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BERLIN TO HANNOVER

The wealthiest welfare is to be none
I translate myself from the past into
what they tell me is the ever-meritorious present,

to be here and now
I walk on towns.

(Enclosure. Life behind fences.
Who wants that?
Do keep us in or keep them out?
We'll never know.

Zaun. Town. The hedge
Of being and the hedge of bets.

Be better. Get out and go.)

The cleanest travel
Would be to change the past

revision time

revise what's done—
this mode of time travel given us
(it pipes, it beeps, the doors close

(pause)

we roll

out of the East Berlin station
into the whacked world.

The television tower is the tallest thing.

all round the town you see the models:

The essence of religion is elsewhere.

Abraham
is everyman

get out of your house
get out of here

you hear?

Hinné ni, he said, here I am
listening to you tell me
to be somewhere else

everyman is Abraham
must get him gone

out of his house to draw
a distance and become it

as a spider
pulls out of her body
the road she'll travel

so he must
(Abraham is Spiderman)
weave from his breath

the thread he'll braid
and twist and ride,
line walker, tightrope walker

into the unconscious
place he goes
where Lilith waits

and up the aisle she's coming now
she too is going to the fair

the one I can't see

the one the world thinks about
incessantly
the stranger the new

Every one of us is Abraham,
even she,
every one of us must get moving

move out of town

chosen as each one is
by some hidden deity

to become.
To travel down the changes

desert they used to call it,
where there is nothing but what happens.

On the intercom they say
Ui uisch jjuh a plesent dschöbni

And I am grateful, I think I'm always grateful

That is what makes me me,
to thank somebody else
for this moment of being

the way lightning thanks the thunder.

And when G-d spoke to Abram and made him Abraham,
did G-d have an accent? Of course not.
He must have spoken perfectly whatever it was he said.
But if G-d had no accent, G-d could not in any way be The Other —
The Other always has an accent, that's how we know
it is the other.

Or: of course he had an accent.

What accent?

From what region of Otherness did he stem?

An accent is the speech of some part, not of the whole.

But he couldn't speak from a part if he is the whole, G-d is the whole.

The *argumentum linguisticum* seems to point in both directions,

like any stick

G-d did and did not have an accent.

Perhaps he never spoke to Abram.

Perhaps he just made Abram hear.

(like any staff or stalk or stem or pole

found lying on the ground pointing east and pointing west,

a unity betokening duality

so we shove it deep in the ground to make it stand up in the air,
and honor the gods with it,

Ashera, the goddess, on the hilltop, her shrine this simple stick.

Maypole in Brandenburg, maypole in August,

like any stick

like any usable thing.

Iron fences by the tracks through Spandau

keep me from looking into Spandau

keep me from looking in your mirror, dear,

I mean your window, darling,

I see just the tiptops of your trees

sometimes a tile or two of your red roof

and when the fence runs out

gives only fields,

and where are you then, dear,

I mean where is your mirror, darling,

this bright skin of yours I have studied all my life,

mirrors, windows, empty houses, eyes,
where are you when I need to see,

where are you when I need you, Other Person?

Sun day is Saturday this week
an American warmth looks to be outside

as if I traveled in the deeper south

212 km/h our speed, now 214

I'm watching a child play a palm-held computer game. I don't even know the generic name for what he's playing, what he's doing. What do I know if I don't know what this child is up to? I was that once, intent on a book, intent on the plug in battery-driven quiz board game my Aunt Celie gave me, a leftover from her daughter's girlhood in the 1930s. I was absorbed by books (*Michael Strogoff*, for example, or *Les Misérables*) and games the way he is now: old-looking, frowning serious, like a little old squire reckoning his taxes. One either side of him a little cubic speaker, surrounding him with stereo sound that drifts vaguely into the carriage. It seems plugged into the pop track or the kiddie program. The classic track is all Tchaikovsky today. He is plugged in on all sides. Machine for living. The cute little boy makes me sad. His music is bad and he makes me hear it. 224 km/h. Sad because he is absorbed in something that is not his own, but he thinks it is his own. The way I thought Jean Valjean was known only to me, only I wept at his unjust fate. But in those days, I was Victor Hugo. Maybe the real reader writes the book she's reading.

The books I read were close to me as my clothes, friends, hands. Were they my own?

Is anything my own?

My past? So there was this past

this past made up of names. Names like Michèle Morgan, Delphine Seyrig, Nastassia Kinski, in places like the Hotel Adlon, Catalina Island, Balbec, whistling music by Vincent Youmans, Friedrich Holländer, Nino Rota, putting clean hands into pockets thought up by Edith Head or Karl Lagerfeld, this

past, this is a world without significant differences. Here the differences only signify, without meaning anything.

Inoffensive meanings of pretty women in pictures, pretty places, pretty music,

God how we have to scrape and scrape to mean the least thing, while all the while *it* is always meaning

It is the past. If you've heard about it or read about it or seen a photo of it, it's the past. The newest wave has crested, and has fallen back long ago impartially into the indifferent sea by the time you hear it, let alone hear about it from someone who once, dazzled by veiled sun and squawking seagulls, saw it crest and break on the shore of the Island of Poel (which was once a part of Sweden, in that respect like the state of Delaware).

And then the paper shows it, and the evening news: the Wave That Was.

So the past is past, and the present, insofar as it is discutable at all or even reactable to, is also past, past before you can say its name. Let us then allow (us?) the primacy of the past. Then the future is also the past, grains or crumbs or shadows of it we somehow haven't yet noticed, and then we do.

Time measures our attention, nothing more.

It is sleepy here, this sunny land, the quick train seeming to drowse along between Brandenburg and Lower Saxony.

Rapeseed yellow flowered. And there's a real cornfield near the autobahn.

Far off across a field, a station wagon is parked in deep trees.

So I manipulate the names of the past.

Yesterday crossing the newly named Marlene-Dietrich-Straße, I was shocked to see that the street-sign bore a little shield above it identifying Marlene Dietrich as a Film Actress, giving her birth and death dates. So famous a woman still needs a footnote. Relentlessly the present comes along, wave after wave, annihilating the past. Everyone is forgotten. But here, in her own city, a mile or two from the 'Red Village' where she grew up, to be unremembered and commemorated all at once. And that too makes sense — why bother to

commemorate those we truly remember? Silliness of streetnames, why not name them for Marlene as much as for some admiral or warbloody miscreant? I thought of her in tears that afternoon in New York when we met at the museum, and the audience laughed as at camp, when she thought they had come to celebrate her artistry. The fearsome embarrassment of art when it miscues. Or maybe always. Name a street for the poor woman, why not, at least she never killed anybody. That's the main thing.

to change the past
begin by changing its names

so Franklin Roosevelt lived till 1951, the nuclear bomb was never used, Germany was not divided. There was no war in Korea. Russia ruled from the Oder to Kamchatka, but went to war with China in 1953. China ceased supporting the Vietnamese rebels. Ho Chi Minh died, an exile, in Beijing. France rules Indo-China to this day, though Algeria broke away.

Other wars, other deaths. Who is responsible for those deaths inscribed by the revision of history? The ones I saved in Korea and Southeast Asia, have I lost those souls in Sinkiang and Turkestan where Russians and Chinese still skirmish?

there is no past
or there is no past

no present

Wolfsburg the big Volkswagen plant

Canal + canal boat
result: wave, wake,

furrow. *Nos sillons*
full of whose blood?

All blood is pure.

A mile of factory.

A black man in a blue
shirt by the canal

end of factory
more trees
another boat
going fast

a steel wall
corrugated to keep
me from seeing
(from saying) any more

There are more bridges in Berlin than in Venice.
And Amsterdam has more miles of canal than Venice has.
What is wrong with these two accurate sentences?
Now, what was wrong with that question?

A cloud over local sun
and a cloud bank coming this way over the great heath
that runs from Russia to the North Sea

does this
change the past

we think time is a mystery, the great mystery is space, no one understands it,
look at space from space, look at the earth when we're not on the earth,

where do we stand

how far is anything

nothing in a sentence tells if the words in it are right

nearly or nearby? new or knew? no or know?
ruly or rudely? green or grown?
a groan?

See,

even the language is not so clear
we thought could tell

we saw the word leaves of Carlfriedrich Claus
floating in a breeze that can read
even read them out loud

(d.1990)

imagine the wind pronouncing a text
that is part of (not part of) a drawing behind it
the lines of which are also made of words
scribbled or written clearly, who can tell,
the words are always talking,

murmur behind the scenes the poor
actors have to endure forever

ducks in a little farmyard
clabber quacking
all flesh somehow making sense

the land is so empty between the towns

I find my eyes were closed
and someone was dreaming me instead.

5 August 2000
Deutsche Bahn,
Berlin — Hannover

IN THE HERRENHÄUSER GARDENS

after the internet café, walked out of town
I come to the fountains of a great garden

I need a piece of coffee
terrace café spelled with terror
the so much talking

topiary matters
white statuary classic cellulite we
are contents in containers

until we are not more than air
inside a vessel
as if might be the molecular activity
inside the bronze of a T'ang tripod

ting

every space there is
vortexed by the energy of form

may we come to be quiet
may we come to be shaped by the world around us
and know it simple, feel it

and we sometimes feel it

enough to say it

sometimes are we empty enough to be
fully who we are.

2.

excellent
pastry excellent coffee
excellent napkin to blot
my excellent lips

sparrows walk around
with a good deal of self-awareness
and only one of the forms of that is fear

Fear Teaches.
But what?

5 August 2000
Hannover

Drowsing in a green gazebo
In the corner of the Low German Rose Garden
I am drowsy with the smell of roses
August roses rarer than winter's

Drowsing in public I suddenly remember
What it was I dreamed
(And so important I knew it was in the dream
And determined to remember but woke and forgot)

When we slept on the Hill of Tara
Just under a year ago
All that while the memory cloaked or asleep inside
Now my drowse lets it awaken

And tell me again
The story of the queen you were and are
And whose servant I the king must be
If we are to be true

To the world we live on
So short a while
The little green hill
Of finding ourselves again.

5 August 2000
Hannover

the godlike
energy of
(sometimes)
saying no

5 August 2000
Hannover

THE PASHAS

Around the great powerful geyser-like fountain in the Herrenhäuser Gardens, tossing its water so high it hurts the neck to stand at the rim and stare up at the top of the spume, there are arranged, like spokes, eight walled gardens.

Identical in plan, each has its entrance facing the fountain. Beyond, in dark foliage, constrained by saplings and wrought iron, the dark gardens stretch out, broader as they grow out from the circle whose center bears the fountain.

These gardens are beech groves mostly, with a variety of smaller trees and shrubs to win that shadowy dimness that strikes the visitor as so cool and soothing on such a day. Cool, but not fresh. The air in here is still, an air stricken dumb by the intricacy of tree work.

The first two gardens I tried to idle in were 'owned' — in each, a man and his consort were seated on the bench at the far end of the garden, facing the visitor who might dare coming in. In each case, the consort was seated on the lap of her lord and being fondled.

Twice I retreated, following the script any fool knows how to read, and then in the third garden I found the single bench unoccupied, and enthroned myself. No consort, but I spread my knees wide and looked lordly, in case anybody came in. No one did. Just the beech trees.

The occupants of these narrow groves gave the baroque gardens instead the strange oriental feeling of a pasha's pleasance. How practiced they seemed in their mastery, how unrehearsedly precise in the way each couple asserted and enforced their claim by the simplest sign we know: the coupling pair, eagles mating in the air, serpents twined beside their rock.

Alone I sit, widower of the hour, and watch the shapes of people moving outside the grove, their earnest tourist footsteps. And they would no more disturb my reflections than I would have disturbed the couples. It is a pleasure of a faintly lugubrious sort to have so many hundreds of square feet all to myself on this sunny afternoon, the garden outside busy with being seen.

And above the iron gateway I can still see the sparkling fountain flowing just for me.

5 August 2000/Hannover

THE TRAVELER

Almost anything we say is just a weather
report. And only the heart matters,

right? So I'm about to drink a can
of Gazo, a Turkish kind of seven-up

while I watch the dozens of green-fatigued Polizei
gather round their green vans in the square,

uneasy, waiting for what? Something
is going to happen

maybe. But not to me. My heart
lives somewhere else. Here

I brought just a stone with me
And some fingertips I laid along

the soft upper arm of the concierge.

5 August 2000
Hannover

NOT KNOWING THE SCORE

Am Steintor, conscious of the last-night-ness

The bronze fountain beautifully verdigris'd
shows the life-sized Goose Girl, a goose at her left knee
looking up hopefully, the girl
looks down at the goose but her face is in shadow.

At the base of the fountain
other geese are posed, one all set
to give some trouble to the frog
from whose mouth, like an eternal tongue,
the clear stream of water flows
that gives this thing its meaning
clear into the scalloped basin down below.

There are little goslings
at the feet of the prominent goose,
one of them too looking up at the girl
who's holding a thin forked twig or branch
with three lean leaves still on it,
young beech leaves I guess.

I do not know this story.

The table is sticky under my arm,
the air is cool, almost cold,
late German summer,
I do not know the story
where the air is cool,
the girl has geese, the geese have a girl
and they all are bronze,
and a bronze girl holds three bronze leaves.
The story where goslings look up at their mother
and mother looks up at the girl and the air is cool
and we're all looking up into the sky all the time
like apostles watching Jesus vanish in heaven
and we do not know the story

the air is cool
and I look up and think
the bush behind me is a woman standing there
waiting for me to forget she's there
and then

I do not know the story of what happens then

The geese know
Is that why they were turned to bronze
for knowing
or for telling what they know?

is this very night
the only story

the story I'm in the midst of
mist of

the girl knows

but I can't see her face in shadow
it's almost nine at night now
but the sky is day time still

I think I can see a flake of light along her nose
it makes me think she's looking with compassion
at all the turbulent productive life below her,
goose, geese, frogs, water, metal, man
looking at fountain, woman reading,
everything hopping and the story lost

if there ever was a story
lost

 thin stream of water
from the mouth to the basin from the basin to the sand.

When I finish my coffee and stroll across the plaza
I find a difference in the statue.

At the base were only two geese, not the four I thought.
On the side away from me, a goose has her head raised,
on the other two faces of the plinth are a chicken
and another bird, one I don't know, smaller
than the others, grouse or lapwing, crested.

Now I can see the Goose Girl's face —
she has a sweet, tender expression
and she is looking with great kindness at a tiny gosling —

that is what's she's holding
chalice in her left hand
safe to her cheek.
The mother goose from this angle
can be seen to have beak open,
she is calling out.

I do not know
the story but I can hear her.
In the poor light it's impossible for me to tell
if that leafed branch is really bronze
or just a stick that someone stuck there
in the goose girl's right hand.

It may not be part of the statue but it's part of the story

the leaves don't tremble
they might be metal

but they are brown, not the green of bronze
could they be recent, added or restored

frail bronze completion of the statue

and will they one day turn green
like all the rest?

If I could only remember the story maybe the dead branch will flower again.
This is Germany after all, where such things happen, in operas and the dark.

5 August 2000, Hannover

HOTEL KÖRNER

There is an ancient half-moon
Perfectly alone and yellow
In the unfrequented sky

Outside my balcony
Above the little graveyard
Where drunks play in the daylight

A ruined graveyard
Empty at night except
For what you might expect

In ruined graveyards our dreams are made.

5 August 2000
Hannover

THE WHITE HORSE OF LOWER SAXONY

Last breakfast on the green field of the white horse rampant
(even in neon on the university engineering tower across the little park)

suppose we really belonged to our symbols
(do I belong to my name?) fortresses and towers and lions and bears
windmill and beaver and this white steed

a name we never use
rampant, kicking up against the sky
to enact the symbol into which one is born.

6 August 2000
Hannover

Every day, they say, the Expo is visited by a number of people equal to the population of the city of Heilbronn, in the valley of the Neckar.

Meanwhile, the people of Heilbronn (where the American poet Lee Ann Brown spent her childhood) are busy with their own affairs.

Unless they've decided, some or all of them, to come to see Expo too. In which case, the equation would lose its force. As hour by hour people leave Heilbronn, and the number of Expo entrants steadily increases, all the relevance of the comparison is lost.

So every day Expo 2000 is attended by a number of visitors equal to the residents of Heilbronn in the valley of the Neckar if and only if all the Heilbronnians stay where they belong and don't make the long trip to the fair grounds near the river Leine.

I imagine them getting out of their Audis, or demounting from the S-16 tramcars that carried them from the railroad station to the east entrance of the fair. Heilbronn is not on their minds. They've come to see Dutch windmills and Latvian amber and Mongol yurts and the elegant racing dromedaries from Dubai.

Yet they're carrying Heilbronn with them. They *are* Heilbronn, and by daring to move around the northern German plain, they are upsetting all the nifty schemes of PR men. These are now desperate, busy scanning gazetteers, minute by minute, coming up with precise town whose population matches the fair admissions that day, that hour. Or rather, since this is Germany, they have sent their female assistants to scan the atlases while they themselves talk on the telephones to media personages and journalists.

And here they come, the sleepy burghers of Heilbronn, who took after all the earliest train to Hannover, and even now are crossing, in the cool morning light of the great heath, the concrete plaza at the entrance to the fair, the plaza that flies so many flags, of all the countries in the fair, in the world, but not the one from the country I'm going to.

6 August 2000, Hannover

