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HYMN TO ISIS

The mirth of murderers (there is nothing
good to tell you) (strong coffee)
(the Dutch in Africa) (an opera) (tell me)
(no) (would these fragments
be
of a Superior Man say,
the great toe
of an Emperor (someone late, Severus, say)
an eyebrow, a burnished
fillet for her stone hair?)

(when this century invented fragmentation
(*invenire*)
the fragments were never their own sweet
sakes, were always
signs of some Great Whole,
telling scrap of papyrus?
chunk of Troy you could carry in your pocket)

(haiku and Sappho and shreds
of Coptic shmattes
in the Art Institute while paltry lemans
were digging the lake out
side the Arcanum of Natural Seduction,
a musée)
(first time I saw that word
was wax, was Eden, Coney Island,
disshaveled murderesses at their wanton consequences)
(a scrap of linen from the Fayum
with a face on it, its eyes
too big and fever-bright
obscene almost in its reluctance to be old,

face close as my own
bent around my skull to make an image

for you to look at and call it me
 (my bones I give you)
 (hundreds and hundreds of years)
but that's my face, the real one, black eyes
 and shy fringe of young rabbi's beard
following you through Time (through all the arrogant Wholes)

to be your own, one meek scrap, to be a fragment
 and thereby be whole
 therein,
 without ever remembering Sappho,
to be broken and be alive, without a kiss!

1 December 1994

VICTORIAN STUDIES

Exorbitant but annual the winter hauls.
What did the dovekeeper say to the hawk? Peace
in all my kingdom — the life form you have chosen,
every man's beak is turned against you. The form
of a woman! The Friday sun in winter drought,
loose-shadowly the trees! What did the maple
say to the linden? Yield. Not enough to make faces
at your peers, there is an ocean I have heard of
whose least spit is full of nutrients — why
don't they try too? But men know nothing either—
it is a porcupine sashaying (is that what it said?)
it is a railroad abandoned to its steel. Bridges
are literature enough. The empty valley tells all.

2 December 1994

the goal of my work:

My work means to prompt by words a mode (or, at least, a mood) of strangeness in the listener, then interrogate that mood itself. From the reader's answers, self-arisen, to those pressing sensuous questions, new forms of knowledge, reverence and conviction may arise.

2 December 1994

Time has nibbled the soft rim of the
rose and darkened it, splays it a little down
to the still water of the bowl it floats in,
roses floats in, time is ever-present,
not a movement, not even a yielding—
*an adventure in seeing, deeper
and deeper till the rose is dead.*

2 December 1994

NUMEROLOGY

First disguise the number as a letter.
Then write a letter telling any number
(strictly) of readers about a new Idea.
Call yourself a poet or the Pope
or an astronomer. Call the idea a star
or say No, this is it, it's in
your hands right now. Now double it.
Everything tries to go on. Even the old
woman with no shoes. Odd how they struggle
(double again) and divide. Whoever
we are, there is always more of us.

3 December 1994

THE CHEMICALS OF CHRISTMAS

Boil something till it turns to whey
and newspapers, little words remembering recent wars —
there are campaigns that fought their way
across my skin and through my chest — this bone
is all I know of it — stalled along the tracks
in Chateau-Thierry — mushrooms
growing in the slim shadow of a rail, little earth
my homeland — a train in the rain —
Frank worked for Union Carbide, woke up
haunted by the faces from Bhopal, I woke haunted
by Frank's face, the cheery well-groomed good looks,
the push of booze in him — never too near the surface —
1914 - 1941 - 1994 the measures tell us
but not enough, not enough the stars, lines
in my palm — the bloated poisoned faces at Bhopal,
the faces pilgrim in our dreams — my shaman
overcoat, my Spain — the discreet assassins
in their quiet clothes, men die for this entitlement,
that's what you have to remember — cowardice
is humorous — every paper talks of War —
at the Belgian frontier do you speak Latin?
Ora tinglely pro nobis pick a saint — the one
with soft brown — like mole skin — robe and white
flowers of Jesus in her bouquet-enduring crook of arm,
how she suffered from north weather, I'll pick her —
her genuine manners in the holy places — Allenby
Bridge — holding hands in perfect darkness — is it
Christmas yet? — is it Eros? — indecisive waterclocks
— a splinter from his cross, just a dark little line
in rock crystal rimmed round with hold —
a walking altar — testimony — and then the Jews —
no one can understand the number of their dead, they go
before us wherever we go — this public mind of ours
will never be free of their images, it is the one matter

it matters to remember — wherever we go they are there,
before us, the witnesses — knowing what we know, going
further than we go — always before us in a fire of interceding
— it is what we did — or did nothing — failure
of our intercession — for we were tardy to love, dull
in intervening — Bosnia — and all the deer
murdered legally this hunting season stand
around the Crib on Christmas morning discussing
us with their eyes — and telling Jesus what we are.

3 December 1994

I wrote a poem for Christmas
she said it was depressing
people don't want to hear about
dead Jews and wars on Xmas
Christ came to bring viyella socks
his cross is made of candycane
the family sings together
softly in its little house.

3 December 1994

DECEMBER DAWN

1

The sun is rising over the bowl of roses
it is just above freezing the arrangements
are perfect even now the macchinetta
bubbles espresso into the top compartment
and I am ready for all my usual sins

2

And the big spruce tree up the hill
why does it take the form of the tapering green flame
shown behind—or sometimes instead of—the prophet
Mohammed when artists dare to represent him?
Something stands for something else—a tree is a diplomat
of eternity offering the daytime heaven to simultaneous
translation. The shape is almost teardrop
(Allah means “the one who grieves”) almost a blade
earth spear and hostage sky. We live between.

3

Athenian customs, I think. Start the year in autumn,
fall in love with those who can't bear children (boys,
preeminently, or foreign harlots). Talk a lot.

If you talk long enough, something will go wrong.
Start wars you can't win. Question the gods.
Be abstract and drink a lot. Thousand of years

people will admire you and (if they're smart) do otherwise.

4

A man writing at his desk at dawn

is alone with multitudes.
Everything speaks. All he needs
is to arrange the silences.

5

If anything could always work
or we forgot it —ducks at the dam—
and algae (everybody knows that,
icky and ecological and green)

the way a river polices itself
or the hydrogen/helium business on the sun
flares off at times some excess fire
—or is that a language too

we are forbidden from overhearing
meant exclusively for angels
archangels hawks winds
and the tired gears inside our machines?

6

I'm breathing too much I'm holding my breath
something shipshape in my guesswork
but my spate is wrong my basic in and out
my small change my invisible tobacco

*{ Smoke this, he said, handing me an empty bowl,
glass or glassy, big as the sky it seemed
& I'm still inhaling. When the last word is said
you will have emptied this. Smoke air. }*

Air holding is another greed. Planes go down,
ferries sink, a strange year wobbles
bleeding to the door and I hold my breath
as if it were made of gold.

7

Time to eat
something
a little Mass
to celebrate
the enigma
of one more day.

4 December 1994

NONE LIKE HER

As imagine a monk edging along the skewed wall
of a ruined house — no owls, but a dog
has been here and the other morning saw a wren
mousing round the lower air —stubby tail stiff —
and the mist is running through the gaps — no roof —
the mist will find you no matter, the mist arises
as a condition of your dormancy, you who were
the golden jactancy of summer saunterers and now
ponder these furtive monkish moves in shabby buildings
and you may be right. There may be nothing but the sky,
bad alphabets, dead sheep, a questionable
(because perishable) river. It is the *together*
of your operation that is doubtful, alchemist.
Would anyone do it with you, or want to? How close
we have to be to be at all. No wonder to the river
he juxtaposed a mountain, opened a door in its flank
went in and sat a dozen years till the cave shone
with the happiness of his thinking. Though he calls it
by another name, something behind everybody's door.

5 December 1994

[B L U E]

Let us see what this color will say. There are foxes
not far away, good at concealment — the hills
are hollow inside and full of voices. City
hidden in rock, forest hidden in cloud, cloud
hidden in sky. No wonder we feel safe at times
and walk (we haven't walked in a week) up the glacial
scour of river bank and find a headland
where the geese fly low, coming in for supper and the night.

5 December 1994

COLORS

The sky-blue robe of Mary the Mother of God
was the first color. Then came the ruby heart of her Son
the one with a little fire in it burnt the thorns
that hurt the heart that grew in the chest
He opened to show us. Only then came yellow,
the sun our gold, the chalice someone lifted —
who could ever watch the priest when that
bright cup was happening, right there, high up,
as if the blood in it were being given
back to Him who shed it, there above the altar
where all the colors died away in shadow,
only the gleam of the thing and then was gone.
Wasn't there some color that was just us,
our skin or rioting sensation, ourselves alone?
But colors take us always into them. Old cabins
in the woods that become just part of the woods,
the sea is just a part of the sky. The large
discipline of our desire, aroused, allayed,
stoked by light and slaked by touch, a mad
wordy memorial of exile on some island
not different from the world. And we were there.
We looked at pictures of us when we were young.
We said: America is where all money's the same
color, as if the green itself were value and the numbers
only talked of quantity, our green your gold.
This strange place. The blue robe of God's mother
is on us, mother of all the minds of us,
wanting nothing but that we be, sky wrapped round us.

5 December 1994

