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LETTER TO A LOST POET

Once the Thalienstrasse trolley car
Took me to the edge of what could be—
A long plain street along an elbow of
Vienna, city small enough to touch.
And there it was, a jewel of a window,
No, a sky behind a house, a bird come
From inside the sky to falter here
Down around the ankles of the town, it
Was anything at all, the common skin—
I'm trying to tell you everything's body.

But why that car? So ordinary a street,
Extraordinarily ordinary, the way dirt
Is on a sidewalk or a bird, any bird,
Nipping down from the air. An old drunk
Passed out across the aisle, slumped
Over his brown paper bags, could he keep
Them from falling all over, spilling,
Getting lost? Can we keep anything
From losing? Can I find you again?

A long street of ordinary stores. This
Could be anywhere, that's what made it
Here especially, why I loved it.
That I could ride through the seeing
Only seeing, unchallenged by the names
Of things, anyplace is not an easy
Place to be, shriek of grey light and steel wheels.
But why tell you? You could have been there
Beside me but you were not. You chose,
And choosers belong to their choices, like
Trolleys to their gleaming tracks embedded
In cobblestone and asphalt all the way
To the end of the line. The city passed us
On its way to green hills I never did
So should have nothing to tell you about
Yet I do, from color and shape I make
Enough sense to tell you my lies, music
To punish you for your truth, the austere
Logic of your quiet final breath.

Who was the old drunk and why should I care?
Could have been me or my father or yours
Or some fallen bishop from the colonies,
Poor man fragrant with self-loathing, mumbling
In smelly dialect, shifting bundles
And finally getting out as if he, even he,
Had somewhere to go to and meaningfully be.
What am I getting at, you'll wonder, and why
Do I keep blaming you. It takes time
To punish the dead for desertion,
Forgiveness comes not prompt to the bereaved,

Red robins on the hill right now, new grass
Trying to fetch me back from Viennese.
All right, Sun. All right, Wednesday, your eyepatch
Slipping out of place lets too much light in
Baffling the measure. You hurt my eyes.
Like crying without the tears. Stupid spring,
As if again could ever come again.

Anyhow, a drunk old man is just one
Little boy mumbling in his sleep, a drunk
Old man is all alone. Nobody
Is loner than an old drunk man. An old
Drunk man is like a trolley car mostly
Obsolete. Soon there'll be no old men left,
No drunks, no tracks in the tired streets—
Auden rode this way sixty years ago,
But he wanted to be modern, up to date
With talk of Spain and atom bombs and Freud
When now for all his twenty million murders
Stalin seems as quaint as Tamerlane.
And none of them will ever wake again
No matter what the robins symbolize
Outside. I'm stuck with who I am, alas,
And who you were. Maybe a little bit
I can take you over now, remake you
In my mind so you'll be mine – you never
Were – for the first time. A score I looked at
Now suddenly some pianist actually plays
All the way through, fast and true, and that
Is finally you. I never knew you.

9 April 2008

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Something speaking.
A cup. Something
Listening. A spoon.
Who knew

you needed more.
Needed me.
The shadow
of a steeple is all

and a street a
street. We
thought we had it
for sure.

Something in the cup
or on the spoon
balanced, tipped
into the mouth

like somebody's
bread. The wine.
Everything
is answer enough.

10 April 2008

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But then where would we entirely be
if there were a we to be it there
or anywhere, given the dragon nature
of the world, all in and out, fire
into water, earth into air and never?

10 April 2008

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What does it mean to pray to the moon?
Do you see it out your window then say it,
five days old, weltering in the west
like a foundering canoe, pray to it or pray for it,
and you, you, what do you make of all this talk,
don't you know that when I met you
I found you far away in the sky already
in the springtime of my need already there
and how are you now? Somehow
whatever you are has to do with the moon.
I pray to it like an empty bowl, a tin can
rolling down the road just out of town.

[Autumn 2007]
10 April 2008

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Trying not even to like
what came before me,
all my Bellini still to be composed
and my voice to be all those voices
give me God something to do.

April 2008

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Denkbild. Enter the supreme
Dragon, the one
inside the air
beyond the air.

Denkbild. an iron
age becomes beyond itself—
wait, I felt with my hands for her,
then, only then, discovered
that she was pure number.

April 2008

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But what does water remember?
Do we suppose the ocean
remembers – with pleasure or
remorse – all the waves it
propagated or endured?

April 2008

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Two women sleeping each other.
Hunting horn. The forest
starts here, especially
a line of shadow shunted
through lines of light
falls here, across them.
Will nothing wake them?
Speak the horn again.

April 2008

AT RHINECLIFF STATION

1.

The forest starts up there.
I see the edge of it
along the hills, the outcry
of geology against the sky.
The mountain.

2.

So hard to stand alone
with the human senses.
We put them on
like a pair of pants too tight.
Come night, we'll take them off.
And then we'll see. Be seen.

10 April 2008

ON THE DAY 5-SNAKE

Looking at a snake you'd think: how hard it must be for them to help other people. They seem streamlined to engorge other people of various sizes. A moving mouth. Thinking that way, you come to imagine that there must be other ways, magical or unseen ways, by which the serpent is able to practice compassion and helpfulness towards other people, which are the two root virtues of the world.

From such thinking, you come to imagine that serpents, who have sacrificed so much in their evolution (think of giving up one's arms, one's legs, one's fingers even that create or caress), must have won through that immense austerity great magical or psychic power. You think: they are Nagas, dragons, beings of immense wealth and wisdom, custodians of might and imagination.

You think about how helpful people like dogs are, and cows, and sheep, and birds of all kinds. Yet the serpent is among that small family of people called Sacred Animals in every culture – *sacer* means holy and unholy both, powerful, set apart. The snake is the most apart of all, and we revere or worship it in rites more nocturnal than the others. In its apartness, it teaches us to be apart-people too, apart and quiet and quick. And wise.

In our wisdom, then, we learn to think our way into the realm where the snake means well, means very well. Because we can *mean well* even without meaning it or knowing it. We mean well because that is how we are made. People help people. The lion leaves scraps for the hyena, who leaves some for the vultures, who leave some for the insects and the worms and things I have never seen and whose names, alas, I have forgotten. But them too. And they do all this without discussion. The agreement is in our flesh. We are the contract of which we're made.

Thinking like this, you might think the snake the custodian of that profound compact. Kindness is built into the world. It is our task, the snakes' and ours, to find it. Invent it. Make it be.

Then you remember Nagarjuna, the great Indian philosopher, who traveled down under the sea to teach logic to the king of the Nagas, who repaid him with the immense trove of teachings called *The One Hundred Thousand Line Treatise on Transcendental Wisdom*, and many others besides. Nagarjuna's name means either Conqueror of the Nagas or the Conqueror who is a Naga. When Nagarjuna came back from the sea, he had much to teach. But the kernel of it, or the jewel around which all the rest was wound like ruby in the coils of a serpent, was

compassion, the wish that all people be free of suffering, and helpfulness, the wish that all people be happy.

We have given the snake a lot of work to do. And to teach us to do, in our turn. To have such power, and go about our business meaning well, as ill-equipped as we are.

11 April 2008

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Could I be near
this place and hold
the hand it has?

Biography is river,
everybody's life is
a myriad already,
as many lives he hath
as readers of his book,

we confer immortality
by accident, o the reader
is a quiet god,
a deep rememberer,

something poltroon
about it, the dropped
book, the tea stain
on the title page, something
angelic, the phrase
held in mind

forever after, an angel
is a message
held in mind
or else the mind
that holds it,

look it up,
some book
dares to tell you.

I mean the actual
life, the spear
hurtling through
the ardent air,
each one of us
hard as we can
inventing the hand
that threw it,

the hand
from which we're thrown.

11 April 2008

Ce que je dis ne me change pas.

—Paul Eluard

All these words we keep repeating,
is it God speaking to us sleepers
bible after bible babbled out
between one nightmare and the next,
REM states, somniloquent.
Then the dreamless answers.

[19 X 07]
April 2008

A SIGN

How long do you think it
will be before the heron
weary of staring at itself
in the calm pool of the stream
looks up and flies fast
diagonally through hemlock trees
into the mere sky? Long life
and patient appetite. Blue
shadow quenched in running water.

[Autumn 2007]
April 2008

(Mishearings)

A nudist?
Anubis
waits to escort us.
Africa
is the wound.

[Winter 2007]
April 2008

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The form of the girl the sleek
ends now.
In a year she will be someone else
anybody
but now the smooth.

[Winter 2007]
April 2008

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From the merits of the case
a quantum star—

imagine me against
your boudoir's ceiling splayed
all silvery or gold
depending on your blue name
coming down.

Aggression. Rays
with stickles on the tips of them
like cat's tongues.
Caressive. Painful. Self-involved.

[Winter 2007]
April 2008

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The secret nature
of reality is
a woman's face.

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