

We will have to reckon, I guess, with our taste
for the way the city has gathered itself

in layers, like a canyon. We want that there
can be a map of desire, that some places

are liberated and others forbidden.
The last man pours a kettle onto the floor,
proceeds to mop.

The Generalists

It was like a painting in the sense that at
first it was hard to tell what was going on.

What had sounded like yelling was rough music
changing pitch as blood rose and fell in our ears.

By the time we arrived much had already
spoiled. We knew then that something always would have
gone unspoken.

The Passersby

Unhappy in the ways it is right to be,
people here pray eagerly to gods of time,

of the hours and the minutes. "Don't you like it
at all?" These buildings are famous for losing

people. "I must. Or I've gotten used to it."
A flock of angels: their mouths open in song

and in hunger.

The Postulants

Thick twists of smoke rise from conversations in gardens where flowers are dry but not yet dead.

Madge, Howe, Anita, Bobbi, and Dee gather the herbs necessary for my father's musk.

Good of them, especially so because they had not known him very well, very long, or even by blood.

The Chemists

In the cold months: the burrowing sound of mouse, squirrel, and pigeon in the walls. The building

hisses at us, its current fare. "I've lost all my earrings." "How?" "People bite them off my ears."

Our lights do not allow for vision here, but only mark distances. We navigate these

dim rooms by touch.

The Incumbents

Suddenly my mother's voice telling me to "lance the boil." I am half asleep. Those who would

populate my dreams have filed in, are waiting cool and expressionless to be given parts.

The phone rings and is at my ear. I am to meet them under the triumphal arch at dawn—

failing dawn, 6.

The Sturdy Beggars

Maxwell Paparella / 2

Outside a little pornographic theater
called Plato's Cave, one man clears the stairs with a

shovel made for digging. Another scrapes the
sidewalk with the short end of a 2' x 4'.

The men have the sharp and defiant aspect
of their tools. Later they must soften with this
salt in their skin.

The Ushers

Face as puffy as a jacket from crying,
the docent walks expertly backward. She says

"The Sun City," but it is night. I am in
a movie palace suddenly bright with a

daytime scene: back in my body, clutching its
balled coat, remembering what is growing cold

in the pocket.

The Holidaymakers

Her lips move but do not seem to form the words
she speaks. It is as if her part has been found

unsatisfactory and dubbed over by
another person. We sit over hot plates,

near to the unlit cloakroom, under antique
photos of when they rebuilt the cities as

they used to be.

The Recordists

She wanted to love him and found her reasons,
which explains also why she no longer does.

He would watch all day the blinking lights of a
currency exchange in line with the others,

leave the line at 5 and go sit at a drink,
his face like a university building

that had been shelled.

The Counterfeiters

I see at once something I can understand
in her bottom row of teeth: crooked, the dry

parts of her smile crackling in her mouth. Pigeons
on leave from their usual loiter perch on

the sign above its strange lettering. One bush
from the row has kept its leaves through the winter

in vanity.

The Flatterers

His was a good face on which to watch the crest
fall. The room was hot with shit and matchsmoke, lit

by a south-facing window, its sill bothered
by bugs of 2 and 3 parts. The pane itself

is smeared hopelessly by paint. The color does
not match any of the gray-blue walls. I point

out the cracked tile.

The Contractors

Something exactly right at the opera
with their concern for singing above all else.

The soprano's face was made with a hammer
out of lead. Their cloth castle shudders, and 2

in the ensemble mime enthusiastic
talk of other things. Their expressions belong
to our own time.

The Liaisons

"You're not making this easy." She cannot trust
her whisper—have the others heard? "Well I'm not

trying to make it easy." From an unseen
drawer, he produces his collection of

rattles. They make no sound at all in his hands.

"If I could," he hums, "I'd give my love to what
never had it."

The Appraisers

"He's too shy to ask for a ransom," she kids,
meaning me, embarrassing everyone but

herself. The others leave into a downpour,
washing the crust of that day's taste from their mouths'

corners. "So what should we do about him?" she
asks, referring to a problem that I had

well forgotten.

The Extortionists

Fumbling about, leaving manners to the light,
we find and thrill to each other. There is the

mournful sensation of something permanent
having been done in a dream. To see in each

building if its tenants sleep or wake at this
hour (and if so what kind of light) is to see

much else besides.

The Inamoratas

She runs her lithe fingers through the sugar bowl,
explaining the latest wrinkle while we eat.

There will no longer be a clock in the room
where 1 of us is to watch the other read

from the book of names. “History is a place
where we will meet again, but first we go our

separate ways.”

The Conjurers

These periods of complete fantasy are
followed by others of intense forgetting.

Women with faces that are all lips and brows
jockey for position in the crosswalk. Their

men keep several steps behind, picking up
litter; taking small, ragged breaths. Time stood still,

but not for long.

The Rustlers