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THERE WAS A MAN WHO WALKED AROUND...

1

...putting funny accent marks on vowels
any vowels he could find,
he called them diacriticals and smiled
ûntil thë wörld lóôkèd likê this

2

...pronouncing everybody's name incorrectly
but with such an apologetic mien
no one knew if he intended disrespect

3

...dabbling his fingertips in people's saucers
—never their coffee cups, just in the slosh —
and writing with thus wet fingernail
words — necessarily brief — that came to mind
as he stared into their eyes

4

...trying to keep perfect silence
but trees and so forth keep laughing, birds
snicker at him from local ponds,
what can he do to defend himself from truth?
He should write letters, but trees can't read.

26 March 1995

THE CHANGEMAKER

1.

This time is the waiting one
where the numbers one plays with
(tennis, poker, shuffleboard)
and the girl was tossed
all dressed in white into the Narrowsburg
swimming pool and liked it
enough to giggle around afterward
fluttering around the cabanas
in wet translucent clothes,
the well, any water is an eye, *Ayin*,
a god glance left in some desert,
water looks out at us constantly,
we behave around it, it makes us
ourselves, most of us is it
they tell us, the dreary measures
of the anatomist, the calipers
into which the heart never the less
contrives to throb, the numbers,
counting by sixes by fives by twenties
I am watching a snapshot
of a small white cottage in Bengal
it will not move, the numbers
nail me to my desk, we are induced
and soothed and magicked and desponded,
here we are, where the numbers
tell us we have come, there are roses
growing over the little porch,
that flower lets a man say
anything he pleases, and a woman
is at the heart of it, the usual unknown,
blue with distance, preposterous
immensities of Chinese distances,
destinies, Gobis and far Turkestans,
and always have to report back to the Emperor
(that woman wrapped in mystery

that ochre-fingernail'd desperado
who was left in charge of the world
while mind is busy dreaming on desire),
that flower lets a woman, that flower
grows as brick among cathedrals,
alternating lengthwise and endwise on
in the pattern called Flemish bond
until the master's house is built,
o graveyard fancy we call music, o hiss
of prairie, arroyo slither, will we
ever get our hands on that windstorm
that fall of cards that quiet refuge
breath is speaking, will we,
and by the pebbles of the Delaware
bleached white by memory
I lay out a hand of klondike
always with my eye out for the Queen
of Hearts the mercyer the cup
wobbles on the weathered table,
o Love my lottery, tell
what is needed to believe.

26-27 March 1995

SUNSET

And dare again to let those juices roil,
the jismal upsurge of a sun gone down
and paints the sky malarkey! Mandarin!
Eggshell! Oxblood! It opens
inside you like an umbrella it closes
like a hen's egg the pavilion is cold
in sunlight your skin peels like a sycamore
what is it? All night your skilful fingers
worried seams apart now
wear this dangerous garment
oeillets scattered on the pavement from the widowers' parade,
explode in passionate and silent visibility.
Then the mountain was all and the light
orblessly diminishing beyond. Spook show,
crows calling it a day, geese
in that frantic discipline of their
heading home, a flight of lost arrows.
Who knows? Who knows? Who knows?

27 March 1995

In winter every
one color,

in spring two
(the green, the rest)

and summer all.
In fall

the balance of
everything

with nothing:
the last rose.

27 March 1995

[The Changemaker]

2.

It depends on what street they were on
the bum steer the weather gave them to wait
in the doorway while the Atom Bomb
incandesced green and orange over Flushing
and still the bus did not come. Mozart
was on his mind, no periwig or stodge
of thematic repetition but what a man
could beat his heart to get (“be at
the heart” he kept saying) and turn
it into the unbelievable Köchel 299.

All through the explosion he was caressing her
through the springtime of her clothes,
what does that mean, and the other one
in the listening booth at the old
then fashionable Doubleday’s on Fifth
listening to her favorite: a moody
Chinese (I mean Cathayan) piece by Ernest
Toch with gongs and shivers in it
and he yearned at the kick of her knees
swinging from the counter she perched on
(she perched on things) and he was not
listening. Lust got no ears. Lust
got big eyes. He yearned
through what he was not hearing
to the smooth of her attention to
what he could never address while she
or someone like her was around.

Not yet did he esteem his obsession
with her and her kind as itself a possible
even commendable aesthetic headlock,
to take the world so seriously
he was stuck with such people in it
and belonged to them by dint of his
attention to what they were. The knees,

nose ring, painted toenails, hair.
Flute and harp. When he was alone
he listened to it over and over for years.

27 March 1995

P R A Y E R

Is this near you? Is a prayer
tossed up in the sky like a show-off
tossing a salad to spark a languid date

going to get your attention? Not the *ultimate* one
that settles on the sweaty forehead of the Crucified
just before He leaves us to ourselves,

our hateful hurtful tender frightened selves.
But the Little Attention gods give to humankind
when we bother them with all our skills —

the duet between Norma and Adalgisa for example,
or the lantern atop the cathedral at Ely or
Michael Jordan lingering a tenth of a second longer in the air

than we are entitled to. Little Attention
they smite us with, storm and pestilence,
my mother's mother subdued by Influence

with twenty million dying at her side.
Little Attention, nightmare and typhoon,
earthquake and strange new ideas

to take our minds off who we really are.

28 March 1995

P S A L M

Blue sky, blue sky, not a cloud,
blue sky above the white wall of my house,

solid white, solid blue
and not a cloud

and up there all the stars are sleeping
as in the blank page all words hide.

28 March 1995

[The Changemaker]

3.

Then each took hold of the other
in a manner that was distinctly other
to what one individually might
have felt natural, at least to one's
nature, other, in fact unnatural
like a stoplight in the Gobi
or those hexaploid wheats carpeting Kansas
healthfoodists are so upset about
imagining — with sweet passionate
paranoid vigilance — that nature
with its cancers and leprosies and death
itself is at least a known enemy
(silhouette of the Messerschmidt: Know
Your Enemy, look up, *when this you see*
wake me ere you flee, war owns the sky,
the river's burning) and thus less scary
because dependably savage, final,
scarlet. And then of course there's spring
with all those Eastery consolations
(your only god the first-born of the dead).
Each held the other by an appendage
not intended for such embrace yet surely
capable of it, I saw them doing it
before my eyes, neither naked nor clothed,
neither themselves nor my own,
aware of me in such a way their eyes
turned towards and focused on the point
where I (or any me) must appear and
by appearing see them, and by seeing take
part in the unnatural enterprise they were,
limb entwined with limb, but eyes (as
aforesaid) fixed on me (or any me)
coming through the thoughtfully left open
doorway into the room, no room, no walls,
no bounds or harsh horizons strung

across the perfect whiteness inside which
their farcical mathematics (how many
ways can you add one and one together?)
projected their literal fleshy (though not I
chanced to touch them) limbs and torsos
strangely blended together as for all
their rosy manipulability
they were mixed-up shadows of two other
persons, for these are persons here,
who moved by chance against the same
access of light and cast independent
images which fell together, knitted
into a seeming action because eyes
were white with yearning and surprise,
I could hardly see them thanks to brightness.

28 March 1995

[The Changemaker]

4.

Such a one would sling it from the belt:
four german-silver tubes arrayed
like organ pipes above his genitals—
one for nickels one for pennies one for
quarters one for dimes, each tube with its own
thumb-worked lever to release one coin
at every squeeze, each cylinder with slot
on top to slip in more. The moneychanger
bounced below his belly, where an apron
veiled the ordinary mysteries of
flesh and blood he was, like any one of us
who watched him with such envy, made out of.
Man veiled in mechanism, veiled in work.
This was what we envied — too soon to lust
for the body of him or what his body did
or who he did it with, all the dreary dangling
prepositions of an active life — so much
we are given, so little of it do we use, so many
loves forgotten, so many hands — that in
fifty years all we would remember is I was with
someone, someone came towards, I ran from,
ran down along, came back alone. Or never lonely,
just a man to run the excellent machine.
The dollars and fifty cent pieces vanished
into the pocket of the apron, hiding, always
hiding, freemason of money, eyes on us
not on our coins, his thumbs knew everything.
Christ, what were we buying? Creamsicles,
fudgicles (pronounced fudge-sickles), tickets
—soft little scraps of grey— to get a ride
on carousel or bumpercars, my favorite
was the Krazy House, walk up a falling
wall, a floor with ideas of its own, doors
that dropped you down a chute, and all the while
a hint of sex in every shadow, every fall
could slide her down to me, every step

could climb into her lap. How old is me?
Finally sit on a carpeted hard bench—
the wall in front slides open, the bench
becomes a belt of rollers, your body
straightens out and down you go
feet first down the Magic Karpet
into the republican daylight out there
sadly safe from all these elitist fantasies
inside the consciousness machine this
crazy house so well represented. Sunlight
and everybody else. Every dark room
was her lair. Every empty room our tryst.

29 March 1995

[The Changermaker]

5.

So around Rockaway I strutted like D'Annunzio
thumbs in my waist band, broad belt, a king
of makebelieve and a blue knife, waves soft
past the bread-white bodies of them coming
for their first Sunday by the sea. Everybody
is from somewhere else, nobody ever
comes from the waves any more. Immigrants
no more. My brain is like an ankle
swivelling to take hold of this and that,
barnacle wood, rotted piling, gull caw, girl.
And I could go up to the changermaker
and give him a nickel and get five pennies
and shove them in the various machines:
What The Butler Saw or Can You Do This
(that is, get your penny back that falters
step by step down pivoting chevrons you
and only you control) and What Husbands
Do Not Know (I still don't, who can say
the limits of human ignorance when I myself
still think I am that ankle-witted kid
who glommed around the moony midway
looking for the single Fact of Life?
I am not and was not and he wasn't
and he is. That's all we can say with certainty.
The rest is the small change of philosophy.
With skill (not luck) you get your penny back..

29 March 1995

CARRYING OWLS TO ATHENS

Even though the Germans are sure they have enough
I still think we should send more. The Goddess
likes them, and pollution takes its toll,
Macdonald wrappers in the nests, et cetera.

It is hard to be an owl. One thinks of the dark
woods of Colonus (where the chemical works are now,
just a neighborhood, get your suit dry cleaned,
catch a taxi) and how there's still a tree or two

but how can I be sure there are owls, enough owls
for Colonus, where the ghosts are still waiting for him,
ghost of a ghost, the angry king, who went out shouting
in the dark woods and no one heard him

but someone answered and they walked away
and only the owls overheard. Only the owls know
where the city is buried in the city, where the nun
with billowing blue habit sings her quiet rosary,

where a man goes walking when he leaves in a temper
and who he talks to in his angry heart. The Greeks
remember so little, but so passionately, of what they were,
or someone was who sauntered through these fields

listening to owls even on the stone streets, rubble walls
in front of rich men's villas, the broken statues
that long after we guessed must have been gods.
Why else put the head and torso of a broken man

in front of your doorway? A head that's smiling weirdly
as if on the first cool evening of autumn the man
looked up and heard an owl throaty in the pines,
and knew something. But what did he know?

We hear owls at night and crows in the morning

and we know, so vividly we know, but what do we know,
we stand in utter knowing in the crowded street,
earphones snug, each one of us in a separate

coaxial tris-agio-noumenocosm, learning Spanish,
hearing music, listening to a lover's long
self-explanatory cassette sent us from Madagascar,
jogging in place while the red light reigns,

prancing on, close enough to touch, vague smiles
and tossed hair, goingness and hurryful
runners trivially happen to be close, close enough
to touch but do not touch, each runner

is an owl of his own athwart the sky, stretched
to the limit and no one but himself in all that blue,
black, green, whatever color is the world
that has such noisy silence in it. We do not speak.

In Athens, Athena's owls sift through the dark.
One must be. The alternatives do not sustain us.
To be a cog in a broken wheel. A street singer
in the city of the dead. Not deaf, we hear too well,

swooning down the night sky with cries of woe.

30/31 March 1995

By a cartridge shoved into a socket
by a camel kneeling
by a sky overflowing with stars
by a torn piece of newspaper with just the start of a story
by a picture of a woman in Siberia walking towards me in the mud
by the evidence of the grass

I know you,
I know you by the cracks in the creases of my knuckles
I know you by the telephone in the burnt condominium
I know you by music when I pass the bar
I know you by the ants under the parkbench in springtime
I know you best by the feel when I run out of words.

31 March 1995

NOTES FOR A HISTORY OF IDEAS

The nests of myth concur with star shadows.
Nonsense science. *Scire*, to know.

To saw through wood. To confess to an old friend
how appalling you find his friends.

Society is our thinnest skin. Be gentle, sailor,
the sea is very frail. Hearths,

they call it, the womb out of which some idea
pulls itself out of the earth and into the world.

31 March 1995
Boston