

***Two Transcriptions
of Imaginary
Elegies I-IV***

Jack Spicer

lack mountain is the publishing project of **zerodegree writing program**, an informal nexus for poetic exchange. lack mountain is an irregular series devoted to missing and fugitive poetries. lack mountain publications will be available free of charge in digital form; print versions will be distributed to friends & supporters of lack mountain and zerodegree writing program.

Two Transcriptions of Imaginary Elegies I-IV is **lack mountain #1**

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Introduction

“Time does not finish a poem” is the insistent refrain in the fourth of Spicer’s *Imaginary Elegies*, and it seems he was never finished with this enigmatic and powerful series, which shifted around in his body of work, added and lost a fifth and sixth elegy, and is to some the ultimate statement of Spicer’s poetics, whether despite its lack of fixity or because of it.

The two transcriptions included in this publication are based on two recordings taken several years apart. The first, from 1957, is an electric affair, the triumphal conclusion of a half-hour reading that included several poems later published in *One-Night Stands* and elsewhere. Spicer is barely contained, popping into the microphone, breaking into falsetto, and hamming it up for an appreciative audience. Here the *Elegies* are the great culmination that poems like “Dardanella” and “Psychoanalysis: An Elegy” have been working to find.

The second recording is a quieter affair, recorded for KPFA radio in 1963. Where the *Elegies* were the capstone of the earlier reading, now they are the foundation, setting the stage for a handful of Spicer’s later poems, which each take the model of the *Elegies* and turn it to a different register.

Both renditions differ, in small but sometimes profound ways, from the four printed versions of *Imaginary Elegies* that readers can refer to today (see the *Bibliographic Note* at the end). Together they can be read as question and answer, objection and reply, Spicer’s continuing argument with himself in the guise of many interlocutors, shape-shifters, and adversaries real and perceived -- the voice of the poem that speaks of itself to itself, and shares that self-talk with all who care to listen.

**Reading at the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Association,
San Francisco, recorded by the Poetry Center, April 11, 1957.**

The last thing for this section are Imaginary Elegies,
dedicated to Robin Blaser.

There's an epigraph from William Butler Yeats' "A Vision":
"All that a man knows and needs to know is found in Berkeley."

-- only, you know what --

Imaginary Elegy #1

Poetry, almost blind like a camera,
is alive in sight only for a second.

Click, snap! goes the eyelid or the eye
before a movement, almost as the word happens.
One would not choose to blink or go blind
After the instant. One would not choose
to see the continuous platonic pattern
of birds flying long after the stream of birds
had dropped or had nested. Lucky for us
that there are natural things like oceans
which are always around, continuous
disciplined subjects to the moment of sight.

Sea, moon and sun, and nothing else
is subject. Other things are less patient
and won't rest between the intervalence
of perception. They go about their business
as if we didn't have to see them.

When I praise the sun
or any bronze god derived from it,
don't think I wouldn't rather praise
the very tall blond boy

who ate all of my potato chips
at the Red Lizard. It's just
that I won't see him when I open my eyes,
and I will see the sun. Sea, moon and sun
are always there when the eyes are open,
insistent as breakfast food.

One can only justify these cheap eternal
by their support of what is absolutely temporary.
The blond boy, like the birds, although moving
is given a sort of fictive presence
through this scenery. He is bathed
through the deepest and bluest of water,
limb upon deep sweet limb.
He is syntactically conjured
through all of love's possible meanings
until he is almost alone in this room.
Here, and nearly alive.
He is bleached by an Apollonian sun
until he is white as cold,
white as my blindness,
an Arctic Circle of absolute dreaming
complete with polar bears and Santy-Claus
and rich with ice.

It is as if we conjure the dead
and they speak only through our own
damned trumpets, through our damned medium:

"I am Little Eva! A Negro Princess from Sunny Heaven!"
The voice sounds blond and tall.

"I am Aunt Minnie. Love is sweet as moonlight here in Heaven."
The voice sounds blond and tall.

"I am Barnacle Bill. I sank with the Titanic. I rose in salty Heaven."
The voice sounds blond, sounds tall, sounds blond and tall.

"Good-bye from us in spirit-land,
from sweet platonic spirit-land.
You can't see us in spirit-land,
and we can't see at all!"

Imaginary Elegy #2

God must have a big eye, to see everything
which we have lost or forgotten.
Men used to say that all lost objects
stay upon the moon, untouched
by any other eye but God's.
The moon is God's big yellow eye
remembering what we had lost or never thought.
That's why the moon looks raw and ghostly in the dark:
it is the camera-shots of every instant
in the world, laid bare in terrible yellow cold.
It is the objects that we never saw.
It is the dodoes flying through the snow
that flew from Baffinland to Greenland's tip
and did not even see themselves.

The moon is meant for lovers.
Lovers lose themselves in others,
do not see themselves.
The moon does, the moon does.
The moon is not a yellow camera,
it perceives what wasn't, what undoes,
what will not happen.
It's not a sharp and clicking eye of glass and hood,
just old slow infinite exposure of the negative that cannot happen.
Fear God's old eye for being shot with ice
instead of blood, fear its inhuman mirror blankness
luring lovers. Fear God's moon for hexing,
sticking pins in forgotten dolls. Fear it for wolves,
for witches, dragons, lunacy, for parlor tricks.

The world is full of watching witches,
bitching the world up.
The witch-like virgin god Diana,
being neither witch nor virgin
is the moon's god. Even her sex changes:
she is a black bitch-dog, look!
she has yellow tits. Even her color changes.
But she doesn't exist; when the poem is over,
she is a nice pretty poet with thick lips
and blue eyes and an elegant wardrobe.
Into the moon she goes.

The world is full of watching bitches
witching the world up.
The witch-like evil goddess Hecate,
being neither witch nor evil, is a moon god.
Even his sex changes: he is an old black werewolf,
sharpening his teeth on a berry-bush.
But he doesn't exist; when the poem is over,
he is an anxious poet with a few delusions,
kind as a rabbit. Into the moon he goes.
The world is full of witch-hunting bitches
watching the world upside-down.
The dragon-slaying hero Sigurd,
being neither dragon-slayer nor hero,
is the moon's rival. Even his sex changes:
he is a huge black valkyrie
looping all over hell for a lover.
But he doesn't exist; when the poem is over
he has dug no pit, killed no dragon,
he is merely the poet at the end of his poem.

Evil somehow exists in the relation
between the remembered and the forgotten,
between the moon and the earth of the instant.
Evil somehow exists in the relation
between what happens and what never happens,
between the poets and God's yellow eye.

Look through the window at the real moon,
see the sky surrounded, bruised with rays.

But look now, in this room,
see the shape-changers,
wolf, bear and otter, dragon, dove.
Look now, in this room,
see the shape-changers,
flying, crawling, swimming, burning with beauty.
Hear them whisper.

Imaginary Elegy #3

God's other eye is good and gold,
so bright the shine blinds.
His eye is accurate; his burnished eye
observes the bright and blinding shine it shines.
Now, accurate as swooping birds,
the burnished eye is shining back

[tape damaged/no transcription 6:46-6:52]

God's goodness is a black and blinding cannibal
with sunny teeth that only eats itself.
Deny the light. God's golden eye is brazen,
it is clanging brass of good intention,
it is noisy burning clanging brass.
Light is a carrion crow,
cawing and swooping,
cawing and swooping.

Then, then there is a sudden stop,
the day changes. There is an innocent old sun,
quite cold, and clouds. The ache of sunshine stops.
God is gone. God is gone.
Nothing was quite as good.
It's getting late, put on your coat.

It's getting dark, it's getting cold.

Most things happen in twilight,
when the sun goes down and the moon hasn't come
and the bats are flying. Most things happen
when God isn't looking, when God is blinking
between good and evil and the bats are flying.
Most things happen in twilight when things are easy
and God is blind as a gigantic bat.

The boys stretched out above the swimming pool
receive the sun. Their groins are pressed against
the warm cement. They look as if they dream,
as if their bodies dream. Unblind the dreamers,
for they ache with sun. Wake them with twilight;
they're like lobsters now, hot red and private
while they dream. They dream about themselves.
They dream of dreams about themselves.
They dream they dream of dreams about themselves.
Splash them with sunset like a wet bat.
Unblind the dreamers. Poet, be like God.

Fourth and Last Elegy

Yes, be like God.
I wonder what I thought when I wrote that.
The dreamers sag a bit,
as if five years had thickened
on their flesh or on my eyes.
Splash them with what?
Should I throw rocks at them
to make their naked private bodies bleed?
No, let them sleep. This much I've learned
in these five years, and what I've spent and earned:
time does not finish a poem. The dummies
in the empty funhouse watch the tides
wash in and out. The thick old moon

shines through the rotten timbers every night.
This much is clear, they think:
the men who made us twitch and creak
and put the laughter in our throats
are just as cold as we.
The lights are out.
The lights are out.
You'll smell the oldest smells:
the smell of salt, of urine, and of sleep
before you wake. This much I've learned
in these five years and what I've spent and earned:
time does not finish a poem.

What have I gone to bed with all these years,
what have I taken crying into bed for love of me?
Only the shadows of the sun and moon,
the dreaming boys, their creaking images,
only myself. Is there some rhetoric to make me think
that I have kept a house while playing dolls?
This much I've learned in these five years
and what I've spent and earned:
that two-eyed monster God is still above.
I saw him once when I was young,
and once when I was scared with madness,
or was scared and mad because I saw him once.
He is the sun and moon made real with eyes.
He is the photograph of everything at once;
the love that makes the blood run cold.
But he is gone, no realer than old poetry.
This much I've learned in these five years
and what I've spent and earned:
time does not finish a poem.

Upon the old amusement pier
I watched the creeping darkness
gather in the West. Above the giant funhouse
and the ghosts, I hear the seagulls call.
They're going West, toward some great

Catalina of the dream, to where all poems end.
But does it end? The birds believe it's there.
Believe the birds.

1963 radio broadcast, KPFA Radio

Imaginary Elegies

1.

Poetry, almost blind like a camera,
is alive in sight only for a second.
Click, snap, goes the eyelid or the eye
before a movement almost as the word happens.
One would not choose to blink and go blind after the incident.
One would not choose to see the continuous Platonic pattern
of birds flying long after the stream of birds had dropped or had nested.
Lucky for us that there are visible things like oceans that are always around,
continuous disciplined adjuncts to the moment of sight.
Sight, but not so sweet as we have seen.
When I praise the sun or any bronze god derived from it,
don't think I wouldn't rather praise the very tall blond boy
who ate all of my potato-chips at the Red Lizard.
It's just that I won't see him when I open my eyes
and I will see the sun. Things like the sun are always there
when the eyes are open, insistent as breath.
One can only worship these cold eternal
for their support of what is absolutely temporary.
But not so sweet. The temporary tempts poetry,
tempts photographs, tempts eyes.
I conjure up from photographs the birds, the boy,
the room in which I began to write this poem.
All my eye has seen or ever could have seen
I love, I love, the eyelid clicks.
I see cold poetry at the edge of their image.
It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak
only through our own damned trumpets,
through our damned mediums:
"I am Little Eva, a Negro princess from sunny Heaven!"
The voice sounds blond and tall.
"I am Aunt Minnie. Love is sweet as moonlight here in Heaven."
The voice sounds blond and tall.

"I am Barnacle Bill. I sank with the Titanic. I rose in salty Heaven."
The voice sounds blond, sounds tall, sounds blond and tall.
"Good-bye from us in Spirit-Land,
from sweet Platonic Spirit-Land.
You can't see us in Spirit-Land,
and we can't see at all."

2.

God must have a big eye
to see everything that we have lost or forgotten.
Men used to say
that all lost objects stay upon the moon,
untouched by any other eye but God's.
The moon is God's big yellow eye
remembering what we had lost or never thought.
That's why the moon looks raw and ghostly in the dark.
It is the camera shots of every instant in the world
laid bare and terrible yellow cold.
It is the objects that we never saw.
It is the dodos flying through the snow
that flew from Baffin-land to Greenland's tip
and did not even see themselves.
The moon is meant for lovers.
Lovers lose themselves in others,
do not see themselves.
The moon does,
the moon does.
The moon is not a yellow camera,
it perceives what wasn't, what un-does,
what will not happen.
It's not a sharp and clicking eye
of glass and hood, just old slow infinite exposure
of the negative. It cannot happen.
Fear God's old eye for being shot with ice instead of blood,
fear its inhuman nerve blankness burning lovers.
Fear God's moon for hexing, sticking pins in forgotten dolls.

Fear it for wolves, for witches, magic, lunacy, for parlor tricks.
The poet builds a castle on the moon made of dead skin and glass.
Here marvelous machines stamp Chinese fortune cookies full of love.
Tarot cards make love to other tarot cards.
Here agony is just imagination's sister bitch.
This is the sun-tormented castle which reflects the sun.
Da, dada, da, the castle sings.
Da, I don't remember what I lost,
Dada, the song, da, the hippogriffs were singing,
Da, dada, the boy, his horn, were wet with song,
Dada, I don't remember, da, forgotten,
Da, dada, Hell, old butter-slaves who always eats her lovers.
Hell somehow exists in the distance
between the remembered and the forgotten.
Hell somehow exists in the distance
between what happened and what never happened,
between the moon and the earth of the instant,
between the poem and God's yellow eye.
Look through the window at the real moon,
see the sky surround it, thused with rays.
But look now in this room, see the moon-children --
wolf, bear and otter, dragon, dove --
look now in this room, see the moon-children,
flying, crawling, swimming, burning,
vacant with beauty. Hear them whisper.

Part 3.

God's other eye is good and gold, so bright the shine blinds.
His eye is accurate. His eye observes the goodness of the light it shines.
Then pouncing like a cat, devours each golden trace of light it saw it shine.
Cat feeds on mouse, God feeds on God.
God's goodness is a black and blinding cannibal with sunny teeth
that only eats itself. Deny the light.
God's golden eye is brazen, it is clanging brass
and good intention, it is noisy burning clanging brass.
Like the carrion crow, cawing and swooping,

cawing and swooping.
Then, then there is a sudden stop. The day changes.
There is an innocent old sun, quite cold and clouds.
The aches of sunshine stop. God is gone,
God is gone. Nothing is quite as good.
It's getting late, put on your coat.
It's getting dark, it's getting cold.
Most things happen in twilight
when the sun goes down
and the moon hasn't come
and the earth dances.
Most things happen in twilight
when neither eye is open
and the earth dances.
Most things happen in twilight
when the earth dances
and God is blind as a gigantic bat.
The boys above the swimming pool receive the sun.
Their groins are pressed against the wet cement.
They look as if they dream, as if their bodies dream.
Rescue their bodies from the poison sun,
shelter the dreamers. They're like lobsters now,
hot, red, and private as they dream.
They dream about themselves,
they dream of dreams about themselves,
they dream they dream of dreams about themselves.
Splash them with twilight like a wet bat.
Unbind the dreamers. Poet, be like god.

Part 4.

Yes, be like God. I wonder what I thought when I wrote that.
The dreamers sag a bit, as if five years
had thickened on their flesh or on my eye.
Safe them with what? Should I throw rocks at them
to make their naked private bodies bleed?
No, let them sleep. This much I have learned,

in these five years, and what I've spent and earned:
time does not finish a poem.

The dummies in the empty funhouse
watch the tides wash in and out,
thick old moon shines through the rotten timbers every night.
This much is clear, they think, the men who made us
twitch and creak and put the laughter in our throats
are just as cold as we. The lights are out,
the lights are out. You'll smell the oldest smells,
the smell of salt, of urine, and of sleep
before you wake. This much I have learned,
in these five years, and what I've spent and earned:
time does not finish a poem.

What have I gone to bed with all these years,
what have I taken crying to my bed for love of me?
Only the shadows of the sun and moon,
their dreaming groins, the creaking images,
only myself. Is there some rhetoric to make me think
that I have kept a house while playing dolls?
This much I have learned in these five years,
and what I've spent and earned:
that two-eyed monster God is still above.

I saw him once when I was young
and once when I was seized with madness,
or was I seized and mad because I saw him once.
He is the sun and moon made real with eyes.
He is the photograph of everything at once,
the love that makes the blood run cold.

But he is gone, no realer than old poetry.
This much I have learned, in these five years,
and what I've spent and earned: time does not finish a poem.

Upon the old amusement pier I've watched creeping darkness gather
in the West. Above the giant funhouse and the ghosts,
I hear the seagulls call. They're going West,
toward some great Catalina of the dream,
out where the poem ends. But does it end?
The birds are still in flight. Believe the birds.

Bibliographic Note

For readers who want to find a previously published and perhaps definitive version of *Imaginary Elegies*, there are four texts to seek out and examine.

The first is in the anthology *The New American Poetry*, edited by Donald Allen in 1960 (Grove Press). *Imaginary Elegies I-IV* appear there, dated "1950-55".

Next comes *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, edited by Robin Blaser for Black Sparrow Press in 1975. Here, *Elegies I-IV* are accompanied by V and VI, each dated 1959.

The *Elegies* make their next appearance in *Exact Change Annual #1*, a massive gazeteer of the art edited by Peter Gizzi and published in 1995. The 1957 recording is included on the CD that accompanies the volume, and Kevin Killian provides a transcription that thoroughly marks out where Spicer's 1957 reading varies from what is found in the *Collected Books*.

That work was part of the great labor that led to *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: the Collected Poems of Jack Spicer*, edited by Gizzi and Killian and published by Univ. of California Press in 2008. *My Vocabulary* presents a scrupulous chronology of Spicer's work, and the individual *Elegies* are placed each in the period in which they were written.

The 1957 performance can be heard online at the Poetry Center's archive (diva.sfsu.edu/collections/poetrycenter). The 1963 KPFA recording was privately circulated for a short time at the turn of the century, but does not appear to be publicly available at this time.