

The Burning Babe
& Other Poems



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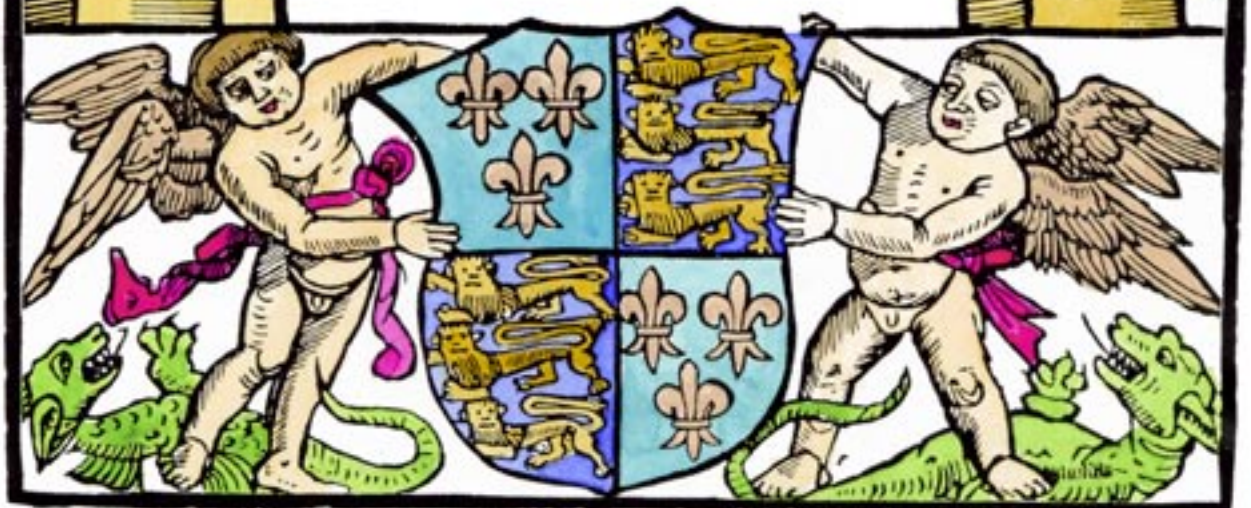
*Poems by Jerome Rothenberg
With pictures by Susan Bee*

*The trees bring forth sweet Ecstasy
To all who in the desert roam
Till many a City there is Built
And many a pleasant Shepherds home*

*But when they find the frowning Babe
Terror strikes thro the region wide
They cry the Babe the Babe is Born
And flee away on Every side*

William Blake, The Mental Traveller

Granary Books • New York • 2005



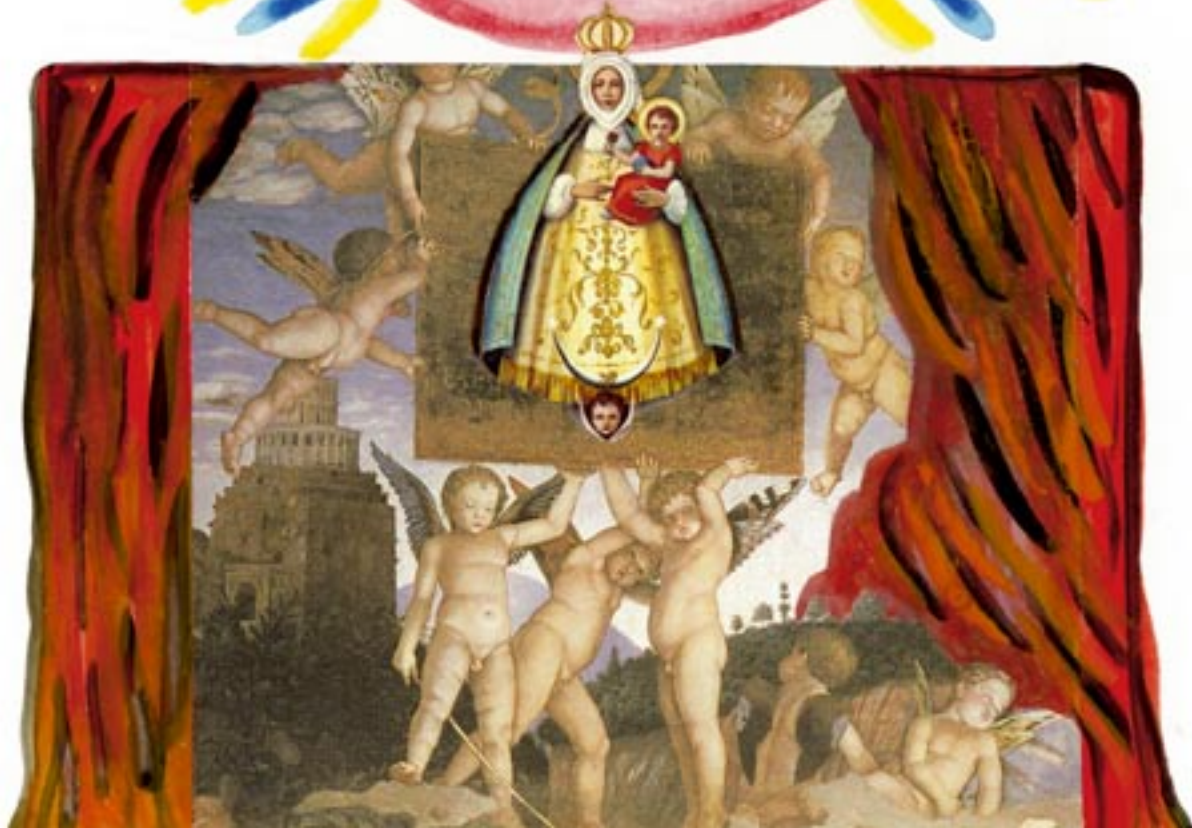
FOR THE GOD OF EUROPE

Poems with Variations & Coda

1

THE VISION

along the road he saw
a row of babes
brightly implanted singing
babes in many colors
red & blue & yellow
was a fantasy of babes & lights
whose eyes spelled europe
& were bright with blood
a chorus muttering forgotten names of god
whose leader was the arch babe
chewing at his mother's breast
a tiny hand upraised in grandeur
gloved & regal



he who would place a ring upon the finger
of his willing bride
pale katerina playing with her child wheel
that she offers up to him
from window of a passing train
the picture of a babe
with glaring eyes
& fingers tightly pressed
against the scepter
held in one hand
& a ball held in the other
by a babe



2

THE MARRIAGE OF SAINT CATHERINE

the groom
a babe
in bright green shirt
& red cape
with a red sun overhead
& dark blue moon
when they have come together
nightly in the dark
& staring at herself inside the mirror
of his god eyes
what will she do to please him
how will the pressures of her body
rest on him
her breathing filling up the nursery
the crib in which he stands
or will a babe
hands cupped go mad
with pleasure

after Lorenzo Venziano





3
VARIATION & CODA

babes with yellow eyes cry out their names the mother draws a ring around each child a picture of a risen babe with scepter grasped between his fingers he whose train she holds unfolding it in grandeur & the arch babe joins the chorus under blue lights rows of babes each with a ball to bounce with eyes that stare out of a window at the waiting bride her hand clutched in the leader's red with the blood of babes that stains the road the babe's hand playing with her wheel one finger on her breast he is the god of europe spinning fantasies & colors in a vision that won't end



& from his crib in which the pressures of the dark so weigh on him that he no longer can distinguish red from green the babe wrapped in her cape feels the moon sinking in his eyes the nursery aglow with pleasures that can change a red groom to a blue god breathing lightly on his hands his marriage shirt emblazoned with the sun that's now a mirror into which he stares & sees himself reflected as before in body of a babe



THE BURNING BABE

1

the babe
is infant boy
he sings

he is so regular
his arms grow feathers
& he flies into your dream

& lost from sight
he sails among the dead
the dear departed

little king
how many times will we
still muddle through

& fit as any fiddle
ride with you
lamb in pursuit of lamb

into a babe's world
bright & brutal
raising a hand to strike

& watching how
your own hand
trembling

bursts
like worlds emerging
into flame



after Southwell

a pretty babe
in air
aglow & glittering

his skin split
from the heat, his tears
a flood

but useless
cannot quench the flames
but feeds them

newly born
& burns like babe
like lamb on spit

he cries but no one
hears or feels
the heat he feels

his breast a furnace
fuelled by redhot thorns
that make him cry out



"blameless love
"o sighs & fires
"smoke & ashes

"shame & scorn
"the flames of angry justice
"mercy's hungry smile

a babe dissolved
like molten iron
casts himself

into a pit
where others fall
& vanish

bathed with blood



TWO FROM MEXICO

1
the babe is god here,
eyeless, he is called
the-little-blind-boy
– plump cheeks, frilly smock
over his thighs –
he rubs himself,
the deep wood
of the cross tightens
his flesh,
o cieguecito,
throne set on cushions,
feet into tiny shoes
with snaps



2
San Cristobal

the babe is god
& grows
against the shoulder of the man
who holds him,
first like a stone
& later
like a planet,
he is a planet & the one
who holds him
is the sun



BLAKE'S BABES: A PROPHECY





3

Pity

a flying horse
swoops down
a rider scoops
the babe up
in his arms

4

Eve

she gnaws the apple in
the serpent's mouth

5

Behold this Midnight Glory;
Worlds, on Worlds.

(Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*)

TO THE BABE IN GLORY

1

a babe
with eyes that spin

like rockets
& a flaming tongue

how cruel he is
who clamps down on

the virgin's flesh —
absent all hope

2

the babe in artaud's dream
offers his vial
of sperm the country
rages, sending forth babes
to stoke its flames



3

a threat more than
a god-send

tearing flesh asunder
he will rise

in fury
strike his head against

the nearest wall
& totter

to the mother
who will worship him

& what he gives
will treat with

reveries of
tender love

4

babes watch
their killers
little eyes gone white


with fingers squeezed around
a doll whose eyes
are also white

& filled with
killers' faces
like a babe's



A VIRGIN WITH CHILD

after Giovanni da Modena



five holes in his chest
the center one bleeding

& the face of the mother
dumbly looks out

with a towel in hand
like a scroll



Saint Christopher (I)

Babe rides
Saint Christopher
with globe
& hand raised
cries
"gidd-up"

a little man
at cave's mouth
holds a torch

Saint Christopher (II)

around his feet
small water monsters
hatch from
eggs
& peck at him

a devil reading
from a book

Magdalene
stripped naked
surrounded by a troop
of babes

after Giovanni Pedrini



INFANTS OF PRAGUE

armless babes,
their faces
desperate

small wings
where arms
would be

& bodies
melting down,
like wax



ITALY 1999

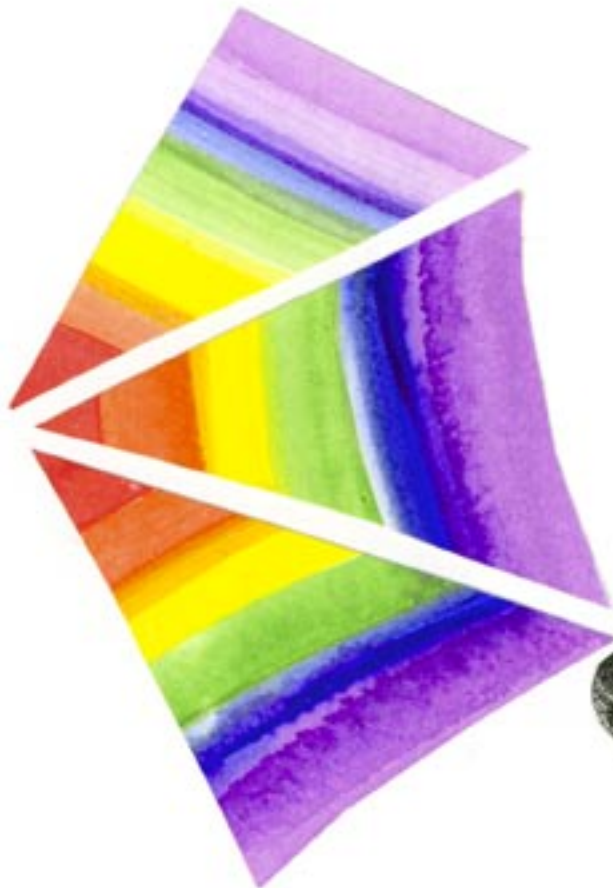



- mother & babe
sit on a rainbow like
a feathered serpent

(Giovanni da Bologna)



or on a cherub's wing *(Andrea di Bartolo)*





dead christ
sustained by two cherubs
one raises his skirt
to show his sex (Gerolamo da Treviso)

The Worried Babe

Bellini's babe
with apple
& about to bawl



Mary Magdalene
goes up to heaven

naked & surrounded
by a gang of babes

entangled in
her flowing hair (*Marco D'Oggiono*)



Mother & Child
above them hangs
an egg
or pearl of some great price
emerging from a seashell
(*Piero della Francesca*)





Babe
stands in the sky
where once the father stood
his foot
atop the dove
& with a cross
in hand (Timoteo Viti)

[Mantua: Palazzo Ducale]

sleeping babe
with snakes
around his hips



Pelican
above the cross
offers its blood
to feed its babes

Crucifixion
one thief
hangs
backwards

babes play
with apples
others hold the stones
in place
while seated on
the backs
of dolphins





In Mantegna's Room

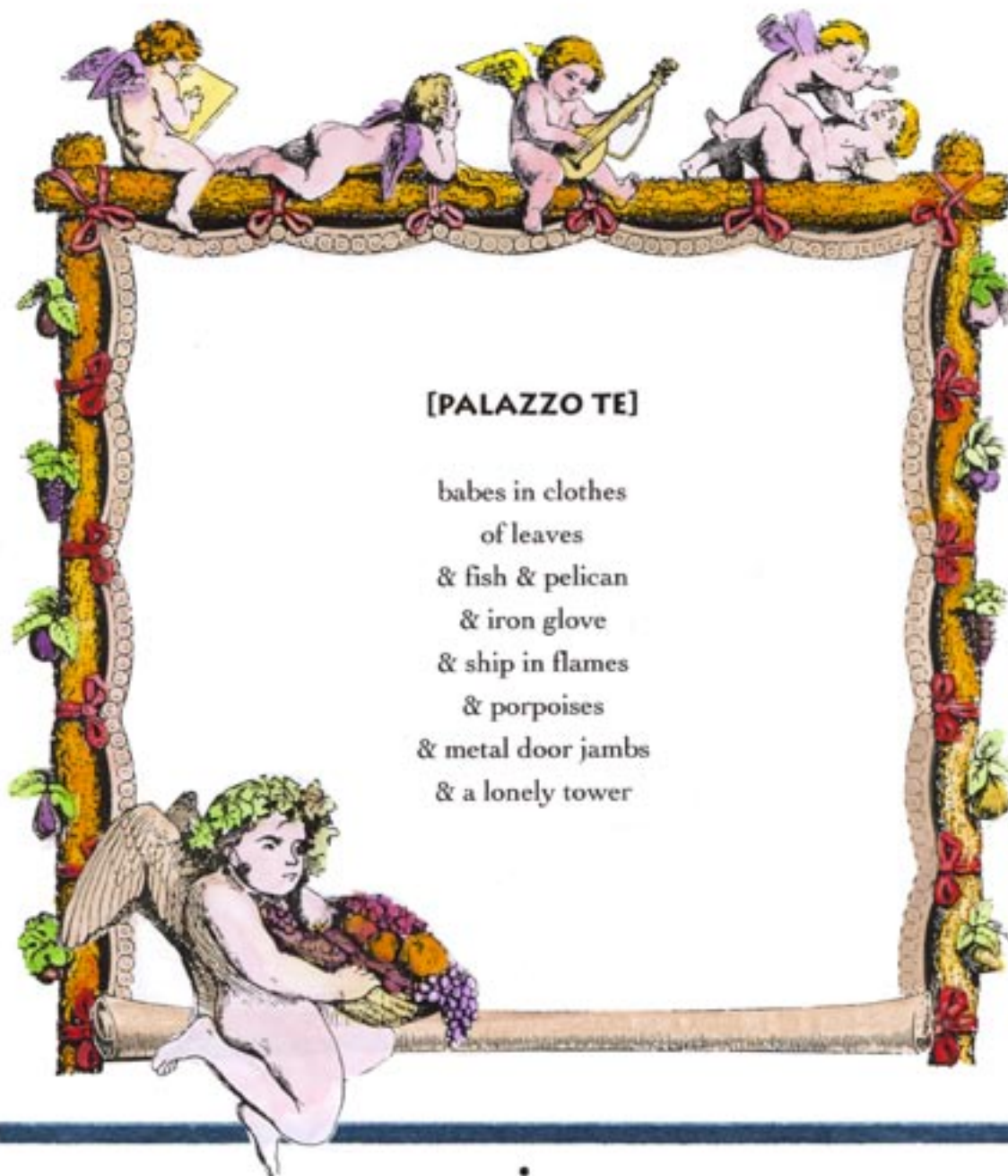
above our heads
the gods are gone
the babes look down
from heaven
with a single bird
& laugh at us

babes with wings
of butterflies

after Mantegna

babe holds an apple
penis pointed at you –
will he piss?

•



[PALAZZO TE]

babes in clothes
of leaves
& fish & pelican
& iron glove
& ship in flames
& porpoises
& metal door jambs
& a lonely tower

the comb the golden crown the sphinx the mask the harp the trumpet the
swan the dolphin the scarab beetle the snail the owl the dog the serpent

NEDJAR'S ANGELS

babe fallen
sails through space
wrecked angel



babe in womb
is goat is feeble bird
is shadow of a babe



is skull
is broken hand
is snake

babe gagged
& blind
babe under water

sewn in bag
& cast
onto the cinders





*is this man
your god?
this man-child?*

no one will respond
& no one
will stay whole

a babe will cry out
coldly
from the ground:

curse god & die



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

After Zurbarán

1

Babes
become clouds
clouds become babes



2

the mother,
newborn,
standing
on the heads of babes





THE BABE AS BUDDHA

1
woke, spoke
his first word.
taking seven steps
proclaimed himself
the master of
the cosmos

2
with cranial
protuberances
& long ears:
a buddha &
a poet




'A BABE SITS PLACIDLY IN SCHWITTERS' BAU'

.....

a babe sits placidly in schwitters' bau
now burnt but saved in memory
the center of a column
that his german hands sealed up
& makes me think
of dolls & dwarfs small metal cars
from childhood buttoned shoes
that fit imperfectly a walk between
high walls of buildings painted white
& nowhere have I seen
a door or found a street to turn into
escaping from the stillness of the moment
as if death wasn't an option
but a fact my mind had never entertained
till now the babe arisen looming up
then crawling where a gang of babes waits
where they fill the air with apples
thrown against the sky the devil in the details
hitting the old mother topsyturvy
in her falling down o ravissement o subterfuge
& lost in wonder a belief that time is endless
that we follow in its tracks like children
bound never to reach the place where nuns & bishops





dance to strains of monk & satie
where the taste of warm beer
fills their mouths & ours
cigarettes aglow in lost cafes
in flow of talk so rapid that the mind
grows numb the father pulls a dove
out of his hat a stick & water glass beside it
& the sky as slick as silver fills with doves
the babe with swollen head can wave at
making some stop cold
& drop to earth the plumage at their necks
once white now red with blood





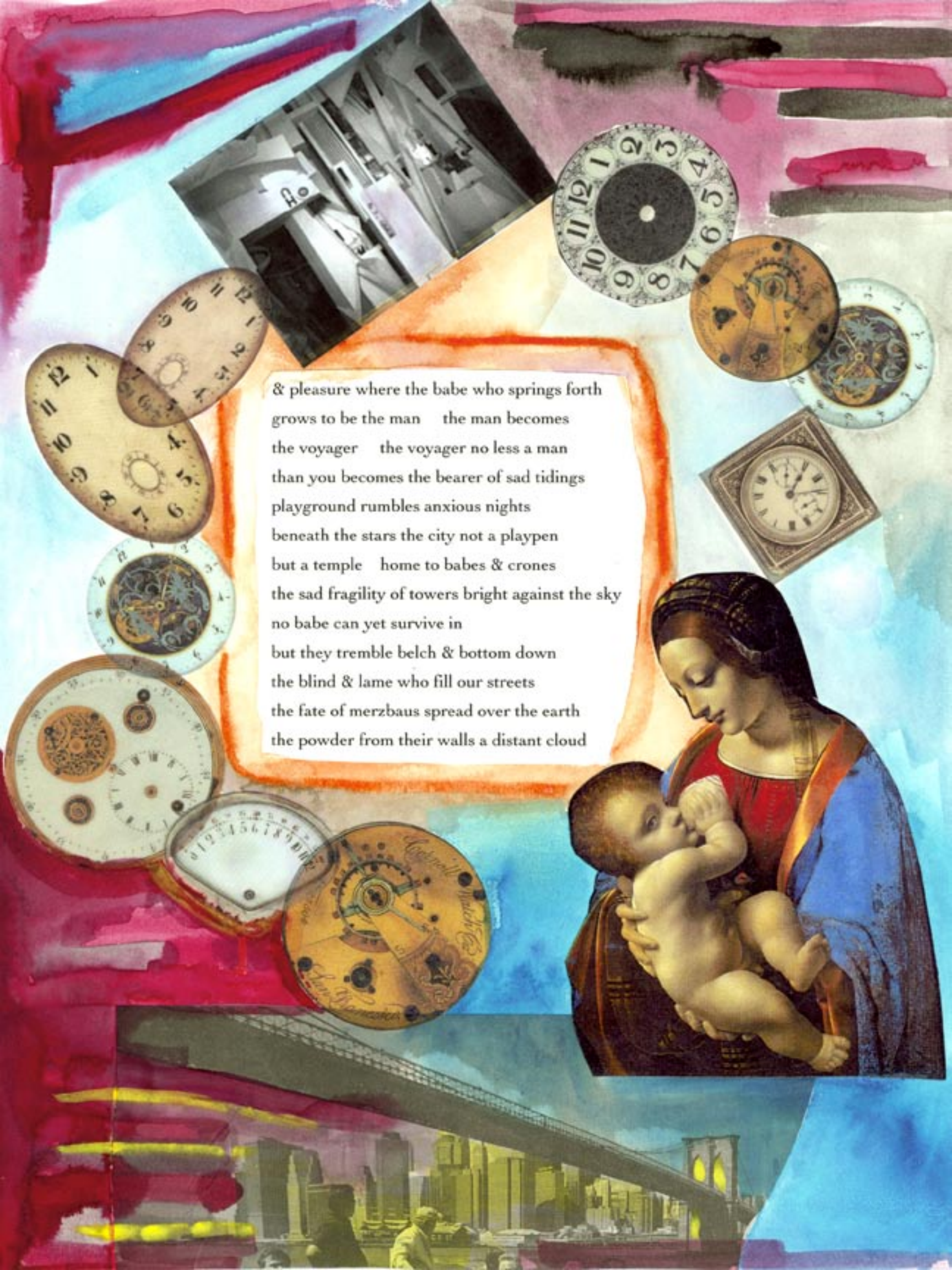
& ants inside their eyes a silent army
like all armies massed for murder
& the ball that rolls across the square
finds no one there to grasp it
but it lies there fading in the sun & rain
remembered from a photograph
shot from a hundred miles in space
& bleeding salty at the edges
where the walkers pass
out of your line of sight a blur
of children's faces shrunken
without teeth or fingers
punished for the fact of childhood
now surrendered to the babe in heaven
helter skelter bowing to his will

the little master of past lives
sad king who wears a bonnet
whom the mother wheels around
in carriage words of warning
written large along its sides declaring
jesus kills the voice of someone
crying in the wilderness



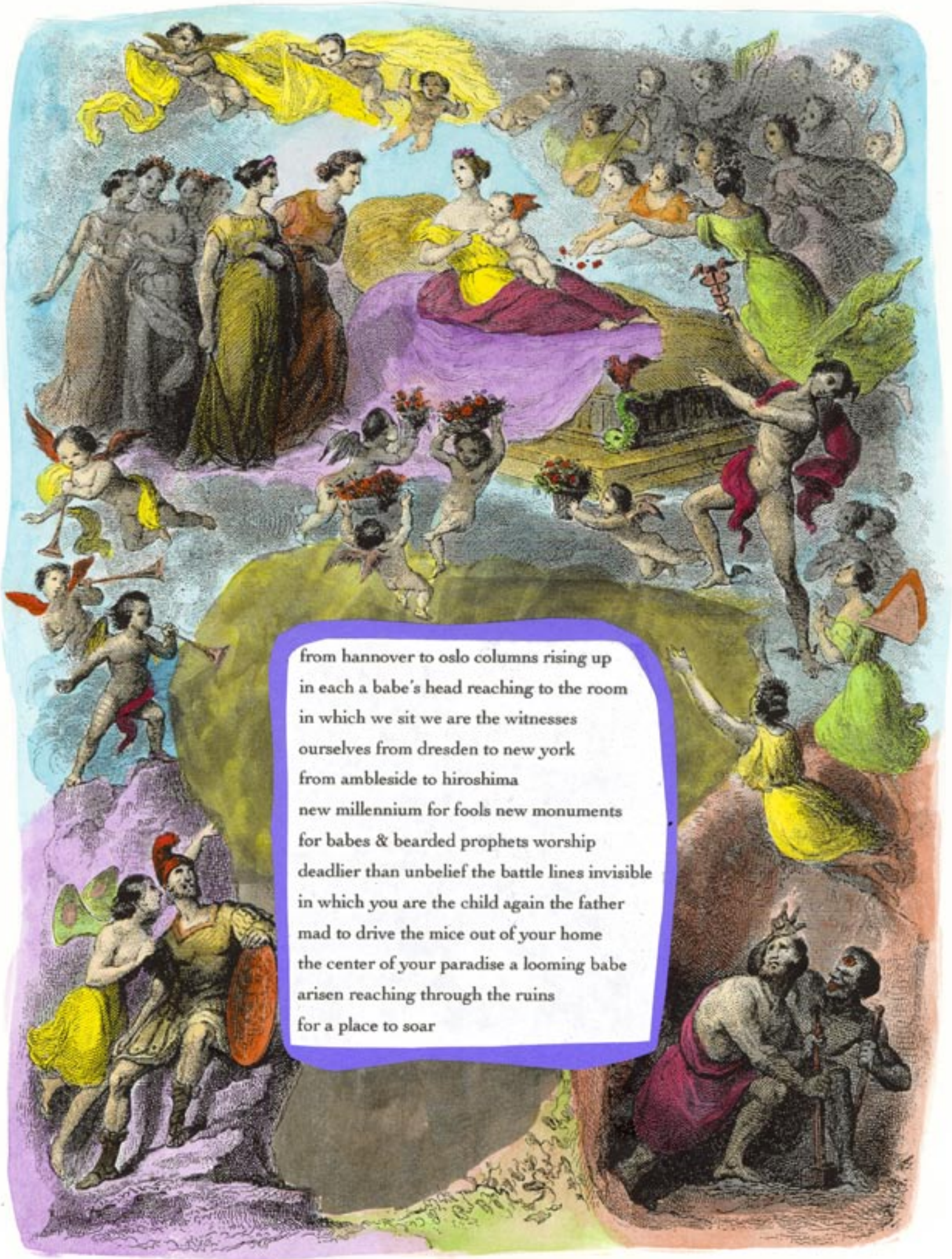
the butcher's hand raised with a knife
to strike the final blow the babe
a real babe now & powerless
while from a window like a jail's
above his head a false babe
has the scene in view his whirling eyes
are cameras poorly focused red
& green & purple
partner to your love & partner
to the task of bearing witness
the discovery of an age when all
was lost when even time itself
not being counted had no meaning
but only mindless space on which
no voyager had cast a thought
no babe had come to birth or knowledge
& no schwitters made a monument
to misery that eats into the flesh
that procreates a life of pain





& pleasure where the babe who springs forth
grows to be the man the man becomes
the voyager the voyager no less a man
than you becomes the bearer of sad tidings
playground rumbles anxious nights
beneath the stars the city not a playpen
but a temple home to babes & crones
the sad fragility of towers bright against the sky
no babe can yet survive in
but they tremble belch & bottom down
the blind & lame who fill our streets
the fate of merzbaus spread over the earth
the powder from their walls a distant cloud





from hannover to oslo columns rising up
in each a babe's head reaching to the room
in which we sit we are the witnesses
ourselves from dresden to new york
from ambleside to hiroshima
new millennium for fools new monuments
for babes & bearded prophets worship
deadlier than unbelief the battle lines invisible
in which you are the child again the father
mad to drive the mice out of your home
the center of your paradise a looming babe
arisen reaching through the ruins
for a place to soar

