

5-1993

## mayB1993

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### Recommended Citation

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## NIGHT SESSION ON MOUNT MERU

And the sky was admirably grey  
and the assembly stood respectfully  
till the bird had perched on this limb—  
then they bothered him with questions  
no man could know the answer to.

The birds begin. Folkways of going to work,  
the car the wing, the seed I bring her  
firm in my beak — she samples it,  
her meed, while I hurry for another.

This life is sweet as life can be  
but there is a chasm running through it,  
caesura through the middle of the city  
Alzette through the honeycombed green canyon  
over which the city wards its peace.

No bird said that, it was the history-an,  
Aimant de Saint Sernin the school-man  
with hanks of paper underneath his wing  
soiled with meanings, spoiled with ink,  
riddled with signifiers, tweet.

*Nous sommes tous des oiseaux*, a bunch  
of birds, even pretty Arroganta de Faussure  
whose twitchy epaulets yawn semaphores  
now red now white against the fresh  
impasto of the springtime. Shudder

at all that green. Now look who's talking,  
Sparrowfeet, Evanderthunder,  
a good man falls out of the sky  
with the clap of a lotus opening  
till fire makes water out of air. He stands  
a moment silent on the branch. Pause  
is a part of the weather of our speech,  
rain cloud over broken barn, a blackbird  
creaks. Board and lodging for all messengers,  
free soup for poetry! Free prophecy  
from the bourgeoisie, translate the Book of Changes  
back into primordial Chinese; bereft of images  
a ship endures the lift and fall of waves,  
themselves nothing but the tedious history of wet.  
Aqua. Permanent wave. Old ladies like sweet ducks  
endure the gallantry of hired friseurs, sad  
bluing whiter what is white. Is this a drake?  
Or something symbolar, quick news report  
from this Hansard's of the fowls in session,  
a crust thrown over the fence,  
a dog born fast asleep. The moon was shining  
(end of pause, he went on) and half  
the wall was luminous and half was black.  
We walked between, in single file the six of us,  
and the guards with their rifles—less than ten  
feet away on either side— did not perceive us.  
A football field away we sat down in the dark

and chanted quietly our evening prayers.  
The moon was still listening. Loose-limbed we walked  
six months over the mountains, we made it,  
mostly. Now there is nothing more to tell  
but what you do. The assembly  
folded its arms and wings and things and thought  
(if they could think) about how little it is  
they do or try to do, and they remembered  
(those of them with memory) how many times  
the word they spoke (if they could speak)  
came back to haunt them. And each thought  
*the thing I said is truer than the thing I am*, and wept  
while the bird stared up into the sky as if the moon  
—racing from right to left beyond the clouds—  
were repeating its own meager lesson: well try again.  
And the sun rose like a woman keeping her vow.

6 May 1993  
*for Charlotte*

## THE NUMBERS

*for Charlotte*

As many as we count  
a few are left over—  
the finches said so, bright  
commoners at their station,

and leaves, little as they are, and young,  
seemed to know also  
this doctrine of commas,  
you always have to pause

to take a breath and when you do  
the numbers keep on going.  
*Think of the largest possible number,  
then add one.* Then square it, make

the result factorial, breathe and add one.  
There is a strict relation, a graveyard  
where the words exhaust their tyranny  
and men irritated by reality can sleep

in the shadow of not paying much attention.  
The ball drops in the left field alley,  
the linden tree is full of leaves, new ones,  
mopping up the morning light.

Can I console you for my difference, the wrong  
habits, fondness for blue jays and Bellini,  
winter, oh I don't know what I like any more,  
less of this and more of mind. Light

distinguishes and understands all things  
but is not things. After all these years  
I'm still trying to deal with bread.  
And doorknobs and pencils and the moon.

7 MAY 1993

WASHLINE

If the door gives way, what's left?  
An incomplete question is a glottal stop,  
laundry on the line taken for prayer flags  
of yet one more religion, the divine  
wind that hurries through our world  
on bluejay wings. Interpretations.

If the word gives way, brush strokes  
on a snow field, we all know  
we're here, we all have the same desires,  
only our pretenses differ, our few skills.  
Cry of an unfamiliar bird. The smell  
of clothing taken in from the line after a day  
in the sun, the strange smell we call "clean."

8 May 1993

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*for Charlotte*

Yesterday a heron over our heads  
flying northeast, big, its shape  
against the bright evening sky  
like a goose flying backwards.  
Just such a goose as had wheeled  
a quarter hour back above us and around us  
over the land and gone back to the river,  
great circle, a tear of light in or on its right wing.

8 May 1993

A chance to get out of the sequence.  
Charlotte on retreat down there and me up here.  
Taming the appetites of day. Nyung-nay. A practice  
of silence, both the words  
spoken and the words taken in.

Call Barbara about her skin, my foot, call  
the man about the essay, watch the cricket match,  
admire a stream full of ducks and geese,  
wonder why I'm doing what I do,

sluggish pilgrim that I am,  
always on foot, with cold feet idling  
to the mysteries, faithful, devout, apart.

And that's not so terrible, is it,  
you have to be really whole to be so apart.

8 May 1993

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Not in talking hearing  
hears  
    enough  
green of a leaf  
    with sun in it,

things are caught in each other.

9 May 1993

Brake squeal, the cars  
are out for sunny Sunday  
amazing the machines  
responding. The organic  
is pervasive. Things  
take on our lives.  
Sardonic sunsmile. Strange  
old sycamore I've just  
noticed it not far away.  
Dogwood. Crabapple  
blossoming too.  
Amazing the machine.

9 May 1993

MAY AFTERNOON

Call of the mourning doves. Red  
petals flutter on the porch.  
Man sleeping on his arms  
like a child at a school desk  
tired of studying his life.

9 May 1993

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A crow settles down  
Like two birds landing.

9 May 1993

IF AFTER NOT SPEAKING ONE SUDDENLY  
SAYS

If after not speaking one suddenly says  
line uncoiling from a bale of hay  
wire a natural release

*into form*

for speech arises from Chaos  
into form  
and it behooves the mind  
to apprehend  
the form disclosed

(whereas prefabricated forms  
conceal —as many cultures mean them to—  
the precise forming / formal  
impulses of the speaking heart

the “I” we look so hard for and  
value high).

That's what I learned from not talking  
for a day.

—But you knew that already, you're always saying it.

Yes, but now I *know* it. And I learned other things besides.

—Name one.

The taste of my own mouth unpersuaded by food or drink.

—You learned that from silence?

It was silence both ways, in and out. A fast silence.

—What else did you learn?

To let questions answer themselves.

10 May 1993  
after nyin-ne  
& for Charlotte

The wide open door onto the Kansas  
corn field abruptly fills with ocean.  
Art is at hand. I touch her  
skin and murmur about oils.  
She is pleased and lets a  
squirrel run up a tree and disappear.

10 May 1993

## THE PERILS OF FAIR WEATHER

sunshine disease, pink-feather  
among waterfowl, the perils  
of engaging in the elements  
other than your own

what is your own? what is the condition  
for which he was meant to be?  
diseases of the atmosphere  
for those inside the world  
imaginary solutions to real problems  
promised by revolution after revolution

remorseless sunrise

this is the alchemies  
a work to be done  
whereas it is his wish  
to play undisturbed among the elements  
tracing each to its licit junctions  
then prompting alternate or forbidden unions  
out to the boundaries of the actual and beyond  
argon and krypton and the rest of them  
dazzling strip-joints of North Beach  
with sudden reminiscences of

home. What is his own? Lawn glider.  
The boy in the basement  
studying the elements before him  
piece by piece the flavor and the feel  
the molecular arrangements of infinity  
while mother stretches organdy curtains  
upstairs on rickety softwood frames  
studded with nails to hold the fabric taut

crucifixions everywhere

and in the unused coal bin his bunsen burner coaxes  
miracles of guesswork from his dazzled mind—  
nothing but sludge in the beaker, his head  
full of pure lands and sensuous monarchies and  
geese flying immeasurably high across the zenith  
while their throaty voices sound sound sound  
closer than heart beats down here

argot of the wise

cheap books pretending paradise.  
A good deal of vanity, orange-sticks for fingernails,  
pearl-handled whatsises from mother's dresser  
a paragraph from Plutarch  
how Mark Anthony wore his tunic belted low

we piece the world together, barrenness  
of neighborhoods, the pilgrimage  
to libraries, finding the books that measure us,  
finding the entitlements of this open world

prairie of cities! grasslands of desire!  
limitless in front of him  
the bus-bisected Paradise outstretched!

the devotion of the alchemist  
is not limited by his first success,  
subsequent adventures in the bathroom of the planet  
constantly recruiting new substance to ennoble,  
raise the ante in weird partnership  
flesh and matter so unlike, mind and history so unlike,  
fire and water mingle to make come  
a philosophic house plant ghost of those haughty palms  
lined the avenue of sphinxes  
to the pointed hump of bread that fed the world  
the Pyramid of mind

light-free in dim cellars, the hope of Man.

Argot tender at tongue-tip  
there has to be someone who understands  
he thought at the mid-point of his presuming

but by the time the first crystals formed  
iridescent on the crucible's icy sides  
he knew his magic fire could elicit  
all animates but brotherhood alone,

argot needs another thief  
to lip it back  
from mouth to ear in delicate chains of influence  
golden shimmer of self-persuasion

listen to the glamour of the names!

portable essences! argot needs a friend to talk to  
a co-conspirator hidden with you in the hedge  
hip to hip and whispering close  
feeling the damp earth press in against your skin  
its all-purpose commentary  
argot needs the dark and dark needs you!  
carbon needs its oxygen

item, someone who could answer back.

Never found. Loneliness of demiurges.  
In their Cuttyhunks alone with Ariels  
and other half-created spirits tight-constrained  
they endure the silence of what has been made.  
Whereas in Paris even churches talk,

go to Paris, go back to subways and the Mystery,

argot embedded in the common speech,  
deliverly extract and cohobate  
until the plausible decencies of written dialect  
inherited his gold and dust and coal and happiness,

for he was joyful at his given work  
joyful at the hurtless transforms!  
A car among chariots, ox among sheep!  
He conceived himself afresh  
got born again into his persuasion  
into the Sect of Saying entered  
drenched in continuous baptisms!

this is the true story it all becomes the mind

what we ever were we are still are  
and he continues in the cellar room  
studying the heroics of the elements, studying  
the great ones who came before us  
their deeds and liberations  
(what do we need but chemists and biographers?)

and he is always the figure at the dawn you see  
slouching disconsolate towards subways entrances  
full of the lush futility of the life-giving quest

and he is beside you in the shopping mall  
measuring the public value of all common things  
to recompute them into emeralds  
deep in the hidden palaces  
from which his daunted Lancelot creeps out  
chipmunk-bold to nibble at the facts again  
then back into the glory story for quick repair

for the hidden animates the visible

and the timid alchemist permits the sun "to shine"  
its near-perfect transmutations  
conferring light on good and bad alike  
because he never wanted less than everything

that little villain caught with a candle in his fist  
and a book in the other and the world  
on fire with false ideas and only he it seemed  
born empowered with the truth, strong  
only with motivation to make clear, the truth  
was guessing hard and hoping words were true  
and rushing out into the lilac-scented morning  
sleepless and book-empowered to chant  
suppositious mantras to the tolerant daylight

argot of the wise so silent says

and here the rhododendron comes in, and the crow  
cruising by for offerings, the world is wild  
with his own silences publicly declared

silenter and silenter the way goats browse

among stone ruins the leaf fall of sunlight  
intolerable afternoons

knowing something that lasts only as long as it takes to say  
then the knowing's gone and the saying lasts  
and twenty years later comes back to appall  
the silent woman at his side

the word was supposed to vanish into its effect  
the word was to be magic  
was to speak the world completely into place  
and then be unreadable therein,

unrecoverable word that spoke all things!

he hoped, and the cellar filled with Chinese ghosts  
and Greek minor-league divinities, the comely limbs  
of naked grammar turned  
smiling to show themselves to him verb by verb  
the world he wanted spoke itself inside him  
and he thought it was no more than  
opening his lips and answering

it all is answering

squirming like the veins of marble in an ancient vase.  
To be known for talking in a silent world!  
To babble argot among the uninitiated  
to spend his chemicals and get not much gold  
around him in his cellar room, light he sees  
is coming through the shallow window at his back, sea-light  
coming through the peach-trees, a neighbor's cock  
begins to speak a better language, he snaps  
the light off on his writing table

heat of the lamp  
he closes his eyes and wonders what the day will bring  
will it be a name to speak to him  
a person able?

the silence of the earth is to be endured forever

he stands in the yard and knows that now  
while the first bus of the day roars up Crescent from the sea  
he has peach gum on his fingers now  
as if he had touched something waking in his sleep.

11 May 1993  
*for Charlotte*

