The Burning Babe
& Other Poems
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
cheewing 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
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
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

I

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

1
infant encoil'd
inside a worm

2
The Throne of Mary
throne of wisdom
on which
the babe sits

he holds
a little sign marked
EGO
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
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

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 BABEL 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 shrunk
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 merzbau's 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