

A NEW SHADE OF

ERIC BASSO

GRAY

**POEMS
1995-1998**

A NEW SHADE OF GRAY

.....

ALSO BY ERIC BASSO
FROM ASYLUM ARTS

FICTION

The Beak Doctor
Bartholomew Fair

POETRY

Accidental Monsters
The Catwalk Watch
The Smoking Mirror
Catafalques
Ghost Light

DRAMA

Enigmas
The Golem Triptych
The Sabattier Effect

ERIC BASSO

A
NEW SHADE
OF
GRAY

POEMS
1995-1998



OBSCURE
PUBLICATIONS
2000

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"WATCH OUT FOR OBSCURE PUBLICATIONS"

for
MARIE-JOSÉ FORTIS

*Et j'appelle les démolisseurs
Foutez mon enfance par terre
Ma famille et mes habitudes
Mettez une gare à la place
Ou laissez un terrain vague
Qui dégage mon origine*

♣ BLAISE CENDRARS

Contents



- Mud Lurking Paraguans • 13
 - The Earthworks • 15
 - Carlo Liguoria • 17
- The Forked Monument • 19
 - Eyestrain • 21
 - The Deserter • 23
- Leaking Stones • 25
 - The Nets • 26
 - Recovery • 28
 - Moment • 29
 - Untitled • 30
- This Little Future • 31

Mud Lurking Paraguanas

she had an invisible tattoo
you saw it too it wasn't
just my imagination

said she was sick of funerals
wanted to throw a party for the dead
to distract them from their Nothing

she walked off and the lampposts
dissolved in the mist that
trailed from her blue heels

it was enough to build the city on
a reprieve for the condemned
absolution for the unforgiven

spirits we snatched at for centuries
they were never really there
time to empty the mausoleum

swaddled here in mud still warm
from a fire which never quite went out
we watch the spider weave a *new* geometry

January 31, 1995

The Earthworks

I walked to the outskirts of the city
with my dead father
this is where we have to go
our separate ways he said

it was not a dream
I watched as my father went off
looking younger than I'd seen him
in years and thought to myself
it's a fitting way to end a mourning
that can never end until my death

I remembered how my grandfather
told me he dreamed of his father
who died of asphyxiation when
the gaslight went out in his room
get on my shoulders he said
they flew into the night
Pa clinging to his father's back

before I returned to the city
I passed by the earthworks
it's the long way back

I stumbled and my boot kicked loose
some planking that bridged
a ditch at the foot of a hill
where one of the workmen
was sleeping off his lunch
the noise woke him

he knew my name and told me
another poet used to visit the site
in the early days when there was
still hope the work here
could be completed

you're small for a poet he said
not like that other one
he was a chain smoker
had a tattoo on his left wrist
I can't remember what it was
what happened to your hands

as I walked back the shadow
of a plane came over
the sun moved behind a cloud

February 12, 1995

Carlo Liguoria

Carlo Liguoria came last night
claiming to be a distant relative
he told me of the adventures he'd had
in one of my unwritten novels

Liguoria's the villain of the piece
the intrigue appeals to him
the drugged women
the payoffs in back alleys
the scent of fear and loathing sewn
into the silk lining of his trench coat

everything has gotten bigger since yesterday
he slurred swilling the last of the dark beer
before he passed out in my favorite chair
I recognized the quote from Blaise Cendrars

somewhere an old woman was dying
dreaming of her last lover's hands
a girl with green eyes and no hands rummaged
in the steamer trunk her dead sister
had sent back from the tropics
Liguoria pissed on the rug in his sleep

I don't think Liguoria's a relation of mine
doesn't know enough about Italian opera
I can buy and sell him in ancient history
he's a man who never got off the plane

I watch him asleep in his urine
the thought comes to me that Liguoria
is one of my stillborn ghosts
come here to haunt me with
a shade of gray I've never seen

outside the bird chirps
there's one less star in the sky
but day or night no one is there
to count the loss

February 14, 1995

The Forked Monument

she ended her letter with this
I'm lost here in the provinces
and never meet anyone new

from my window I could see
the forked monument in the distance
standing on the rubble of granite slabs
that forms its stair-shaped pedestal
out there at the edge of the earthworks
where the horizon bites into the yellow
at the bottom of the sky

I put the letter in a drawer
it was the last she ever wrote
her mother gave it to me years later
asked if I could tell her whom
it might have been addressed to
I couldn't stop thinking of her hands

my eyes were half gone then
too many hours reading letters
that had never been posted

her letter which I've lost now
mentions the forked monument
more than once she asks the person
she's writing to for a detailed description
as if she didn't quite believe what
others there have told her they'd seen

I could tell her how the monument
stands against the gray clouds
Neptune's trident in a sea of air

its middle tine was snapped off
by the wind a long time ago
two hooks remain
baited with bright blood

February 22, 1995

Eyestrain

there are no more hauntings here
you can go to bed at three in the morning
sleep long past noon
but it means nothing
we're no closer to death now
than we were five years ago

I was standing on the pier
watched a yacht go down
no one drowned
they're still hiding
in the deep

all our women are beautiful
even the very old
their teeth gone
skin clinging to the bone
from force of habit

sometimes the parrot barks
the dog repeats a platitude
it overheard its master
mumbling in his sleep

this is the easy life
the one that plummets
through a sprung trap door
into another country

eyestrain is nature's way
of telling you you've
seen too much

February 23, 1995

The Deserter

nothing to show for the months
that have passed between this
and the last time I wrote you

I go to bed at midnight now
without thinking of the island
where I survived for twelve days
in silence and insomnia
amid the half burnt books
of an abandoned library

the ship split in two between
a flooded lighthouse and a crow's nest
could be little more than
an unremembered dream or
a figment of my imagination

from my bed I can hear
the wild geese flying north
tomorrow will be summer

the cow may jump the fence
I'll be asleep and feel
the weight of its shadow
across the waning moon

June 20, 1995

Leaking Stones

count the speckles in a stone
make each one stand for a century
and hope they bleed out their images

that green patch of sky
the chain pocked with rust
the hiss of draining sap
the scent of yellow dust sucked
by a bee in the cup of a tulip
means nothing without
the weight of memory

a piece of blue string
snakes down from a kite
to a field of burnt grass
the few sparrows whose beaks
have not been broken
peck at its threads

November 26, 1995

The Nets

with loose links
the nets divide
square parcels of sea

each forms a window
frames green depths
and muddied clouds

the blue fisherman
can't see what's trapped
when he tugs at the line

he's cast his nets for ghosts
lost ones he hopes to haul
from an endless sleep

sometimes he mistakes
a reflection of the moon
for a drowned face

he goes down to it
puts his lips to its ear
as the water fills his mouth

begs forgiveness for all
the things he could not do
to spare it from oblivion.

November 29, 1995

Recovery

a man wearing sunglasses
lies in a coffin
they're pouring bourbon down his throat

that snapshot of the moon by the bed
if a stranger should knock
don't come out of your stupor

he would only tell you things
he thinks you want to hear
so sleep and do not dream

they've pulled out the tubes
you can breathe on your own now
at least for a while

enough breath to let them know
you have nothing left
to add to the insanity

Moment

yesterday I saw
what was left of Paris
a forest at the end of
a sea of grass

trees no light could penetrate
and at the center of it all
a notch of submarine shadow

it must be the Champs Élysées
I told my mother
and wanted to walk into
that tall alley of darkness

before I could take a step
mother's bell rang in
the sickroom and woke me

March 7, 1997

Untitled

in the sky I see
a poem made of stones
a black grit blinkering
the nebula

an open book
dead leaves for pages
smelling of ash
and wet resin

no difference now
the cello the footprint
the knuckle bruised by
the fractured door

all is one with what
passes for the portrait
eyelids shut blue
the night descending

May 12, 1997

This Little Future

it's round but there are
lumps at the perimeter

the leaves fall melting
before they reach the grass

all the rooms are dark
except the sickroom

the clanking cowbell
guts into my sleep

going nowhere tonight again
and for a small time to come

no hope of return till
the swan drowns

this little future
stretches out its fist



ERIC BASSO was born in Baltimore in 1947. His fiction, poetry, drama and essays have appeared in the *Chicago Review*, *Fiction International*, *Central Park*, *Collages & Bricolages*, *Exquisite Corpse* and many other publications. His five collections of poems are published by Asylum Arts.

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Erin Basso



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