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THE BOOK OF THE SYCAMORE AND THE OLIVE¹

for Charlotte

1.

How long are people living
undre the sycamore
under the olive?

They live as long as the river does
dying by seasons
being by being

Weary of the yellow bee-colored
frothy beer she's brewing
a young woman yawns wide

And then the other women yawn
and the dog yawns too
and the sun finds the secret tunnels
inside the mountain inside the field inside the tree

and it heats the oil that rises
through the secret channels of the olive tree
to hide it in the red

fruit the dark
red fruit the black fruit

to hide it in the wet flesh of the tree
the black tree

¹In the Egyptian galleries at the British Museum is an item, numbered 22878, from El Amarna. It is a blue faience book label from the XVIIIth Dynasty, the reign of King Amenophis III and Queen Tiy. The label reads: *Book of the Sycamore and the Olive*. No such text has been preserved. Seeing the label in its certainty and handsomeness, I realized that I had to supply the book, especially since il faut parler à Charlotte à propos de sycomores.

and then the sun yawns on the horizon
and the woman yawns again
a big yawn
her mouth so open so open

and the women lick the ladles clean
and cover the bubbling mash
with a cotton cloth a bombax cloth a cloth
the color of honey bees.

15 September 1992 Kingston

[after reading a review of a biography of Evelyn Waugh]

We assumed he was making a statement
but couldn't understand what he said.

His fault or ours? With tweeds
and opinions so loud

it was hard to hear even an ordinary God
whispering in the busy office of the church.

15 September 1992

[responding to *Poetic Briefs*, Vol. I, No.7]

In the centrifuge of
what (little attention) we have,

all common and uncommon excellences spur
to the margin — there
the valuable solids of the Menstruum
congregate,
close-packed at the perimeter
yet (by that rim fact) far from each other.

We are far from each other,
we are furthest from the center when
we can see most and do most good,

leaving the bland serum at the center
(Buddha-Family, ignorance,
belief in a personal self
(that vapid pervasion of reality
by a fancied One))

We are margin.

If you are value, to the margin expect to go.
If you need the benefits of new, look for it at the margin
where the trans-commodity transpires,
restless, hot-blooded,
coaxing its chance.

[15 September 1992]

All I ever asked was a little rain
love sex music food fame enlightenment
a cloud in no sky something blue.

16 September 1992

ON THE DAY THIRTEEN CAWUK

1.

Not a day to turn to the machines
that wait below the world the blue wheels
turning in a red air and cobalt knows
and silver runs away and hides
deep in the black solemnity of lead.
This was the dream or every day it is
from which we fall for hours into waking
always on this far side of the earth.
We never see the other. The body falls
towards every other and there is silence
also where that falls. A touch and nothing.
Answers everywhere and no question.

2.

We think we move free but it is not so
no grand canyon no savannah but holds us
tight around the armpits the molecules
compel us to move. No liberty
except to imagine an actual space not filled
with all the obsolescent products of our Will
this world we made. So there it is
no room in the out. Around the weariness
a stink like a match lit and the light
soon goes out. The dark is one more solid
honest though and not pretending to be wide.
Doors opening and closing this is what music.

16 September 1992

Staring at the face
I had no choice
the interval
was cut into the music

the dread
was inside of things
like the shiver
when you're cold

no part of you
different from
what you feel—
a goal nowhere

you keep towards
and the light
usually doesn't work
the cup is empty

it doesn't matter
the sore teeth the
lame horse the eyes
of someone you hurt

look back at you
from everywhere
—beyond the name
there is a name

nobody dares to say
you are it
you fold your whole day
around it and sleep

pretend to sleep
the silence
is all you have
left to give.

17 September 1992

*Holding count. I can almost see the words ahead of me
and this pen just traces them to make the letters dark
so you can read them too like the dark rock between summer glaciers*

*what is written writes itself out of great Time
and time unwrites it at its season so we are left
only what we've written down of all that passing.*

17 September 1992

To help them speak
but what they say

ears pricked
against the informing wind

a loser in a limousine
memorizing money

a priest in a graveyard
waiting for love

we all have
some of what we need

I dreamt a line of regular French verse
ending with the words *désir adroit*

and what we want
is always straight ahead

thing after thing in line
waiting for our appetites

so our desire
must be adroit

a nimble lust to skip the in-betweens
and go right for the king or queen or light

itself glamorous beyond the black horizon.

18 September 1992

There's something wrong with the camera.
Every time they take a picture of me
back from the lab in Connecticut
comes a folder of strange images:
a heavy-set grey-haired man is standing
smiling possessively next to my
own beautiful wife, or sitting calmly
in the ergonomic chair at my desk
or leaning on my back porch
as if he owned something almost as
big as the world. Who is this person?
Where did he come from so suddenly,
galloping out of the years into the snug
dark inside the camera to scare me silly?

18 September 1992

Things waiting for things
like an island waiting for the ocean

endlessly what can it do but
there is a tower in a city

one is poised there
feeling the whole of it inside

civilization and a bronze
arrowhead a white pig

in the shadow by a river
someone journeying interminably up.

And we will never get enough of feeling.

18 September 19992

[THESE EMANATED POWERS]

The henchmen of the ruling junta
throng at the bird feeder.
Caught between the living and the dead
the third great population waits

half-servant half-master
at the edges of our timeless waterhole
for these birds and such and me to need
their impeccable attentions

cuter than squirrels neater
than crows dissecting carrion, full
of sex and politics and inspiration
lost sciences and found grails,

the Imagined Ones, those owls
who fly up from our dying heads
into the substantial memorable air
like Sherlock Holmes or that red mind

of ours who thrilled the nineteen-sixties
with liberating lust and revelation
Tanya naked at the barricade
enforcing peace. Gidget. Asterix.

19 September 1992

Knowledge
is an impropriety
a crazy housemaid
masturbating in your bed

There is something else
a Quiet
Browning's Caliban detected
on the other side of the moon

or whatever that bright light is
confuses us
and makes us stand in front of audiences
lecturing and gesturing
with small five-fingered beige hands

starfish with giant stupid servants.

19 September 1992

Now that first light catches across the tree tops
deep reassurances of green. Something still here.
Pain lives so close to the attention. Light decides.
Things come back to their places. We talk things over

when we're afraid. I'm afraid. This long
life made of pleasures freaked with pains—
an animal turns the leaf of its ears to the signal
and catches the rain of sound. We

are at the cross-hairs of the world, targeted,
every sound finds us where we are. The word,
then, insists on being heard. And the pain
is almost the loudest word there is.

20 September 1992

THE AGE OF MIRACLES

Counting this word then as a stratagem
the house on hen's legs and a dark bread
we break open to find a thing like a fish
but swims and sings and we close the book

having no more need of marvels
since we live in the propinquity of mind.
What does that mean. We are where it happens,
everything. There is no other weather.

20 September 1992

A poem booby-trapped with houses
with silences

suddenly you're living in it
and you wife is getting dressed across the room.

20 September 1992

And these are the things I haven't gotten to say

A canoe going over a cataract.
A businessman sitting at a table in Hell reading my book.
People laughing. Women on a stoop discussing
one single child how terrible to be a single child
in a multiple world how terrible to have a name.
The laughter is the worst of it, and the body pain,
part pain, the hurt in the nerve ends. The worst
of it is teeth and fingernails. The shame.
The muddy forest full of little boys
lost between a war and a law book.

Now it is going to be autumn and we are beautiful.
We meet each other in somber fashionable restaurants
for midnight suppers. The opera still burning in our chests,
to sing that way for money. The ball
rolling across the carpeted floor, the dead red cat
at the side of the highway. I never told you this.

The machine is broken but it makes no difference
the messages are part of the air part of the wood
there is no way they will ever stop talking
I slept late I wanted my body to be oak tree and oil
wanted to be cake to be swallowed by someone laughing
I never told you I fell inside you and never came out,

there is an island where the dead emperor's body is propped
up successfully on the high cliff where the naked people dive
trying to rouse him with their beauty and the sexier they are
the deeper his sleep. For life is the reciprocal of sleep
and we wake fractional, in only one of all our bodies,
our shadow dancing in the cobalt waves of the Tuscan Sea.

21 September 1992

TO THE AUTHOR

Unspeakable depredations
as of a posse of hyenas
reporting for a local paper
on the contents of your knapsack
and you thank God are in the puzzle tree
with the sleeping serpents and the hornets
waiting for another continent
to rise from the sea
fatter than Atlantis and full of witty books
even you can understand you fool
you have been here forever counting on your toes
we drown in your trifling imagery
even the moon gets tired of your tricks.

—T.Parsimonius Lucius, *ensor librorum*
22 September 1992

LOVE LETTER

To whom it may concern:

the bridge was dead
I went around

came overland
disguised as water

the silvery blue water
in my canal

and found her north
by the pratie fields

of Martin Van Buren
who opposed in his day

the Power of the banks
to tell our time

and came to our new home
here is the carport

between sun and rain
the Humid Path

of all our effort
dance floor of the sacrifice

pasta salad Edith Piaf
a man walks by the worse for music

and the rain keeps singing
"I will call you

before I get home
a relaxing stewardess

to ask me Are you serious?

and the fluting voice of the pilot

assures us at least of heaven
no matter the company

no I have never been
serious since I left the ground"

but I have detested
whatever is popular

having only this tree
here

the leaves are
only shadows

you are the fruit of it
forever.

— 22 September 1992

[from notations on an old yellow scrap, I think this spring]

Nothing is certain. The fireball of the inevident
swept through the bar like Jussi Bjoerling
singing *Nessun dorma* from the juke box
in the corner I pressed against the girl
who called herself Astarte. Ike
was in the White House and I was drunk.
Police handy with their clubs outside San Remo.
I think I am in the hands of memory.
She smiled with ferocious serenity back at me
from her face under its aureole of turbulent
almost black hair she wore like a habit
for these nuns of desire. She pressed
against me and the hills of Korea filled with snow.
This must be memory, but why remember.
The snow was pricked with little drops of blood
her lips I touched I loved another woman
altogether and sometimes I remembered.
Wasn't there one other thing I had to do?

22 September 1992

OOLONG TEA

Oolong is Crow / Dragon
we are beset
with meaning

what does it mean though
to mean the way it means
when oo means crow and long means dragon

and nothing is pronounced the way it seems
except the black of it
or the blue of it sweeping down

into the well and out of the meaning?
Now we have something in the cup.
It steams and the steam

flies away into the morning.

22 September 1992

In my own defense let me plead how few people know
about the giant sea bass that can weigh six hundred pounds

and there is an orchestra to which Viennese gymnasts turn
for inspiration when walking in the desert sun and cars pass

How could I have done other than continue following my eyes
into the dust waltz of the pueblo ruins — muscle by muscle

love understands her way and it is always to a joining always
lying down within reach and the shadows scoot over like hail

and we still wake up on the other side of the planet arguing
how any animal so big can hide so successfully so many years

then I see the clever tusche tamps that define an elegant cheetah
looking back over her shoulder at me in the dentist's chair

Paradise was always following the hips of a hill or the crown of a road
till there was nothing but going and being awarely you go.

22 September 1992