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obsidian

One time in Mexico

I read a stone—

not the kind the old
imperialists carved up with
kings and calendars

just a stone,
black, sleek,
almost opaque.

If you could get a little bright
light into the edge of it
you'd see it was a soft
kind of brown in there,
brown,

but the stone passed for black
the way people do
for whom brown is too sad
a word, a memory of light,

just be black and be done with it,

but the black of this one
snagged sunlight,

was a mirror, an opaque
mirror

and I read my destiny –

a hundred years of yellow
a hundred years of blue

then a month or two of red light blazing
and one night
pure white then
God would begin to understand me.

[26/27 January 2006]

in memory of Ted Denyer

LANDSCAPE

The sudden turn
to face me

the acrobat
leaping for my head

you, thoughtful, winged with light,
pressing near me if
press is not too fierce, a brush
like sable, a tip trailing pale
over the blank space that is me,
fox tail in snow,
a saying
smiles.

And then the real dark
against which our gothic
traceries dispose, no, form,
they form
as clouds do on the mountains.

But you have no mountains. Frost
is on the fields today, stretching
level towards the forest, hoar-frost we used to say,
canities the Romans said,
the quiet foam
of the mad dog the weather is,
the world is.

27 January 2006

"The floorboards chirped and the birds creaked."

—*Laura Dorsey*

I hate poems about squirrels
though I write them all the time.
When I walk in the woods
(and I hate poems about walking in woods)
I hear squirrels cheeping or chattering
(my wife explains though that the
technical terms is 'scolding')
and I always think they're birds.
So when the floorboards chirped
I knew squirrels had gotten into the house
and I hurried to soothe the crying birds,
because birds are to the weather
what stars are to the sky
when time becomes space
and I can finally get there
limping a year later out of the woods.

27 January 2006

[towards the talk on magic]

to be radical, for once:

what is an image?

what does an image make us see?

how does an image make us see?

The world is built of image, of magic, in this precise sense:

having once seen something, you cannot unsee it.

To unsee something would be to unmake the world.

And the world is made, is there, thick with all our seeings.

[end January 2006]

ALTERNATIVE ENERGIES

it likes to say
in the top of my mouth
when I pick up a pen.
I think I'm reading
a meter on my dashboard
telling me they've switched tanks—
whoever they are,
whatever it is in them.
So many times I hear it,
not today so I ask
what these energies are.
Alternative: alter (other)
nature. The energies
born of the other,
not the me.

Does it mean

I've run dry
and need to pick up the phone
and call some other animal in the woods?
How small a reading
that would be of my
master sentence,
but how accurate to where
meaning comes from – meaning,
that rich cream on the top of language,

best part of it, our nourishment,
comes from where language comes from,
the other.

Alternative

energies are what we give each other.

What you give me. Endlessly.

Since there is no end of you.

Pat the dashboard.

Pick up the phone.

28 January 2006

INSTRUCTIONS FOR YOUR NEW TELESCOPE

The word *telescope* is derived from the ancient prayer, *Tell us how to cope!*, with which the wise men of old begged for insight and portents from the stars, which they studied every night on their freezing pergolas. Wise women of old looked in other directions for their information.

After you have greased your azimuth with *huile de coude* (not supplied), wound up your armillary sphere, cranked the mantissa to the right and coaxed the abscissa to the left, you are ready to begin studying the constellations. They're easier to find than the stars, since they have lines connecting the dots, and most of them have familiar shapes (a bear, a dipper, a lady sitting on a chair, a dragon, a fish with the head of a goat, and other things we see around the house).

And don't forget to look for the new constellations that NASA has discovered! Our space program doesn't just hurl billions of dollars worth of esoteric hardware (manufactured by friends of the President) into space, it also brings back pretty pictures of planets we don't have to visit yet, and galaxies that are so far away that they have not yet even applied for membership in the European Union.

So far, two new constellations have been identified. Several of the old constellations, long outmoded, have been removed to make room for the new, up-to-date configurations. Here are the new ones! See if you can find them with your new telescope:

The Rumsfeld. Named for a mythical high-school wrestler who later went on to discover the true Warrior's Code: get somebody else to fight and die for you. The brightest star in Rumsfeld is Algol (*Alpha Rummi*), which the treacherous Arabs –terrorists to a man— called the Ghoul, or Demon Star, eater of corpses. Some say the wrestler's name derives from Ruin's Field, but that is conjecture.

The Deer Tick. A fabulous monster once feared by the ignorant Indians of the Mid-Hudson region; its visits caused a debilitating and sometimes fatal illness. After the missionaries of Saint Aetna the Insurer came to the region, however, belief in the creature gradually disappeared, and people began dying of other diseases with identical symptoms.

Nautilus. This replaces the ridiculous name Orion or O'Ryan – what was an Irishman doing in the sky? The new name celebrates the Holy American Mystery of Self Improvement, and shows a man pressing weights to build up his pecs. The second-brightest star, in the left ankle as we look at him, used to be called Rigel, but Arab names are crude and scary, so Beta Nautili is now called Nike.

Hey, Rich, Happy Boitday fom Robbit n Shallot!

[28 January 2006]

VALERIAN,

like catnip some say,
or cat piss in an old house
floorboards, some say,
cat piss in moonlight or

fiacre past Steffi's
in new snow's slush
and the blue
breaks out beyond the Belvedere,

caress her in the orangerie,
the leaves
of every tree tell lies.

But at Dodona, no.

The whispering sunlight across the oaks
tells only what you need to know.

*Sun keeps coming back,
a yellow word you still can't read.*

28 January 2006

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Older than young an owl
older than some, portals
opening into hallways
lead to doors. Older than old
a corridor. The shape
felt along the cold walls
is not temperature but temperature
tells. Late night and no owl.

29 January 2006

=====

To know what you have made
is hard as making it. Knowing
it finishes the work. Otherwise
dust and furniture, toys
of your dead son. To know
makes something live again
even if not exactly ever him.

29 January 2006

THE HOUR OF OUR

1.

Hold the wood that holds the water.

The dying man debates with angels,

wants them, wants them also

to get away from the window

so he can see the light: Show me

the leaves, show me the underbrush,

show me the running fox, show me the tree,

the skies you come down from

I don't want you, I only love you

for where you're from.

2.

The dying man at last

knows all the differences.

Between glass and air.

Between flame and fire.

Between your breath

and what you actually say.

3.

At dark of moon
the wood is densest.
All the hydroptic fluid
is sunk out of the wood.
The hard sleep of wood
is soundest now.
Water always
is a kind of dream,
isn't it, fitting snug
the corners of sleep.
And there is no dream now.

4.

The Chinese are beginning a New Year
while the dying man begins his New Death.
Death of the Cock. Death of the Dog.

While the man is busy dying,
all the animals in the world
are dying in him.

All the birds are dying,
and even the great rough red
rocks along the sea beach are dead.

5.

The light comes in and comes in.

It's the time when the man doesn't know.

He lies open like a book nobody's reading,
the light lies on him and presses him down.

Never till now did he ever know how
heavy the light is. And now he can't even know.

29 January 2006

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Someday they'll all be Christians again.
They'll all be Jews, Buddhists, Hindus
of the oldest religion. They'll all be pagans
from the religion older than that.
They'll be music. And all the words
will flush with meaning again, flush
like young raspberry canes awkwardly up
out of the snow this morning. Eggshells.
Oystershells. Billiard balls. Dark
water of a smaller canal that hides
its way down into the delta. And there
the Holy Spirit stands like a naked woman
over the immense uncertainty of the sea.

29 January 2006

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Eke out. As air
surrounds us
utterly adequate, we
also distribute.

Δαίωμαι. I give
my attention
to a thing. Things
know how to.

The wind
answers.
What more
could I ask?

30 January 2006

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But the thing you hear
is different from a beginning,

it is not the brick of a galaxy
falling free from its mortar
damaging your princely head no

it is a grate over a sewer
you hear the departures under,

you hear the deportes the sportifs
the terrible bacchanale of money
and the gods sailing away away
in their underworld canoe

into a heaven they have to make up
furlong by furlong as they flounder

through such syrtes. Through such swampland.

Speaking Finnish, the cold

crows yak at them

the closest thing the world knows to truth.

30 January 2006

=====

Of course. The gizmo
belongs, like the moon,
to what we know about ourselves.

We came here for gold
wherever 'here' is
they taught us in school

they had to tell us something
it would be terrible
for little children to trudge home

every afternoon, dark already
in winter, and not give them
any explanation of why we're here.

So they said gold.
It's prettier than 'glory,'
harder than 'God' – the other

explanations we heard later.
Columbus (himself now a box
half full of yellow bones in Seville)

somehow brought me here
from England and Ireland and France—
I never understood how it worked

my blood was there, summer and winter,
north in another language,
then suddenly I'm born here.

And am still here.
I want to be in Donegal instead,
I want to be in Picardy

or Somerset below the sea.
I want to be where I am
but I want to understand.

30 January 2006

AT A FORMAL DINNER

Suddenly a foreigner

I am looking at my friends.

Tonight they're all speaking
a strange language,

I see their lips move, their eyes
emphasize. Hear nothing

but a distant murmur,

Hungarian, Turkish, Lapp.

30 January 2006

MARS

Marching through another city
our soldiers found a huge
scarlet amaryllis, two
big chalices already open
and three more to come.

They stood and studied it a while,
easing their flak jackets off
and smoking quiet cigarettes.
The thing grew in a green stone vase
on a second story balcony

on the one wall of somebody's house
still standing after our earlier
aerial reconnaissance.

I watched them watching it
and for a moment I felt at a loss,

what could I tell them now?

Then I took heart and commanded:

it's a flower, don't worry.

And one of them admitted

he had seen something like it once before.

31 January 2006

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Though some of them stand
the wheat kind rest
in sheaves against the sunshine.
Miracle rye, mushrooms overnight,
fish swim by. All the dialects
of survival. And a mulberry tree.

No cat, no dog. A little
painted turtle from Times Square
I called by my own name.
We can share our names
with the simplest things.
Our names are huge, like barns.
Come, move the barley in.

31 January 2006