

THREE AMERICAN LETTERS

Brian Mornar

LRL e-editions

THREE AMERICAN LETTERS
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Acknowledgments

Miles Coverdale - Lisa Fishman - Rick Meier - Zenobia Fauntleroy - Priscilla
Moodie - Henry Morren - James Fishman-Morren - Sam Kincaid - Orfordville, WI

LRL e-editions
www.littleredleaves.com/ebooks/

Series Editors: Julia Drescher, Ash Smith, and C.J. Martin

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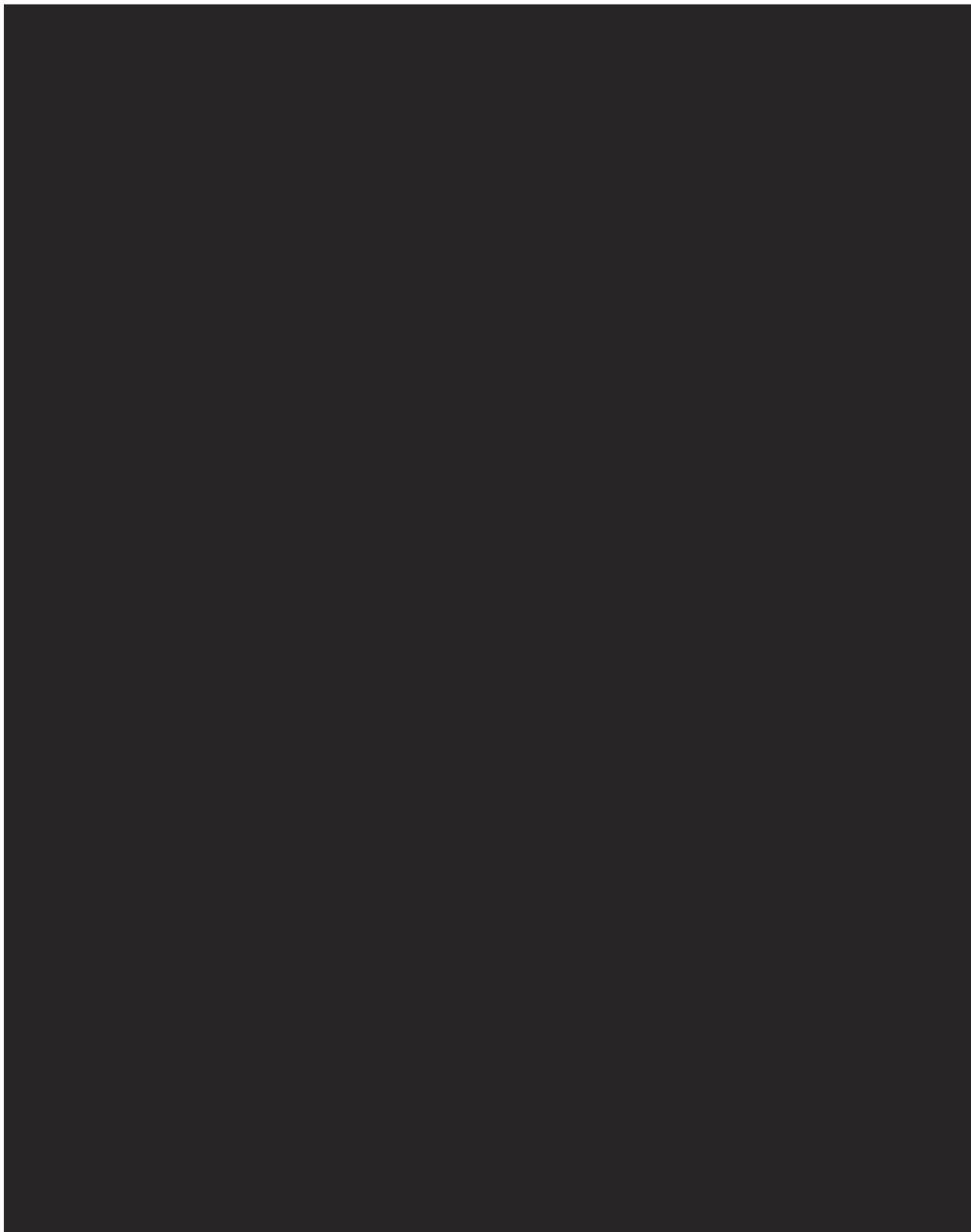
Brian Mornar

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Sophia Peabody

[To Sophia Peabody]

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Everyday of my life makes me feel more and more how seldom a fact is accurately stated; how, almost invariably, when a story has passed through the mind of the third person, it becomes so far as regards the impression that it makes in further repetitions, little better than a falsehood, and this, too, though the narrator be the most truth-seeking person in existence. How marvelous the tendency is! ... Is truth a fantasy which we are to pursue forever and never grasp? ...

My cold has almost entirely departed. Were it a sunny day, I should consider it myself quite fit for labor out of doors; but as the ground is so damp, and the atmosphere so chill, and the sky so sullen, I intend to keep myself on the sick-list this one day longer, more especially as I wish to read Carlyle on Heroes. ...

There has been but one flower found in this vicinity,—and that was an anemone, a poor pale shivering little flower, that had crept under a stone wall for shelter. Mr. Farley found it, while taking a walk with me. ...

This is May-day! Alas, what a difference between the ideal and the real!

[Nathaniel Hawthorne]

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

Holy ferment this summer speaking to. I have felled nothing yet but place myself close to the action. I have no tree in grasp, only this morning, the evening in mind trying so far to consider myself fit. Departed is the name of the wildflowers growing at the house. Soon the wage will fit the task and I can walk to the day sullen. One day longer here I way, one more flower is the difference between the ideal and the real!

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

So my chill has turned speakably sour. Feed torment paid with. The stone wall has crept under the flower. How the tendency is to wait for work. Or how it finds you, sickness or sleep. We feed on the same thought but. To be here. But how is here a place; let us clasp hands.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

To be with you, concord grape, fingerling potato, how is this to be with you, sunny day, the thought of you, chastely drawn. Wit for work, but we drank coffee under a tree with muffins, I remember. How the things endangered my memory for you.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

I mean the breakfast room, and how truth-seeking has not departed here. A structure of activity, and thoughts of indolence. The hammock a spindle of fire afore the mind—oh yes, indolence. Oh but how the grasses grow greener when they're left uncut. O not without desire they burn for.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

You gendered the romance green. Hands in basil and garlic. This is no ordinary nature song. I came here to feel again. Our romance, from here is local. Hands placed on, your.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

We need a new definition of soul, already. Soul to dance or say some difference.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

Vicinity is a city word. There is no vicinity here. We are a circle, as Emerson says. Circumference is only willing a line into place. Well is a fine way of. Certainty is a circle round twice. Circe is a rough beast ashore. The here came when I mailed you this. How more seldom do we think about the shore here, between you and I?

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

Is the way obstinately refuses to never grasp. Absolute never will grow
here from the west eastward. Faltering will the grasses grow askew.
Mowed ever more. Never joining to what your neighbor thinks of you.
We will join, the west will run.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

How seldom a fact is accurately stated. Have confidence can claim a thing.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

Why can't the summer romance, a verb? Because we are between.
The touches only think of the past and the way in.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

To row our imagination in the creek I thought solitude. I made this up
to say.

To Sophia Peabody

[Brook Farm] May 1st [1841]

Belovedest,

Read American. More to the glen or clearing than our imagination.
Therein underneath leaves. It's a solace understanding, speaking with
words anew, always a thicket, here a 'weed.

That's why I am so quiet, that's why I move in hands.

Lorine

[from a letter to Louis Zukofsky, dated in his hand, May 23, 1948]

You know something—I don't know how the old time poets did it—the poetic being was the soft-spoken, hushed, sweet-worded kind of thing, almost artificial, but maybe in their time it was earthy enough for poetry ... now I find when one hasn't been writing for a while, you start off in something like that soft vein, but as soon as you get used to writing again, you pick up everything for poetry, get into everyday speech etc.

[Lorine Niedecker]

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

Come here o holy tatters, amid the money, speaking and new drywall.
Her uncle said he would take a baseball bat to the broker's office. I am
struggling to recall this space. Wood paneling of a makeshift cubicle,
and later S. and I went back and did it on a sleeping bag. I just want to
remember Brooklyn, being drunk, and 5 a.m. on Myrtle.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

You mean in the soft low vein, hushed as if even this orphic moment could not hold the loss. What I have seen here, holy tatters, the rats are squirming in garbage bags. S. and I did it in the back of a parked and borrowed car and became shy. Near the end all becomes Hades and sex painfully silly. In the soft low vein each memory as line as breath.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

OK. We are always closer to the disaster. Disaster is also a circle. We (S. and I) are always a circumference measured by what could go wrong. Violence is the way the moment happens. Movement is merely the dance reported after the fact. The newspapers boldly state a perimeter. This measure puppetry. There are big words more than meaning but now I just want you to touch me.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

You mean in the soft low vein, lay my head by the river and hear the taps of the factories wind down. Dusk is a bone and Lord Byron you are the spine underneath this campus tree. The Fall always happens like this. Somewhere near this I knelt poetic and went home to find the cat ducking behind the washing machine.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

Can you tell me more about the ineffable? Find all that leaks under.
Lorine! Tell! Tell me more about your flowers, conversations on the
way to work, and moments before sleep. All that happens isn't earthly
or in a violin's frets. No, all is earthly, but if you know the river it passes.
You know what doesn't happen when it does, but Zuk only wanted to
hear his son. There is so much the child and childless know. Boats
rivers seas.

- -

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

We're always closer to the disaster. But you hid there with the muskrats and letters, and here I am trying not to forget Brooklyn by remembering all the trees on Clifton Street and how even in January the radiator was too much. Vowels always even closer to the stale heat. I want the space of this to speak this, too hot as my eyes close. But cramped as it is, sight prying a way apart from the disaster that is the beholder.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

Lay my head by the and with one thought know memory was somewhere near a fear. Disaster was an article but as a noun becomes final. Being too serious clothed the ineffable with a life. The figure of the river and the Rock River; the ideal and the real; the space with and here I want to tell you of beauty.

Or the disaster old. Ship sinking. Whirlpool sucking in the barges. But with this too sporadic memory and the avant-garde too "last century" I without aplomb can feel the failure of the moment to find a measure lasting. Lorine tell me Wisconsin is immeasurable.

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

some where is looking for a form

but I do know how the word waits

brittle in my teeth—impatient—before typing; brittle, the art is nailed
away

To Lorine Niedecker

somewhere near
30 Willow Street
Brooklyn, NY
c. 2005

in the soft low vein, night-gown on the grass
stained before the midnight a farmer's in the house
sweet lowed a tongue and when a line

Patchwork for _____

The work of the past is now romance; we, resisting the academy but finding no other place than in it, gesture fiercely, rigidly with our arms and hands, so to say, there was a way of doing things that we've lost. The space between is really a space to navigate as if steering a lost ship between continents. We've lost the space between, and any oasis is the blood between the ears when we think. Being aware of the 'human universe' within our bodies is only sex, as D.H. Lawrence implies, and is the only space where the threshold becomes sensible. But where do we minds hold the sand we think we can hold? So Charles Olson, what is there to hold onto? Romance, Charles, is simply what we think of as the space of being across a new grass and the way the soil and concrete greets the mind. We are here. What we know is what we used to do. Habitus. What we've forgotten but know as the contour of a room comes to the blind. In his *Gestures of Ethical Life*, David Michael Kleinberg-Levin notes the loss of the pre-industrial hand, the

[o]ld hands. Hands belonging to the time of a timeless tradition. Old hands graced with memory, handing themselves down, handing down their inwrought wisdom. Young hands receiving what the old hands know. But the old-timers speak in elegiac tones, tones that mourn the end not only of a work of the hands but an entire way of life, which they, with still keen memories, would rejoice to see continued.

In the birth of the new 'productive gesture,' the getting and spending Wordsworth and Coleridge wrote of, we lost the means to mourn the loss by way of our hands. And so singing ourselves, I suppose, we moved onward and attempted to measure the loss by returning to the farm, or form (of land, before the Inclosure Acts) if only by idea, as the reluctant Coverdale of Blithedale, 'returned' to the alien movements of reaching and picking and hoeing and registering this as loss, if only because of the very fact that we have words and songs for these acts.

Benjamin, whose writing measured this loss at every ink-point, resisted the touch of others. As Pierre Missac remembers, Benjamin “could not tolerate a friend’s so much as putting a hand on his shoulder and considered all disgust to originate in touch, in physical contact.” Prefiguring the alien hand of Sartre in *Nausea*—

For instance, there is something new about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or fork. Or else it's the fork which now has a certain way of having itself picked up, I don't know. A little while ago, just as I was coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which held my attention through a sort of personality. I opened my hand, looked: I was simply holding a door-knob. This morning in the library, when the Self-Taught Man came to say good morning to me, it took me ten seconds to recognize him. I saw an unknown face, barely a face. Then there was his hand like a fat white worm in my own hand. I dropped it almost immediately and the arm fell back flabbily.

—Benjamin knew the civic hand as a lost, floppy appendage, and this was the weight at his sides, but, as the cramped handwriting and work of juxtaposition in the Arcades demonstrate, latent in this hand was the possibility of grace, of the puppetry of the words of others. And this, for Benjamin, was the dream of being without hands. The work of collage or juxtaposition is the work of the hand that in the end attempts to efface the trace of the hand. In its place the work attempts to let the pieces speak for themselves while the hands return to the body. The hope is ventriloquism, that the pieces will speak autonomously and work in concert (or orchestra) to tell their story. This work is more than alchemical or magical; the ineffable may surely hide behind the hands, but here we can at least see the workings into the work.

Kleist knew that he was on the side of time short of grace. He saw in the puppet theater the work of the hand that was fragile and ephemeral enough to record. In "On the Marionette Theatre," Kleist paradoxically claims that the unnatural, or man-made, puppet can, through the decentering of the puppet's gravity, return us through the backside of nature's end to a state of grace. The puppet bobs, the arms and legs move autonomously, and we are returned to the speechless work of the wooden puppet's craftsman. And so, as Benjamin suggests, is the way of the collage.

A dance of the hands, collage knows only vertigo. Modernists were familiar with the kind of vertigo urban life and new technologies showed us human beings, but perhaps this kind of vertigo has deeper sources. In suggesting that the man-made puppet finds a grace and perfect purposelessness beyond even Kant's aesthetics, Kleist demonstrates how one can communicate something to another in a gesture indirect and hidden within a pair of hands not one's own. Like the puppeteer, at some height above the stage and out of sight, Benjamin suggests in the Arcades "the philosopher who wishes here [in popular culture] to garner fresh perspectives must be someone immune to vertigo--an independent and, if need be, solitary worker."

The danger is the grace, yes, or vice-versa, but the lyric needs more. The Blithedale Romance is the anti-lyric, the false 'outside' for Hawthorne, the threshold or partition between town and city, between the automated mechanics of human motion and the pre-natural human movements he expects from the migration (slightly) westward. But, as Blithedale unfolds, the civic body isn't far away, as it is never far away, and we are reminded that the hand of the other fellow Coverdale, as if a reporter on assignment, reaches toward the earth and its appendages on assignment, with one thought toward the future of what can be said.

The distance between the farm and the city is more reassuring: not death, no shores, and these are the distances within us, American. And the lyric, always on a string between the farm and the city, finds reassurance in this *between* as a place. Method, orthodoxy: holding a line and keeping it. Being set upon. One cannot be with the line, only open it, holding it. Here we find our bodies again as if for the first time. What we thought we lost, we found again, because there is a way, for our bodies to face, for our arms to extend forward in purposefulness.

But what of the ineffable, or the juggler's third ball that, for a millisecond, lacks a hand; and what of that moment, in mid-leap, where a dancer's body is neither thrust nor gravity? What makes us speak the lyric, or join the line, to get there? Where is there no-place in America? I admit, all of this is reconstruction, a dredging of the past, and idiosyncratic return to the past as strangeness. Looking for my own breath in Hawthorne and Niedecker and others. Or, not really looking for my own breath as a fact, but rather why or how, to speak? Again, as Niedecker puts it (whose Coleridge lived in a college textbook, short-lived),

I don't know how the old time poets did it—the poetic vein was the soft-spoken, hushed, sweet-worded kind of thing, almost artificial, but maybe in their time it was earthy enough for poetry...

If not our brain, from whence are these whispers drawn? In these small towns, or small rooms in big cities, they, like the hand of a clock, arbitrarily control time. What is 'out of time' beside control?

Ashbery of the city returns to his farm in his verse to rediscover the voice that speaks to and with him (if only ironically). If only his point A to his Manhattan point B, the farm thrusts its distant patterns into the urban present:

A protracted wait that is also night.
Funny how the white fence posts
Go on and on, a quiet reproach
That goes under as day ends
Though the geometry remains,
A thing like nudity at the end
Of a long stretch. "It makes such a difference."
OK. So is the "really not the same thing at all,"
Viewed through the wrong end of a telescope
And holding up that bar.

(from "Farm")

Pokes his awkward haircut into the book, speaks of the joke
Of the ineffable, the brute end of things, somewhere between
The right and wrong “end[s] of the telescope”

We receive, but how do we speak?

From the self, only a whisper in time, across a landscape of pages, orders, and margins upon which the self is deferred, footnoted. And still, how do we speak? Listening to a recording of Ashbery read in the early 1970s (on my iPod, as I walk down State Street, Chicago), the voice sounds matter-of-fact, tinny, like incidental noise caught on a vinyl recording. Though the city is “the gibbous / Mirrored eye of an insect,” Ashbery’s flat voice reminds me that the city is not infinitely doubled, and that our patterns, in a trebly rhythm, circulate a bit wobbly at 33 1/3 rpm.

This the voice without risk—your measure, cadence, calm. And yet the poem is about risk: “The words are only speculation / (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror): / They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.” And still, so, voice: from whence these words pushed out? Perhaps underneath the soothing, instructional tone, as motivational record that my grandfather listened to long ago, your anxiety jumps forward—it is not your heart that leaps but rather that which sits at the back of your throat, squats and is thinned out into filmstrip. In spooling out these thoughts on a keyboard, one in tap tapping away “go[es] on consulting / This mirror that is no longer mine / For as much as brisk vacancy as is to be / My portion this time.” Where and what and if? This anxiety leads us to drink (or worse) to extend possibility. In the Wordsworthian sense, “By one soft impulse saved from vacancy,” we are led away from nothing by some shore or wind discovered one’s own “portion of time.” Risk leads to save something, if not oneself from vacancy. Or vice-versa—it’s a circular argument, yes, yes, and no; this something is voice, or absence of—the mere primitive utterance anesthetized. And from the battered and flattened island of Manhattan, Ashbery finds the “magma of interiors” a smoke screen for the terrestrial self of the “Farm” poems.

More interested in the hole at the back of the throat than the arch itself—or two arches, each circle half joining where the esophagus unites the inner with the outer—we are walking around in a dark room. The intellectual center: jumping through, or across the state of New York, past pathos and landing on experience as poesis, these arches are merely doorways.

And there are the pieces that hands leave. Where is the hand that once knew, reunited with remembrance, where is the traceable topography of the edge of the throat's arches, where does speech taste sweet and not flat, like the outward vision of experience? If not the teacher holding the chalk, the master, and if not remembrance, what were we supposed to have held, for having learned, and then what?

**Composition Notes:
From a Farm Journal**

Sat June 7
Tornado warning
Alone here on the farm

20 rows of tomatoes down
7-8 to go.

Cherokee purple
Garden peach
Brandywine
Rose de berne
Jaune Flamme
New Girl

Sunday: more planting
& Monday: get
pigs

they came home:
later, at dinner—

order and alchemy

me: washed up between

Monday 6/9

Pesto: garlic
olive oil
arugula
ricotta
almonds/walnuts

Tuesday 6/?/08

Today we finished
planting the tomatoes

druzba

(no pigs yet)

Wednesday—

tying grapes in the a.m. and p.m.

hoeing potatoes &

hooking up the new grape/apple

sprayer in the dinner eve

hour

riding bikes with blond S.K.

and she left

maybe she'll stay

tomorrow—

eggs, asparagus, &

beer & Boca burgers

H sawing now,

or welding

clink

dark

[Wednesday, still]

The humming of three different
engines

the truck coming up rte 213
the arc welder
throwing sparks like a slow
walk through the grass
and the general storm:

L. takes notes on a yellow legal pad
while talking to her sister

but it comes from here
no matter what I
imagine, a written
spark
Blue lights against the house
siding

what is verse
when it's all versed
or totally unexpected

—I'm sad S.K. won't stay
the night—

the ideal has not fallen
but happens another summer

(varying soil)

Thurs 6/12 (?)

hoed leeks

planted 2 rows of zuks

morning rain & huge lightning

& S.K. walking back toward the field
to see it (me scared for her)

rings of storms

angry, "it's a mad
world."

says J. the four year old.

hoed tomatoes all afternoon

tropical.

7/7/08

Hoed tomatoes in the morn

Hoed potatoes

Picked up stakes from
Randall's

Cut stakes with table buzz saw

Ate Red Baron frozen pizzas

w/ Paul Berman's Terror and Liberalism

7/8

Pounded stakes in

&

trellised tomatoes.

Also by Brian Mornar

Repatterning (Punch Press, 2007)

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