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BEING

a romantic comedy starring the ocean

1. Rendezvous in Your Town with a fish
• they thought was a galaxy — for truly
what do they ever know, those heavy-breathing
guessers with no telephone? The first thing you saw
coming from Europe, when you were new to it,
was a —standing tall in the Free Land,
see above— storage tank for gas
of the kind called ‘illuminating.’ It was big.
This is a promising beginning for nothing
but here I am, axle-deep in reflection
whose only sign is words that speak
as sunlight glinting off the pen has
not much to do with what the hand writes.
Devious delivery men and sly synapses,
thinking wields us against the peace.
2. Your town was a fish. You lived in the gills,
• gasped, collected the names of birds
from books and saw them in the marsh,
calling each by the label you supposed.
Nearsighted birds miss a lot of feathers.
Everything finds it hard to live up to its description—
what is a bittern? Where is sedge?
3. Even sleeping your way to the top is work,
• has worth, is doing something, not pure Luck,
the Luck we pray to in the gleaming cars.
(See Yeats on Fergus.) The Portuguese woman
was sly too, it took long sustained eye contact
to make her smile an answer to his glance
and favor him with an appointment, later,
under the flag of the kingdom, in grass, midnight.
I read this in a book: the image means
the wounds of Christ. Who died that I might live.
4. Do you see what I’m getting at here, a child
• swelling into language, the Erectile Word
that swells in turn and fills the vacancy of world,
a perfect match, a bliss of meaning.

Word heritage, playing in and with this vast
estate that is all that's left of kings and popes
and immigrants and pioneers, this jive
and its particles of jitter, this oily mystery
of the alphabet, spells words that don't exist,
words name things that never were,
verbs declare events that cannot be
and adjectives instruct us how to feel.
Words name us into action and we kill.
Simili modo we might come to love.

5. At least be busy loving you. That makes it better.
It's not such a gamble when there are two of us.
People live together so silence has a chance to speak,
so language stops interfering, even goes to sleep
in wedding bed or meditating mind. That's why love
is true and cuts the lovely lonely gull gabble
which is the sky's campaign to capture earth.
Like any picture, leave it resting harmless on the wall.
6. Things get shorter as they go along. Once when Issa
stopped under a temple gateway to duck a sudden shower
a girl eating a banana took shelter too. She gave him half
and ran away before the rain had ended. *Nothing said,*
he reported, *not even a smile, but my mouth is full.*

14 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE

The Presentation in the Temple
doesn't take place today, it's just a wide
day late in Libra, but I want
to think about her now: Raphael's
blue sky above a dome serene
on pallid columnwork upheld
and women in the foreground,
the Virgin set before a bearded Sage.
Far out of sight, dogs are yowling
at a fleeing deer, but the deer
escapes, the disappointed dogs
kennel down in yellow elm trash
on a day like today after all.
The Virgin has passed beneath the Dome,
morning-glories flare beneath her feet.

14 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

HELIOPHOBUS OF GALATIA:

THE SURVIVING FRAGMENTS

1.

... that woman in the sky
yearning me
dread

2.

On the sea wall yellow lichen
each stone delineated
I cannot name this color
what have words
to do with stone?
What I see when I look at it
is pollen, autumn willow,
hillside of dry summer above the sea,
finches' bellies, four-lobed mustard flower,
fields of rapeseed, spring.
And every time I look at it
I feel a strange and tiny joy
that feels like grieving.

3.

... the strangest thing
is wanting it to be different ...

3a.

... the strangest thing
is wanting to be different ...

[The two testimonia differ.]

4.

... walking the sea road

I found some pink flowers
and asked myself
Why does language make us lonely?
There is nothing lonelier
than a word spoken.

... the sea road
and found some flowers,
where are you, why is language lonely?

Is this the explanation,
that the spoken implies a hearer
and by its very passage through
the distance between speaker and listener
reaffirms forever that distance
it foolishly imagines it abrogates?

Say nothing, that we may be as one.

5.

... now clouds
have given me

the day.

6.

We look, we look
and everything we see
we take inside—
seas, stones, winds,
cormorants
riding down the breezy
channels in us
preying on our wet thoughts.

7.

All afternoon walked
along the sea cliffs

the sun snickering at us from behind the clouds

14 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

WAITING ROOM

She sat for a long time in the room. From time to time she looked at a painting on the wall. It did not interest her very much, but it was something to look at. Looking is almost like doing something. She wished she were doing something and not sitting there.

After a while she had looked at it often enough and long enough to see that it was a reproduction of a painted picture of a face.

Later, when her business in this place was finished, she left the room. She had closed the door behind her and walked down the hallway and then the carpeted stairs before she realized that the picture on the wall was the picture of the face of a woman. She thought so but wasn't sure. Then she was sure.

By the time she was on the sidewalk moving towards her car, she knew that she had sat in a room for a considerable time alone with the picture of a woman. That seemed to her strange, being alone with somebody else's face, for such a long time. There was no way for her to tell who the woman was, or why her picture had been painted, and by whom, and above all why it was in the room, alone on the wall.

It all seemed strange to her, and the longer she thought about it, the stranger it seemed: room, wall, picture, woman, alone. And as strange as it all seemed to her, and it seemed very strange, she could not say why it seemed so strange. And that seemed even stranger.

14 October 1995

Cuttyhunk

SONNET OF FILIAL PIETY

Interrogate the losers about the mountain passers
after the fuss of battle has died down.
It's raining and I feel it in my prayers,
in the swell of paper under my fingers
when I sit reading trying to forget the weather.
The battle. I try to sell the sound
of what's going on. My eyes won't focus
on the actual, which has no word.
My father would be sitting in his kitchen now,
wild hair sleep tussled and a stare
slowly assenting through cigar smoke to the day.
What is the kingdom he was always coming from,
a man with no need for neighbors?
When Srebrenica fell I touched the rough
hairs on my chin and almost understood.

15 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

Orders of attachment

1. Be attached to weather. Awed silence, heart-happy, in which I wake to see clouds, rain, mist. My delight in these.
2. Distracted from that deep sweet sober soaring joy, as by a woman passing, I see a woman passing. In the pleasure of seeing her, I sense a lower, keener but poorer, order of attachment. It is a flare of *wanting* in a serenity of *just like this*. I call it distrachment.
3. I am attached to my own self's seeing and feeling this. Attachment to the feel of feeling.

15 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

Every man is his nation.
Every woman is her own.
That is the difference.

Only sometimes
(and only in France)
is the opposite the case.

15 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

(the fragments of Heliophobus)

8.

These grazed paths are my delight
among the tall wheat grasses swung
by the fall cold wind. Sea near,
its roar comes to me now and then
like a bird over the hillcrest
athwart a fitful wind.

9.

... peregrine falcon
perched on the roofpole
over there where
gulls usually pause
to study the air

and tonight all the clouds
are gone
except the Milky Way

15 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

THE ART OF POETRY

How to get a handle on this stuff—
the rest is breathing.

Or rest in breathing
the sacred twitch of Variation
that made your music,

it's all baroque, honey,
and Goldberg's echo

down to our days and after
this lift of lilt around a given

air,
 a mien of matter
moved to spirit
 coming of one substance — air —
with what proVoked it,

 answer.

The oldest poetry in English is riddles.
It's supposed to be hard, fathead,
otherwise it all would blow away.

16 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

WHAT THINGS SAY

Go to a famous place and buy the cheapest souvenir
or just pick up a piece of crumbled rock.

Always. Matter doesn't need much reminding.

It sits on your mantelpiece and says

*I am the castle at Norwich you saw in sun,
Dame Juliana saw me every day of her life
and wasn't too impressed. I am yours forever.*

16 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

By strange overlay, as I got to this point in transcribing Notebook 219, on 23 Oct 95, the music playing was Edward German's handsome *Norwich* Symphony, sent to me for review, unasked for.

ABOUT HISTORY

Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est, said Saint Vincent of Lerins, who died about AD 450. And I suppose that is all, finally, we can call History, all that History could ever be. Since the facts themselves (and what is a fact?) are ultimately elusive, and the stories seldom even consistent one with another. Anybody who has ever participated in an event or witnessed an ‘occurrence’ and later read a newspaper account of the same, will know full well how different her own memory and understanding are from the story printed. Yet what a nostalgia we have had, especially for the past couple of centuries, for an object of measurable solidity and precise parameters called History, or The Past, or The Truth of What Happened. Alas, it is just nostalgia. All we ever have to go by, against all the revisionisms and conspiracy theories in the world, is just what Saint Vincent nobly settled for: *What is believed always, everywhere, and by everyone*. What a humbling burden for the mind! To take history and truth just as we take the language we speak, straight and safe from the mouths of other people.

16 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

The wind has scoured the island for two days,
birds hide in the intervals, downdrafts, coves,
thick bayberry bushes inland and some few soar
wind-guessing wise and look comfortable up there.

17 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

Your business is not to fight with each other
but to work it out.

And what is 'it?'
that's the first of your labors, to find out,

o Aldermen!

17 October 1995
Cuttyhunk

all I can do
wear a small
heart in my lapel

and think about
all the young dead

and write a small
book that opens
like a song

a song
about the blue rose.

18 October 1995
Boston

Rhamnus

& swamp
alder said
you know the red
berries the hard
name is earned
by people
call it that
what other word
can touch you
inside
where hearing is?

19 October 1995

a note for Gore Vidal

More powerful even than the man who wants something and knows how to get it and gets it, is the man who doesn't want it.

By myriad demissions of velleity a man grows immensely strong.

Can't I tell Vidal this, whose ancestor went so far as to doff human shape for sheer wanting?

19 October 1995

Leaf counting time,
A miracle again.

From the breath-hole
On the world's back

A spurt of yellowness:
Sunbait, some ancient
Japanese squirrels
Frolic in my lawn.

Picture them
By means of brushes
Plucked from sable,
Camel, ox.

Every animal
has its own mystique.
An aesthetic engine
To bother us

Into some quick bliss.
Dig those tails.
Picture this
As if I had a word for it,

For everything
You stand aside and watch,
The bleary myriads of different things
Crowding us out of the world

And all our bliss
Is seeing this.

20 October 1995

Wanting something is to perceive yourself as not having it,
thus being deficient, less than perfect.

Hence: wanting weakens.

Getting what you want just reinforces bad self-image:
the lack in oneself is made up from a captious unreliable outside.

Wanting is always waiting. Wanting is never now.

Only the strongest and most perfect live in the moment.

Everybody else is later.

20 October 1995

ON THE INFINITY OF THE SUTRAS

Just turn a page
the leaf of it
lifts in the low wind
and shows the sky

the sky I am

20 October 1995

M A T R I X I

SLANT SUN YUM COME
MEET MEASURE WORK
FROM DONE WE WILL
SPARE STREAM DEER STANDS

20 October 1995

M A T R I X I I

ALL SOME RAIN LEAF
TOUCH SUN TORCH SPILL
IN OUR TRICK LIGHT
NO HOPE FALL KISS

20 October 1995

THE BLUE ROSE

Once they grew grass inside the house,
the wind blew rain, the courtyard
was familiar with bees. The blue
rose of everything I mean

unfolds in the cracked light
of old movies, time exposures
make the moon old all at once.
Now what do I do? The blue

rose of everything I mean has ruby thorns
and when you leave the city you're
always driving west, the sun
is always in your eyes, the thorns

have a way of finding your hands.

20 October 1995