



if there were water

The Crossing
Donald Nally, conductor

Crossings Cycle (2015/2017)
Stratis Minakakis

Crossings' Epigrams

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 - 2 Epigram 2 4:16
- Crossings
- 3 ...if there were water... 6:05
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un/bodying/s (2017)
Gregory W. Brown

- 6 1. The Meeting of the Waters 8:03
 - 7 2. The Valley of Lost Names 5:56
 - 8 3. Questions for a Disincorporation/Atlantis 9:59
 - 9 4. Poem with Any End 8:24
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Crossings Cycle
Stratis Minakakis (b. 1979)

Crossings

July 2015, Island of Lesbos, Greece. We arrive at the island of Lesbos at the same time as a massive influx of refugees from Syria lands on the Greek shores. Lesbos is the primary destination for the hordes of flimsy inflatable boats, preferred means of transportation of the Turkish smugglers. The number of families with pregnant women or small children is astonishing. Toddlers younger than my then three-year-old daughter, newborns, and their exhausted parents, brave the unforgiving heat without food or water as they walk the 60 kilometers of mountainous terrain that separate our resort town of Mithymna from the port of Mytilene. There, they will endure unspeakable hardships for days until a boat chartered by the Greek government, itself collapsing under the uncontrollable financial crisis, transfers them to the port of Piraeus. From there, most will walk for three weeks to reach someplace in Europe, hopefully Germany or Sweden. As I am thinking about this piece, my wife suggests rereading the *The Waste Land*. The verses "if there were water and no rock" and "who is the third who walks always beside you" seem painfully relevant.

Crossings' Epigrams

Crossings' Epigrams is an elegy on things irretrievably lost. Once again, I turned to Ancient Greek literature because it expresses something about the human condition that resonates deeply within me. Three text fragments are interwoven throughout the three short movements that comprise *Crossings' Epigrams*: the moment where Odysseus tries to grasp the fleeting vision of his mother, which escapes like a 'shadow', or a 'dream' (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11); the lines uttered to Antigone by the exhausted old Oedipus as they arrive in Athens, where they plan to seek refuge (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*); Hecuba's lament over the fall of Troy and collapse of the House of Priam (Euripides, *The Trojan Women*). *Epigram I* is a fantasy on the words 'shadow' and 'dream' of the Homeric text. *Epigram II* interlaces Odysseus' agonizing description with Oedipus' painful realization regarding his current state. *Epigram III* presents Hecuba's lament, echoed in distortion by the sea waves, transforming to a chaotic primordial cry. Shadows of the Homeric text trace an invisible but omnipresent line that connects the three *Epigrams*.

Crossings' Epigrams can be performed autonomously, or in conjunction with *Crossings*. In the second case, as heard here, *Epigrams I* and *II* are performed as a unit before *Crossings*; *Epigram III* is performed immediately after the conclusion of *Crossings*.

–Stratis Minakakis

Crossings Cycle

Crossings' Epigrams (set in the original Greek)

...Three times I sprang

Toward her, and my will said, 'Clasp her', and three times

She flitted from my arms like a shadow or a dream...

– Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11, 206-208 (trans. A. T. Murray, rev. George E. Dimock)

...Little do I crave, and obtain

Still less than that little, and with that I am content..

– Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 5-6 (trans. Sir Richard C. Jebb)

...Lift your head, unhappy one, from the ground; raise up your neck;

This is Troy no more...

–Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 98-99 (trans. E. P. Coleridge)

Crossings

...if there were water...

If there were water

And no rock

If there were rock

And also water.

– T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V. "What the Thunder Said," 246-250

...who is the third...

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

– T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, V. "What the Thunder Said," 360

un/bodying/s

Gregory W. Brown (b. 1974)

Text by Todd Hearon (b. 1968)

The Quabbin Reservoir is located in the former Swift River Valley of western Massachusetts. Engineers had been considering the Swift River Valley for a reservoir to ease the growing demands for fresh water in Boston since about 1895. In 1938 the towns of Dana, Prescott, Enfield, and Greenwich were legally disincorporated and the valley, now cleared of all things human, was flooded until it reached its 400 billion gallon capacity in 1946.

In the first part of *un/bodying/s* I took Todd's language as a cue to represent an avalanche of culture enveloping a landscape. The music is dizzying at times, and references a variety of styles and textures. It is a jumble of rock tumbling down the hillside – a river cascading to the sea. Water symbolizes various things in various cultures: a bridge to the underworld, dream-space, the subconscious, flow and vitality (here dammed and controlled). Water has its own story here – its own migration through our environment.

Any story of diaspora is also a human story, and the second part of *un/bodying/s* settles into a calm and reflective pool. The music is relatively stable in harmony and style. We see individuals going about their daily work. We see human detail and intimacy.

Part 3 is all about place and time. Displacement can be a result of movement in space, in time, or both. The music goes into a deep nostalgic past, perhaps to the 1938 Enfield Farewell Ball itself, here inhabited by trees and birds made human in the mind's eye. The record skips – itself a displacement of phonograph needle both in space (to another groove) and time (to repeat the immediate past). The 7,000+ graves are carefully removed and reinterred in a new cemetery. The fields, now covered in ice, are locked in summer. The birds return, and it is suddenly simultaneously winter, spring, and summer.

Humans collectively form a diaspora from the past, pushed out of the present into the foreign future. The islands, still referred to by their mountain names, poke through the surface of Quabbin and intrude into the present as a sort of geographic palimpsest. In a similar way, Atlantis intrudes into the reverie of Part 3. Utopic Atlantis has haunted Western culture for millennia:

The notion that we were perfect... before it all fell apart... before the flood. The speaker looks up through the water at the sun, now turned blue and distant. Culture is rendered undecipherable and forgotten; the speaker longs to be moving.

Part 4 brings us to Boston, John Winthrop's *City Upon a Hill*. The music is staid and implacable and references Renaissance techniques and textures, placing it firmly in the erudite and urbane city. We quickly detour into the madness of present-day Boston streets and an uncertain future, haunted by sea-level rise. Out of Boston we confront the question that is the heart of Quabbin, and of all civilization: How do cities meet the demand for water? At what cost? Rome had its methods, and their architecture remains and reminds us of the importance of water to all peoples at all times. We watch the water flow back downhill to Boston as it makes its cycle. That deep human longing to see our home through "unbeclouded eyes" is fleeting and ultimately we are reminded that all cultures pass.

– Gregory W. Brown

*"I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true"*

–Geoffrey Hill, i.m., 1932–2016

1. The Meeting of the Waters

Sempiternal waters, singly
sing, gush glottal-less & all
onomatopoetical your
triphthong's liquid pluraling
through rock & ruck & rill
purl, pounce, pronounce & preen the sourceless
flourish of your sundry selves, unseamed
anima, antiphonal
Ursprache,
 ensembling in simultaneous
tumult the babbling

Earth's eternal tongues;

 O airy

Yggdrasil, within whose watery limbs
climbs the burgeoning current
of birdsong indistinguishable—
wren-trickle, thrush's trill,
aria of orioles
dissolved in the dawn chorus
but intimated tributaries
still:

 voicings of a universal
dialect, a will
gone malleable & migratory
raptured in translation, diaspora
becoming at a stroke
diapason; O
Ouroboros, origin-&-end,
in Bacchic spring come thundering
down the escarpment's scree & skim
littering the valley
with erratics, scattered limbs
of a glacial language éxtant only in
lacunae, contour,
kettle, esker drift,
congregated relics
where a village went; what crook
denotes you truly, what
wandering wand divines
your secular in-saecula-
saeculorum sign:
your mouth's green myth
pressed to the ocean's ear,
your mountain tale in touch

The score includes the following additions:

chipmunk, Massachusetts, moose, Nichevaug,
Nenameseck, racoon, skunk, woodchuck

1 There is a land of pure delight,
 where saints immortal reign;
 infinite day excludes the night,
 and pleasures banish pain.

— music by Jeremiah Ingalls
 text by Isaac Watts

with some ridiculous sublime
that slips like the gopher soul into its hole

surfacing into the world of time:

2. The Valley of Lost Names

Think of a time our own names conjure
nothing but a body of unbroken water

*(Moon over Quabbin. Body of bottled light
poured across the body of the water,*

*something far, at the surface—finned or feathered?
rolling in distress—)*

at dawn the sudden, trumpeting eagle
strikes.

The drowned towns, four-square, hymned in stave & stanza,
swallowed walls on walls of song, each stone a tongue

where the salmon canter over the meadow baffle dam
& small-mouthed bass hosanna...

Too deeply now for any to remember
so why does it seem important to remember

when we will ourselves, these fluent selves, like water
subsumed in greater water be impossible to remember

to distinguish the veins in the hand that worked the lathe
wove the straw, rippled at morning into a gesture of love or praise

or clipped the dewy lilac from its stem
or turned the fieldstone into the sunken wall

of a cellar hole, the jam jars lined within
the vagrant bittersweet unwinds among

when the shore recedes (*in the twinkling of an eye*)
the tombs stick out like knees.

Deep in a time that is no longer time
but the greater dissolutions of the water

within whose workings ever unspool our names
as it were (as it will be) upon a ghostly bobbin...

3. Questions for a Disincorporation

"to undo, separate or dissolve from a body"

Dana, MA; Prescott, MA; Greenwich, MA; Enfield, MA: April 28, 1938

A solitary grebe
filling itself, in reflection,
into a globe—

Where does the body go?

Is it the same

as the wind in the trees

the wind in the highest limbs

that sweeps them uniformly like the necks of swans
swimming in consort

so they seem in time

with a music it is impossible to hear

from this distance

(we are very far)

—as in a silent film, the couples dancing,
the sweeping of light & limbs across the floor
as across the water's surface, in reflection,
when the wind lifts
& the glacier of a cloud pulls over
& the mares' tails fly
like tribes, nomadic tongues, erratic stars?

Winterlong
the bodies of lost deer
lie littering the ice.

The human graves, carved up & carted
to the minted cemetery on the hill.

The summer fields, under the frozen surface...

*(Something of us remains Something of us
shall not suffer to be changed)*

In spring, when the small birds come
back to the north meadow & the eagle-fretted bones
rise from the ice

across the breaking floes

as it were upon another shore

where does the body, through the fields of other bodies,

go?

Atlantis

About that country there's not much left to say.
Blue sun, far off, a watery vein
in the cloud belt. The solid earth itself

unremarkable: familiar ruins
littered with standing stones our people
had lost the ability to decipher.

How deeply had we slept? Beneath the jellyfish
umbels of evergreens, each one a dream,
and the effervescent stars, cold currents

tugged at our thoughts like tapestries
unraveling into war. All spring
the nightingale perched on the green volcano's lip.

The rats had abandoned the temples.
My mind was a voyage hungering to happen.

4. Poem with Any End

When all this All doth pass from age to age—

this City on a Hill, its golden dome
and cupolas a quiet sea floor,
the crabbed, neurotic streets still disentangling
obsessive thirst, obsessive westwardness...

what is a city without
water?

Rome, its spidered aqueducts
bearing the bounty of barbaric springs
down mountaining arches, a song in the valley

sempiternal waters

sing

over the sunken ponds & soapstone quarry,
the Dipper rising with inscrutable stars
over the village where they made the bobbins

to slip down dark, infernal aqueducts
(like shades to slake the high, titanic thirst
of Boston)

to Boston.

5 O could we make our doubts remove,
those gloomy doubts that rise,
and see the Canaan that we love
with unbeckoned eyes;

— Ingalls / Watts

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John Grecia, accompanist

- ¹ lead voices in Crossings Cycle
² solos in The Meeting of the Waters
³ soprano in The Valley of Lost Names
⁴ duet in The Valley of Lost Names
⁵ duet in Poem with Any End
⁶ Karen Blanchard's performance is made possible through a generous gift from Beth Van de Water in memory of Hank Van de Water.

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People

Check out these sites to learn more about us:

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gregorywbrown.com

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The Crossing and Donald Nally
crossingchoir.com

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