

ERIC BASSO

Shards

Petroglyphs

Poems
2007

Shoals

Petroglyphs



ALSO BY
ERIC BASSO
FROM
SIX GALLERY PRESS

POETRY
Earthworks



FROM
ASYLUM ARTS PRESS

FICTION
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POETRY
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ESSAYS
Decompositions

DREAMS
Revagations

ERIC BASSO

SHOALS



PETROGLYPHS

POEMS
2007



OBSCURE
PUBLICATIONS
2008

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 SHOALS

The Burrow Field

like you I have been dreaming strangely
mostly about a house she said
last night the house had wild birds
in its bedrooms but it's the first time
I dreamed a hole in the roof

after she left I walked out into a field
snaked with humps where the living are buried
huddled in black beside their treasure piles
denarii from ancient Rome or acorns
stored against the drifts of winter

other chambers I knew were there
silted in mineral under mossy rays
ghost voices choked by pebbles
the netherworld I would invade
and pillage to make this new dream

March 21, 2007

Gentians

the nearest tree receded
dwindled to a bush
drifted in feathered air
as musk muffled its stems
with a greener loom

suddenly she was there
naked in the gentians
violet petals reflected on
pale flesh the gap where
rays pierced parted clouds

we called the season spring
no other name for a delusion
that chokes us in midbreath
and tutors language with
the tongues of inspired beasts

April 30, 2007

Absinthe

they debrained their skulls with abandon
an emerald rot ate into floating dynasties
as water flowed over the sugar cubes
made milk of the past and future

coalescing in bloodshot eyes Verlaine
his memory already greened for slaughter

abortions and those little foetal snails
elder siblings pickled in the jars
his mother kept on the mantelpiece

sketch of the ruin before Rimbaud's
knife nailed down his hand

April 1, 2007

Hooded Easels

he won't show you the paintings
I offered him a week of sex with my wife
the fastest woman in three counties
but still the easels stay hooded

a wino tripped into him one night
no wife just a bottle of muscatel
why was this not enough to lure
the linen sheets off those easels

the croupier at the Blue Penguin
promised him the run of the crap table
but he said no dice those paintings
have become too used to the dark

the croupier's sister was a nympho
who owned a brewery and even that
fell short of tempting the painter to
unveil the secrets of his silent studio

those hoods on boxwood legs remain
the promise of forgotten miracles
exotic birds asleep in covered cages
never to be roused by light again

The Consul

you want to dream
of the one you love
place a wormwood root
under your pillow

unpock the moon
of its craters
dine on snails from
the Sarmatian Sea

walk blindfold through
the kingdom of the blind
crawl to Morgenstrasse
or the blue Rue de Lune

the abandoned Embassy
faces 330° Northwest
I still live there
a resident in exile

waiting for your shadow
to fall across my door

April 12, 2007

Rough

the grain in the wood
stairs that take you to
where you've never been

forget the lives you opened
a man walks up a street
in an unreal city he hears
voices lure him to sleep

even with no wind
the air stammers around us
a coat opens on darkness
fish leap out and the sky
is beyond consoling

look for my face there
you will find a mask
come to the covenant
I will give you bread
that tastes of salt

the doors you discover
will always be shut

Marine

this is the perimeter of hope
seen through the narrow eye
of a lensatic compass
the map where our fears are
soothed by lines of latitude


no ship has foundered here
or run aground on a reef

from the captain's cabin
a view of the open sea
mulched to the brim
in expectation of grass
of houses to descend
from clouds long after
we have sailed below
the orange horizon

we'll return singing
the blind king's song
when those who lived
in the wake of our voyage
are gone to dust

 PETROGLYPHS

Go inside a stone
That would be my way.

 CHARLES SIMIC

The Dream

night sealed its dream
in a stone's mouth
and stars bedded down
with the dream for
half a million years

before wind and rain
wore the stone to dust
it hatched out a man
with a small pebble
on his tongue

May 31, 2007

Lilith's Glyph

he and I would still
live in our leafy mansion
if I had not known the secret
of the one we called the Word

the secret festered into jealousy
it pierced the heaving clouds
that veiled my perfection
from our maker's eyes
all because I had refused to
lie beneath a mate shaped
of the same spit and earth
which birthed us both

driven from that place
by fire and sword I became
the first anathema
egg of the primeval Lie

the Word tore a daughter
from the widower's rib
and the two engendered
a race of fools

Glyph of Poets

a stuporous mind defiles itself
creating new worlds
it's the dirty secret of poetry
chaos honed by a reeling geometer
who snatches form from nothing

this is the mesmeric hour
froth in the cauldron of the alchemy
that heats and cools at random

October 14, 2007

Ritual and Romance

a stone rolls downhill
but it's always been said
that stones once moved
freely over level ground

ancients told of singing rocks
whistling oracles unintelligible
to all but the charlatans who
posed as their interpreters

from the small pebble in the stream
flattened by a century of racing water
to the megalith where the sun descends
at solstice in a groove between pillars

of this we have made book on
a past that's nothing but conjecture
a present scarred over by illusion
and countless uninevitable destinies

May 22, 2007

Liberators

they saw what transfigured the rock
the stalagmite of the cave the ivory
where we would see an anomaly

the arched spine of a bison rearing
a horse's muzzle a tiger's flank
were nested yolk to be hatched

it took an innocent yet jaded hand to
crack them from suspended animation
by blows of the razor's edge

now those dim centuries have passed
we've learned the wisdom of fools
and at last can fathom the ecstasy of

Buonarroti blundering on that tall
block of marble in the quarry
tapping at a life waiting to be born

June 25, 2007

Flint

squatting in their lice and filth
they gave more thought to the itch
of the pelts that warmed them

our distant ancestors knew
the indirect approach was best

you strike at an angle
the shard chips off
the bared part sheens
often the second blow
shatters the slab to bits

find another flint
begin again to sculpt
the sharp tooth of death

it will rip into a bison
pierce gristle and bone

this surgeon's blade
this wedge on which
species tottered
toward extinction

Violet Glyph

the school of desire never closes
classes are held through the night

the windows always dark
panes steamed by breath
by moans in ecstasy
too easily confused with pain

the color comes out of wilderness
petals drenched by nonexistent rain
trap other shades of purple
glances of humid light

October 19, 2007

Interiors

split a flat stone at the edge
it becomes a wordless book

often stone is only
a wish stillborn
cracked wide to reveal
nothing but stone
but if you're lucky
there may be crystal
more than enough for
a ring of onyx or amethyst

once in a blue moon
you'll find a fossil there
the husk of a trilobite
a skeletal fish a worm
a spectral trace of spider
tissue that breathed before
the first of our species
ever drew breath

a few of us may one day
have the happy fate to be
a bas-relief in rock

wondered at by creatures
that live long after
our millennia of sleep

August 6, 2007

Glyph Inscription

umber lines rimmed green
still bite deep into the stone
script of an indecipherable tongue
the bottled message cast
into a dried sea

maybe a prayer a supplication
but death came so long ago
it does not matter now

withered by time
even passion
becomes an artifact

October 11, 2007

Vision Quest

shaman creeps into the niche
on a ledge in the cliff face
the flame from his oil lamp
gutters under blood blots
dancing off the stone where
they've slept a generation
dreaming of shaman's return

or this is the dream the scent
of ash and wormwood as
embers blink behind a paw

shaman blown back from
the far side of eternity after
years that are a single day
to the tribal elders lying
stunned in the brush below

June 19, 2007

Indigo Glyph

more than a mood
the cave dwellers can
feel its sap welling
phosphorescing their veins

blood colors these walls
brings back the dreams
they'd long forgotten

beds them down in
a counterfeit time that
once was all too real

October 21, 2007

Cromlech

three slabs dragged
no one knows how
miles to this place where
they came to monument a burial

two pillars support the canopy
 π or a Hebrew character against
the horizon casting its shadow
on a tufted rock in the knoll

one night a white spider
hatched its way blind from
the stone crevice that
ripened it into a ghost

the illusion of transformation
it can only happen in dreams
when we see the dead take on
foreign form to haunt our memory

and realize then the one
the cromlech was built to bury
once might well have answered
to our name

Glyph of Stupor

he always sleeps standing up
this has been his way for years

no one ever complains of it
everyone here felt long ago
the grace and intimacy this gave
to the objects we've placed
at his feet since the beginning
then snatched away before
he could regain the will
to open his eyes

he knows nothing of this
or of the general suspicion
that this life in stupor is
richer by far than ours

October 18, 2007

Cities

here you can see Troy
burning in the distance
all the fallen cities
from Ur to Berlin
gone to rubble

some remain in ruin forever
a frenzy of despoiled tombs
lashed by the desert winds
others spring newborn from
their brittle shards

the cloud in that window
muffles an intruding shadow
as I stumble through Gomorrah
imagining what a stone must
dream of to make a city rise

September 15, 2007

Garden Glyph

when the ancient weapons are sent
back to the museum drawer for good
or hung within a wooden frame
pressed to a cloth field the color
of fine old wine it comes time
to think of the gardens again
their stones' prehistoric whisper
of a mountain called Hōrai
that mount of the immortals
they preserve in miniature

November 29, 2007

Japanese Gardens

deities they first were made for
are dead and gone as all gods
eventually fall to anonymity
their worshippers long forgotten

only the raked gravel remains
swirled striations curved around
one or two tall islands of stone
the focus for contemplation
on a cool soothing emptiness

eyelids lower just before
vision sinks toward stupor
and the numbed drift of
the faceless mask until
the man's blank stare at
the garden becomes
one with a jehovah
he has never known

July 9, 2007

Stepping Stones

they cross the garden pond
shaved granites sunk in its bed
their tops filed smooth
flat with the water's sheen

you step from one to the next

along their staggered row
ripples glow the wake of
finned goblins darting
gone formless as they plunge
toward what blossoms
only in the deep

halfway across you're stopped

the sky's riffling mirror
and your eyes lost
glide you backward
to the mossed bank
from which you came

Warriors

the samurai lotused
in blank meditation
under cherry trees
whose blossoms blew
off branches with
the first breeze
and fell to stones

they believed it to be
the true way of death
for the warrior
the life cut down
in beauty drifting
for an instant between
two annihilating worlds

July 14, 2007

Ancient Poem

a thousand years ago he
waited in a garden of stone
dreaming of her scent
craving the sheen of
a silk kimono as his eyes
stared transfixed by
the drunken moon
rippling in the pond

pebbles silent till sandals
squeezed a gasp from them

never to be forgotten
this ideogram defying
time and death
where warm arms
long turned to dust
still grope to embrace us
in our distant night

July 20, 2007

The Sickness

when pebbles in the rock garden
are left alone at night they gossip
about the odor of sandal soles
the males among them brag
of a glimpse of leg and thigh
up the geisha's silk kimono

it's the chattering of stone teeth
the ache which welds its desire
to memories that know nothing
beyond the ground at eye level
and the unattainable clouds
hurried by wind across the sun

they are flinty veterans drafted
against their will to endure
the long life of servitude
the nightmare of lost centuries
from which I in my sickness
am also trying to wake

August 23, 2007

Blue Glyph

closing your eyes can be
the most dangerous thing
in the world

it's the second-level reality
the hue that warps memories
into disquieting dreams

the sea horse drifts backward
through this smoked mirror
desperately seeking its ocean
its great dark bed

October 24, 2007

Levitation

a stone floats under the pillar
the clothes we stand in become rags
the defiance of gravity means more
than a green sky to the blind king

his wife decides to leave her lover
she can't remember what life was like
before a stone became lighter than air

this is the prism of her anguish
the spectrum drained from the lens
pools its colors on the tiles
inked by a stone's shadow

May 18, 2007

Glyph of Gods

gods return unexpectedly
bringing back with them
that cruel exile from joy
we have learned so well
to live without

no sooner do we master
the obliteration of their shades
even from our bleakest dreams
than they come through these streets
Vishnu and Adonai among them
staggering in filthy rags
from hunger begging us for
the crumb of black bread we'd
snatched out of their mouths
when they slept like the dead

that crumb which would
put them to sleep again
and condemn us to
interminable starvation

November 14, 2007

The Stone Men

stone man and his brothers
feed upon our slumber as
they creep up the hall
in squeaking shoes

their eyes always betray them
the names and the faces
on their identity cards
are forever false and deny
their very existence

a premonition condemns
stone men to wade through
streams of war and retribution
toward the gallows tree

nothing left at the end
but blood's bright stain
on this slab of granite

enough light to whittle out
this piece of painted bread

Green Glyph

tinged with gray it renders
flesh up to its hour of decay

without it the fuse of grass
saps toward renewed life

earth's darkness will soon
be one with the body
that blends into the field

the grimoire falls open
its lone cipher betrays
this magical contradiction

October 30, 2007

The Accomplice

the killer always carried
a pebble in his back pocket
he'd snatched it years ago from
a headstone in the Jewish cemetery

the pebble's bond with death
lent weight to his delusion that
it possessed a property which
had made him invulnerable

it brought a peaceful sleep
a time for forgetting that
taste of hot iron when
the blood sprayed his lips

after noon the blinds were drawn
the pebble lay on the dresser
eyeing the killer in his bed
and as he slept without dreams

there was a waking dream of
grass and the innocence
an endless quiet beneath
cool marble scars

Glyph of Time

the definitive avuncular specimen
dispenses useless wisdom
keep it sealed in a jar
pay no heed to those fists
pounding at the glass

duration annuls itself
frames time in an illusory mirror
exists only to be touched in loss
as it dies in your arms

the sand's breath
slips through your fingers

October 17, 2007

Hydrophane

the boldest stone of all
is also the most timid
it flares or shies
according to the medium
in which it finds a home
a residence that's always
of the moment and never
of the stone's choosing
for no stone has ever
been granted the liberty
by god or man to seek
its true place of repose

in air the hydrophane
is a listless opal
unable to breathe

place it in water
view the vanishing
of base matter into
a celestial dream

this stone with gills has
taken on the transparency

of water without yielding
a grain of its mass

all you can see now
are its streaks of fire

September 19, 2007

Glyph of Defeat

our horses lie down in the woods
the trees shake off their leaves
the sky turns the few clouds that
remain from what was heaven

this is the dawn and the pride
turned to ashes under a jaded eye
the vagrant that passes his rags
on to the next unsuspecting victim

the poem no one wants to write
because it is too hard to bear

sleep late but when you wake
remember to take the evening air

all the masked conqueror left us
beyond the imprint of horses' hooves

November 20, 2007

Properties

blue anhydrite hold it close
your joints and marrow will be
healed of degenerate affliction

bustamite improves digestion
enriches the endocrine glands
and regenerates the sexual organs
you can find it in New Jersey

cinnabar is the mineral for
viral and bacterial infections
and when the wounds heal
its alchemy leaves a residue
that used with discretion
bends reality to your will

when polished picture jasper
yields panoramas of parched earth
under slate or marbled skies
its touch smooths necrotic tissue
clears the arteries of debris
dulls the agonies
of the cancer ward

stones can shatter glass
bruise flesh or pulverize bone
a small rock snatched
from fire to water will
bring the liquid to a boil

those other properties
nets cast after a drowning

August 22, 2007

Yellow Glyph

the sun's spiraling madness
stains a sulfurous sky
fevers the brow of every rock
melts wheat into pools of gold

earth toughens under it
fissures as night comes on

a few insects remain alive
the rest have left us these
last trails of panic this
vanishing of ghosts

November 4, 2007

September Stone

it changes color before the leaves
go red and fall to ground
this stone that hums in the grass

when someone walks by it lies
unnoticed as the green blades
smother its breath

beyond the long death of memory
September stone blushes with
a prophecy we will never hear

it's still summer but autumn
lies pregnant in the earth
turning forever on its cold dream

September 1, 2007

Glyph of Mourning

another door draped black
pulled shut from the dark side

anteroom walls barer dimmer
as an oiled latch turns in silence
locks part of your life away

September 30, 2007

Symmetry

what life lies in a stone
seldom dies and therein
hides an imagined symmetry

death's mask assumes
a symmetry of stone

the scent of all traces
eventually passes off
and these vanishings
sew stitch by stitch
a shroud for the living

each black anniversary
I remember how it felt to
watch her flesh become stone
on that narrow bed

July 29, 2007

Glyph of Echoes

the urban slab the pastoral pebble
wherever your eyes lie down
the site is the lip of an abyss
the stones clear their voices

Scarlatti's sonatas echo up
from a sunken recital hall
the acoustics couldn't be better
but the notes pulse your
inner ear in a garble

this place you've never come to
this place you'll never reach
the one place you cannot leave

October 16, 2007

The Stone Guests

I'd invited them in to
steady a crumbling foundation
taught myself the blind touch
felt for the absent pulse
the beating of dead hearts
within those heavy stones

I even went so far as
to lick their bitterness
scraping my tongue till
it bled out salt but
the stones never gave
more than a whimper
no plea for mercy did I hear
nor the song I'd hoped
they would sing

the guests were as still
as they'd ever been

I had willed them to speak
but there was a silence

I had wanted the miracle
my house remained a ruin

Orange Glyph

this is the spectral curtain
that fizzes in the closed eye
the primal phosphene churning
the molecular tuber withering
seconds after it sprouts

this is the foetal fluid
the amniotic bifurcation
between a life and a blind
plunge toward the death
that ends in a dream

November 7, 2007

Cold Comfort

petrification has its points
bad dreams and memories
never to be revived
bears sprawled in a cave
of perpetual hibernation
the ice age in a core
smaller than hope

if it ever thaws there's
too much deterioration
for pain to return

sleep inside the stone
and you dream in peace

June 3, 2007

Red Glyph

heart of the old Paris
those lampposts unmistakable
a house three storeys high

you have almost come full circle
from desire to the tooth of passion

somehow you know there are
extraordinary books in that house

behind a shuttered window on
the third floor waits the woman
who will change your life

November 8, 2007

The Staircase

inside this innocuous pebble
is a long winding staircase

at each landing a door
that opens on a chasm

the first you come to overlooks
sky and snow and both are
the same gray shade of death
as stumbling rags in ice that once
were called the *Grande Armée*
retreat from Moscow's ruins

the second opens on a room
where memories go to die
the only furniture there
a narrow wooden table
a sparrow hops across it
pecking for absent worms

hundreds maybe thousands
of these unnumbered doors
and at each successive landing
the ridiculous follows so hard
on the sublime that before long
the two become confused

just to climb those stairs
to reach the door at the top
you have to be very small

even then they say it takes
a century or more to get there

no one has ever come close to
the landing where the stairs stop
or glimpsed it from a distance
to confirm the rumor that
the last door is locked

September 2, 2007

Glyph of Space

I imagined the gray space
of the sky and the earth
Tanguy's counterfeit perspective
stretched to a blurred infinity

viscid forms solidified
stood in silent occupation as
ancestral monuments that
hoped I would confirm
my blood on them

a long walk to the end
I never made it that far
just sat on the front porch
young with closed eyes
knowing what lay before me
was more than enough
to make a beginning

November 17, 2007

Lethe's Glyph

you'll never touch bedrock through me
never feel sand swirl from your fingers
or sense this wetness though nothing
that surrounds you will be dry again

why close your eyes when there are
still a few faint figures drifting
with you aimlessly in my murk

no drowning here not even
the dream of a drowning since
the thing others called your soul
left you to live in another's dream
to flee from another's drowning

November 26, 2007

Stones

though cold to touch
stones have inner life
cloisters of silence
and slow cunning

no stones with eyes
but blind seers closed
to the false light
that surrounds them

some stones are barren
others womb remnants
of lives long extinct

when the last star
collapses to a pebble
stone will be night

May 16, 2007



ERIC BASSO was born in Baltimore in 1947. His work has appeared in the *Chicago Review*, *Central Park*, *Collages & Bricolages*, *Fiction International*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and many other publications. His novel, *Bartholomew Fair*, is available from Asylum Arts Press. He is the author of twenty-one plays. His critically-acclaimed drama trilogy, *The Golem Triptych*, the complete short plays, *Enigmas*, his play, *The Sabbattier Effect*, a book of short fiction, *The Beak Doctor*, and five collections of poetry, *Accidental Monsters*, *The Catwalk Watch*, *The Smoking Mirror*, *Catafalques* and *Ghost Light*, are available from Asylum Arts Press, through the Leaping Dog Press. Asylum Arts Press recently published his *Decompositions: Essays on Art & Literature 1973–1989* and *Revagations: A Book of Dreams 1966–1974*. Six Gallery Press will publish *Earthworks*, his seventh collection of poems, this year.

Shoals and *Petroglyphs* are the first and second sections of Basso's eighth collection of poems, *Barbarous Radiates*.

THIS EDITION IS LIMITED TO
60 COPIES

THIS IS NUMBER 6

Eni Basso



OBSCURE
PUBLICATIONS