

ERIC BASSO

AFTER SILENCE

THE
SCHOOL
OF DARKNESS

POEMS
2003 – 2005

AFTER SILENCE
THE SCHOOL OF DARKNESS



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

ESSAYS

Decompositions

ERIC BASSO
AFTER SILENCE
THE SCHOOL
OF DARKNESS

POEMS
2003–2005



OBSCURE
PUBLICATIONS
2006

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✦ AFTER SILENCE

Deiner Mutter Seele peitscht die Haie vor dir her.

 PAUL CELAN

After Silence

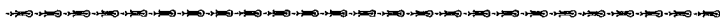
years in the gray
no speck of dark
to pin a word to

I staggered out of
that death-in-life
still waiting to exist

the scar on my forehead
snaking a blank river
landscapes petrified

the single slab of wood
I scrape against the grain
of this satori

April 12, 2003



The Shroud in the Drawing Room

he glimpses Death at the harpsichord
she strikes the keys with flinty fingers
arpeggios of silence ring in her ears
weave the rigid cobweb round her head

the cruelest month a time against forgetting
the green leaves fall without having lived
down by the city wall it's business as usual
they're carving horseflesh for their dinner

don't tell the old ladies he's under there
Mr Abattoria at the term of his hibernation
not long before he'll lift the yellowed sheet
to take his first uncertain steps into oblivion

April 14, 2003



City of Ghosts

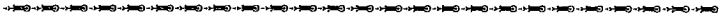
the parapet at flood tide knows
how well my shadow resists
the temptation to be carried off
with the rest of the debris

searching for her dead lover
a woman catches sight of a snail
scarred by foam as it blackens
and mistakes it for a foetus

when I look around for a reason
I look right at you she says
but the sun is far behind her
too far for me to see her face

I do not know my name
it was taken from me years ago
the first time I crossed this bridge
into the city of ghosts

April 25, 2003



Bœuf Lunaire

though bugs nest in his ears
Mr Abattoria still hears
the thud of the butcher's boot
kicking at the planks of the shed
letting air into the miasma

before the swarm settles
a lightbulb crackles and goes out
the carcass hangs from slaughter
a butterfly of bone and blood
flayed above the killing floor

a gull sinks with the tide
the horizon grows fainter
a moonstruck ox lies
in a field of grass dreaming
the false dream of the life to come

May 14, 2003

A Bedside Archaeology

the small tape recorder
on the night table
he'd forgotten it was there
held it in his hands again
wiped away the dust
pressed the button
and excavated his voice
from seven years ago
the resonating fossil
of a stranger

the dust mite nibbling the sheet
was destined to become the ancestor
to a new race of dinosaurs that
would have ruled the earth
a hundred million years from now
when the human race
is long extinct
but reaching for his buried past
Mr Abattoria rolled over
and crushed it in the bed

Field Notes

he found an egg of stone
not a fossil but so ancient
it must have stood for centuries

he turned it under the lamp
listened for the muffled plea
of a voice from within
shook it then held it to his ear
but heard only a roaring silence

he noted the faint inscription
scratched into the flint of the shell
characters he could not decipher

the sun sank behind the elms
warmed it on the kitchen sill
as some cracks appeared
fractured roads on a map
leading nowhere

a reptilian flower bloomed
a hand hatched free
the morning after

on the third day two scaled petals
and some fingernail parings were

all that remained of the egg
he sealed them in a plastic bag
with the notes he had made

the next time Mr Abattoria discovers
something interesting under the bed
he won't let it out of his sight

June 7, 2003

Mutoscope

crowds through drenched streets
I didn't know a single face
two nights dancing and two more
without a bite to eat
it was not what I'd planned

I wanted to say something
about persistence of vision
of how the illusion it creates
distorts all reason but he
cornered me before I could begin

he whispered I should have
murdered you in the park because
that's where you killed my brother
though I'd have preferred a more
nimble executioner for him

nothing remained to be said
I stared through the viewer
at that unexpected face and
glimpsed the ghost of a gulag
between the flipping cards

it rained hard for days
I was getting up late



not minding that someone
with fists made of stone
kept pounding at the door

June 19, 2003



Exploded View

Eden will never be more than a dune
latchkey to the blind kingdom
viewed from our common grave
it hovers in false memory
refracts the dull glister of
anomalous worlds

Babel's tower sinks and
a silence overtakes us
seeding the ground with its
shambles coughing up
oblivion before it speaks

November 2, 2003



Blue Noise

this desert is an inch long
I can't cross it until I've
counted each grain of sand

time slags into mud
the faces left behind
never fade from memory

the horizon gets closer
pages jaded or blank
blasted from shale cliffs

I stumble past the last of them
lost till a blue noise lures me
to the bed of my mother's death

and here I lie
wondering if I can
ever rise again

March 9, 2004

✿ THE SCHOOL OF DARKNESS

Cold Image

a river flows under the transom
those specks when you close your eyes
pulse and flutter in the old books
blur the words and sing off-key
pages foxed with the leopard's pelt

I stayed up hours to hear them
they weren't worth a skeleton key
the poem makes music and the dead
die again to return in dreams
as I scratch for what flakes off

March 15, 2004



Riding the Tin Gorilla

it steps out from behind the mirror
politely asks you to climb onto its back
then you're off at a scampering gallop
riding the tin gorilla past hope and fear
past the lonely place where punishment
peels the glove from its frozen fingers

these shattered bricks cradle
the spume of an aching sky
through dreamless nights
a surrender to false horizons
to gigantic arches of mud and mist
as the tin gorilla gallops past

the clatter of its spiked fur
raises a terrible din and as you cling
to its shoulders you shut your eyes
praying this is not the endless
nightmare of the life after death
but the tin gorilla gallops on



The Locusts

the beetle sleeps with the stone
we have put on this living mask
to see a stone scuttle away

bricks from the sagging wall
the pox on these rubbings
smudged by desperate fingers

we return here for no reason
our shoes sink again into
the same brittle carnage

these seventeen years
too many we loved have
put on the mask of exile

the ashen swarm descends
their death rattle has
shaken the woods for days



Dispossession

viewed from the bridge at night
these blind forms drift and slither
the few lights left are shattered
broken by the tide where the moon
lies slivered between the rocks

this is the hour of expectation
the glossary of pure desire where
every name of the woman that
will never come is listed
alphabetically in the clouds

we no longer watch the skies
though the skirt of heaven rises
and our backs are to the parapet
leave us this compass of dominion
this shrieking space of horror

May 29, 2004



The Madness

the skin of the tent cribbled
like the lantern in a dream
vistas of sky and earth
pebbled by the calfskin
blanched of color and crime

we followed close behind
taken by the madness
trying hard to forget
the paintings in the grass
the festered lip of mimosa

the mound where we'd
buried the sacred fish alive
those crows sketched
crudely on the clouds
for weeping women

more food than these people
see in weeks he mumbled
as we stepped gingerly over
the freshest of the tombs
where the cobra slept

The Spiral Jetty

salt crusted black basalt
a sigh of relief crossed the lake
we knew we'd died long enough
to hear the boiling in those rocks

something ill-conceived was
taking shape along the strand
a wish a distant meditation on
all our misbegotten hopes

when the spiral uncoiled
breasting a roar that didn't
sound anything like water
the jetty crumbled under us

the jetty moved out to sea
seeking the high desert
it drowned in a mirror image
of gently undulating ground



The Transposed Heads

Mr Abattoria is dreaming of
the mystery of the transposed heads
people he has known for years are
no longer as he remembers them

his childhood friend his dead parents
the women he once pursued have
all made common cause with
their new heads' evil personalities

this degree of treachery has its
own richness because though
the transposed heads seem strange
they appear disquietingly familiar

from the dune Mr Abattoria has just
enough time to consider the nights
of confusion that lie ahead if he fails
to wake or is suddenly struck down

he can't see the answer under his eyes
it lies like a log along this ashen shore
melts into a mist as it dismantles
the pyramids of the far horizon



Of Remedies

for the better preservation of your health
put up the chicken in angularity
no clysters make nor any purge of aloe
bind shut the bill and let the chicken
hang for days to tenderize its flesh

Sir Thomas Browne maintained that
in the time of Albertus Magnus they
made use of cauteries in divers places
fomentations distillations and other
remedies for the great coldness of hawks

the chicken was gorged on vinegar
and fed the hawks with boiled bats
to restore flesh and feather for the sport
this against consumption with further
decoctions to add unto your knowledge

life stops when the power goes down
at least the toilets continue to function
Paul Valéry wrote that when he was young
people read for hours by the light of a candle
with no harm done to their eyes



Desire

even when I imagine you
you are no phantom
I feel your image
breathe in my arms

smell the scent of you
under your clothes
sniff the essence
of your secret flesh

I've closed my eyes to
the ruins around me
and will never be able
to open them again

no ship can sound
the depth of the ocean
this night must cross
for me to lie beside you

September 7, 2004

Moss

the light in the park was
beautiful this morning
the way it fell on the moss

cold can't kill it or
keep the moss from dreaming
of a new country to bury

the rock the wall
the stump of tree
becomes a sinking stool

moss cuts a path
ribbed with illusion
to hold back the night

drowns extinction in
the heart of the labyrinth
with a green sleep

Intimate Herrings

the spinach on the grill
he didn't want to eat it
refused point blank to sink
the tip of a tusk in

this was when he noticed
the waiter had dwindled
the man was slowly sinking
legs puddling out of trousers

Mr Abattoria hadn't been
in the city for long when
he began to hear rumors
of the intimate herrings

they don't resemble fish
the night clerk advised him
adding that the management
urged residents to avoid the stairs

spring being slow to come
love was not in bloom
but the promise of love lingered
in expectation of the herrings

Mr Abattoria combed his hair
and plucked his eyebrows waiting
for an intimate herring to appear
it could assume any form

that much he knew from
the lady who changed the bed
its properties were self-refuting yet
no one had witnessed a metamorphosis

what made these herrings intimate
was their overwhelming desire for
close contact with the human body
thus they were impossible to console

prowling the marina Mr Abattoria
wondered how dangerous it would be
to discover himself in the presence
of an intimate herring

the harbor patrol dragged the bay
for bodies but dredged up only
a few small foreign coins
a suitcase and a tub

an engine hummed in the alley
it was still winter and not
a mosquito to be seen as
a cloud dimmed the moon



intimate herrings were
the blind seekers
the dream flesh warmed
the nightmare

February 17, 2005

Pier

the pier over dry land
stopped just at the water
they were tossing the severed
heads in from there

faces floated till it
filled their mouths
each sank bubbling
its bloody wraith

the pier over dry land
descended with the sun
drowned water in shadows
that fell with the trees

when will they come again
earth roughs its nail into
what was memory
the crows fly away



The Accusation

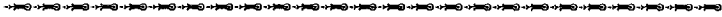
you know those little sausages
Pasquale was lying on his back
in front of the palazzo I crouched there
feeding them to him one by one

I didn't want this to go on any longer
without absolute proof of his accusation
my arms were getting tired the one I had
slipped under Pasquale's head was numb

they're filling my coffin with potatoes
he said so that when I die it will be
something else they bury in the family plot
give me another one of those little sausages

by then Pasquale had opened his eyes
raising his finger and shaking it at me
lips puffed as if to blow away the bubble
floating just above his expressionless face

night had fallen and neither one of us
noticed the street lamps gave off no light
the water from this morning's rain glistened
reflecting the blue shore of the Mediterranean



His Posthumous Existence

here in what he hopes is merely
the first of his posthumous lives
he hides under a smothering branch
books float in an unforgiving ocean
he opens one as they bob by
clings to a page before drowning

this is what it means to have passed
to the blind side of the mirror
the hours of waiting laid out
on drab linen and soiled sheets
that voice at the foot of the stairs
if it could ever speak it would say

a man lies there conjuring dissolution
a rusted relic to be exhumed and
misinterpreted by the archaeologist
nothing to do with what life was
everything with what may come after
a rest that cannot rest for moving



The Pageless Brain

saved from certain death I was
hauled into their time with no
memory of the there I came from

birth to the quark of transmutation
a spent wing swaddled in the cumuli
fortunes of destiny and despair buried

neither a moment in eternity nor
the eternity in a moment there was
only an itch crawling from vein to brain

gray matter tumbling forward
its satori long forsaken
the paled air after a vanishing

May 17, 2005



Tusk and Talon

the torment of a courtyard gate
screeching in the heart of China
only empty rooms here
the promise of amnesia but
nothing to pay for forgetting
the profane god we are
forced to live with now

a blade cradles some stars
clouds unlace the night
the smoke of doom
curls across the cobbles
dividing this wilderness
from the sleep to come
from the one life left

May 24, 2005

The Legacy

mindful of the proverb
he that smiteth the spider
shall inherit the web
Mr Abattoria probes for
loose stones in the parapet

he combs the soil
for worm castings
the pillow is no nearer
when he tries to sleep
his head grows smaller

memory has become
a guest house for ghosts
time to lay down the knife
let the black swarm settle
never a breath of wind but

the sand shifts and there are
some new dunes each night
billions of grains cascading
as the spider lies on its back
beside him

Primavera

purple tongues of larkspur
shudder from the breeze of
Apollonia Portinari's passing

the broad dome of the sky
huddled behind drowsing clouds
pretends to be inconspicuous

not far from here the forest
where mammals one never sees
are storing their acorns

the seed cowers by the parent plant
the jewel from a cast off ring
lies in grass waiting to blossom

bark of a beech tree so smooth
it scarcely wrinkles the shadow
of Apollonia Portinari's passing

Without Title

what I can imagine now
the field has narrowed
the stump of oak couched
in a pond of moss

no way to move beyond it
the old skies have slipped away
a moon blows brittle leaves
against the cabin window

dew in morning light
is the sweat of fear
the glottal sob of
drowning moths

my fingers cold
even in summer the Thief
lies under a low ceiling
his face hidden

Wisdom

failed scholar Zheng Xuan
fell asleep beneath a tree
an old man cut open his chest
and removed the heart

always an old man wields
the knife in the dream
he fills the cavity with ink
then stitches it shut

this marked the beginning
of Zheng Xuan's wisdom
but *The Book of Xun Zi* says
all wisdom resides with the heart

ink where the heart was
takes a lifetime to dry
put not your trust
in wisdom or in dreams

July 5, 2005



Time and Fate

we try to sleep but our heads
turn to rocks on the pillows
insomnia has no end when
centuries come to mean nothing

the tenth planet housed in
the sky has been there since
the time no one remembers

a wake of fallen armies
shudders long after blood
loses warmth and plants
its scent in the grass

the heart still beats for
the blue cage of night
it hopes to touch again

July 30, 2005

Far from This Place

the small comet sizzled in
its mound of tide soaked sand
west of the river they were
bending over blue drops of rain
when you awakened naked

in the apple's womb a specter
caught the whisper of chalk on slate
dust where the last idols drifted
the final stroke of the lesson
that closed the school of darkness

the order of things had changed
without warning ash from embers
of the night before was swept away
leaving a smooth pebbled floor
a leveled path for the barefoot

August 6, 2005

Sorgues

the head wound in the Great War
came close to blinding him
it was then Braque realized
he no longer believed in anything

an object had no life of its own
now it existed for him only
in rapport with other objects
that glowed beneath a leprous light

Braque burned the regimental colors
surrendered in the house at Sorgues
to a harmony that brought peace
and made all things possible

the plow stilled by the sun
the sauceboat and the asparagus
the metronome's reflection in
the muted burl of the piano

In Aspic

he lies immobile
jellied in aspic
remembering the vision
of Apollonia Portinari
six poems ago

the desire that
pricks at her hips
darkens the anemone
breeding endless night
into its spines

half his life Abattoria
has told himself
a sea change will come
he sleeps engarnished
warm and waiting

August 30, 2005



The Dog-Headed God

never the moon of poets this
satellite bearded with craters
and parched untranquil seas
passes behind stilled clouds
its eyes bleared by smoke

those burning tears
could flood a city
no stories left to tell
only dull sand smothered
by memories and regrets

I stood with my dead mother
at the top of the stairs
peering through the window
at a spotted silver coin
crutched up by branches

September 10, 2005

Dark Crawling

dark crawling begins
an escape from bad dreams
and an even worse reality
animal warmth remains
but nothing more

just to slip off
all that is needed
you feel the air
tingling the hairs
on your body

the poem hangs in midair
the exercise you take up
at night without wanting to
new routine of an old age
you'll never learn to live with

a coldness under your fingers
it's marble from a country
that you will never see
from a torment
yet to be named



drunk or sober you are
committed to the passionless
exploration of what lies
beyond the pillow and
the night sweat

a swelling mud turns
to crust beneath you
the rumpitous monster
grins but tells nothing
of what it knows

still a long space to crawl
across this darkness
a light to imagine
at the very end
that won't be there

September 20, 2005

A Scumbling

what he already knows
Apollonia is so beautiful
even the dead dream of her

alive but sleepless Abattoria
fears the salted paddock that
will horse him round for good

he sees a forecastle tilt
above bleak marsh land
and paddles toward it

sniffs the scent of fog where
fish turn up their bellies
to pale the silvered night

the owl's blind burden
leaves him speechless as
he drifts toward his prey

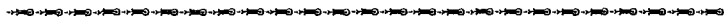
something gray bloats the air
between him and the place
where he hopes to find her



a sudden modification
what painters call a scumbling
traps him in its convexity

just as he's getting close
the wilderness emptied of him
stretches far so far away

September 30, 2005



How It Happens

a few words dressed in black
or an image that comes on
without form or warning

molecules squirm there
nameless protozoa
swim into existence

a scent of something raw
pricks at your nostrils
takes on its own breath

swells and capitulates
with the room you lie in
and finds you waiting

staining nothingness
in the blood and color
of a new world

October 10, 2005



White Domes

the hill where the houses stood
had long been leveled and the street
slept under clumps of yellow weed

not a single brick or window left
to frame or smother echoes of
the ghosts who still resided here

one floated through high grass
to post a letter to her dead lover
lips of a phantom mailbox yawned

an elm is the lone survivor
I used to park my car there
now there's nothing to shade

just those white domes
the palely blistered light of
noon with no beginning no end



Revelation

and the lobster in the bib
spake unto Abattoria saying
put not forth thyself to meddle
with the dainties that are set
before thee for they are deceitful

he that hath no governance over
his own plate is like a fool who
uttereth all his mind into a thimble
go to the Great Fish thou glutton
consider its ways and be wise

when Abattoria heard these words
he arose and was full of wonder
and it came to pass that he went
out from the lobster and set himself
to dwell in the midst of the sea

October 29, 2005



Ink on Silk

they unrolled the hanging scroll
six hundred years out of China
we saw the woodcutter crouch
strain to fade into the cloth
the dulled blade motionless
the banyans stood frozen
against the stiffest of winds

in the webbed window behind us
roof slates curled then melted
domes sank into the foundations
of temples whose walls collapsed
under them centuries ago
no one could say how those
domes had waited so long to die

December 7, 2005



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. He is the author of twenty-one plays. His critically-acclaimed drama trilogy, *The Golem Triptych*, the complete short plays, *Enigmas*, his play, *The Sabbatier 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, through the Leaping Dog Press. This year, Asylum Arts will publish his *Decompositions: Essays on Art & Literature 1973–1989*.

After Silence and *The School of Darkness* are the second and third sections of Basso's sixth collection of poems, *Earthworks*. The opening section, *A New Shade of Gray*, was brought out by Obscure Publications in 2000.

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60 COPIES

THIS IS NUMBER 6

Eric Basso



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