horses like roses being burned alive

X. SCHOOLING

In those days the police were weak Family was strong
Hand in hand the first day Geryon's mother took him to
School She neatened his little red wings and pushed him
In through the door

XI. RIGHT

Are there many little boys who think they are a
Monster? But in my case I am right said Geryon to the
Dog they were sitting on the bluffs The dog regarded him
Joyfully

XII. WINGS

Steps off a scraped March sky and sinks
Up into the blind Atlantic morning One small
Red dog jumping across the beach miles below
Like a freed shadow

XIII. HERAKLES' KILLING CLUB

Little red dog did not see it he felt it All
Events carry but one

XIV. HERAKLES' ARROW

Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's skull like a comb Made
The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a
Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze

XV. TOTAL THINGS KNOWN ABOUT GERYON

He loved lightning He lived on an island His mother was a
Nymph of a river that ran to the sea His father was a gold
Cutting tool Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that
Geryon had six hands and six feet and wings He was red and
His strange red cattle excited envy Herakles came and
Killed him for his cattle

The dog too

XVI. GERYON'S END

The red world And corresponding red breezes
Went on Geryon did not

APPENDIX A

TESTIMONIA ON THE QUESTION OF STESICHOROS' BLINDING BY HELEN

Suidas s.v. *palinodia*: "Counter song" or "saying the opposite of what you said before." E.g., for writing abuse of Helen Stesichoros was struck blind but then he wrote for her an encomium and got his sight back. The encomium came out of a dream and is called "The Palinode."

Isokrates *Helen* 64: Looking to demonstrate her own power Helen made an object lesson of the poet Stesichoros. For the fact is he began his poem "Helen" with a bit of blasphemy. Then when he stood up he found he'd been robbed of his eyes. Straightaway realizing why, he composed the so-called "Palinode" and Helen restored him to his own nature.

Plato *Phaedrus* 243a: There is in mythology an ancient tactic of purgation for criminals, which Homer did not understand but Stesichoros did. When Stesichoros found himself blinded for slandering Helen he did not (like Homer) just stand there bewildered—no! on the contrary. Stesichoros was an intellectual. He recognized the cause and at once sat down to compose [his “Palinode”]. . . .

APPENDIX B

THE PALINODE

OF

STESICHOROS

BY

STESICHOROS

(FRAGMENT

192 POETAE MELICI

GRAECI)

No it is not the true story.

No you never went on the benched ships.

No you never came to the towers of Troy.

APPENDIX C

CLEARING UP

THE QUESTION OF

STESICHOROS' BLINDING

BY HELEN

1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not.
2. If Stesichoros was a blind man either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent.
3. If Stesichoros' blindness was a temporary condition this condition either had a contingent cause or it had none.
4. If this condition had a contingent cause that cause was Helen or the cause was not Helen.
5. If the cause was Helen Helen had her reasons or she had none.
6. If Helen had her reasons the reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made or they did not.

7. If Helen's reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made either it was a strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavory aftermath the Fall of Troy) or it was not.
8. If it was a strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavory aftermath the Fall of Troy) either this remark was a lie or it was not.
9. If it was not a lie either we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros or we are not.
10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back.
11. If we meet Stesichoros on our way back either we will keep quiet or we will look him in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen.
12. If we look Stesichoros in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen either he will tell the truth or he will lie.
13. If Stesichoros lies either we will know at once that he is lying or we will be fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out.

14. If we are fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out either we will find that we do not have a single penny on us or we will call Helen up and tell her the good news.
15. If we call Helen up either she will sit with her glass of vermouth and let it ring or she will answer.
16. If she answers either we will (as they say) leave well enough alone or we will put Stesichoros on.
17. If we put Stesichoros on either he will contend that he now sees more clearly than ever before the truth about her whoring or he will admit he is a liar.
18. If Stesichoros admits he is a liar either we will melt into the crowd or we will stay to see how Helen reacts.
19. If we stay to see how Helen reacts either we will find ourselves pleasantly surprised by her dialectical abilities or we will be taken downtown by the police for questioning.
20. If we are taken downtown by the police for questioning either we will be expected (as eyewitnesses) to clear up once and for all the question whether Stesichoros was a blind man or not.
21. If Stesichoros was a blind man either we will lie or if not not.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RED

A R O M A N C E

*The reticent volcano keeps
His never slumbering plan—
Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man.*

*If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her
Can human nature not survive
Without a listener?*

*Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every babbler be
The only secret people keep
Is Immortality.*

EMILY DICKINSON,
NO. 1748

I. JUSTICE

Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early.

They used to go to school together. Geryon's brother was bigger and older, he walked in front sometimes broke into a run or dropped on one knee to pick up a stone. Stones make my brother happy, thought Geryon and he studied stones as he trotted along behind. So many different kinds of stones, the sober and the uncanny, lying side by side in the red dirt. To stop and imagine the life of each one! Now they were sailing through the air from a happy human arm, what a fate. Geryon hurried on. Arrived at the schoolyard. He was focusing hard on his feet and his steps. Children poured around him and the intolerable red assault of grass and the smell of grass everywhere was pulling him towards it like a strong sea. He could feel his eyes leaning out of his skull on their little connectors. He had to make it to the door. He had to not lose track of his brother. These two things. School was a long brick building on a north-south axis. South: Main Door through which all boys and girls must enter. North: Kindergarten, its large round windows gazing onto the backwoods and surrounded by a hedge of highbush cranberry. Between Main Door and Kindergarten ran a corridor. To Geryon it was

a hundred thousand miles
of thunder tunnels and indoor neon sky slammed open by giants.
Hand in hand on the first day of school
Geryon crossed this alien terrain with his mother. Then his brother
performed the task day after day.
But as September moved into October an unrest was growing in Geryon's brother.
Geryon had always been stupid
but nowadays the look in his eyes made a person feel strange.
Just take me once more I'll get it this time,
Geryon would say. The eyes terrible holes. *Stupid*, said Geryon's brother
and left him.
Geryon had no doubt *stupid* was correct. But when justice is done
the world drops away.
He stood on his small red shadow and thought what to do next.
Main Door rose before him. Perhaps—
peering hard Geryon made his way through the fires in his mind to where
the map should be.
In place of a map of the school corridor lay a deep glowing blank.
Geryon's anger was total.
The blank caught fire and burned to baseline. Geryon ran.
After that Geryon went to school alone.
He did not approach Main Door at all. Justice is pure. He would make his way
around the long brick sidewall,
past the windows of Seventh Grade, Fourth Grade, Second Grade and Boys'
to the north end of the school
and position himself in the bushes outside Kindergarten. There he would stand
motionless

until someone inside noticed and came out to show him the way.
He did not gesticulate.
He did not knock on the glass. He waited. Small, red, and upright he waited,
gripping his new bookbag tight
in one hand and touching a lucky penny inside his coat pocket with the other,
while the first snows of winter
floated down on his eyelashes and covered the branches around him and silenced
all trace of the world.

I I . E A C H

Like honey is the sleep of the just.

When Geryon was little he loved to sleep but even more he loved to wake up.

He would run outside in his pajamas.

Hard morning winds were blowing life bolts against the sky each one blue enough
to begin a world of its own.

The word *each* blew towards him and came apart on the wind. Geryon had always
had this trouble: a word like *each*,

when he stared at it, would disassemble itself into separate letters and go.

A space for its meaning remained there but blank.

The letters themselves could be found hung on branches or furniture in the area.

What does each mean?

Geryon had asked his mother. She never lied to him. Once she said the meaning
it would stay.

She answered, Each *means like you and your brother each have your own room.*

He clothed himself in this strong word *each*.

He spelled it at school on the blackboard (perfectly) with a piece of red silk chalk.

He thought softly

of other words he could keep with him like *beach* and *scream*. Then they moved

Geryon into his brother's room.

It happened by accident. Geryon's grandmother came to visit and fell off the bus.

The doctors put her together again

with a big silver pin. Then she and her pin had to lie still in Geryon's room

for many months. So began Geryon's nightlife.

Before this time Geryon had not lived nights just days and their red intervals.

What's that smell in your room? asked Geryon.

Geryon and his brother were lying in the dark in their bunk beds Geryon on top.

When Geryon moved his arms or legs

the bedsprings made an enjoyable PING SHUNK SHUNK PING enclosing him from below
like a thick clean bandage.

There's no smell in my room, said Geryon's brother. *Maybe it's your socks,*
or the frog did you

bring the frog in? said Geryon. *What smells in here is you Geryon.*

Geryon paused.

He had a respect for facts maybe this was one. Then he heard
a different sound from below.

SHUNK SHUNK PING PING PING PING PING PING PING PING PING PING PING
PING PING PING PING PING PING PING PING.

His brother was pulling on his stick as he did most nights before sleep.

Why do you pull on your stick?

Geryon asked. *None of your business let's see yours,* said his brother.

No.

Bet you don't have one. Geryon checked. *Yes I do.*

You're so ugly I bet it fell off.

Geryon remained silent. He knew the difference between facts and brother hatred.

Show me yours

and I'll give you something good, said Geryon's brother.

No.

Give you one of my cat's-eyes.

No you won't.

I will.

Don't believe you.

Promise.

Now Geryon very much wanted a cat's-eye. He never could win a cat's-eye when he knelt on cold knees

on the basement floor to shoot marbles with his brother and his brother's friends.

A cat's-eye

is outranked only by a steelie. And so they developed an economy of sex for cat's-eyes.

Pulling the stick makes my brother happy, thought Geryon. *Don't tell Mom,* said his brother.

Voyaging into the rotten ruby of the night became a contest of freedom and bad logic.

Come on Geryon.

No.

You owe me.

No.

I hate you. I don't care. I'll tell Mom. Tell Mom what?

How nobody likes you at school.

Geryon paused. Facts are bigger in the dark. Sometimes then he would descend to the other bunk

and let his brother do what he liked or else hang in between with his face pressed into the edge of his own mattress,

cold toes balancing on the bed below. After it was over his brother's voice got very kind.

You're nice Geryon I'll take you swimming tomorrow okay?

Geryon would climb back up to his bunk,

recover his pajama bottoms and lie on his back. He lay very straight in the fantastic temperatures

of the red pulse as it sank away and he thought about the difference between outside and inside.

Inside is mine, he thought. The next day Geryon and his brother went to the beach.

They swam and practiced belching and ate jam-and-sand sandwiches on a blanket.

Geryon's brother found an American dollar bill

and gave it to Geryon. Geryon found a piece of an old war helmet and hid it.

That was also the day

he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things particularly his own heroism

and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted all outside things.

III. RHINESTONES

Geryon straightened and put his hands quick under the table, not quick enough.

Don't pick at that Geryon you'll get it infected. Just leave it alone and let it heal,
said his mother

rhinestoning past on her way to the door. She had all her breasts on this evening.

Geryon stared in amazement.

She looked so brave. He could look at her forever. But now she was at the door
and then she was gone.

Geryon felt the walls of the kitchen contract as most of the air in the room
swirled after her.

He could not breathe. He knew he must not cry. And he knew the sound
of the door closing

had to be kept out of him. Geryon turned all attention to his inside world.

Just then his brother came into the kitchen.

Want to wrestle? said Geryon's brother.

No, said Geryon.

Why? Just don't. Oh come on. Geryon's brother picked up

the empty tin fruit bowl

from the kitchen table and placed it upside down over Geryon's head.

What time is it?

Geryon's voice came muffled from inside the fruit bowl. *Can't tell you,* said his brother.

Please.

Look for yourself. I don't want to. You mean you can't.

The fruit bowl was very still.

You're so stupid you can't tell time can you? How old are you anyway? What a jerk.

Can you tie your shoes yet?

The fruit bowl paused. Geryon could in fact tie knots but not bows.

He chose to pass over this distinction.

Yes.

Suddenly Geryon's brother stepped behind Geryon and seized him by the neck.

This is the silent death hold,

Geryon, in war they use this for knocking out all sentries. With one surprise twist

I can break your neck.

They heard the baby-sitter approaching and Geryon's brother stepped quickly away.

Is Geryon sulking again?

said the baby-sitter entering the kitchen. *No,* said the fruit bowl.

Geryon very much wanted

to keep the baby-sitter's voice out of him. In fact he would have preferred

not to know her at all

but there was one piece of information he needed to get.

What time is it?

he heard himself ask. *Quarter to eight,* she answered. *What time will Mom be home?*

Oh not for hours yet,

eleven maybe. At this news Geryon felt everything in the room hurl itself
away from him

towards the rims of the world. Meanwhile the baby-sitter continued,

You better start getting ready for bed, Geryon.

She was taking the fruit bowl off Geryon's head and moving towards the sink.

Do you want me to read to you?

Your mom says you have trouble going to sleep. What do you like to read?

Bits of words drifted past Geryon's brain like ash.

He knew he would have to let the baby-sitter go through with this in her wrong voice.

She was standing before him now
smiling hard and rummaging in his face with her eyes. *Read the loon book*, he said.
This was cagey.

The loon book was an instruction manual for calling loons. At least
it would keep her wrong voice away
from words that belonged to his mother. The baby-sitter went off happily
to find the loon book.

A while later the baby-sitter and Geryon were sitting on the top bunk calling loons
when Geryon's brother surged in
and landed on the lower bunk, bouncing everyone up to the ceiling.
Geryon drew back
against the wall with his knees up as his brother's head appeared,
then the rest of him.

He clambered into place beside Geryon. He had a thick rubber band
stretched between his thumb

and index finger which he snapped on Geryon's leg. *What's your favorite weapon?*

Mine's the catapult BLAM—

he snapped Geryon's leg again—*you can wipe out the whole downtown
with a catapult surprise attack BLAM—
everyone dead or else fill it with incendiaries like Alexander the Great he
invented the catapult*

Alexander the Great personally BLAM— Stop that,

said the baby-sitter
grabbing for the rubber band. She missed. Pushing her glasses back up
onto her nose she said, *Garotte.*

*I like the garotte best. It is clean and neat. An Italian invention I believe
although the word is French.*

What's a garotte? asked Geryon's brother. Taking the rubber band from his thumb
she shoved it in her shirt pocket and said,

*A short piece of cord usually silk with a slipknot in one end. You put it
around someone's neck*

from behind and pull tight. Cuts off the windpipe. Quick but painful death.

No noise no blood

no bulge in your pocket. Murderers on trains use them.

Geryon's brother was regarding her with one eye closed his mode of total attention.

What about you Geryon

what's your favorite weapon? Cage, said Geryon from behind his knees.

Cage? said his brother.

You idiot a cage isn't a weapon. It has to do something to be a weapon.

Has to destroy the enemy.

Just then there was a loud noise downstairs. Inside Geryon something burst into flame.

He hit the floor running. Mom!

How is a cage a weapon?

IV. TUESDAY

Tuesdays were best.

Every second Tuesday in winter Geryon's father and brother went to hockey practice.

Geryon and his mother had supper alone.

They grinned at each other as night climbed ashore. Turned on all the lights even in rooms they weren't using.

Geryon's mother made their favorite meal, cling peaches from the can and toast cut into fingers for dipping.

Lots of butter on the toast so a little oil slick floats out on top of the peach juice.

They took supper trays into the living room.

Geryon's mother sat on the rug with magazines, cigarettes, and telephone.

Geryon worked beside her under the lamp.

He was gluing a cigarette to a tomato. *Don't pick your lip Geryon let it heal.*

She blew smoke out her nose

as she dialed. *Maria? It's me can you talk? What did he say?*

.....

Just like that?

.....

Bastard

.....

That's not freedom it's indifference

.....

Some kind of addict

.....

I'd throw the bum out

.....

That's melodrama—she stubbed her cigarette hard—why not have a nice bath

.....

Yes dear I know it doesn't matter now

.....

Geryon? fine he's right here working on his autobiography

.....

No it's a sculpture he doesn't know how to write yet

.....

Oh this and that stuff he finds outside Geryon's always finding things aren't you Geryon?

She winked at him over the telephone. He winked back using both eyes and returned to work.

He had ripped up some pieces of crispy paper he found in her purse to use for hair and was gluing these to the top of the tomato.

Outside the house a black January wind came flattening down from the top of the sky and hit the windows hard.

The lamp flared. *It's beautiful Geryon*, she said hanging up the telephone.

It's a beautiful sculpture.

She put her hand on top of his small luminous skull as she studied the tomato.

And bending she kissed him once on each eye

then picked up her bowl of peaches from the tray and handed Geryon his.

Maybe next time you could

use a one-dollar bill instead of a ten for the hair, she said as they began to eat.

V. SCREEN DOOR

His mother stood at the ironing board lighting a cigarette and regarding Geryon.

Outside the dark pink air
was already hot and alive with cries. *Time to go to school*, she said for the third time.
Her cool voice floated
over a pile of fresh tea towels and across the shadowy kitchen to where Geryon stood
at the screen door.

He would remember when he was past forty the dusty almost medieval smell
of the screen itself as it
pressed its grid onto his face. She was behind him now. *This would be hard
for you if you were weak*

but you're not weak, she said and neatened his little red wings and pushed him
out the door.

VI. IDEAS

Eventually Geryon learned to write.

His mother's friend Maria gave him a beautiful notebook from Japan
with a fluorescent cover.

On the cover Geryon wrote *Autobiography*. Inside he set down the facts.

Total Facts Known About Geryon.

*Geryon was a monster everything about him was red. Geryon lived
on an island in the Atlantic called the Red Place. Geryon's mother
was a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River Geryon's father
was gold. Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings.
Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one
day killed Geryon got the cattle.*

He followed Facts with Questions and Answers.

QUESTIONS *Why did Herakles kill Geryon?*

1. Just violent.
2. Had to it was one of His Labors (10th).
3. Got the idea that Geryon was Death otherwise he could live forever.

FINALLY

Geryon had a little red dog Herakles killed that too.

*He retells
myths
what do
we
make of
myths?*

Where does he get his ideas, said the teacher. It was Parent-Teacher Day at school.

They were sitting side by side in tiny desks.

Geryon watched his mother pick a fragment of tobacco off her tongue before she said,

Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?

Geryon paused.

Then he reached up and carefully disengaged the composition paper

from the teacher's hand.

Proceeding to the back of the classroom he sat at his usual desk and took out a pencil.

New Ending.

*All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand
in hand.*

VII. CHANGE

Somehow Geryon made it to adolescence.

Then he met Herakles and the kingdoms of his life all shifted down a few notches.

They were two superior eels

at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics.

Geryon was going into the Bus Depot

one Friday night about three a.m. to get change to call home. Herakles stepped off the bus from New Mexico and Geryon

came fast around the corner of the platform and there it was one of those moments that is the opposite of blindness.

The world poured back and forth between their eyes once or twice. Other people wishing to disembark the bus from New Mexico

were jamming up behind Herakles who had stopped on the bottom step with his suitcase in one hand

trying to tuck in his shirt with the other. *Do you have change for a dollar?*

Geryon heard Geryon say.

No. Herakles stared straight at Geryon. *But I'll give you a quarter for free.*

Why would you do that?

I believe in being gracious. Some hours later they were down

at the railroad tracks

standing close together by the switch lights. The huge night moved overhead scattering drops of itself.

You're cold, said Herakles suddenly, *your hands are cold. Here.*

He put Geryon's hands inside his shirt.

VIII. CLICK

So who is this new kid you spend all your time with now?

Geryon's mother turned to knock her cigarette ash on the sink then faced Geryon again.

He was seated at the kitchen table

with his camera in front of his face adjusting the focus. He did not answer.

He had recently relinquished speech.

His mother continued. *I hear he doesn't go to school, is he older?*

Geryon was focusing the camera on her throat.

Nobody sees him around, is it true he lives in the trailer park—that where you go at night?

Geryon moved the focal ring from 3 to 3.5 meters.

Maybe I'll just keep talking

and if I say anything intelligent you can take a picture of it. She inhaled.

I don't trust people who

move around only at night. Exhaled. *Yet I trust you. I lie in bed at night thinking,*

Why didn't I

teach the kid something useful. Well—she took a last pull on the cigarette—

you probably know

more about sex than I do—and turned to stub it in the sink as he clicked the shutter.

A half laugh escaped her.

Geryon began to focus again, on her mouth. She leaned against the sink in silence for some moments

gazing down the sight line into his lens. *Funny when you were a baby*

you were an insomniac

do you remember that? I'd go into your room at night and there you were

in your crib lying on your back

with your eyes wide open. Staring into the dark. You never cried just stared.

You'd lie that way for hours

but if I took you in the TV room you were asleep in five minutes—Geryon's

camera swiveled left

as his brother came into the kitchen. *Going downtown want to come? Bring some money—*

The words dropped behind him as he went banging out the screen door.

Geryon rose slowly,

closing the shutter release and pushing the camera into the pocket of his jacket.

Got your lens cap? she said as he moved past her.

IX. SPACE AND TIME

Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition.

Geryon was amazed at himself. He saw Herakles just about every day now.
The instant of nature
forming between them drained every drop from the walls of his life
leaving behind just ghosts
rustling like an old map. He had nothing to say to anyone. He felt loose and shiny.
He burned in the presence of his mother.
I hardly know you anymore, she said leaning against the doorway of his room.
It had rained suddenly at suppertime,
now sunset was startling drops at the window. Stale peace of old bedtimes
filled the room. Love does not
make me gentle or kind, thought Geryon as he and his mother eyed each other
from opposite shores of the light.
He was filling his pockets with money, keys, film. She tapped a cigarette
on the back of her hand.
I put some clean T-shirts in your top drawer this afternoon, she said.
Her voice drew a circle
around all the years he had spent in this room. Geryon glanced down.
This one is clean, he said,
it's supposed to look this way. The T-shirt was ripped here and there.
GOD LOVES LOLA in red letters.
Glad she can't see the back, he thought as he shrugged on his jacket and stuck
the camera in the pocket.
What time will you be home? she said. *Not too late*, he answered.

A pure bold longing to be gone filled him.

So Geryon what do you like about this guy this Herakles can you tell me?

Can I tell you, thought Geryon.

Thousand things he could not tell flowed over his mind. *Herakles knows a lot about art. We have good discussions.*

She was looking not at him but past him as she stored the unlit cigarette
in her front shirt pocket.

"How does distance look?" is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless
within to the edge

of what can be loved. It depends on light. *Light that for you?* he said pulling
a book of matches

out of his jeans as he came towards her. *No thanks dear*. She was turning away.

I really should quit.

X. SEX QUESTION

Is it a question?

I better be getting home.

Okay.

They continued to sit. They were parked way out on the highway.

Cold night smell

coming in the windows. New moon floating white as a rib at the edge of the sky.

I guess I'm someone who will never be satisfied,

said Herakles. Geryon felt all nerves in him move to the surface of his body.

What do you mean satisfied?

Just-satisfied. I don't know. From far down the freeway came a sound of fishhooks scraping the bottom of the world.

You know. Satisfied. Geryon was thinking hard. Fires twisted through him.

He picked his way carefully

toward the sex question. Why is it a question? He understood

that people need

acts of attention from one another, does it really matter which acts?

He was fourteen.

Sex is a way of getting to know someone,

Herakles had said. He was sixteen. Hot unsorted parts of the question were licking up from every crack in Geryon,

he beat at them as a nervous laugh escaped him. Herakles looked.

Suddenly quiet.

It's okay, said Herakles. His voice washed

Geryon open.

Tell me, said Geryon and he intended to ask him, Do people who like sex have a question about it too?

but the words came out wrong—*Is it true you think about sex every day?*

Herakles' body stiffened.

That isn't a question it's an accusation. Something black and heavy dropped between them like a smell of velvet.

Herakles switched on the ignition and they jumped forward onto the back of the night.

Not touching

but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh.

X I . H A D E S

Sometimes a journey makes itself necessary.

SPIRIT RULES SECRETLY ALONE THE BODY ACHIEVES NOTHING

is something you know
instinctively at fourteen and can still remember even with hell in your head
at sixteen. They painted this truth
on the long wall of the high school the night before departing for Hades.
Herakles' hometown of Hades
lay at the other end of the island about four hours by car, a town
of moderate size and little importance
except for one thing. *Have you ever seen a volcano?* said Herakles.
Staring at him Geryon felt his soul
move in his side. Then Geryon wrote a note full of lies for his mother
and stuck it on the fridge.
They climbed into Herakles' car and set off westward. Cold green summer night.
Active?

*The volcano? Yes the last time she blew was 1923. Threw 180 cubic kilometers
of rock into the air*

covered the countryside with fire overturned sixteen ships in the bay.

My grandmother says

the temperature of the air rose to seven hundred degrees centigrade downtown.

Caskets

of whiskey and rum burst into flame on the main street.

She saw it erupt?

Watched from the roof. Took a photograph of it, three p.m. looks like midnight.

What happened to the town?

Cooked. There was a survivor—prisoner in the local jail.

Wonder what happened to him.

You'll have to ask my grandmother about that. It's her favorite story—

Lava Man.

Lava Man? Herakles grinned at Geryon as they shot onto the freeway.

You're going to love my family.

XII. LAVA

He did not know how long he had been asleep.

Black central stalled night. He lay hot and motionless, that is, motion
was a memory he could not recover
(among others) from the bottom of the vast blind kitchen where he was buried.
He could feel the house of sleepers
around him like loaves on shelves. There was a steady rushing sound
perhaps an electric fan down the hall
and a fragment of human voice tore itself out and came past, it seemed
already long ago, trailing
a bad dust of its dream which touched his skin. He thought of women.
What is it like to be a woman
listening in the dark? Black mantle of silence stretches between them
like geothermal pressure.
Ascent of the rapist up the stairs seems as slow as lava. She listens
to the blank space where
his consciousness is, moving towards her. Lava can move as slow as
nine hours per inch.
Color and fluidity vary with its temperature from dark red and hard
(below 1,800 degrees centigrade)
to brilliant yellow and completely fluid (above 1,950 degrees centigrade).
She wonders if
he is listening too. The cruel thing is, she falls asleep listening.

XIII. SOMNAMBULA

Geryon awoke too fast and felt his box contract.

Hot pressure morning. Houseful of tumbling humans and their languages.
Where am I?
Voices from somewhere. He made his way thickly downstairs
and through the house
to the back porch, huge and shadowy as a stage facing onto brilliant day.
Geryon squinted.
Grass swam towards him and away. Joyous small companies of insects
with double-decker wings
like fighter planes were diving about in the hot white wind. The light
unbalanced him,
he sat down quickly on the top step. Saw Herakles stretched on the grass
making sleepy talk.
My world is very slow right now, Herakles was saying. His grandmother
sat at the picnic table
eating toast and discussing death. She told of her brother who was conscious
to the end but could not speak.
His eyes watched the tubes they were putting in and pulling out of him so
they explained each one.
*Now we are inserting sap of the queen of the night you will feel a pinch
then a black flow,* said Herakles
in his sleepy voice that no one was listening to. A big red butterfly
went past riding on a little black one.
How nice, said Geryon, *he's helping him.* Herakles opened one eye and looked.

He's fucking him.

Herakles! said his grandmother. He closed his eyes.

My heart aches when I am bad.

Then he looked at Geryon and smiled. *Can I show you our volcano?*

XIV. RED PATIENCE

Geryon did not know why he found the photograph disturbing.

She had taken it herself standing on the roof of the house that afternoon in 1923 with a box camera. "Red Patience."

A fifteen-minute exposure that recorded both the general shape of the cone with its surroundings (best seen by day) and the rain of incandescent bombs tossed into the air and rolling down its slopes (visible in the dark).

Bombs had shot through the vent at velocities of more than three hundred kilometers an hour, she told him. The cone itself rose a thousand meters above the original cornfield and erupted about a million tons of ash, cinder, and bombs during its early months.

Lava followed for twenty-nine months. Across the bottom of the photograph

Geryon could see a row of pine skeletons

killed by falling ash. "Red Patience." A photograph that has compressed on its motionless surface

fifteen different moments of time, nine hundred seconds of bombs moving up and ash moving down

and pines in the kill process. Geryon did not know why he kept going back to it.

It was not that he found it an especially pleasing photograph.

It was not that he

did not understand how such photographs are made.

He kept going back to it.

What if you took a fifteen-minute exposure of a man in jail, let's say the lava has just reached his window?

he asked. *I think you are confusing subject and object*, she said.

Very likely, said Geryon.

*who is doing and what it is being
done to*

XV. PAIR

These days Geryon was experiencing a pain not felt since childhood.

His wings were struggling. They tore against each other on his shoulders like the little mindless red animals they were.

With a piece of wooden plank he'd found in the basement Geryon made a back brace and lashed the wings tight.

Then put his jacket back on. *You seem moody today Geryon anything wrong?*

said Herakles when he saw Geryon

coming up the basement stairs. His voice had an edge. He liked to see Geryon happy.

Geryon felt his wings turn in, and in, and in.

Nope just fine. Geryon smiled hard with half of his face. *So tomorrow Geryon.*

Tomorrow?

Tomorrow we'll take the car and drive out to the volcano you'll like that.

Yes.

Get some photographs. Geryon sat down suddenly. *And tonight—Geryon? You okay?*

Yes fine, I'm listening. Tonight—?

Why do you have your jacket over your head?

Can't hear you Geryon. The jacket shifted. Geryon peered out. *I said sometimes I need a little privacy.*

Herakles was watching him, his eyes still as a pond. They watched each other, this odd pair.

XVI. GROOMING

As in childhood we live sweeping close to the sky and now, what dawn is this.

Herakles lies like a piece of torn silk in the heat of the blue saying,

Geryon please. The break in his voice

made Geryon think for some reason of going into a barn

first thing in the morning

when sunlight strikes a bale of raw hay still wet from the night.

Put your mouth on it Geryon please.

Geryon did. It tasted sweet enough. I am learning a lot in this year of my life, thought Geryon. It tasted very young.

Geryon felt clear and powerful—not some wounded angel after all

but a magnetic person like Matisse

or Charlie Parker! Afterwards they lay kissing for a long time then

played gorillas. Got hungry.

Soon they were sitting in a booth at the Bus Depot waiting for food.

They had started to practice

their song ("Joy to the World") when Herakles pulled Geryon's head

into his lap and began grooming

for nits. Gorilla grunts mingled with breakfast sounds in the busy room.

The waitress arrived

holding two plates of eggs. Geryon gazed up at her from under Herakles' arm.

Newlyweds? she said.

XVII. WALLS

That night they went out painting.

Geryon did an early red-winged *LOVESLAVE* on the garage of the priest's house next to the Catholic church.

Then passing down Main Street they saw fat white letters (recent) on the side of the post office. *CAPITALISM SUCKS.*

Herakles eyed the paint supply dubiously. *Well.* He parked in the alley.

After crossing out the white letters

neatly with a bar of opaque black he encircled it in an airy red cloud of chancery script.

CUT HERE. He was quiet as they got back into the car.

Then down the tunnel

to the on-ramp for the freeway. Geryon was bored and said he couldn't see any good spaces left,

got out his camera and went off towards the sound of traffic. Up on the overpass the night was wide open

and blowing headlights like a sea. He stood against the wind and let it peel him clean.

Back at the tunnel Herakles had finished printing his seven personal precepts in vertical black and red over a fading

stenciled *LEAVE THE WALLS ALONE* and was down on one knee scraping the brush on the edge of the can.

He did not look up but said, *There's some paint left—another LOVESLAVE?—no let's do something cheerful.*

All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me.

Geryon watched the top of Herakles' head
and felt his limits returning. Nothing to say. Nothing. He looked at this fact
in mild surprise. Once in childhood
his ice cream had been eaten by a dog. Just an empty cone
in a small dramatic red fist.
Herakles stood up. *No? Let's go then.* On the way home they tried "Joy to the World"
but were too tired. It seemed a long drive.

X V I I I . S H E

Back at the house all was dark except a light from the porch.

Herakles went to see. Geryon had a thought to call home and ran upstairs.

You can use the phone in my mother's room

top of the stairs turn left, Herakles called after him. But when he reached the room
he stopped in a night gone suddenly solid.

Who am I? He had been here before in the dark on the stairs with his hands out
groping for a switch—he hit it

and the room sprang towards him like an angry surf with its unappeasable debris
of woman liquors, he saw a slip

a dropped magazine combs baby powder a stack of phone books a bowl of pearls
a teacup with water in it himself

in the mirror cruel as a slash of lipstick—he banged the light off.

He had been here before, dangling

inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt. Spokes of red rang across his eyelids
in the blackness.

As he made his way downstairs again Geryon could hear the grandmother's voice.

She was sitting in the porch swing

with her hands in her lap and her small feet dangling. A rectangle of light
fell across the porch from the kitchen door

and just touched her hem. Herakles lay flat on his back on top of the picnic table,
both arms across his face.

The grandmother watched Geryon cross the porch and sit down between them
in a deck chair

without interrupting her sentence—*this idea that your lungs will explode*

*if you can't reach the surface—
 lungs don't explode they collapse without oxygen I have it from Virginia Woolf
 who once spoke to me at a party not of course
 about drowning of which she had no idea yet—have I told you this story before?
 I remember the sky behind her was purple she
 came towards me saying Why are you alone in this huge blank garden
 like a piece of electricity? Electricity?
 Maybe she said cakes and tea true we were drinking gin it was long past
 teatime but she was a highly original woman
 I was praying God let it have been cakes and tea I'll tell her my anecdote
 of Buenos Aires those Argentines
 so crazy for tea every day at five the little cups but she drifted away the little
 translucent cups like bones you know
 in Buenos Aires I had a small dog but I see by your face I am wandering.
 Geryon jumped. No ma'am, he yelled
 as the deck chair gouged him. Gift from Freud but that is another story.
 Yes ma'am?
 He drowned not Freud the dog and Freud made a joke it was not a funny joke
 having to do with incomplete transference I cannot
 recall the German wording the German weather however I remember exactly.
 What was the weather ma'am?
 Cold and moonlit. You met with Freud at night? Only in summer.
 The phone rang and Herakles
 fell off the table then ran to answer it. July moonshadows stood motionless
 on the grass. Geryon watched
 a presence soaking out of them. What was I saying? Oh yes Freud reality
 is a web Freud used to say—*

*Ma'am? Yes. Can I ask you something? Certainly. I want to know about Lava Man.
 Ah.
 I want to know what he was like. He was badly burned. But he didn't die?
 Not in the jail.
 And then what? And then he joined with Barnum you know the Barnum Circus
 he toured United States made a lot
 of money I saw the show in Mexico City when I was twelve. Was it a good show?
 Pretty good Freud would have called it
 unconscious metaphysics but at twelve I was not cynical I had a good time.
 So what did he do? He gave out
 souvenir pumice and showed where the incandescence had brushed him
 I am a drop of gold he would say
 I am molten matter returned from the core of earth to tell you interior things—
 Look! he would prick his thumb
 and press out ocher-colored drops that sizzled when they hit the plate—
 Volcano blood! Claimed
 the temperature of his body was a continuous 130 degrees and let people
 touch his skin for 75 cents
 at the back of the tent. So you touched him? She paused. Let's say—
 Herakles bounded in.
 It's your mom. She's finished yelling at me now she wants to talk to you.*

XIX. FROM THE ARCHAIC
TO
THE FAST SELF

Reality is a sound, you have to tune in to it not just keep yelling.

He woke fast from a loud wild dream that vanished at once and lay listening
to the splendid subtle ravines of Hades
where hardworking dawn monkeys were wheedling and baiting one another
up and down the mahogany trees.
The cries took little nicks out of him. This was when Geryon liked to plan
his autobiography, in that blurred state
between awake and asleep when too many intake valves are open in the soul.
Like the terrestrial crust of the earth
which is proportionately ten times thinner than an eggshell, the skin of the soul
is a miracle of mutual pressures.
Millions of kilograms of force pounding up from earth's core on the inside to meet
the cold air of the world and stop,
as we do, just in time. The autobiography,
which Geryon worked on from the age of five to the age of forty-four,
had recently taken the form
of a photographic essay. Now that I am a man in transition, thought Geryon
using a phrase he'd learned from—
door hit the wall as Herakles kicked it open and entered carrying a tray
with two cups and three bananas.
Room service, said Herakles looking around for a place to set the tray down.
Geryon had moved all the furniture

up against the walls of the room. *Oh good*, said Geryon. *Coffee*.

No it's tea, said Herakles.

My grandmother is in Argentina again today. He handed Geryon a banana.
She was just telling me about the electricians.

*You know you have to pass an examination to get into the electricians' union
in Buenos Aires but all the exam questions*

are about the constitution. What do you mean the human constitution?

No the constitution of Argentina

*except the last one. The last constitution? No the last question on the exam—
guess what it is you'll never guess. Guess.*

No.

Come on. No I hate guessing. Just one guess come on Geryon just one.

What time of day did Krakatoa erupt?

Great question but no. He paused. *Give up?* Geryon looked at him.

What is the Holy Ghost?

*That's it? That's it. What is the Holy Ghost—a truly electrical question!
as my grandmother put it.*

Herakles was sitting on the floor beside the bed. He drained his teacup
and regarded Geryon.

So what time of day did Krakatoa erupt? Four a.m., Geryon said pulling the quilt
high up under his chin.

The noise awakened sleepers in Australia three thousand kilometers away.

No kidding how do you know that?

Geryon had found the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911 edition) in the basement
and read the Volcano article.

Should he admit this? Yes. *Encyclopedia*. Herakles peeled a banana.

He seemed to be thinking.

So your mom was pretty angry last night. Geryon said *Yes.* Herakles ate half his banana. He ate the other half.

So what do you think? What do you mean what do I think? Herakles placed his banana peel on the tray

and straightened the parts of it carefully. *Think you should be getting back?*

Geryon was chewing

a mouthful of banana and didn't quite hear. This sentence is important for you, said a little lulled voice inside.

What? I said there's a bus every morning at nine or so. Geryon was trying

to breathe but a red wall

had sliced the air in half. *And what about you? Oh I'll be staying around here*

I guess my grandmother wants

the house painted said she'd pay me I can probably get a couple guys from town to help.

Geryon was thinking hard. Flames licked along the floorboards inside him.

I am quite a good painter myself, he said.

But the word *good* cracked in half. Herakles watched him. *Geryon you know we'll always be friends.*

Geryon's heart and lungs were a black crust. He had a sudden strong desire to go to sleep. Herakles slid to his feet

smooth as a monkey. *Hurry up and get dressed Geryon we're going to show you a volcano today I'll be*

on the porch my grandmother wants to come too.

In Geryon's autobiography

this page has a photograph of some red rabbit giggle tied with a white ribbon.

He has titled it "Jealous of My Little Sensations."

Geryon fell asleep seven or eight times on the way to the volcano.

The other two were talking about feminism then life in Hades then unstable bitumen or was that from *Britannica*? All

the sentences mixed around in Geryon's drifting drowsing head *men had to be taught*

to hate women for foot massage pumice and ballast on railroad sure they know how eruption

takes place his little elementary courtesies darting out like a tongue but how can I talk

to people who don't know the European experience—now jolted awake Geryon

glanced out. The world had gone black and bulbous. Shiny ropes of old lava rose and fell in every direction

around the car which had come to a halt. Most volcanic rock is basalt.

If it is dark and blocky that means

very little silica in the composition (so the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Very little silica in the composition,

said Geryon as he climbed out. Then the rock silenced him.

It pitched away on all sides

utterly blank except for one crazed blackish unit of intraplate light

bouncing from rock to rock

as if looking for lost kin. Geryon put his foot out to take a step.

The lava emitted

a glassy squeak and he jumped. *Careful,* said Herakles' grandmother.

Herakles had lifted her out of the back seat,
 now she stood leaning on his arm. *The lava dome here is more than ninety percent
 glass—rhyolite obsidian they call it. I find
 it very beautiful. Has a kind of pulse as you look at it.* She began to move
 forward with a tinkling sound
 over the black billows. *They say the reason for all these blocks and rubble on top
 is strains produced when the glass
 chills so rapidly.* She made a little sound. *Reminds me of my marriage.* She
 stumbled then and Geryon
 caught her other arm, it was like a handful of autumn. He felt huge and wrong.
 When is it polite to let go someone's arm
 after you grab it?
 Just for an instant balancing on the vitreous surface he went to sleep and awoke
 still gripping her arm, Herakles was saying
... in crossword puzzles. It's the word for blocky lava in Hawaiian.
How do you spell it?
Just like it sounds—aa. Geryon dozed off, awoke again, they were in the car
 already driving away
 from the terrible rocks. Up front Herakles and his grandmother had begun
 "Joy to the World" in harmony.

XXI. MEMORY BURN

Herakles and Geryon had gone to the video store.

Full moon sends rapid clouds dashing past a cold sky. When they came back
 they were arguing.

It's not the photograph that disturbs you it's you don't understand what photography is.

Photography is disturbing, said Geryon.

Photography is a way of playing with perceptual relationships.

Well exactly.

But you don't need a camera to tell you that. What about stars?

Are you going to tell me

*none of the stars are really there? Well some are there but some burned out
 ten thousand years ago.*

I don't believe that.

How can you not believe it, it's a known fact. But I see them. You see memories!

Have we had this conversation before?

Geryon followed Herakles to the back porch. They sat on opposite ends of the sofa.

Do you know how far away some of those stars are?

*Just don't believe it. Let's see someone touch a star and not get burned. He'll
 hold up his finger, Just a memory burn! he'll say*

*then I'll believe it. Okay never mind stars what about sound, you've watched
 a man chop wood in a forest.*

No I do not watch men in forests.

I give up. That would be very cold. What? That would be very cold, repeated
 the grandmother from the porch swing.

Watching men in forests? A memory burn. Ah. She's right. Yes she is she

had lung burn once

and that was cold and don't call me she when I'm right here.

Sorry.

You got lung burn in Hades? No it was in the Pyrenees I burned my lungs I had gone to St. Croix to photograph skiers

that would be the winter Olympics 1936 Grushenk was competing do you know

Grushenk? Well never mind he was very fast

I sold a photograph of him in his extraordinary scarlet ski pants to Life magazine for a thousand dollars.

That was a handsome sum in 1936. Don't be patronizing it's still a handsome sum—for a photograph. Herakles' father

(she waved her hand towards the sofa but Herakles had gone back in the house) gave me less than half that for "Red Patience"—

you took a look at "Red Patience" didn't you? I wish he hadn't hung it in the kitchen much too dark in there

people think it's a black-and-white photograph of course nobody knows

how to look at a photograph nowadays.

No I saw the lava, is it lava? Of course yes you mean at the top of the cone.

No I mean at the bottom

of the picture on the trunk of one of the pine trees little red drops like blood.

Ah yes very good the little red drops

my signature. It is a disturbing photograph. Yes. But why?

"Gaiety transfiguring all that dread."

Who said that? Yeats.

Where did Yeats see a volcano? I believe he was talking about politics. No

I don't think that's what I mean.

Do you mean the silence. But all photographs are silent. Don't be facile you

might as well say all mothers

are women. Well aren't they? Of course but that tells you nothing. Question is how they use it—given

the limits of the form— Does your mother live on the island? I don't want to talk about my mother.

Ah well. Silence then. Herakles came out the door from the kitchen.

Climbed over the back of the sofa

and subsided into it lengthwise. Your grandmother has been teaching me the value of silence, said Geryon.

I bet, said Herakles. He turned to her. It's late Gram don't you want to go to bed?

Can't sleep angel, she said.

Is your leg paining? I can rub your ankles. Come I'll take you up.

Herakles was standing in front of her

and he lifted her towards him like snow. Geryon saw her legs were asymmetrical, one pointed up the other down and back.

Goodnight children, she called in her voice like old coals.

May God favor you with dreams.

XXII. FRUIT BOWL

His mother was sitting at the kitchen table when Geryon opened the screen door.

He had taken the local bus from Hades. Seven-hour trip. He wept most of the way.

Wanted to go straight to his room

and shut the door but when he saw her he sat down. Hands in his jacket.

She smoked in silence a moment

then rested her chin against her hand. Eyes on his chest. *Nice T-shirt*, she said.

It was a red singlet with white letters

that read TENDER

LOIN. *Herakles gave it*—and here Geryon had meant

to slide past the name coolly

but such a cloud of agony poured up his soul he couldn't remember

what he was saying.

He sat forward. She exhaled. She was watching his hands so he undenched them

from the edge

of the table and began spinning the fruit bowl slowly. He spun it clockwise.

Counterclockwise. Clockwise.

Why is this fruit bowl always here? He stopped and held it by the rims.

It's always here and it never

has any fruit in it. Been here all my life never had fruit in it yet. Doesn't

that bother you? How do we even

know it's a fruit bowl? She regarded him through smoke. *How do you think it feels*

growing up in a house full

of empty fruit bowls? His voice was high. His eyes met hers and they began

to laugh. They laughed

until tears ran down. Then they sat quiet. Drifted back
to opposite walls.

They spoke of a number of things, laundry, Geryon's brother doing drugs,
the light in the bathroom.

At one point she took out a cigarette, looked at it, put it back. Geryon laid
his head on his arms on the table.

He was very sleepy. finally they rose and went their ways. The fruit bowl
stayed there. Yes empty.

XXIII. WATER

Water! Out from between two crouching masses of the world the word leapt.

It was raining on his face. He forgot for a moment that he was a brokenheart
then he remembered. Sick lurch

downward to Geryon trapped in his own bad apple. Each morning a shock
to return to the cut soul.

Pulling himself onto the edge of the bed he stared at the dull amplitude of rain.

Buckets of water sloshed from sky

to roof to eave to windowsill. He watched it hit his feet and puddle on the floor.

He could hear bits of human voice

streaming down the drainpipe—*I believe in being gracious—*

He slammed the window shut.

Below in the living room everything was motionless. Drapes closed, chairs asleep.

Huge wads of silence stuffed the air.

He was staring around for the dog then realized they hadn't had a dog for years. Clock
in the kitchen said quarter to six.

He stood looking at it, willing himself not to blink until the big hand bumped over
to the next minute. Years passed

as his eyes ran water and a thousand ideas jumped his brain—*If the world
ends now I am free* and

If the world ends now no one will see my autobiography—finally it bumped.

He had a flash of Herakles' sleeping house

and put that away. Got out the coffee can, turned on the tap and started to cry.

Outside the natural world was enjoying

a moment of total strength. Wind rushed over the ground like a sea and battered up

into the corners of the buildings,

garbage cans went dashing down the alley after their souls.

Giant ribs of rain shifted

open on a flash of light and cracked together again, making the kitchen clock
bump crazily. Somewhere a door slammed.

Leaves tore past the window. Weak as a fly Geryon crouched against the sink
with his fist in his mouth

and his wings trailing over the drainboard. Rain lashing the kitchen window
sent another phrase

of Herakles' chasing across his mind. *A photograph is just a bunch of light
hitting a plate.* Geryon wiped his face

with his wings and went out to the living room to look for the camera.

When he stepped onto the back porch

rain was funnelling down off the roof in a morning as dark as night.

He had the camera wrapped

in a sweatshirt. The photograph is titled "If He Sleep He Shall Do Well."

It shows a fly floating in a pail of water—

drowned but with a strange agitation of light around the wings. Geryon used
a fifteen-minute exposure.

When he first opened the shutter the fly seemed to be still alive.

XXIV. FREEDOM

Geryon's life entered a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste.

He got a job in the local library shelving government documents. It was agreeable to work in a basement humming with fluorescent tubes and cold as a sea of stone. The documents had a forlorn austerity, tall and hushed in their ranges as veterans of a forgotten war. Whenever a librarian came clumping down the metal stairs with a pink slip for one of the documents, Geryon would vanish into the stacks. A little button at the end of each range activated the fluorescent track above it. A yellowing 5 x 7 index card Scotch-taped below each button said EXTINGUISH LIGHT WHEN NOT IN USE. Geryon went flickering through the ranges like a bit of mercury flipping the switches on and off. The librarians thought him a talented boy with a shadow side. One evening at supper when his mother asked him what they were like, Geryon could not remember if the librarians were men or women. He had taken a number of careful photographs but these showed only the shoes and socks of each person. *They look like mostly men's shoes to me,* said his mother bending over the prints which he had spread on the kitchen table. *Except—who's that?* she pointed. It was a photograph taken from floor level of a single naked foot propped on the open drawer of a metal file cabinet.

On the floor beneath lay a dirty red Converse sneaker on its side.

That's the assistant head librarian's sister.

He pulled forward a photo of white acrylic socks and dark loafers crossed at the ankle: assistant head librarian.

She comes in at five sometimes to get a ride home with him. Geryon's mother looked closer. *What does she do?*

Works at Dunkin' Donuts I think. Nice girl? No. Yes. I don't know.

Geryon glared. His mother reached out a hand to touch his head but he ducked sideways and began gathering up the photographs. The phone rang.

Can you get that? she said turning to the sink. Geryon went into the living room and stood looking down at the phone as it rang a third time and a fourth. *Hello? Geryon? Hi it's me. You sound funny were you asleep?*

Herakles' voice went bouncing through Geryon on hot gold springs.

Oh. No. No I wasn't.

So how are things? What are you up to? Oh— Geryon sat down hard on the rug. fire was closing off his lungs—
not much. You? Oh the usual you know this and that did some good painting last night with Hart. Heart?

I guess you didn't meet Hart when you were here he came over from the mainland last Saturday

or was it Friday no Saturday Hart is a boxer says he might train me to be his corner man. Really.

A good corner man can make the difference Hart says.

Does he.

Muhammad Ali had a corner man named Mr. Kopps they used to hunch down there on the rope and write poems

together in between rounds. Poems. But that's not why I called Geryon
the reason I called is to tell you
about my dream I had a dream of you last night. Did you. Yes you were this
old Indian guy standing on the back porch
and there was a pail of water there on the step with a drowned bird in it—
big yellow bird really huge you know
floating with its wings out and you leaned over and said, Come on now
get out of there—and you took it
by one wing and just flung it right up into the air WHOOSH it came alive
and then it was gone.

Yellow? said Geryon and he was thinking Yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams
he doesn't know me at all! Yellow!

What'd you say Geryon?

Nothing.

It's a freedom dream Geryon.

Yes.

Freedom is what I want for you Geryon we're true friends you know that's why
I want you to be free.

Don't want to be free want to be with you. Beaten but alert Geryon organized all
his inside force to suppress this remark.

Guess I better get off the line now Geryon my grandmother gets mad
if I run up her bill but it's real nice
to hear your voice.

Geryon? All right if I use the phone now? I have to call Maria. His mother
standing in the doorway.

Oh yes sure. Geryon replaced the receiver. Sorry. You okay? Yes. He tilted
to his feet. Going out.

Where? she said as he angled past her in the doorway.

Beach.

Won't you need a jacket— The screen door slammed. It was
well past midnight

when Geryon got back. The house was dark. He climbed to his room.

After undressing he stood

at the mirror and observed himself empty. Freedom! The chubby knees
the funny red smell the saddening ways.

He sank onto the bed and lay full length. Tears ran back into his ears awhile
then no more tears.

He had touched bottom. Feeling bruised but pure he switched off the light.

Fell instantly asleep.

Anger slammed the red fool awake at three a.m. he kept trying to breathe each time
he lifted his head it pounded him

again like a piece of weed against a hard black beach. Geryon sat up suddenly.

The sheet was drenched.

He switched on the light. He was staring at the sweep hand of the electric clock
on the dresser. Its little dry hum

ran over his nerves like a comb. He forced his eyes away. The bedroom doorway
gaped at him black as a keyhole.

His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw the doorway
the house the night the world and

on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing drinking getting
into a car and Geryon's

whole body formed one arch of a cry—upcast to that custom, the human custom
of wrong love.