



ALLEN GROSSMAN

OBLIVION

—“*Let me make this last thing.*”

The first time I read Virgil’s Tenth Eclogue
was April 21, ’51, in the Allerton Hotel
(the 23rd floor) on Michigan Avenue,
Chicago. — That same day, at noon, Gen.
MacArthur paraded up the Avenue,
ordered home from Korea by Pres. Truman
for threatening use of nuclear weapons.
People in Chicago greeted his boast
with flowers and music. But Truman said,
“Gen. MacArthur is fighting the wrong war.”
Paper flowers floated upward into the sun.
Arcadian music was heard on the 23rd floor:

Song is extreme work. — Help me, river sister!
It’s getting dark. Hey, sweet water, flow fresh
through Ocean’s salt. *Give me some words for him
I love, so he can give words to someone else.*
Start love’s gift *once more*: — WORDS FOR ANOTHER.
Then everybody will have *something* to give someone.
If not, I’ll drown you in oceans of salt tears,
and then you’ll be indistinguishable from tears.
This is Arcadia. In Arcadia, sweetheart,
everything hears our songs and sings back.
Right now, however, my soldier sits alone
on a stone like an animal. He has no gift to give.



Where ARE you, sister, word-giver, shining
among what wander-roots, what wet shadows —
unvisitable source? Kiss my mourning man,
Arethusa, kiss my wordless animal
on his mountain stone-alone, among animals
standing around? Arethusa, where are you?
Is this the end? — “Allen, I’m underground
among streams. I do not despise the grief
of animals!” That’s what she said. Now WHO
will tell me where she’s gone? — Here’s Upilio
coming up the avenue. He eats acorns and dirt.
But he doesn’t know. And here come the shepherds,

the pig-keepers, ploughmen, etc. They don’t know.
But Apollo says, “She’s gone off with a soldier.
Sex on ice. *Anything* better than YOU, kid!”
And here’s Sylvanus — glorious, mute, and slow —
with grandeur of quaking lilies on his brow
and fennel. After him comes Pan, the god of Arcadia.
He sings: “Love is strong as death, and as indifferent
and cruel.” — And through the darkening air,
I hear my desolate soldier talking to me
from his stone — one stone among all the stones.
(*But which stone he is I don’t know.*): “My dear!
Death is an imperceptable deepening of life’s

solitude. I wish I were still one of you.
But insane love of war compells me. Tell
my story, Arcadians. Only Arcadians by their art
remember, in the circling echoes of their song,
the magnificent graves of the human heart.
— It is dark under the hill. She who is
lost in that dark is ever fair (they say),
wherever she may be, in earth, or in the air,
in the far, or in the near. I hear her sing.
I feel her breath. Love is as strong as death
but no stronger. Love conquers all but one
last wonder — the limit of the work — oblivion.”



The room on the 23rd floor had four walls
(but 13 wall surfaces) and one window.
Under the window was a radiator.
Along the wall was a bed, on which I lay down.
Opposite the one window, at the other
end of the room, behind my head, was a door.
In sleep, on that bed, something happened to me.
And now it returns: the dream of the lighter
and the lighter-men. Night and day, the lighter-
men ferry crowds of men and women through
an enormous surf out into open ocean.
“Why is death in Arcadia?” the men and women cry.

And the lighter-men answer: “No death, no song.”
Then I hear a groan down the hall on the left.
I get the phone number and ask my question:
“What might it mean to take your word to heart?”
And the groaner down the hall answers me:
“What do you want now? Its been a long time.
What city do YOU live in, fucker? Under
what stone. Here we howl and IT MEANS NOTHING.”
— So I lie down and dream again the dream
of the lighter and the lighter-men who ferry
wanderers through the surf and out
to a schooner. There it is, luffing off shore,

rigged for the open ocean. And there looms,
seafarer, in the setting sun, the great
ship *Oblivion*. — “What are you doing, Allen?”
“River sister, I am doing two things
at once, weaving and singing. I am twining
a basket of hibiscus to carry things in,
and I am saying what doing that means.”
She says to me, “Allen, you must be either
living or dead.” And I say to her, “Sister,
I am weaving and singing words for another.
Give them to your cold soldier on his stone.
Start once again our Arcadian song:



*There is a tree that grows fast, hour by hour.
At noon the tree casts a shade. Then, deep shade.
Then darkness wounds. After that, kills. What kills?
The darkness under a fast-growing tree.”*

—“Allen, what can it mean to take words to heart?”