

# the other lives

peter carravetta

GUERNICA



EDITIONS

# the other lives

poems 1998-2012

peter carravetta



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*For Martina, Claudia, and Juliana*

*A larger poem for a larger audience  
As if the crude collops came together as one,  
A mythological form, a festival sphere,  
A great bosom, beard and being, alive with age.*

– W. Stevens

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## Fever

Parched, convulsed, hungry, mind bulging through the eyes  
as if prey to an outbreak of unknown pathogens  
entangled worldviews unnatural timbres stilted thoughts  
radiant dawns and dreary passageways alike uncertain and ahead  
while the past entire is there noisily thumping  
covering souvenirs palazzos mythologies and the mirror  
a kaleidoscope endlessly reinventing  
an ever widening sky  
you can hear the din of grandly clanging instruments  
it is raw energy let loose upon the world  
it is the great fever of creation

there's my roommate Richard  
with clenched teeth and ears perked for  
that note, the keyboard  
dumb to the light as echoes  
of silence weigh down  
his fingers over the "C"

then there was Antonio, back at City,  
who'd often drag the screechy tripod  
lazy brushes and sticky pigments  
to welcome heaving obloid seas  
warrior gestures & elusive  
mists to seep through  
unwillingly on virgin canvas

but I, with all I ravenously imbibe,  
do not digest, sleep, or live:  
a written page torments me to no end  
but a blank one is sheer torture

*(Bologna, 1973)*

## Reflection\*

The sparks off the charcoals slice arcs into the breeze  
Though at a distance in the November air I felt my heart warming  
Flying out there to the center of the brazier by chance unmanned  
Nicked and tilted and on the recently laid cobblestones uneven

I drew near slowly and slowly by the heat I crouched  
A few feet from the still unhasped greenish door and  
The stone-gray plaster-splattered moldering façade:  
For a moment my thoughts crackled and vanished like the favillae

Then looked about dreamily at the ancient familiar scene:  
A hen pecked warily by the mud and stone staircase  
While further down a youth polished endlessly his tiny FIAT  
And to the right by the acacia tree a truck clearly long abandoned

A face furrowed by countless seasons dragged his past nearby  
Saw me, asked about me and mine, while a young woman,  
Stout back and threadbare stockings, juts her nose skyward  
Artlessly masking her wish for husband or house her own

Perennial fashions of opaque blacks and faded browns  
Shabby neckties and leather-like shirt collars of the original  
Hand laborer, the one who since Biblical times throws a hoe  
Clears quack grass and wipes his sweat at dusk, fulfilled ...

A few survive still, surprisingly – but not for long –  
Ready to revere the priest the mayor the landlord,  
Grateful if merely acknowledged to be existing and grateful  
To the altar for His daily bread and strong children

---

\* Upon revisiting the native town of Lappano, pop. 500, on the foothills of the Sila Plateau, in Calabria, about ten miles from the city of Cosenza, which lies below in the valley of the Kratis river.

There is a clutch of youths in the tree-shaded promenade  
Skeptical and fickle, in tight-fitting clothes they squabble  
About their team or their party or worse yet the prospect  
Of being chained to a slow-moving future:

They look down the valley at the city at tumult  
Or progress or chaos or in brief their dilemma:  
They cherish no hope about reaching for some distant star  
Or more modestly rattle their traditions just a bit

A handful of newly minted professionals  
Beloved offsprings of the tiny replastered stone houses  
Aware of their perch and awkward with briefcases  
Shrewd proud fighting humility yet aware of their limits

Two or three have gall enough to hawk a name claim a title  
Or invent a lineage a past whatever gives them an edge  
They are rude sickly avaricious or lie about abuses made  
I see them dwelling still in their presumption oozing hostility

There's the octogenarian who'd been abroad and back  
Before most had even had communion, respected yet ignored,  
White locks and whiskers purified by faded harvests  
Like a child uncertain of step and puzzled at posterity

A mother rough and tough invents a phrase in that other tongue  
— Italian it is called and still divides the town —  
As she yanks her son's ears for mocking the harsh aging teacher  
The same one who taught her with the very same books

The alphabet and catechism and pride in obedience  
When people still traveled by gig or wagon and  
Government vouchers meant bread and predictability  
A contrived well-being a home a mirror for the public self

Yes, most people over forty here still remember the *ventennio*

And they still argue and curse and vote over it however painted  
And it's strange how different this music sounds next to  
What I heard in other parts of the country, so faraway north

The hills around the town are abandoned, thorn bushes  
Along poorly tarred roads seem poised to strangle  
The scanty intrusions of modernization and, look!,  
There wanders about a dog, a cat, even a goat

Animals doomed to some timeless stupor like these souls  
Apparently resigned to suffer a deplorable primitive warp  
As if living in that practically hidden fold of the mountain  
Would turn them into people, like their owners or *padroni*

Those same individuals with the transfixed gaze  
Who will not believe who in fact cannot believe  
That books and laws and self-propelled rockets  
Are really only inventions  
The effort of minds like their own...

(Lappano, Nov. 1973)

## Piazza Maggiore

At the usual café with evening approaching  
Within earshot of tongues foreign and familiar  
I am wondering whether I'll find my own reflection  
Beneath the yellow smoking foam of the espresso;  
San Petronio's façade is looking on,\*  
Dark unadorned undaunted, even menacing,  
Perhaps comparing us to like gatherings  
Of poets lost in other fogs;  
The piazza feels and looks damp,  
The depthless mantle reveals and conceals unevenly  
The ghost-like silhouettes of passersby,  
Shaggy students, buttoned-up clerks, unopened umbrellas.  
Our discussions about Nixon and  
The Middle East and bourgeois life leave no traces  
On the cold and sweaty columns that support the night;  
The bustle shakes them not and the relentless  
Screeching of the XX Century is not felt at all.  
Barely visible, the D'Accursio tower on the right  
Seems braced to outlast us all, defiantly.

For much eludes us.

And then I wonder if the very same arches,  
The same grainy spandrels from long ago really  
Care a lira or two about our conversations  
In cigarette smoke diluted and warm lemonades,  
And may not actually be waiting for my son

---

\* The church of San Petronio, protector of the city of Bologna, is a 14th century basilica whose main façade was only partially built, showing more than half of the upper part in raw brick. Palazzo d'Accursio, with its Renaissance clock tower, houses the city government since 1336.

Someday to visit and say the same foolish things,  
When I will be yesterday,  
Leaving you with that feeling of utter powerlessness  
Which goes well beyond the pat sentimentalism  
Of a frugal youth, or the theories on  
How the world should run its course.

*(Bologna, Winter, 1974)*

## 1.1. Back and forth

*Al qual intender fur mestier le viste*

— Dante

In my native town they talk about it casually  
This thing about history buttressed by their memory  
Sacred and profane and unquestioned because  
They can even point to Greek amphoras and African drafts  
In two *piazzettas* blunted Spanish crests and  
By the *municipio* some Teutonic detritus

Yet on the etched edges of recent centuries  
The Title has turned to stones atop indifferent portals  
Pagan dwellings sacred roofs and alleyways  
And it's snaking up pulpits loggias wrought-iron balconies  
For both the current dons and the timeless *cumpàri*  
Sporting tunics uniforms their Sunday best

Here, instead, in the land of the Columbiads  
They say that them foreigners for decades ran afoul  
Of some other club of deities or self-appointed vox populi  
No one explained to them the social political disgrace back home  
No one lingered on their past because their past too  
Hid sweat and blood and betrayals in the basement  
Titles turned to Degrees and bought one a ticket to suburbia

Back there it happened by chance they say  
Or by revolution or invasions or simply chance ideas  
The myth of power is bled and lulled on the hammock  
Of history with people quick to kneel to dandle  
To cultivate faith pride a plethora of entitlements  
Paralyzing some and scattering others but definitely  
So many knew of cold side drafts atrabiliar blizzards visceral torments  
Upon seeing such peasant proles gouging a breach

But in the land of mechanized modernities Titles and  
Degrees are multiplied serialized transfigured  
Brisk business for reformed laborers seeking advancement  
Their avatars pontificate donning reusable erasable  
Crowns cut to measure with faux gilding for the unsuspecting  
The gods awaiting restively their prophets  
The bourgeois verbs fleshing them out and in infantile ways  
Here and there fleece themselves with  
Ideas words knives and the Atom Bomb

Take stock of the transparent overrated currency  
Hapless pupils grasp but then trail erudites and luddites  
Empowerment has become an industry  
Entitlements come by mail or television

Meanwhile somewhere between the two worlds  
Neptune is listening to the rush of the waves  
Maybe the difference ends at the bottom of the sea

*(Chicago, Spring 1976)*



#### 4. The poet discovers a god

A remarkable discovery I made, the other day,  
When quite by chance I looked up at the heavens for a while and...  
there it was, Helios!  
who immediately demanded a measure of this puny life  
and ordered I start groping along the calendar purposefully  
and put the brakes on the penchant to relive reruns  
or even faintly assume the former poses  
the hilarious crazy-colored blazer for friends and family  
the red Converse sneakers dating to high school

So that if one late March morning some pansy still gasp for  
[violet  
and occasionally some chaff trails the wheat  
and two- and four-wheel drive make no diff on the LIE  
it's no reason to brandish futuristic weapons and  
pledge the 'struction of lumbricus terrestris  
or decree any other parallel paranoiac schizo gesture

Really  
he thought while nursing his now daily scotch on the rocks  
if people were to rev up 90% of their lives  
and perform life as the bard says dreaming it real  
engaging fully themselves, pardon, their selves  
without challenging the systems shiny or rusty at least explicitly  
and so their habits their in-laws their little peckers unduly...

why, Helios, just think:  
we might have a hell of a lot better society  
trust me:  
I dreamed it up  
it is possible  
and people don't even have to see from up there  
that

a world of Paul Cavaterras  
is just around the corner  
    to refurbish Dis and Macondo and Tapobrana  
    maybe even "u'Bronx" and Mogadishu  
oh yes  
Helios will descent majestically *en la tarde*

## 7. Because

because I resent it when my good friend Rob glosses over a phrase  
which I'd recombined to stretch the mind's eye  
or so was the intention  
and adds "we say it this way here,"  
freezing me before the power of that We  
and the Here imperiously branding me an outsider

because for so long I spent so many sleepless nights  
marauding the canyons of philosophical pursuits  
pushing the body the pages the conversations  
to feel the skein of intelligibility  
to thread the capillaries of passion plays  
and register the absurd the predictable  
even the spontaneously original  
only in short to find that reason like a cancer grows  
when happiness drops the shield and stretches out a hand

because I had to discover humor well past fifty  
it wasn't hidden under the bed or anything and  
neither Pfizer nor Monsanto had patents on the potion  
but I'd sworn before the mirror one sullen morning  
I wouldn't be brooding and cranky all the way  
to the grave like a sorry tattered coat  
despite etiquette early tax returns and Warhol's Marilyns

because I was simply trying  
to be cute when I stepped on the plane  
and told the attractive forty-something flight attendant  
"does 22A get champagne too"  
and surprised she smiled and said  
"no, sorry, only first class" pointing the other way  
and four hours later while soaring in the *Comedy*  
she walks unexpectedly over with a cup of the elixir

because it still depresses me when I hear the rubbish  
on the nightly news and read the lies and the bile  
some illiterate posted unscreened on websites  
while I had charted Hesperus ages ago  
and navigated through the shoals of "Imagine" and  
"A simple song of freedom" and other youthful "rants"

because my father had to emigrate at age sixty-one  
and mamma also nearly fifty-two  
to give two little peasant children "an opportunity", it was said,  
deciding against preordained paths and postures and  
common sense and the offended dead  
biting their pride and silencing their suffering  
like shadows meandering along undecipherable coordinates  
awed and worried and bemused at times  
at the weird hairdos circus dress and false cognates yet  
living for years the edge of sheer isolation and incomprehension

because I can now clearly recall the signposts  
when the rainbow stretched over a different map  
and I marched to the tune of contrasting grammars  
making of conjunctions and unsuspecting prepositions  
the subject of sentences and of sentences

because of the shibboleth of this oscillating existence  
forever signaling I'd come from somewhere else  
constantly reminding everyone hey, he's not one of us  
persistently betraying the learned quality of my speech

the time has come to see beyond the wounds  
the time has come to listen to the words themselves:  
you cannot do philosophy unless you theorize humanity  
but writing, instead, well, it needs not identitarian selves ...

## The LOTECH Chronicles\*

*We have now sunk to a depth at which  
the restatement of the obvious  
is the first duty of intelligent men.*

— George Orwell

*These figures moving in my rhyme,  
Who are they?  
Death, and death's dog, time.*

— N. Scott Momaday

### Prologue

The ineluctable dissipation of the megamyth, Allen,  
that's what I'd call it, or the crumbling Thormetron  
as spoken by the Voices immaterial and deveined,  
and I will rename thee, and some of your buddies,  
Jack and Neil and Gary and Diane too

The prophets of Babylon,

Despite your courageous but by now sentimental a-peals  
to Wilting Walt and all the nonsense 'bout de-mo-kracy!

The minds you so vehemently berated yesteryear  
have not been destroyed by madness, alas!, and  
they are not even faintly hysterical hipsters  
drawn out by cold-water flats:

they are rather pellucid possessors of  
islands copters politicos and stock options:  
their story is not about a Fall, it's about manging the Fallen

---

\* Begun September 11, 2004, in the cacophony leading to George W. Bush's re-election.

The word is out — I mean, here in America too,  
for the Euros with their schismatic history  
knew it all along! — but it bears repeating:  
that all that gunk about e-qualitee and  
We the people and civil rights and the common good  
they force fed us since the Bastille the plebiscite the million-men  
[marches

translate tragically perversely cynically  
into what twenty, maybe a handful more, Corp-  
orations running the Unpredictable Sluts of Aggression  
say they mean

The country is really really in trouble, Allen  
And your infectious jingle about ghosts this and that  
is no longer jolly jazzy or jiggy  
for the generalizers the tycoonians the media stuffers  
took over the turnstiles the hidden cameras the bar codes  
the peons defiled beyond recognition and  
simultaneously held in contempt:  
what rules the posthistorical world are  
embezzlements unproven negatives collusion galore  
as unprincipled oligarchs  
waltz down madison and pennsylvania avenues  
evangelists dig their claws deeper into divinity  
fear-mongers pin flags up the rockies stake the prairies  
and wall street stokes contracts in the gullets of the 'burbs  
by the gulfs through the deserts over the tundras  
while building fences solid but mainly invisible  
to 'round the worlds of others already bloated by malnutrition  
and yes, this vector you had foreseen,  
virtual narcissism slurped untrammelled amid the cognoscenti  
for several decades now

## I. The Advent of LOTEK

There is certainly a creeping babel of indictments & complaints  
entirely available on the waves the wires the ubiquitous monitors  
about the wreckage of the twentieth century

but think, Allen, 'bout the fact  
that so many – count them: by the hundreds! –  
in well-ensconced network coves and boardrooms  
and both in major international dailies  
and supposedly alternative websites  
have been prognosticating

*that something really really huge is afoot*

something the likes of which human history has not seen  
its equal  
it is variously violent vigilant vitriolic venturesome virulent vainglorious  
it is the product of the countless allegorical monsters of our cosmic  
fears  
turned upon themselves with the rage of Cerberus with suicidal folly

**Logotechnitron** is its name

people around the world now refer to “it” only as **LOTEK**,  
magmatics of virtual obsessions and reduplicating biomic flows  
run amok among the few surviving thinking  
hominids of Millennium III, or M3 for short:

LOTEK is the theory of relativity come to life  
and in power.

## 2. LOTEK and the production of truth

LOTEK knows that Truth is merely a tall tale  
to wear to work and refashion  
as the need to stage pomp and circumstances demand  
(all recent history attests to this)

LOTEK knows that even among competing factions,  
some of the megacompanies that know no birth-right  
nor clan nor affection nor collective memory  
'cause they are inter-national, liquid, phosphorescent, plasma,  
and whose leaders are psychotically bent on accumulation  
exploitation extortions while "legally" concealing  
off-shore accounts, trust-funds and Nigeria:  
yes, even among such an infernal accolade of cut-throats  
like the devils of *malebolge*,

LOTEK agrees that it is ok to step on people  
foment conflict sell any crap for a buck:  
More power more influence more control  
more godliness more air space more air time  
more of the empty same  
more of the unprecedented shame



### 3. LOTEK in the present tense

In the Unlimited Stratosphere of Arrogance,  
the Great Bastard speaks hardly a coherent sentence,  
babbling and stumbling like a recovering dope and yet,  
clever marionettes that he and Cheater dangle  
till the verbs gain legitimacy,  
the nouns appealing to rich and poor alike,  
the tele-images bamboozle the indifferent and the water logged,  
and for those just tuned in, it is bandied as the whisper of Him  
above,  
nay, god's own very voice, naturally it is the True god  
    (as other people's is just a surrogate)  
to whom the privileged star-struck bumbling bible-thumpers  
think they converse with, with the literalness of a child, an idiot

Ah, but Allen, did you really believe Main Street  
had so changed its tune since you'd gone?  
Are you blind or something, now that presumably  
you could see us mortals for what we truly are?  
The lies told the people are not perceived as such  
    (that they are lies no longer seems to matter).  
Far too many citizens have been duped  
thinking themselves beyond reproach  
in being on the right side of the equation,  
in upholding universal values and all that vomit,  
while pundits and moguls and anchors and lo! the proles too  
see to it that eighty percent of the population is, well,  
suckered up into advertising fantasies  
or unexamined childish exhortations.

This is well known, Allen, but

*The tragedy is that no one seems to be able to stop it.*

Worse yet for the whizzing media octopus

the ultimate achievement is

the infomercial to blur and squander and titillate

and the droning mantra to see something when there is nothing there:

"They're defending us from them Islamic terrorists"

reports everyman every day for each of the now four years of the

[plague

(You do recall when the enemy wore red and called the

[Great Bear,

and you should recall when the enemy was at home and

[was black,

and you can't forget when the enemy were natives nay

[redskins

and you shouldn't forget when the rest were immigrants,

and called all sorts of names)

*But now the terror is inside, Allen,*

*and the LOTEC knows that*

## author's note

The poems in Part I, *Otherwise*, were written between 2002 and 2008, although they refer to events and situations in my life which stretch over nearly twenty years, from 1972 to 1990. I left my small native town on the outer slopes of the Sila Plateau, in Calabria when I was twelve, and lived in the Bronx until I graduated from City College (CUNY). In 1973-74 I returned to Italy, but in the northern city of Bologna, to study towards an MA in Italian. Here I picked up the language again, which I hardly knew since as a child I mostly spoke a dialect from the Cosenza province. But I mastered Italian, loved it, and plunged into its tradition. After spending a few years between Chicago and New York, I returned to Italy for another three-year stay in 1978-1981, during which time I lived in Milan while working on my dissertation.

In all, I eventually wrote four books of poems in that language: *percorso masticato* (1974), *delle voci* (1980), *dialogi v* (1984) and *metessi* (1980-1989) (1990). The first section therefore references explicitly my Italian adventure, gathering poems from each of these books.

The poems in *Otherwise* are recreations, as I have used the original poems almost like journal notes. This is the reason for including places and dates at the end of most of them. I eliminated many of the experimental ones that characterized a great part of *delle voci* (1980), since thirty years later the compelling need to break up the language and devise a new syntax seems to have lost cogency. Moreover, it would not

have made much sense, since this destruction and recomposition of a tradition has to be done from the *inside* of a language, as it were.

In my production in English, I have in fact all along labored at this task, first in *Existenz* (Adams Press, 1976), which was more about finding my voice, and then in the more mature *The Sun and Other Things* (Guernica, 1998), which is a true research into the languages of the tribe, in the manner of Pound and Eliot.

The poems in Part II, *Because*, written directly in English and almost all posterior to *The Sun*, are of a slightly different tenor. They are brief ventures into language, thought, emotion, and social reality. From the earlier self-imposed sanctions on using the first personal pronoun, I have here often freely shifted from fact to fiction, from person to persona.

In this past decade, my poetry has tended to become more and more political and less concerned with the self or selves of the poetic persona. Especially after September 11, 2001, which I have argued elsewhere signals the decline of the postmodern era, I believe that poetry and art in general should be driven by the concern for the entire community – be it local or regional or planetary, – as I no longer believe that the aesthetic can be distinguished from the social and ideological forces that shape our lives. This emerges forcefully in the last poem of *Because*, “Time and Death,” and is at the core of the future oriented allegory of “The LOTECH Chronicles,” which speaks for itself.

LOTECH is now my perennial work in progress.

I would like to thank Michael Mirolla for accepting to publish this collection with Guernica Editions.

Bogliasco, GE, May 10, 2011

Whitestone, NY, December 25, 2012

# the other lives

peter carravetta

In *The Other Lives*, Peter Carravetta shapes and reshapes a voice that has listened to "jargons among marbled scripts," disrobed "gods [who] do not want to be seen nude" – be they gods of his own making (Humanus, the Manifold, Helios) or the ones he inherits (Whitman, Pasolini, Ginsberg), and "dwell[ed] on the breathing of the night." We find derelict, outré voices which would convene "the honestly confused / the graffiti faces the booby traps / call 'em clumps of humanity," and corporations/Capital in their misery-causing dance. But, in the end, our "migrant poet" says: "[I] did figure it out, sad miracle, the journey has no destination."

– Richard Milazzo, poet, art critic, publisher based in NYC

In tracking these moments in the homelands of the person and the personal, the poetic, the public, and the political, Peter Carravetta offers us the face of the poet, his own, in a classical sense. Moving in and out of worlds made, remade, and destroyed, we are left with a record of the real.

– Ammiel Alcalay, Professor of English, CUNY/Graduate Center



Peter Carravetta is D'Amato Professor of Italian Studies at Stony Brook University, NY. He is the author of six books of critique, and seven books of poetry, including *The Sun and Other Things* (Guernica) and *Existenz* (Adams Press).

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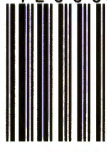
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