

POEMS BY NEIL ELLMAN

Memories of Uncle Joe

(George Condo, painting)

When the moon was new
Uncle Joe could be as invisible as a cat
skulking in an alleyway
while purring his dreams of muscatel
to forget his skin was spotted brown
and thin as cellophane
but then, when full, he re-appeared
the messiah a day too late,
the prodigal son with patches on his knees
and pockets as empty as hollow gourds.

He could juggle balls, five at a time,
as many as the lives he led,
recite Rimbaud, play Falstaff to a fault
as if he had written the words for himself
and he could discern Lafite from ordinaire,
pull a rabbit from a hat
and speak in perfect Portuguese

A friend of Bukowski, he wrote poems
about whores in Ecuador,
bar fights in the Philippines
and prison-time in Thailand and Brazil.

I believed everything he said
and hung on every world—
in December he died and no one came
but me.

The Red Balloon

(Paul Klee, painting)

I am a deflated balloon
emptied of its air
and the substance that composed
the reason for what I was.

My skin is now wrinkled
my memory lost
in the convolution of my brain
a maze without exit or grace.

I am caught in the limbs of a tree
hanging limply
waiting for redemption
and the Messiah to bring me to life.

I now know
There will be no resurrection
as the balloon I once was
filled with the prospect of flight.

The Invisible Man

(Salvador Dalí, painting)

I am an apparition
in someone else's eye.

I am a figment
of another's need.

I am invisible
to everyone else

except who know
my shape

as if it were
their own.

Make of me
what you will:

a phantom
or mirage

fata morgana
or living thing

or the peace
you seek

In the certainty
of flesh.

The Pyramid

There were cracks in the pyramid
that foretold its fall
into a pile of rubbish
and hieroglyphs unread.

What s a story it could have told
of gods and pharaohs
the secrets of the boudoir
and strategies of war.

They could have spoken
of divinity and worship
and how their gods were created
from granite and mud.

Its fall came quickly
by shifting, precarious sand
but inevitable
because it was made by man.

Freaks

Surf Avenue, Coney Island, 1959:
a pin-headed freak in alligator skin
and conjoined twins wait to begin
the afternoon show
at 15 cents a peek behind a canvas screen.

“Not a dollar, not a quarter, just 15 cents,”
the barker screams,
“to have the bearded lady flirt with you
and the elephant man eat peanuts from your hand
while the boy with scales and gills
(a fish out of water, so to speak,)
struggles tor air to breathe”
not a bit ashamed of what they are,
such as they are, or what they seem,
In their daily battle to survive.
it’s just a job, they think,
what freaks they are
who pay to watch us live
our ordinary lives.