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As if also the eyes were stone as
emeralds or amber in the head or no
no let it be that stones are eyes of earth
and from the general mass of pregnant dirt
these eyes look up and out
and for this million years or so
we are what they see. before that
know knows what an eye did see.
but cant we know by looking at them now,
gaze into the blue diamond or the gravel on the ground
and know what such eyes saw
or was there anything to see
before we came yesterday afternoon to look
or was it this morning and we saw a tree?
was that all there was, just what there is?

12 December 2009

CARPET SLIPPERS

Carpet slippers are apparel of the utmost importance. I'll try to tell you why. They are, at least for me, the very emblem of the nineteenth century and what it learned and what it knew.

Consider it this way. A man comes home from his work in the City or the Bourse or from the antechambers of the Hofburg. He steps with a certain weariness up the burnished steps to his apartment, hands his hat to the maid, who helps him off with his muffler, his overcoat, his boots. She squats and guides his toes into his carpet slippers. They have thin leather soles, quite flexible, stitched to uppers. One pair is in scarlet felt, with a reticent pattern in gold thread, symmetrical, but he has never quite identified the insignia or design. Another pair is fine soft goatskin. It is this pair he is being shod with even as we speak. He admires the heavy bronze hair of the maid, its conscientious parting; the pale skin of the scalp is too physiological for him, it gives him a slight tremor in the sphincters – not disgust, certainly, but a distinct aversion. He looks up across the hallway to the double-doors of the drawing room, through which his wife is not visible.

With his feet in the nice warm slippers (they had been sitting near, not too near, the great porcelain stove), he allows the maid to help him out of his suit jacket and into his smoking jacket, a rather gorgeous dark crimson double-breasted affair with satin lapels and sash. It is of course worn over his waistcoat. She hands him his plush fez, and arranges its tassel so it falls behind his left ear. His collar is still firm, his necktie in place.

The girl curtseys and leaves the room. Now our man is ready for his home. He crosses the hall into the drawing room, picks up the evening paper and settles with it into an armchair not too close to the stove. He crosses his legs and begins to read.

What we have seen is a man of the nineteenth century coming home. Now what I would have you attend to is this: our man was dressed for work, for street, for luncheon with his colleagues, for meetings with his chief, for interviewing suppliants and clients, for walking along the Graben or into Harrod's, for complaining at the police station about a deficiency of streetlamps, for buying tickets to the opera, for slipping into the church for a quick round of the Rosary or into a certain establishment where he has an understanding with a young woman from Carinthia. Dressed as he has been all day, he could be photographed by the newspaper as he gives his report on the decline of the tanning industry, or as he receives a silver medal from the Singverein for his focused if slightly dry tenor in an amateur performance of excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

Now he has taken off those clothes and donned another suit altogether. With his necktie and collar and waistcoat and smoking jacket and fez he is as modestly dressed as ever, no fresh skin is exposed, everything formal, everything neat. But he is indoors for the day now. For the night. He is home.

The point here is that he has entered personal space. Inside. The space called Private.

This was the great invention of the Victorian (the Wilhelmine, the Republican) era: the distinction between public and private. The distinction is precious. And is being lost. When television first started, people dreaded this Eye set up inside their houses. People were afraid to undress or make love in front of the flickering Presence in the box.

But that's not what hurt the private life. It turns out that the flickering Eye was our own eye, looking out. And where we turned our eyes was the private life of other people. So that the greatest danger to civil liberty and decency and common sense in America (Europe, Asia) is the collapse of the distinction between what is public and private. We worry about a pair of frou-frou intruders waltzing through security into the White House. What we should be worrying about is our own frou-frou appetites being treated to the inside of other people's houses, other people's lives. We call it 'reality TV,' and we know it's real because people are crying. When people are being humiliated we are happy. Suffering is democratic. Joy is elitist. When we have brought a joyful citizen down (the famous golfer, the peccant governor, the secret invert) we rejoice in turn. We are a land of Schadenfreude now.

That's why slippers are important. How dare we be naked in our own house? Nothing is private anymore, and to be a celebrity means to be exposed. That's why our Viennese (British, Parisian) businessman is so important, the worn wool of his slippers, the greasy headband of his fez—these are signs of the sacredness of the interior. Put on your carpet slippers and forget the peccadilloes of statesmen and athletes and singers. They are

in their slippers too, they pinch their own maids and no one knows, they sleep in their downy beds and no one knows. There is a crucifix on the wall or a painting of the beach at Dieppe or a Laughing Cavalier. Nobody sees, nobody knows, nobody cares. This is paradise. The man and his wife in their fresh-laundered nightshirts, their pointy nightcaps drowse in deep pillows. Soon they will dream of meadows, mountains, gondolas with masked naked figures, children running along the top of an old stone wall, a priest preaching a sermon to a row of bicycles. This is sleep. No one knows you in this country. Your slippers are beside the bed, pointing into the dark.

13 December 2009

WRITING WITH AN OLD PEN THAT WRITES AGAIN

To bring things back
to their places

αποκατάστασις

the return also
of the animals:

In the last ten years these animals have come back or have let themselves be seen, and I speak only of those seen on my own half-acre or the little roads a mile or so around it: wolf, fisher, fox, coyote, wild turkey, vulture, bald eagle, black bear. And two days ago a mountain lion (the animal my father called a catamount) strolled or stalked through the trees in our back yard.

The return of what we need,
the open spaces of animal mind
so free of time
alive in will
admires us our destiny
remind me what that is:
we are the ones for whom all things are

real and because they are real they are signs. Only real things can be signs.
And all real things are signs.

A bee passes
through flowers say
presumably indifferent
to the aesthetics
of our boutique
—color, texture, form and feeling—
to go where the feeding is,
the absolute.

I want to hear
a bee buzz in the Masonic temple
with silent cars parked out back
in one of them a real estate man groping a woman from the bank
and the real stars over America
jingle in the clear winter sky

but it is always indian summer inside the temple
the bees buzz between the columns
Jachin, Boaz, bees
hungry for something richer than meaning
and their hunger is our meaning.

Wonderful feel of this old pen back in my hand. A Parker 51 with a burgundy barrel and a gold cap, my father's, given to him when he retired, given to me. It got clogged, I had it repaired, clogged again. For and years years it stood in the pen cup. Now I soaked it for three days in soapy water and it comes loose again, fills, I filled it with Waterman's violet ink, the

French ink that is the most fluid I know. And it writes! Thick lines,
continuous, smooth as ever. What a privilege to inherit it again, write with it
again. I feel almost shaky as I write with it, right with it, the exquisite loony
energies of the Seventies are alive in the animal hand. Come back, friends
made of sunshine and seasons, time trash, loves, sweet flowering midnights
of merest talk

whence God arose by morning
and turned off the war
and silenced all music but Pan's pipes alone.

Sometimes the whole body stoned by talk alone—
stagger at the end of night
up the steps from our chattering hovels
and spill into dawn
still talking, trying
to defile the workman's day already
as if we had better news to hawk,
doubt and tremor and touch and sleep past noon,
what else is poetry about
but freeing love from persons
and letting the night proclaim
Laila's lilith-lispings God tries in vain to make us forget.

13 December 2009

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Apology my mind

still spills continuous

the gaps of attention

not yet ready to swing—

wild thought still

wings on grammar sings.

13 December 2009

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The problem, Ulysses (as Homer
explained), words really are like snow—
not just that they come down
thick through the listening air
but when we're done talking, the words
are still there, dense-packed, treacherous,
we're up to our ankles in them,
they have to be dealt with,
how can we cope with what we hear?
O silence your stories while we still have fears,
our own ones, the ones that never melt away.

13 December 2009

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Poetry begins when the word

is cut free from human will
and speaks without intention
other than the intention to speak
the word you overhead,
chatter from the city of the mind.

13 December 2009

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the Other lives inside the heart

and hides there often

till you meet him or her out there

and suddenly the Other and the Other meet

and both are one

the way a bird coming down to land

meets its shadow on the ground

the Other lives inside the heart

when you meet someone like that

you feel her or him slipping in

taking up a sudden residence inside you

and there you are

and there he is alert and capable of telling

and there she is—you never

know the Other till she's stuck inside.

13 December 2009

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The whole tribe talks through you

and that is the strangest thing.

Animals yelping in the woods

and you understand them

suddenly in the act of speaking.

Because everything speaks.

Only God knows how to be silent.

13 December 2009

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The new arrayed

beside the old

slipshod symmetries

you spider your

way through every

thing you can name

hide there drag

the bones of your prey

sleep be tomorrow.

13 December 2009

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Call it whatever name

she lets spill into your mouth

then that will be its name

strange sounds the broken

consonants of a word

hunting you down, caught

already in your heart or in

whatever that organ is

makes you cudgel another

organ till it makes you speak.

There was a time when

nothing had a name.

Now there are more names than differences.

And talk is a kind of noisy dream.

13 December 2009

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Ending before beginning
like a man in a tree
everything looks up at me
waiting for a word
simple as fall down

Gravity is never the same—
some people in their bones
listen harder to what mother says
her fatal song of come closer
darling fast as you can

But beside me a bird
croaks purest contradictions.

4 December 2009

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Fortunate so few can
read minds, even their own—
a mind perused
traps the reader forever
in what it thinks it wants.

14 December 2009

Sa'arah,

שערה

barley,
so called from hair,
its long-haired grain
lowest glycemic index =
fortitude.
Samson unshorn.

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SAUGERTIES

Alternatives abound.

A town north of here

a cup of coffee on the corner.

Some people read books—

find out who they are and measure them.

Readers are zombies. Give

us a book and what happens.

There used to be a movie theatre on this block

but neighbors are the last people

I'd sit down with. A real live red

flower grows in your house from a lava rock.

14 December 2009

WAITING BY THE WATERFALL

Learn the classical determinants—
love by night and flight by dawn.
Star-shaped functionaries
glib in some alien patois. Listen—
you can hear them now, that buzz
beneath your ears you think
is just your pulse. Poor foolish girl!
Mist rises from snow, sunrise
after the fact. A clean sink we are
told is a sort of sanctity.

14 December 2009