Midway through the retrospective of Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers currently at the Museum of Modern Art, the visitor comes across the witty short film *La Pluie (Projet pour un texte)* [The Rain (Project for a text), 1969]. By this point in his career Broodthaers—poet, painter, sculptor, filmmaker, collector, and ever the protean provocateur—was devoting himself to projects related to his idiosyncratic Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, of which he was founder and curator. As the film begins we see Broodthaers seated in a small garden that he's appropriated for the museum, dipping his pen in an inkwell and writing intently in a notebook. A squall of rain bursts over the scene, releasing the still-fresh ink into puddles and wisps as Broodthaers doggedly keeps trying to get something down. By the time he gives up and sets down his pen the notebook is soaked beyond salvaging, its text now illegible. Or perhaps not: this project's text might best be regarded not as a sequence of disintegrated words but instead as the performance, preserved on film, of a moment of writerly intention transformed into something unforeseen, an object primarily fashioned through its encounter with the elements.
La Pluie recalls two earlier iterations of texts in Broodthaers's work, and specifically poetic books, made into objects. These pieces collapse the distinction between text and thing: the object is poetic in its thingness even as the poet’s words are effaced and subsumed into the work. In 1969, Broodthaers created a new version of Stéphane Mallarmé's experimental tour de force *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (*A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*) by overlaying thick black marks on the text, resulting in an abstract dance of rectangles that suggests a player-piano roll (indeed, the concept behind German artist Michalis Pichler's 2009 refashioning of Broodthaers’s concept as just such a musical score). As a bearer of cancelled-out words, the film’s rain-drenched book also reaches back to one of the foundational gestures of Broodthaers’s career as a visual artist: after covering much of the text with colored paper in unsold copies of his own collection of poems *Pense-bête* (*Memory Aid*; though literally and not incidentally “Thought-Beast”), he encased the books in plaster and exhibited the resulting piece at Brussels’s Galerie Saint-Laurent in 1964.

This act can be interpreted as a renunciation of poetry—*Pense-bête* would be the last of the four collections published by Broodthaers, until then primarily a poet, who would now dedicate the remaining twelve years of his career to visual and conceptual art—or, as the show’s curators would have it, a transference of the poetic urge to other means of expression. Curator Christophe Cherix has stated that one of the retrospective’s aims is “to bring the poetry back” and to counter the “idea that in ’64 [Broodthaers] stopped being a poet.” But to properly delve into the relation between the visual and conceptual projects of the 1960s and ’70s and the poetry that preceded it, we need more than books in vitrines at the beginning of the exhibition. In this regard, it’s to be welcomed that Siglio Press has just published translations of two of Broodthaers’s collections (bookending a middle section that offers a version of one of his slide-projection projects from 1973–74): *My Ogre Book* (1957) and *Midnight* (1960).

What’s immediately striking, at least on the basis of these two volumes, is the seeming cleanness of Broodthaers’s break with his poetry, the lack of much evident continuity with the visual and conceptual art he would go on to create. Granted, there are certain bridges to be found: Broodthaers’s dialogue with Mallarmé begins in the poetry and culminates in his reimagining of *Un coup de dés* as nonverbal abstraction; the eagles that appear several times in the poems, as pointed out by Elizabeth Zuba in her translator’s note to the Siglio volume, adumbrate his later preoccupation with the bird (the line “O Melancholy bitter castle of eagles” from *My Ogre Book* is even carried over into one of his Department of Eagles museum projects). But these links are conspicuous because so little else seems to join the distinct phases of Broodthaers’s career. Other than the eagle, the visual forms that he worked and reworked obsessively in his visual and conceptual endeavors—broken eggs, mussel shells, the pipe borrowed from Magritte, and, eventually, palm trees—seem to have attracted him only later on: the words *oeuf* (egg) and *moules* (mussels, but also molds) do not appear in *My Ogre Book* or *Midnight.*
More profoundly, in his poetry Broodthaers seems uninterested in engaging with the social realm. Except for the announcement on My Ogre Book's title page that the book has been printed “Under the Banner of the Arquebus of Silence / Ostend,” there's not even a hint that the poet is Belgian—a curious omission in retrospect, since by the mid-1960s Broodthaers the artist was making a series of works using the colors of the Belgian flag; his mussel-shell pieces, too, accompanied at times by representations of frites, are playful meditations on Belgian identity and its cultural touchstones, not to say clichés. Likewise, Broodthaers's later forays into what we now call institutional critique would have been unthinkable to one of these books' original readers. Whatever dimension we might say these poems exist in, it is not the twentieth-century social sphere of mass communications, bureaucracy, and the culture industry.

Instead, the world of these poems is far removed from modern life. My Ogre Book in particular, a self-described “suite of poetic tales,” unfolds across a medieval-ish neverland of forests, mad kings, storm-swept landscapes, and those ogres invoked in the title. Its fairy-tale idiom is vivid but generalized, the animal and human figures serving as emblems that are never far distant from elemental strife: “Lost in solitude / I have always been prey,” reflects the speaker of “The Donkey-Drummer”; “The toads devour themselves / at the heart of diamonds,” runs the full text of one of the brief untitled poems interlarded throughout the book; in “A Drama of Solitude” a “huntsman of ogres” turns on his loyal dog and kills him, preferring “to be alone in the Great North.” Broodthaers’s archaism, which according to his translator extends to his use of anachronistic phrasing in the original French, was also deeply personal, providing him with a means to map his inner geography in ways both distanced and intimate. These wintry tableaux offer the poet’s sense of his own narcissism, his attraction-repulsion to violence and the irrational—he seems to imagine
himself both ogre and ogre-slayer—and his feeling that true vision still lies beyond his grasp: “I make myself a cardboard Head / to the window-forbidden world.”

The poems in Midnight largely continue in the folkloric vein of Broodthaers’s first collection, but they feel lighter, more buoyant and less inward looking. Vast temporal expanses open up and are domesticated for the poet—“The centuries are lined up in a box of matches. / I’ll buy.”—and we’re offered glimpses of revelatory beauty, or at least intensity: “Lady Nature takes off her robe / and dreams of the lights where the wolves pass.” The surfaces of the poems are also more given to playful manipulation. My Ogre Book alludes to card games and chess, but these references fit with the hothouse artificiality of the book’s figures and conceits; in Midnight Broodthaers collages sound-words ("Tic Tac Tic Tac Tic") and strings of spelled-out numbers into his poems, so that the page not only records the poetic utterance but becomes a visual field to be worked upon, played with.

What comes across insistently in both collections is Broodthaers’s attraction to thresholds, to points of transition that equally signify ends and beginnings. He makes reference to voyages undertaken and to midday, daybreak, and other such points of passage in our experience of time. Midnight ends not in darkness but at dawn, as its concluding poem “The Morning” closes with a gift of visionary illumination: “A light filters through to me, a / light of the crests of grasses.” One of the more moving poems in the Siglio volume is simply called “Final Poem,” coming at the end of My Ogre Book, suggesting that the book’s particular journey has reached a kind of terminus:
The streets enter from all sides. Blue flies begin to circle. They cast their eyes down to the pavement. They cry out:
That it is morning
That it is war
That life is costly
That it doesn't fail to run too fast
That a storm has come quick
That it isn't surprising
And that one has said it well.

Telescoped here is a sense both of distilled experience and of pride: the poet has made it through, at a cost. But on the opposing page, as a kind of envoi, we’re told that the storm has subsided and “That which had been lightning / became the zigzag of my steps”—the finality of the book’s last poem has now been transmuted into new, animated movement, leading to an unknown beyond.

There’s a restlessness on display in Broodthaers’s poetry that reveals something integral about what he achieved through his career’s varied projects. The poems seem to come from a radically different place than the later visual and conceptual work, but what unites all of it is an emphasis on renewal, reinvention, moving onward in the wake of what one has brought to completion. The eggs we repeatedly encounter in his visual art are broken—something has been hatched, just as those unsold copies of Pense-bête appear to be birthed out of the plaster that surrounds them. Molds are to be filled and moved beyond. It’s an irresolvable question whether Broodthaers ever ceased being a poet, because the answer depends on what one thinks a poet is and does: with words, with ideas, with life itself. Paul Valéry once remarked (in the rather free translation later cited by Auden) that a poem is never finished, only abandoned. Broodthaers reminds us how abandonment can keep alive the poetic impulse, and carry it through to unsuspected places.