

**Bowery & Gowanus**  
Poems of New York

Jim Lampos

PO Box 4122  
Old Lyme, CT 06371  
212-388-1702  
[jimlampos@aol.com](mailto:jimlampos@aol.com)

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## Nocturama

Candy for the saints, those broken in the glass  
backwards or at the front offices of jaded  
commerce. Smokestacks smirk, milk the gas  
and jab the firmament on an all-week jag  
around the bend at Mulberry Street, trees  
flower no more, we lower  
our voices, lovers in the hall  
speak of former selves and former slaves  
lay buried in the courtyard, curt rejection  
of violets at the start of Slav's war, biological  
weapons and boiled potatoes, dreams frission  
the dust of Manahatta's secret sunset,  
our ruined lives photogenic fodder  
for Hollywood's exclusive recreation.

Kinetic pop-art crackhead on St. Mark's Place  
be-bops with skinny rat steps,  
razor thin lines to stave off the sane:  
locks and laughter, storefront disguises,  
bells ring in Polish church as  
Pope looks on, bronzed.

Foul-mouthed children of wound-sex on streets  
of rainy ruin passing art on obituary walls  
for fallen outlaws, magazine shops shudder  
with rock and roll industry, homegrown do-it-yourself  
wanna-be, someone See Hear, hear me now  
tattoos and haircuts, taxi drivers emptying ashtrays  
into gutter, dog regarding each other  
as two third-generation hippies play hacky-sack  
on Vice-President Tompkins' grave.

Outside the gates-- here is a man  
swollen hands and feet,  
skin like plaster cracked  
rolled up in a grime blanket,  
passed out on sidewalk,  
we reach the freezing point  
there is no tonight or tomorrow  
as rivulets of piss  
cross our path.

## Crosstown

The vines come alive  
as I step into the world.  
Hint of jasmine in the air,  
something vital stirred,  
I set about venal tasks--  
grab the L train at First.  
switch for the C at 8<sup>th</sup>  
then up to 23<sup>rd</sup>. A group  
of kids like an amoeba  
squeeze into the station  
with bookbags, laughter,  
grab-ass, then a shove, a scream,  
silence--and the muffled sound  
of a thousand feet running,  
dispersing in all directions.  
The sadness of gravity as  
a body falls flat, fast,  
stabbed—lifeless  
on the cleared landing.  
He and I alone,  
sole witnesses, but he's  
not talking and I keep  
stride, scurry down the stairs  
warm breath from the tunnel  
plastic bag caught in the updraft  
hissing rails, then the roar.  
I mind the gap, slip into the car  
and watch the closing doors.

## Nightingales

One rolled the paper between her thumbs  
and forefingers  
long and lean like young branches.  
Sitting on a stoop, East 9<sup>th</sup> Street  
the two sisters tangled with the promise  
of a Friday night without mom and sitcoms.

Round 7pm, it's still warm but way past  
sunset in a New York October,  
and everyone is still fresh and looking  
at crotches and cornices.

The gate is open  
and I need no password—  
I have a box of clementines under my arm  
and construction paper for the future.

A Nightingale looks over the edge  
of a tenement roof, down on us,  
haunting the street below. Hollow  
thoughts permit adventure

as the two sisters blow green clouds  
of smoke up her way.

## **Lemuel Steedly**

Lemuel Steedly still lives in my mind.

When I met him he was living  
in a small, neat room  
in an abandoned building  
on the Lower East Side  
East 4<sup>th</sup> near Avenue D.  
No heat, no electricity, no running  
water. Along with groceries  
he'd carry a bucket  
filled from an open fire hydrant  
up the failing stairs  
past a ravaged second floor  
of falling plaster and garbage,  
up to the third floor  
open a heavy wooden door  
with a porcelain knob  
and enter a small bedroom  
clean and orderly.  
A cot with blanket and sheets,  
corners turned crisply.  
A small dresser with a mirror,  
and a framed photo of his family  
long vanished.

His veteran's ID carefully placed  
and wrapped in cellophane.  
He lived there alone. Sometimes he was looked in on  
by Eli who ran a barbershop in the basement  
Barber chair salvaged from another abandoned  
storefront, magazines picked up off the street.  
Eli was a Renaissance Man--doctor musician inventor

who helped junkies kick--  
three days without food, just water.  
He would minister them, staying with them throughout  
the withdrawal, the shivers, the seizures.  
The trashed second floor was dedicated to the cure.

Lemuel in his thrifty sport coat and fedora  
climbed the stairs past them,  
just another old gentleman  
in a rooming house.



## **The Holiday**

Three steps down,  
open the door  
and the room's breath  
is cool and musty.  
Dimly lit beer signs  
of long vanquished brands--  
lusty St. Pauli Girl  
as a young maid,  
had she lived  
she'd be your grandmother's age.  
Old man Schlitz  
giving you a cloudy mirror  
to check your hair, stare deep  
to find a trace of that crazy look.  
But tonight the wolf  
is feeling foolish and rusty,  
soul tired and meek.

You've never been here  
but you know this room  
as well as your own.  
Stride up to the bar  
slowly but not without purpose  
and sit in a familiar chair of hard wood,  
elbows up on the mahogany deck  
feet resting upon the brass rail.

The bottles gleam,  
a genie in each one  
Spirit or demon  
take me for a ride

a little vacation in my mind.

This is how

I commune with the dead.

It's perfect here.

No one has any hope.

A muted television no one watches,

a jukebox waiting to be played,

I should have at least an hour to myself

before someone takes notice

and speculates as to why

I haven't struck up a conversation,

looked anyone in the eye,

sought out companionship, information,

or talked politics and sports.

I still have time before

the regulars get wary.

"What will it be?"

asks the man behind the bar,

the man who fought

the Battle of Stalingrad.

"We must sing for our supper."

O what will it be? Yes,

the delicious decision

that will conduct

this symphonic night.

## **Dr. High**

Club kids  
seeking forbidden knowledge  
treasure hunt  
to X marked Avenue B.

Dealers skulk  
on crook of rainy October eve,  
hidden stash  
in loose bricked wall.

Small bottles of water, bloody napkin  
darkly crumpled, matches burnt  
aluminum foil from cigarette pack,  
ashes, more blood smeared ketchup dark  
on building inspection card  
signed by Dr. High  
in Lower East Side vestibule.

Backpacked girl on hands and knees  
six hours in front of Mary Help of Christians Church  
sifting through the dirt and streetside debris  
for a lost fix.

## Love Scene

Carmen runs up the street behind Angelo's car  
screaming: "You Motherfucker! You can't leave  
me here sonofabitch Angelo—Fuck you  
Angelo, fuck you...  
I'm not coming back...  
Do you hear me?"

Behind one of the unshaded dark  
windows across the street  
flickers the unnoticed  
occasional firelight  
of a cigarette.

Carmen and Angelo caress against the trestle pillar,  
the streetlight reflecting the tears spreading  
down Carmen's face. Back from a rumbling night  
at Coney Island, Carmen's hair is matted  
and she's beginning to limp from the splinter  
she got dancing on the boardwalk  
barefoot to Reuben Blades.  
She feels Angelo's leg and the hard  
change he won out on the pier.  
They look at each other now the same  
way they watched the sand earlier tonight  
turn a dampened darker shade  
after the waves receded,  
the sand become heavier and leveled  
after the waves receded  
and tugged at the buoy ropes.  
Receded

leaving the darker stones  
and unclaimed  
half-buried cans at the shore.

The cigarette momentarily  
captures their attention—  
an unexplained  
deep impression,  
an untraced  
sad-eyed red flash  
of a lighthouse  
somewhere in the dark bay  
between Breezy Point and Brooklyn,  
a crimson border light  
seen from up high  
way up high on  
the Coney Island Cyclone.

Angelo pulls away, backpeddling  
into the street. “Watch this!”  
He finishes off a bottle and throws it up  
toward the train, but it misses and shatters  
against the brickface bridge, sending glass  
raining down on them.

Still covering her head, Carmen  
limps out toward him  
laughing. “You know Angelo?  
Let me tell ya...  
you’re a crazy ol’ sonofabitch.”

In the window  
a form appears:

the yellow streetlamp  
illuminates the face  
watching Carmen and Angelo  
get into the car  
and start up the street.

A distant gunshot  
reverberates  
but doesn't stir the neighborhood.  
The sound of hammering  
metal, diesel engines  
beat boxes and voices  
rise up across the surrounding blocks  
then fade away,  
leaving only the constant  
distant hum of the BQE  
in their wake.

A lock clicks.  
A door opens.

Sixteen year old  
local lovers walk  
like heroes toward the corner  
station to catch  
the southbound F; lovers  
with matching haircuts  
and matching razors dangling  
over their virgin hearts.

A figure—  
a shady reincarnation of Sam Spade

walks across the road.

I kick some of the glass  
away from my tires  
and listen to the train pass overhead.  
At the top of the street  
Carmen and Angelo are still  
making out at the light  
after its already turned  
green twice.

Back inside,  
I know something's up  
when my ashtray catches fire.

## **Eli**

Eli lived in a small shelter he built himself  
decorated in the style of Haitian folk art.

Vivid, lurid,  
alive on a vacant lot  
the size of a full city block  
Lower East Side,  
Avenue C between 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>  
in the City of New York.

He ran an extension cord from the base  
of a street light to his shelter  
so he could have light, warmth, and TV,  
He could power his inventions:  
space machines, communications devices,  
strobe tuners with healing powers...  
Most of all he could plug in his electric piano.  
“When I make my music,  
I can fly...”

Eli was the local doctor, minister,  
sage, savant, fortuneteller, bon vivant.  
As he spoke, a Mourning Dove perched  
on his arm, his eyes twinkled,  
and the Empire State  
shimmered in the strong afternoon sun.



## **The Small Events of a Sunday Night in Brooklyn**

It's two A.M on a Sunday night,  
unusually warm for October.  
A hesitant rain slicks the street  
as two guys, even slicker  
slide by speaking Romanian,  
smelling of wet leather and cigarettes.

A cabbie pulls up slow and stops  
directly in front of me. He rolls  
down his window and fires  
a blast from a canister  
he's holding in his hand,  
spraying the sidewalk  
with sunflower seeds.

The pigeons come down from off the elevated  
subway ledge, falling like leaves  
they come down to feed.  
It strikes me: Does this guy's wife  
know he does this on those solitary  
Sunday nights when he's working  
the graveyard shift?

He pulls away and continues up the street.  
I wonder how many others notice the pigeons  
or the lost notes, the combs; you know  
the real nuts and bolts  
of a Sunday night in Brooklyn.

## 4<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>

The F train rattles my windows  
and fractures my dreams  
as it rumbles condemned and indifferent  
carrying dead men and workers  
from Coney Island to Queens  
all night over the rain-drenched streets  
and stained ceilings of Brooklyn.

Under the train bridge junk cars are ditched,  
kids hide from cops, jump barbed wire  
and broken bottles, barnacled drunks  
seek boxes to sleep in.  
A Puerto Rican matriarch  
is overcome by sadness  
as she stops to wait  
for her dog to shit.

Stella groans, mumbles something incoherent  
and turns over in her sleep.  
I'm out of bed, dressed  
and looking for the cigarettes,  
figuring on paying a visit  
to the statue of Maria.

The sink sings an aria  
then breaks down sobbing  
for the aching ribs and ringing ears  
of the underground refugees

strung out

and listening  
to the hammering city.

Finding the keys and smokes  
I silently close the door behind me.

My body's getting rigid it seems  
I'm developing a different  
instinct (less animal,  
more insect) .  
I'm adapting  
to the abstract sense,  
the grids and alphabets,  
the absolute divisions  
that rule Avenue X  
where fate depends  
on switchblade decisions  
and the friends you keep,  
on the welders of the night-  
shift who might ignite  
these propane dreams  
in a desperate fit  
of passion.

No, not tonight.  
All I see  
are the billboards  
with their messages peeling  
revealing others underneath.  
The battered Woolworth  
curtains behind the window  
grates. The products  
on the shelves of the Korean

grocery gathering dust.  
The shadowless kids  
on the corner peddling  
sensimilla.

Maria  
looks down on me  
from her eyes  
of stone,  
with her crown  
of stars,  
and her arms  
stretched out,  
in front of the red brick  
graffitti-ridden Third St.  
Church. She once summoned  
ghosts and brought down the  
heavens, but now she's  
impotent and dispossessed,  
leaving me stranded,  
my senses  
reduced to three  
dimensions.

The stars are forming  
a pattern that looks  
like the grill of my dad's '62  
Delta 88.  
He was so proud  
of that car then,  
but where is it now?  
(I actually thought  
I saw him tonight

sad and alone  
shining its chrome  
in a junkyard  
here in Brooklyn.)

I wonder if Stella  
can take the day off?  
When the sun comes up maybe  
we can walk  
to the East  
River, out across the Brooklyn  
Bridge. I feel like seeing  
the chickens and pigs  
hanging upside-  
down in the windows of China-  
town for a change  
today.

## Notes from Apartment 21

Mourning Dove at my window  
neck scruff ruffled like lavender calico—  
fellows across the alley  
perch on fire escape rail

Or pace iron platform  
peer over edge—free fall  
follow each other around  
pointed tail feather down.

Sumac heavy with seed  
leans low,  
car siren on 12<sup>th</sup> St. below  
announcing vandal is ignored.

Schumann violin sonata on radio  
white pine floors reflective.  
Ginsberg's catty-corner windowshade  
drawn unusual—

Bright slats of sun break  
October overcast,  
turn black fire escape white  
then fade again.

## **On a Paper Street**

Ice cream truck  
harbinger  
of New York Summer.

Conversations wired  
carried on until dawn  
beneath my window.

Sumac tree  
harbors  
Mourning Doves

The shallow junk holds  
as stars fade  
from Cynthia's eyes.

Daylight remains  
as workers  
return from the Tower

Before the rain—  
the Hermit  
buttons his vest  
flexes his left hand  
spits to the West  
and sighs.

## Strange Developments

Ideas pass like currency, spindled and mutilated.  
Stones survive. Rain dries on the benches.  
Newspapers suffer chronic depression.  
Magazines chain smoke.  
Fixtures become unpredictable over dinner.  
Games scores are served slippery and raw.  
Clocks fabricate ancient histories.  
Flowers remain faithful to the Arts.  
Carnival announcements adorn the sanctuary.  
Birds remain uncommitted.  
Unusable lengths of rope find respite in a dog's memory.  
Prosaic ghosts are encountered in the chandlery. Is it not so?  
Monuments weather with the waves  
beneath Southern constellations. Ice flows  
in the veins of laughing ticketholders entertaining disaster.  
Untuned pianos sigh when left alone  
in church basements or disused talent offices.  
Carpets of astroturf curl near the pool  
surrounded by rainforests.



## Today in the Rain

Today in the rain  
we walk  
by the old stone house.  
Men pass  
dressed in drab  
and women in fabrics  
from the Orient  
move through the fog.  
The ocean  
surrounds us  
today in the rain.

Today in the rain  
we can play on the swings  
as divorced fathers watch  
from third story windows.  
We can warm our bones  
and remember a song  
standing at the deck of Farell's Tavern  
with a glass of beer and a shot of rye.  
An old man displays his coins and artifacts:  
Irish pence and Liberty Standing quarters,  
a lead shot from the Revolution and  
a plastic bullet from the Troubles—  
they're all for sale today in the rain.

Today in the rain  
I think of Athens  
with her pure sunrise,  
I think of Paris

and her blue-grey afternoons,  
I think of London  
with her spectral children,  
Dublin brooding in black,  
the women of Lisbon  
in their secret gardens,  
breathless sunsets of the spirit  
in Tangier,  
cool evenings immortal  
in Ste. Marie de la Mer,  
I think of adventurers, exiles, refugees, and slaves  
crossing the ocean today in the rain.

Today in the rain  
I sit by your fire  
and dip my bread  
in your hot stew.  
I sit by your fire  
and think  
how I've come to live  
on this island.

Today in the rain  
I remember it all.  
Today in the rain  
you wake me up  
stroking my head.

Today in the rain  
I kiss your birthmark.  
I am astounded.  
I am rooted in the darkness.  
I am reaching for the light.

## Gowanus Canal

The tugboats moored on the Gowanus  
Canal are mourning tonight, letting out long  
humid notes that echo in the machine  
metal valley between South Brooklyn  
and the Slope. Bells of surviving  
Red Hook churches sound the hours  
as old men add up their points  
and cough up their dough  
in the private cafe backrooms

Smoke windowed black limos  
slice through the mist  
like a permanent Sunday past  
the spare-parts shops and lumber  
yards, through red lights  
steady and unscathed  
over the deserted broken  
cobblestoned and tar patched roads.  
The back seat bosses watch television,  
sleep off dinner and make decisions  
on their way to Court Street funeral  
parlors and family reunions.

A scarred junkie moon  
illuminates the overgrown courtyards  
and vacant lots, looks through  
the empty shells of long abandoned  
row houses or tar papered shacks  
still inhabited. Still inhabited by the boys

on the nod crashed on the needle  
and bottle strewn floor dreaming of reliving  
that first power rush. Still inhabited  
by the bachelor mechanics of 3rd Avenue,  
still inhabited by sleepless families,  
still inhabited by sad widows  
sitting by the window  
counting the cars to pass the night.

In the apartment above the Time  
Machine Tire Shop, a man lays restless  
in his bed howling beneath the finite  
ceiling and watching the late show's electronic  
terror in a humid evening fever. He doesn't know  
I see him as I walk by--walk by feeling  
like someone with a spade  
is turning over  
the soil in my bowels.

The moon twists and stretches  
in the oily waters under the 9th Street  
bridge. A creaking barge  
sits waiting for it to be raised.  
Hector sits on the deck,  
lighting a cigarette hoping  
to get back on time to his wife,  
to a beer, to a dreamless sleep.

Four cans of Ballantine  
will put us away tonight.  
"What do you mean  
the kid's not back yet?"

Why the hell can't you  
keep an eye on him?"  
Hector's shouting and Wanda's crying  
as the Spanish minister's promising  
hellfire and repeating the number  
for donations on the Christian station.

Downstairs a rickety 1940 B-movie geezer  
comes out of the 3rd Avenue Pub  
muttering to himself: "You'd better  
watch it Henry, the boys are gonna  
bust this place up tonight.  
Get your men together  
and get outta here,  
they'll be coming  
down hard alright..."

The Red Hook Boys roam Smith Street  
looking for some action, another taste  
of old-time passion and glory. They're crossing  
the border into the lower Slope all decked  
out in brand-new Puma shoes,  
brass knuckles, blades, spiked leather  
wristbands and belts.  
Hip-hopping high jumping  
the turnstiles with a nothing-coming  
grace, they shoot up the stairs  
to the subway platform  
and get down on the rails  
for a memory race  
down the trestle  
to the 4th Avenue station.

The switchman looks the other way,  
calls ahead, and holds up the trains.

The dogs howl  
remembering the legend  
of hot summer rumbles  
that tore up the streets  
for three days straight  
back in '71. But no one  
fights in the streets these days,  
no, now it's done in the dark,  
in the hallways of walk-ups,  
in the warehouses of the Bronx,  
on the docks and Port  
Authority piers. They've traded  
in the knives for guns and the bikes  
for Impalas, smashing windows  
at Dominic's corner store  
for running horse in the Project.

Getting pumped  
with a cut,  
colder than snow  
a soul on ice.  
Orders from the boss,  
midnight dumping unseen:  
bodies sinking deep  
in the Gowanus.

Used to be the Canal carried  
boats heavy with enough fresh fish  
and fruit to feed half of Brooklyn.

But now its dark along the docks clear  
from Red Hook to Sunset Park.

Windows are all broken,  
hoods are popped open,  
and even the diehards  
need a good recharging.

Old industrial injuries and Night  
Train headaches--no one can  
think straight. Carrying more weight  
everyday, harboring permanent limps  
and instant suspicions, swollen lips  
and bleeding fingers.

But the reactions  
remain quick--the instincts  
accurate. Deep  
inside an unbreakable  
heart, there's a faith  
and love burning in the scars,  
deep inside the head  
there's a sense  
that can separate  
the living from the dead.  
See these hands, they still have  
feeling in them---  
enough feeling  
to fix anything.

See Mickey and Slade got sprung  
from the Tombs and are back to tell  
their tales to us wharf-rats  
squinting over trashcan tip sheets.

They gave up tagging  
trains in the BMT yards since the guards  
started using razor wire, shotguns, and Dobermans.  
They've been working in the forgotten  
corner playground beneath the El,  
two cans in each hand,  
spraying a desperate ecstasy--  
throbbing letters making love  
inside pulsating messages,  
volcanic coded colors  
clashing and bleeding  
into each other.  
Spreading the word,  
the street level news.  
Language that won't fake  
it coming from the tongue.

Rusty wrought  
iron fences unevenly line  
both sides of a rising  
buckling road that cuts  
through grounds of untended  
grasses and groaning Oaks;  
road ending dead at the humming  
formaldehyde factory where men masked white  
concentrate in the floodlit  
forbidding receiving yard.  
Aimed walk with this known  
inevitable destination inexplicably is twisted  
and severed, familiar terrain suddenly  
becomes unsettling, and the air thinner as if



descended from higher elevations. An apparition  
stands near the factory gates, in the empty field motionless,  
her uneasy features rippling in seeming  
metamorphosis with the slightest direction  
shift of wind, sparking memories  
undefined. Who is she? Here homeless  
in this world, in the barren stretches  
along the rotting piers of Brooklyn  
New York with garments mended timeless,  
back curved, and eyes piercing through electric  
lines of strain. Has she returned to review  
the works forsaken her, to examine  
the foundations of ancient addresses or resurrect  
a lost relation? Unresponsive  
to voice and gesture, with my forward  
movement she dissipates  
into an atmosphere  
of unattainable presence.

The air is heavy with  
the smell of the harbor,  
the all-night chemical plants  
of Red Hook and the refineries  
of Bayonne. Leaning over the drawbridge  
rail; inhaling the fumes of phenols leaking  
and motor oil oozing into the intestinal waters,  
taking in the jailhouse blues of lonely Shepherds  
complaining to the warden, old pooches crooning  
to the stars beyond the chain-link sky, old hounds  
howling spook requiems to their mothers out there somewhere.  
I'm leaning over and hearing it all--the wail of alley cats

getting boned, the sputter of tired Detroit engines  
turning over and warming up for Elizabeth,  
seizing up in Red Hook, ending up dumped and dismantled  
in some scrapyard far from home. I'm leaning over  
watching the Canal smear its story as it flows,  
the drain pipes cough up phlegm,  
the tugboats blow their nose.

"C'mon, don't treat yourself that way Joe."

I've come with a notion  
Old Gowanus, to recollect  
the splinters of dreams  
and severed fingers  
you've tucked away,  
the stolen pistols  
and sunken treasures  
you've saved  
the piss, tears  
dreams and sweat  
you've claimed.  
Recollect--shitty Canal  
stinking to the heavens--  
that you were once a river  
and hills rose from both  
your banks. Brooklyn Heights  
nourished you as it returned  
your borrowed waters sweetened  
with the blood of revolution.  
A city was built  
all around you--  
a city of pizza parlors, churches and

Whitman. A city of pigeons,  
ice factories and hit men.

Old Gowanus--you clogged vein,  
sister of the Seine,  
kin of the Thames--  
I've come to reflect  
by your giving pilings  
and your storied gateways,  
on your wood-frame  
drawbridges and tenacious  
catwalks, under the bypass  
interstate artery overhead.

I'm killing time now  
watching the staggered grave-  
yard shift workers as they pass,  
picking out who's going to work  
and who's coming back.  
Vinny comes by--familiar figure--  
visionary and hungry,  
talking to himself,  
scrounging for cigarette money.  
Splitting a pack  
of menthols we head back  
across the Canal  
silent and smoking toward home.

Crossing back up to 10th Street I get a quick  
sickly sweet whiff from the Christianson  
Bakery preparing rolls for the morning  
deliveries to diners across town, and a sudden

sting in my nostrils of sulfur growing stronger.

A red haze blankets the Slope, obscuring the clock-tower, sending down a fire-light mist.

The kids, I guess, have been doing their homework-- they didn't forget, 'cause tonight they've blocked the road and are putting on a show.

Block buster bottle rocket M-80  
helicopter roman bomb candles  
firing up the neighborhood,  
ripping up the dirty curtains  
and exposing our piece of Heaven  
in a pure one-punch explosion.

The streets are covered  
one-inch deep in a firecracker  
confetti carpet of red.

The neighbors: Bruno, Stella, Izzy,  
Carmen, Carmella, Hector, Wanda, Pops,  
Vinny, Alely and me, Marie and everyone  
else on the street are out on the sidewalk  
with chips and bottles on folding tables  
watching; the fathers are teaching  
their kids how to hold  
the sparklers proper--they're showing them the way,  
because tomorrow  
is Independence Day.

I head East up 10th  
with a stray cat  
following me, and the sense  
of a spirit to my left,  
just out of sight, two steps

behind me. Back on my front porch  
smoking the evening's last  
cigarette, I tip my hat to the cats with trash can  
salvaged chicken bones and the wreckers  
hauling the spare-part remains of a Brooklyn  
celebration. I watch them squeeze in and out of the dust bin  
junkyard under the W.P.A. trestle  
right there across the way,  
all the while under  
    the spell of Ancients:  
the green Boiled Hams delivery truck and the Chow  
Mein fast-food van that have been stuck there for decades.

Finally then--at 3 A.M.--the sky  
musters up a thunderstorm.  
All the houses are dark.  
A drunk leans against the trestle pissing.  
I watch the water  
roll down the street  
carrying newspapers and debris,  
paper cups and unnamed things,  
in a stream  
down the Slope  
toward the Canal.

## Nightbirds

Glasses  
of gin  
ushering  
change.

A snake bearing  
Venus

One red book  
will unite  
the textures  
of our skin.

Our words are worthless  
unless they're watered  
with the spirits.

## **All Roads Lead to God**

The Atlantic Flyway—  
masses of birds in  
mid-migration rest  
in our restless city.

Jets routed overhead  
for destinations unknown,  
unemployed angels sing from rooftops  
up to curious ears in transit,  
heavenly wisdom warmed indigo  
in Manhattan's mercurial sunset.

How far beyond our imaginations  
we have arrived, transcending language  
in the marketplace. 7 billion souls now  
exchanging fates without a glance.  
A bomb in your pocket  
or a coin in your ear—it makes no difference  
as the subways rattle on  
comets streak silent to the naked eye  
and submarines prowl the ocean  
prepared to abolish the world.

## **House of Silence**

On the day before the eruption of Vesuvius  
the denizens of Pompeii were baking bread,  
picking lice from children's hair,  
painting frescoes  
in the Villa of Mysteries,  
cavorting in the Great Room,  
drinking beer on the streetcorner,  
adding sums, reciting  
the Philippics of Cicero  
and dusting the windowsills.

While across the Aegean, the Greeks  
were finalizing the documents  
which mourned the end  
of the Golden Age.

It is for this reason that I wear the white flower  
when called upon to serve in the House of Silence.  
or when drinking wine  
with the ambassadors of the night.



## **Magnetic North**

In the backstreets  
of the mercantile city  
by the sea, Buddha laughed.  
He did. I heard him.

In the café  
Grace sat at a table  
next to me,  
self-possessed.

The papers are talismans  
to our sanity,  
attesting that this too  
shall pass, whatever it be.

A new edition  
will arrive on the morrow.  
The sparrow will not mind  
the change very much.

I clutch your hand  
for a while,  
the blood coursing in your veins  
like the tides through Hell Gate.

We meet fate dead on  
day to day, face to face.  
We have no more to expiate or explain  
than does the sparrow.

## **Jolly Roger**

The privateers have been drinking rum  
from a skull passed around the table  
and now, oh the cock crows!  
and they spill out into the street.

In this one moment just before dawn  
when most men die  
or abandon all hope  
they ride

and scream bloody Hell  
feeling for the first time  
a breath of life.  
Tomorrow, they'll set sail

or be hung.  
It goes around--  
the skull passed down,  
the ring clamped on  
like a shackle.

Pulling mussels from the river bank  
this is the fair season.  
Blow gentle wind  
we many never know

if in caves of the desert  
inscribed on the wall or  
written on papyrus  
and sealed in clay jars

are the instructions  
for the coming days.  
What words will we choose,  
which treasure will surface?

Whose thunder will be stolen?  
Who will do the bidding  
and suffer the beheading?  
As the privateers say:  
If there is drink tonight  
then tonight we will be drinking.

## **March from Union Square**

Ascend to the street  
breathe the bitter air  
we gather on  
Union Square

March with candlelight  
and Tibetan drums  
down Broadway, toward Towers  
of Light on the horizon.

Glowsticks on ashen faces  
the Harvest Moon just risen  
horrified expressions  
from the rooftops.

We march toward our fear,  
stepping into our future  
wide-eyed and blinded,  
in the early autumn night

Distant mountains and flowers,  
radio in little rooms  
broadcasting plaintive Ukranian aires--  
what is not resolved here?

The ghosts lingering by the shop  
windows, the thoughts  
put to paper, the sorrow raining o'er  
the City—

it's clear tonight.  
When it's done  
we will sip gin  
huddle and kindle a spark

in Fraunces Tavern.

## **Minerva Hailing Liberty from Battle Hill**

The brutish will insists upon simplification  
as hot gases explode in the atmosphere:  
pungent, random, and determinate.  
There are voices raised in greeting,  
we awaken to the false notes  
and try to rectify them.

The clash of metal, the exhumation  
of desire, the improvements which call  
upon demolition. Now we are too poor  
to re-imagine anything, too shop-worn  
and flawed to hold much brilliance  
in our deepest facet.

There was once a Scarlet Oak that held  
back the earth and produced  
the finest perfume of the spirit,  
corporeal, the acorn at the center  
of the temple, the leaves of transubstantiation  
voicing the wind, the twig dropped  
in our lap, we snapped it in two and that  
was our offering to the dead.

In the courtyard there is chaos  
buried beneath the flagstones, kept  
in a strongbox whose locks  
have long rusted. In the distance  
buses carry us away but never leave  
the city limits. The light plays  
on every face from the amusement park  
to the prison and we insist

upon additional simplification, a further  
reduction of the sentence.

Casting ourselves, we re-enact the passion  
and hold the ghost of a hibiscus  
firmly in our mind—the condensation  
rolling off the glass of lemonade—  
whatever trace of the moment we can  
muster, when we belonged in the  
universe and these towns, these  
landscapes, these relations were not quite so  
vacant and sinister.

The belltowers, antiquated and silenced  
by the late sleepers, the anachronistic  
painter awakens and perches himself in  
the dormer, the monochromatic Bowery  
unfolds below, the cobblestones exposed  
through worn asphalt, poking up  
around the manholes. The University  
will redefine our memory and through  
plumb and level, compass and square  
the Architect will dare create a dictatorship  
of skyscraper. The arguments fail to  
register—the drunken shouts of four a.m.—  
the torn lovers, Lincoln and Douglas  
at Cooper Union—the resolutions come  
through brute force and will.

Still we are drawn out and down  
toward the ocean that refuses surrender,  
toward the roses of June and the wheeling  
joy of Swallows at dusk—here

we stand upon immobile Granite  
lashed by the Sound and the currents  
of the Race, we sing softly to ourselves,  
to the wind, as Manitou listens.

The distillations which will fix this  
moment eternal above all others, it  
will sustain us as we turn and descend through  
Dark Hollow, in the night and the rain.  
Pressing through inhospitable lands until  
we reach the distant vantage, there,  
my Love, we meet again as we  
always have, on the hillside, in the Sun,  
on the morning when the buttercups first bloom.

If there is any meaning here  
it is between me and you.



## Things to Do

This summer in New York  
is bound to be a memorable one.  
The long hot days interrupted  
by short stretches of cool—giving us  
just enough time to reflect.

There's so much to do.  
I still have volumes of Dizzy, Miles, and Satchmo  
to cover. Then there's Mendelssohn, Mozart, and Beethoven  
blowing through the canopy of maples on the hillside  
at dusk. The Stanley Brothers and Bill Monroe  
have been waiting on their front porches, watching the shadows  
grow long over the Appalachian valley, distilling their harmonies  
and offering to uncork the longing of the heart.  
Edith Piaf's orphic vintage too remains, along with the feast  
prepared by Mahalia Jackson that we've barely touched.

I've yet to understand the currents off the Race, and the breaking  
of the waves off Sachem's Head, and how it is that they  
strip sand from this strand and deposit it on that. There is the flight  
of the pelican and the egret, there is the logic of the otter who I've hardly  
met.

Robert in Paris detailing the dance of the stars as Chi on Ocracoke holds  
geologic surveys in her palm. The Astral light that bathes us all  
on these summer nights opens the door to forgotten rooms with silver  
keys,  
slips silently and purposefully through the hallways of the Great House.  
The gentle haunting that promises pure love in our dream  
lingers eternally beyond our step.

## **Tower of the Winds**

We built a tower of the winds  
to stave off our tragic fate.  
Down river at a place unmarked  
we cast our thoughts to the sea.  
Now the great oak  
is rooted in your bones.  
Who watches over us  
from the attic window tonight?

Our logic split in pieces,  
cracked like a poorly laid sidewalk.  
You always said that life  
was the law of the jungle  
and love flowed  
like a river of glass.  
But that was in in the winter  
when we were frozen in.  
Now it's the rainy season  
and I understand  
you were serious.

## Entering the World

A spectrum of grey  
revealed today  
shimmering, vibrant  
ocean of fortune  
bleeding my violet  
hair. Perennial  
prayers sprout  
from my scalp  
and drift on  
the Brooklyn breeze  
through the virgin  
green foliage  
of backyard trees.

My head broken open  
to receive the communion  
of memory, bullets  
of speech sever my nerves  
as the stones grow  
wings and flutter  
along the turbulent  
Earth. My feet  
seeking their level  
take deeper root  
and tap the water table.  
I ascend into the grey  
ocean air twisting,  
my torso turning to smoke  
aligned with the wind,  
my body no longer mine,  
I dissipate.

Losing my gravity,  
I hang suspended  
and await the rain.

## **Mystic Occurance**

Four in the afternoon  
golden light filtering through  
cypress leaves.

You reveal yourself  
without a word  
as I drink from the stream.

On a table nearby  
rests your tattered pack  
of tarot cards.

The beauty of the world  
slowly spreads and trembles  
at the anticipation of your touch.

The telltale clouds  
appear in the West  
reflected in the eye of a snake.

You look up as if  
you hadn't seen the sky  
since you were a child.

Our nature won't be constrained  
anymore without courting  
a great disaster.

I accept the little surprises:  
see you leaning  
out the open window

a silver key  
falling slowly  
through the yearning  
atmosphere.

a smile  
on your face  
brighter  
than the sun  
off the ocean.

Our problem  
of long division  
solved.

All that remains  
is to climb  
six steep flights  
to your room.

## **And Here You Will Begin**

Someone's poisoned the cherries  
and the prophetic song's been parodied in the church.  
A cypress tree grows and a fountain of memory crumbles  
for the youth you governed during the insurrection.

The flags and the stones and the skulls of slaves  
lie buried in the market.  
A painting of forget-me-nots from the war  
no longer conveys the simple gesture intended.

Some note possesses your morning chimes,  
some strange tale of temptation before breakfast.  
A scarlet glove points to the weakstone of the fortress  
in the hour before dawn

as you pour sorrow from your  
brow.

In the garden  
the talisman is uncovered  
the walls sink into the meadow  
and the vows  
are betrayed anew.

Set forth now  
in the cool morning  
of judgment.

## BIO

Jim Lampos is a writer and musician. A native of southeastern Connecticut, he received his B.A. (Summa Cum Laude) at Brandeis University and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. At Brandeis he studied poetry under Denise Levertov and Frank Bidart. He was awarded a Kaplan Fellowship to attend the New School for Social Research, where he received his M.A. He was the development director at non-profit agency in New York City that converted abandoned buildings on the Lower East Side into housing for the homeless mentally disabled. It was a position that gave him an intimate knowledge of diverse aspects of a city that was his home for 25 years. In the 1990's he was the next-door neighbor of Allen Ginsberg, who became a friend and informal mentor, encouraging this cycle of poems that he praised as "fine work" with "a wonderful specificity of reference."

As a musician, Jim has released eight CDs that received airplay on over 300 stations and charted on the AAA and Americana surveys. He has toured the nation, been featured on network television, including VH-1, and performed at festivals such as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Nashville's Tin Pan South. His work has received glowing reviews from the Village Voice, Newsday, the Concord Monitor, and the Clarion-Ledger among others. He currently performs annually at New London's Sailfest and New York City's Vigil for Peace at the Central Park Bandshell.

Along with his wife Michaelle Pearson, he's the author of *Rum Runners, Governors, Beachcombers, and Socialists*, published by The Old Lyme Historical Society in 2010, *Remarkable Women of Old Lyme* published by the History Press in 2015, and *Revolution in the Lymes : from the New Lights to the Sons of Liberty* published by the History Press in 2016. His poetry has appeared in various small presses, including Brooklyn's *Bad Henry Review*. *Bowery and Gowanus, Poems of New York* is his first book of collected poems, drawing from over 30 years of work, and focusing on subject matter relating to New York City.