

THE CITY OPPOSITE NINEVEH

Pier 7, San Francisco

Then came the white sisters clapping
to the waves' progress,
and that was Emancipation—

jubilation, O jubilation—
vanishing swiftly
as the sea's lace dries in the sun...

—Derek Walcott

VARIATION ONE

Lovely as milk, smooth as a knell,
bodiless and made of breaths,
a blue bed of pollen,

lace, mesh, the sea ran
like a prayed tongue, the waves
shining where they fell like eyes of needles.

VARIATION TWO

Streaks of wet pastel the sea around the bridge
smudged on or between delaminated glass
sound of one hand clapping, the sea of commas.

The sea tarnished beneath the cliff.
It marbled and fleeced and breathed
jasmine unravelling in a skittish wind.

VARIATION THREE

The sea was drying its laces
in the sun. The bored wind
nosed one corner of translucent

paper. From the pier, three
lines went down into the brassy
sea which shone in belted buckles

VARIATION FOUR

The sea heavy as a trombone.
Out of this sea the man yanked
a long silver fish which glared

and shook and shone. Another man reading
The New York Times brought home
his line invisible in the sun.

Bodies in the glare were dark commas on the bench.
In Mosul, said the paper, the garbagemen have again
started work and rake through human remains.

VARIATION FIVE

The whipping marbling fleecing sea drove
wind up my nostrils.
My body in the glare was a bead the wind and the light

threaded the wind crept back out the mouth of me
the light blew through
the singing gaps of me.

The wind crept back out the mouths
of two of me with the sea
slaughtering between them the light

blew through
the singing gaps
of them.

One buckled but
the other was
singing—

VARIATION SIX

The other was singing, buckling:
O lovely in milk, in wreathes,
lovely in breaths,

the sea shivers like a prayered tongue—
jubilation,
O jubilation,
vanishing swiftly,
as the sea dries its laces in the sun

drying in the sun the refuse of faces faces
not there no longer there
where the sea was where I was

on a bent green bench
holding and pouring
a singing where I was—

VARIATION SEVEN

Where I was was
Mosul.
Where I was

was Mosul by the Tigris
Mosul the Green
Mosul

Mosul the Pearl
Mosul
Mosul the Remaining City

steeped in stink and human remains.
But where an I was
was all the waves.

VARIATION EIGHT

Burl of the gnarled green
sea in its milkskins, beneath the bridge
wrinkling like grapeskin.

Where I was, all the waves.
Each falling into the sea.
Each a knock-kneed lamb.