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THE ELEMENTS OF POETRY

It should be formal as water
is, obedient
to every contour of what is
yet in generous authority
leave every surface changed by its touch.

Formal as fire
sustained by what it consumes—
your memories and desires flame
suddenly in the tinder of the text,
your breath the oxygen it needs.

1 December 1995

New York is the greatest city in the world
because the subways run all night.
No matter what else is true
the channels of movement are always open,

the meridians. This is true. All night.
Do you understand? How can a city
be great that does not circulate?
A New Yorker has veins, arteries and the IRT.

1 December 1995

While Lauterbach is reading in Olin
about a woman and her father
geese fly loudly overhead. It is four
on a winter afternoon, almost dark,
the geese on their way home. The river.
Where things hide, and hunters wait.
There is no getting away from their cry.

1 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 1

A gala mushroom dance, floaty debts
in flocculent foustanelles, do you read me,
Serge, is this prance enough for thee,
old adolescent of the heart, the midmost,
the moo? Drink me, one said,
and hoped the party did. Russian spoken
the way it jumps out of the cow, a pull
is all it takes, a little squeeze around the bag
and our heart's in it too, you rascal you.
It isn't ninety years ago any more,
bridges seem to build themselves nowadays
and there are more flags than I can recognize.
The cruise ships keep dropping off shoppers
who throng our exhausted living rooms.

2 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 2

Pushing the treasure maps aside, bring out
that letter from your broker and explain it.
I can't either. It's the way the sea looks,
all Canaletto squiggles and a golden glare
like mosaics from Byzantium referred to
in a poem you'd rather not remember.
Once they started putting opera on the radio
war was certain. We are being prepared
day after day for a very long song, and most
of us will be dead by the end of it. Beauty,
that's what it means, all our soft sweet throats
making ruby sounds and understanding
finally what we feel. Even what you feel
is clear to me and I tell you a thing or two, too.

3 December 1995

What were they hearing
while the ground was listening to me,

step heavy, scuff a leaf
stuck to the sole, a patter-song
of quick sleet suddenly

and I look up and see I'm passing oaks,
their leaves in sleet make that hiss or hush

though generally the world is quiet
and takes what falls without a word.

3 December 1995

WALKING ALONE

Wheat ears
 sheavely
 mounded by thinking

stripped of circumstance
the logic stays.

 Be dog,
encollared be demissed
to haunch down hard.
This is the world.

I walked in osier,
a mere shive of ice
flicked on the puddles and
some few as well
 mid-air, twig-uplifted
where high water had frozen
and thawed out from under,

transparency of the glance.
We are left
in things.

For all I knew
I was walking in rare wheats,
the gene banks of agro-financiers
were chittering
with profitable variation,

for all I knew the sun
is a conspiracy
and it went as I went,
westward, under a cloud

I walked in osier,
there was meaning
raked shadow verticals,

imagine me
owning a shadow
and leaning it into you
deep as the doubt in a bride's mind

things lend us

tie a knot in shadow
and this remember

then the sun was gone
and I was looking for a stone
to hold the shadow down.

3 December 1995

EPISODE

The thought pressed against the world
like a child's brow against a window—
all there, all that radiant
terrifying there means only here,

inside, a guess of me, an appetite,
the whole thick world just one whispering wish.

4 December 1995

Becoming transparent. Letting air
pass through. One cold
Sunday in Brooklyn
on my way to the Jewish baker
the wind went through me
and left me pervious to light.
What I learned I learned from simple wind,
my mind comes stumbling after.
Five gates open and the words asleep.

4 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 3

As if in counterpoint a theme
fell beneath another and was lost
to all except the cunning analyst
who counted while all others listened

and that was you, the melody
abstracted from the incident,
the flavor of what happened,
the color of your eyes I never recall,

and no one knew anything at all—
that's the one I fell in love with,
the lost sister, the thirteenth at table,

whose voice I hear in my sleep
and know it's you who call
because I wake up in an empty world.

4 December 1995

On my way to the Jewish light
I caught a maple
that northed my mind
like a fold down the middle of a page

everything I said went nowhere
but the space was pure

and answers came from every side
to no questions.
That's what I mean by a mountain

but what were Jews doing in a mountain?
Isn't that always where they are coming from?

4 December 1995

Touch her edge. More opportunities open nowadays
for original research. Analyze lucidly in sequences of need
the harmonious energies men organize. Over night,
fanciful ordinances repeal any lingering intentions
south of noon. It is the moon. She is waiting in the street
to give it to me. She turns around and points,
her arm upraised making an angle with the street lamp
of no more than seven degrees. "There it is,
and there you are, and here I am." How much
one hand can say, a finger vaguely twirling towards the sky.

4 December 1995

And in this dark permission I am leased
— an absurdity to explain myself — “no one
lets me but I am,” “there is nothing
to say so I sing, yet I’m no opera”
“coffee spilling in her lap, her eyes
serene” are things I try to say,
to explain the word that has no meaning
but only being, pushing me
like light falling through Venetian blinds
formally and orderly on any carpet
indifferent to the previous design.
All form is now. A hand is a kind of milk.
Launched by unseen celebrities
one sprawls through language. The gods
are inferences from your remarks.
This is the final dream of politics,
inaccessible mountains full of yellow flowers,
the vast stone towers of Svanetia
where the original alphabet is stored.
The one we dream we hear whispering
from children busy doing what’s forbidden.
There, that’s what I mean by permission.

4 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 4

And what carries me when I intervene,
a gasp or two instead of breakfast,
and frown at the lawn? Great are the Symbolists
of old Karnak. They knew what sunlight's for.
What if we grew our grass inside our heads
and used the light to water that, so lush
inside with serried thinking we'd be free
of irritating answers and weekend guests.
Shadow would be half the world and it would fall
where we put it, obedient to our plausible
architecture, upside down. Control,
not waste. Environment, be inside.
Outside be sand. Salt-rimmed quiet river,
huge Sphinx with her haunches in the sea.

5 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 5

Here come the footnotes blue as rain.
Listen to the antique violin — Francesco
transcribed by Ezra — what we prize
illuminates us and grants us peace.
A fustanella is an Evzone's skirt, flounced
like a tutu but very masculine, très turc.
An Evzone is a Greek policeman but not now,
name meant handsome belted or neat waisted,
alluding to all that bombazine, I guess.
Song of the Birds. Jannequin made it too,
Dolmetsch busied himself with all such things,
beauty. Budapest. Blue smoke from a lodge
where hunters wake late grieving for what they killed.
It is winter, whose trade is bare remembering.

5 December 1995

LAZ

So the Laz
that Seze says
are butts
of Turks' jokes

are these same Georgians!
Far, in the disreputable distances,
Colchis and impenetrable valleys
crazy as birds and borders

speaking a language
remote from others
evidently not even related to themselves.

5 December 1995

The problem with lyric poetry
is that it says everything and means nothing

and those who listen to it
(hiding under their umbrellas,
Munich, sun shower,
by the window of the drugstore,
waiting for the bus)

have to have good ears. A philosopher
(miles and miles to the west,
in the black forest, watching
loggers truck romantic
trees down to Donau-Eschingen)
would say: if their ears are so good
they don't need poetry,

they can hear the truth of things,
the spheres' old tunes,
the music of ordinary mind.

Only poets need poetry.
It is their noisy messy gift
to everybody, nobody,
it is their self-important Clang,
a road they keep building
into the rising star,

only the poet needs poetry,
something for him to make and bring and try to give,

the fourth wise man
stumbling far behind.

5 December 1995

A G I F T

The problem with lyric poetry
is that it says everything and means nothing

and those who listen to it
have to have good ears. A philosopher
would say: if their ears are so good
they don't need poetry,

they can hear the truth of things,
the spheres' old tunes,
the music of ordinary mind.

Only poets need poetry.
It is their noisy messy gift
to everybody, nobody,
it is their self-important klang,
a road they keep building
into any rising star,

only the poet needs poetry,
something to make and try to give,

the fourth Wise Man
stumbling far behind.

DECEMBER MORNING

I lie in the light with my eyes closed
hearing the snow plow rush past
I follow the bounce and jar of it
far down the orchard road until
its sound slips beneath your quiet breath.

6 December 1995

R A S P B E R R Y

Raspberry, that's all I know,
the evidence means nothing,
there are thorns on the cane
and maple leaves sometimes,
you brush through them painfully
on the way up the shaggy slope
over Clermont.

Here we are
with one more obstacle, alive
and cognitive as sin. She bends
over the table to deliver bread.
He crouches behind the counter
to stow.

People wait for me
all the time. It is their way
of using me as a road, amazing
how many places I go. They go
and I stay, it is that yellow stripe
down my back that keeps me stuck.

That keeps me useful where I am.
Raspberry inside and ashen out.
Like the viper Borrow picked up
and handled on the road, the one
that taught him every language
but most of all the language of the goers,
the Gypsy men, the travelers in stars,

the line is golden, lies there, reasons
with the four directions. Following
it closely I am alive, I am instruction
folded in upon itself and listening.
Inside the ashes fire. Inside the fire

a city. Inside the city a tree,
the ends of the earth upon me!

Things teach things. Nobody
teaches nothing. I have to learn
that all by myself.

6 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 6

Simon likes to exaggerate. It is an opera
he is always singing. It is comfortable
to hear him complain, the world's all right
if ol' Simon's bitching. There is a lyric
hidden in the shoddiest conditions,
the most humiliating interviews
come out like Act One finales, glasses
smashing, choruses revving up, tenor
fibrillating with high C oaths. *The Sunken
Gondola* means his car won't start,
Sigismondo Maledetto means he's late to Mass.
Der Unterrgang der Menschheit means it's snowing.
As long as people go on exaggerating,
language and art are safe from liberation.

7 December 1995

CARMEN SAECULARE: 7

Break the raft I want to walk across
with my feet on the bottom and the water
up to my balls, I want to feel the river
one last time before the trees
come down and get me. I will get there.
I will vanish into the shine of gold
when sun comes out after rain
and the jungle smokes. And far away
I will be taking measures to help you cross.
Don't ask me what they are yet, I won't know
till all the hairs on the inside of my thigh are dry.

7 December 1995