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PUTTING MYSELF IN YOUR SHOES

The ranunculus uncurl
the almost amber calla lilies
shockingly their phallic scepters shield
inside a curl of let

and there are tulips in the Dutch intrigue
bouquet by Klara Peeters
on the actual dining room table
elliptical in rain light

so we try, troche by troche to
understand the principle of pain,
the ridiculous instruments of an orchestra
that wield the movie music we so
suffer from or to, lovers and leavers
ambiguous threnody of empty
space between and morning always,

still clambering up our way to noon
despite all the sad quotations that come to mind
lugubrious testimonials, Virgil,
Cavafy, not without their lovely shivers,
the lust for losing.

Hold things in the air,
phonic babblers, what you spell

stays enchanted
for what the old books used to call forever,
every word you write becomes a thing
and every thing betrays you,

now we know there is a space
outside of time that holds us too
if we let it, it all
turns out to have been about permissions,
legal commotions, such an orderly
cosmos after all
and we obsessed with liberty when all
we should have cared about is peace, peace,
peace to our dear company,
we saw it scribbled on the blackboard
\yrj \wlc
our dear ordinary intimates, hello friends,
'the company of love' one called it
but I wouldn't let him touch me,
peace as you stumble through the doors,
hello everybody you blue cathedral.

The spelling bee is almost over
and the strangest words are the littlest,
lierne, dado, erg,
and all our holy ampersands
hold us together

shadows in the rocks

dry mountains you're glad to wake up from
even into this spiked martini of a morning
you sip the light until the pain is gone
and the subtle poisons of a too urbane elite
sickens the tender misprisions
we have to live by, getting
things wrong and making them work
to help us find an easy hour
till the right one comes.

6 March 2004

THE SIGN

I heard a strange bird
a beautiful sound
call note over and over
like a girl calling her lost cat
contralto, rain, spring,

how the world call us
by the right name
always. Always

someone listening.
Some animal though
that will never come back

and we are left alone
with the beauty of our calling.

6 March 2004

AN ELEGY FOR WOLVES

Everything will be with you already
all the while you go on waiting
there is another sturgeon swimming
peacefully towards you this second
her belly charged with eggs for you
you get to understand, knowledge is caviar
the old man said, swinging his racket on the roof
testing once again (so many years)
the Ghibelline light. No one wants it
because when the General knows you have it,
you're a marked woman, the old man said,
or man as it happens, you are a shadow
cast by candles on a gold mosaic wall
and you last no longer than the morning.

And there was snow in Venice this year
on the little bridge with the Hebrew street sign
telling how you find the House of Study,
that fervent observation the others call 'prayer.'
Snow on old tile, dangerous, snow
settling on water, a dream dreaming a dream.

This little book, questo librettino, I got it
from my German mother, my Jewish mother
as it happens if the truth be known, o knowledge
of all days compressed in this, this night also
the snow is spoken, and so I read

*Henry Menaced by Wolves; or, Prayer Never
Goes Unanswered*, who knows who wrote it,
a long walk home he had of it,
not even counting the snowflakes,
their eyes all round him, their breaths
observable in every shrub
as little puffs of bluish steam
sifting through foliage, low to the ground,
the bushes breathing, and the boy decided
Mamma told me God is everywhere
so those are His eyes I see all round me
gold as His crucifixes hot as candle wax
I will not fear except with that praiseworthy
fear of God they say is proper
though I have never felt it yet, maybe this
is it now, since God is a baby in a manger
far littler than me, or God is an old man
bound and fettered, tied to a cross
and dying, pity and not terror
is what comes of that, but those yellow
eyes are on me now, they must be He,
how many eyes you have o Lord!
The better to behold you, sang the wolves
and waited.

I don't recollect
what became of little Henry after that,
the old man said, the years have bound me
to this chair I made once for another,
and then they took my books away
across this interminable room, long

out of armshot, shadows for breakfast
and a bird on the roof of the garage
for lunch, is it time for my ravioli yet,
my glory?

His daughter was his wife.

The ambulance got lost on the canal,
no matter, he felt better after eating,
went to his desk and later managed
to play some tennis for a quarter-hour
lobbing the ball against the house wall
all alone, no one to play with, pale
Tyrolean sky, just his instruments alone
and the mosaic in which he stands
fixed for a thousand years but only
as a shadow is, until the next
dose of medicine goes down, Lenin calls,
Christmas trees thrown out after Candlemas,
their tinsel and angel hair still on them
cluttering the bonfires with threads of light.

7 March 2004

CAT GIRLS

The cat girls were all about me
not me about them, the way an iris
is about the garbage can it grows beside
doing its bit to ameliorate
the neighborhood like Wilberforce
or Jacob Riis and I just sit here in my squalor
waiting not in vain to be improved.
Oh if politics were only like girls
and history and math. But as it is
it is. Only people change. Weather
is just how we think about things.
Wet snow clumps fall from branches
softly on my roof and more snow
in particular comes down. All I ask
is to be alone with the morning
and my body. Basic rights of man.
To enter the day sideways,
like a leash between what dog and
what master's hand I bind the world.

8 March 2004

CAPTURE RATIO

I like meeting in the museum because buses
go everywhere from there, the streets are so
thronged, I love traffic, a secure transfer
of affect between us is easy in a crowd
mostly German and Japanese so nobody
knows what's going on inside anybody
else's body since they're all here only
for the architecture anyhow. And stones
don't walk. You're almost invisible
and I move at your side like smoke
from a cigarette in autumn mist, all
our signifiers rhyme soft and sure
just like a yale lock snicking into place.
Though strictly speaking any word
rhymes only with itself, so no poems
truly rhyme, but you and I do.
This is what they never taught at school.
You tell me you've done something
to your body and I have to guess what.
But can't use my hands to find out.
Or not yet. You're irresistible, our
shoulders touch but that's permitted.
What can it be? Geese cry overhead,
so many homeless people all around,
I can feel the answer but can't say it yet.
Meantime we study the routes of buses,
north today we want to go, uphill, happy,
invisible, unguessable, to that little park

from which the whole city can be seen
and then we'll know. The city teaches us.
Because I have a secret too, a thing
you don't know but this is always true.
Nobody knows anything yet. Not even
after all these years the gender of the moon.

8 March 2004

KNOT

Endless knot of wind and water
this day weaves or braids
as if light were separate from the air

but we see light only in our atmosphere
only the dark of space without a body
the rope of which our fate is frayed

8 March 2004

=====
The beginning is with me again
the arguable road map
crater with handles
every story rolls to the bottom of the bowl
reaching eternity at the same moment
the end is the middle

the same blank page
so much definition so many
islands in a crowded ocean
no connection but what disconnects them

the middle is always straying
while is end is always firmly fixed
in nothingness my master
while the beginning is always around my neck
like that pretty red corn snake on the Este girl
posing so long for the painter
both girl and necklace so long alert
waiting to see the new regime's policies

after the libidinous barricades
where every citizen saw to herself
the work finally begins
after the close-grained overture
seized all that is to come
and made one tune or two of it

we will go on hurrying
all the afterlife
through the rain dance of the Apsarases
or the pretty little late winter snow
for two days now so delicate
sometimes a sheer mist of going down
or sometimes those large flake flowers
that seem to take nine minutes to touch ground
or like now a platter spilled
aslant the whole pale conversation

that's what it will be like in purgatory
not much accumulation
white lawns black roads
and all we'll have to hold onto is the fact
we saw her dance
before the aching censor waddled in
to deprive the air of her caresses

by which our local atmosphere was changed—
call it politics they way you'd call her
queen and falls asleep on her haunches
like the weary animal at last I am
when all is said and nothing's done
the only world there is is what we do to it.

9 March 2004

SCENES FROM CHILDHOOD

Strike up a conversation
righteous gentlewoman
riding on a shadow towards me

and wary of strangers I consent
to my congested silences hello
is not an answer was it

but that flag still flies
while many a bumptious commonwealth
dissolved in snoozy tyranny again

here sit beside me
while I think what words will touch you
the way my easy fingers mean to

2

how hard it is to talk
hard as a hawk, choked
as an epistle, prick the skin
like avalanche and all

my old comparisons all wrong
my mother made me speak to strangers
so my skin for centuries
has to take revenge for that

talking to them by touch
by inches not by nouns
pressing my unmeaning
hard to their idle lips

3

do you understand me now
maiden hour
street of stopped clocks

hell's post office choked
with my dead letters
your conversation

at least at last it ends
we do what we do
to find relief from doing it

4

the doctor tells me I never learned to breathe
and all my hiphop Hellenism comes from that

speak only that word you have the breath to say
said old Isopothos in his farewell speech

taking leave of his hoplites in Hayastan
where dark-eyed woman climbed up date trees

and since they were up there anyhow
they walked home in the sky

peaches and cream the sunset was
and that whole night smelled of honey.

9 March 2004

=====

We name our houses
but we have no names

the wood is old
and stands among the trees
a hundred years
the house kept understanding
they said to me your house
is Lindenwood, the old
man called it that

now only one linden is left
but most of the trees
have no names,
they are like us
they drink light all day long
and whisper to one another as we do

life after life
I think I know you

and only the names are wrong,
the long distraction
from who we really are.

10 March 2004

=====
There is something gentle in the waiting
because the folk of God go right in

but God knows what they find there—
we of the outer nations only know
from time to time the roars or cries
like fire on the prairie that come out
or a large animal roused from sleep.

We have our barns, school buses,
our opinions on politics and morality.
They last all day and then night comes
full of heresy and risk. A tired man
is close to God. I read that in a book.

This is the book. Try not to think.
Let it think for you, the way a bird
lets the wind decide. Then you
also can sleep up in the air
supported by the flimsiest of arguments
and full of light. We could call it
a dance but the trouble with dance
is you have to do it. This does you.

10 March 2004

=====

Effortless and uncontrived
it keeps keeping up.
The closest taste to it I know
is sleep, my dark jewel.

10 March 2004

RAHU

Rahu is my lord
means everything
comes to me in sleep.

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RAHU ACCELERATES COSMOLOGY

Like an exile
who would have nothing to say or show
if he stayed home

he sells the rumor of his journey
to the world

he writes books.

Like an exile
I wake every morning

in this new place Rahu has created
while I slept.

The towers of Annandale
bong with Russian churchbells
over an uneasy sea
crowded with tall ships

I think I am a lighthouse
born alone
a seashell on your mantelpiece

a wooden idol of some tribe that sold me
hidden in your cellar
in a cardboard box
among the spiders

spinning their odysseys around my dream.

10 March 2004