

12-1992

## decD1992

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If they were casting around for it  
they'd find it

a man made to look like horror  
(at horror, we watched *Night & Fog*)

travelled. So we were in London together,  
you and my red-haired wife and I

and it was country too, this town we got off in  
a kind of suburban express to climb down from

on long iron stairs of the el station  
to what I thought was nowhere

was the heart of the city  
and then we were in some borrowed flat

on the borderland between Leicester Square and the forest  
look at the blossoming neon the hope

of economic recovery  
friends travelling to earth.

\*

This measure does not teach me anything,  
    this meter's out of ink, I pressed  
on the back of your shoulders  
    like a comrade, to make you feel better,  
headache was it, or sudden doubt  
    why were you grieving in warm sunshine  
    of a London quiet  
    maybe a Sunday even  
when the song creeps out of moldy churches and  
the car lights are coming down the hill?

We never go anywhere on Sunday.  
We are a dream. We are cups  
moving to the lips. Our hands  
rest in sunlight faintly smoking.

We who inherited only a mirror  
salute you who inherited a rock.

There is bitter running in this world,  
hurtfang and winter and

the stories do not help us understand  
our own, we run to them  
because we know this weather so deep

the tragedy of being who I am.

O poets  
you should read a  
book.

\*

Swept out of the subway at dawn  
one has no friend but the sky

because I am shy  
she had to teach me where to place my hands

though well knew I how to roar  
but knew no other thing—

can you write the history of your teeth,  
your own teeth one by one  
how they grew in and fell away and came again  
with pain or easily  
and stayed, some or all of them, or none,  
how you lost each one?  
Can you tell the history of your hands?

For mouths and hands are secret places,  
palaces,

beneath his mask the dentist's face  
is Thoth's beak or a hawk from high heaven

and every handshake sealed you in some pact—

all of them,  
                    history of touch.

  We stood  
on Parliament Hill to watch the congress burn,

touch, teeth, the common  
insinuations of public language  
I must here block or disembowel

to speak a cureless jargon of my own

by which a new thing's heard

and new hands caress the amice of your skin,  
shoulder to shoulder even  
like a bad song

forward into the imaginary town.

23 December 1992

THE EMBODIMENTS

*for Charlotte*

are with us  
to be sure  
what we can  
by already being be

*in this knowing  
is the highest bliss*

where this  
is the knower's  
own

they arrive  
at midnight  
in stony places  
the stable the valley  
between foothills  
rising to the pass  
where no one can breathe

and it is cold  
with politics and war  
and the animals  
who warm them  
will not live long

into a murderous universe  
they descend  
to be what we are  
so we can know what we are

we are other  
than we seem  
only who we are.

*Christmas Eve 1992*

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When we are caught  
in the Embarcation  
we meet a distinguished  
foreigner whose eyes  
are like a palm tree  
shading Orion from our sight  
straight overhead  
on this winter night.

24 December 1992

## CHRISTMAS HOUSE

The name of the flower  
that seems to be the same as itself  
stamen or what is it  
arising from the waxy heart-shaped  
I suppose it's the corolla

brittle flower  
now can winter know us  
sealed in the mystery of house  
where our compact torsos  
secrete all round us  
the space of mind

2.

I understand this is the Nineteenth Century still  
the Century of Comfort,  
Dr. Morton's anesthetic surgery  
and such soft chairs  
horsehair and scarlet leather and

we rest in this opulence  
a sofa!  
a paradise of indoor weather  
where the spectators are  
sporting with each other on the loveseat  
while the All-Seen Eye regards them

this gentle nescience is our mind.  
Christmas Eve. Four Jimmy Stewart movies  
greet the birth of God.

Surely we have a better antiphon than this,

in the Dharma-ending time of merit slight  
and quick deteriorate the qualities we brought

empty handed from life to life—

the comforts of language  
console us for the fragmentary real.

25 December 1992



## THE DRUNKARD

who lost his key in the alley  
looks for it in the street  
because that's where the light is.

What we're afraid to do in Bosnia  
we bring to Somalia.  
A good deed, indeed,  
but where are the others,

that open up the gate of Paradise?

25 December 1992

## HOMELESS PEOPLE

From Çatal Hüyük to the Armory shelter in Manhattan  
nine thousand years.

In an age when all estate is Real  
the only protest is to have no house.

25 December 1992

## *La Littérature secondaire*

Transmission is about itself. Deprived of other gasps of the machine, it proposes no one, it tries to cure common colds, it stands above the Ravine of the Alzette marvelling. How small a trickle of water slices a park through a city, a canyon through a massif. Little does it take to make a burnished nose decant the dubious vintages of the head -- that *testa* or old pot from which some of our glory and much of our woe ariseth. Amen. Can you what I say? Transmission transmits, there is no object. We live in an intransitive universe if the truth were known. All effect is illusory—only the doer suffers or endures the consequences of what appears to him (and only as long as it appears to him) his action. La Tete. *Kamboreke no galama, kamore so tekim* said the Tchadic Fragment, “the language of the people of the Blessing is hidden in children's ears, the language of death talks out loud.” So perhaps to close the books, as Christmas closes them on the year, and beckons glad-handed out towards the snow, a miraculous vacancy rife with beginnings. Not another word. Speak! The poem rises from the scratching of birds among your seed.

26 December 1992

13.

It could not cut the vanity the haughtiest  
Zoa the thorn-throne she sat impassive on above us  
moving merely (meager) in the precincts of the giant's chest  
this body me. I have who hurts. I aim lowest with heat  
and high to take each sunset clear. There is  
a sundog I see through the trees. There is a language  
I beat. The musical instrument (that air-scoured blanched  
remarkable ribcage) tongued out a sterling music  
to which the stately masochists of Urban Life did step  
a flaming and a Fleming mingled, up-ankled numbly to receive  
the Gift of Feeling. Take this, and this. The Gang of Five  
have you in their clutches, and the Dark Masker  
is still far across the rolling green who comes to save you.  
Vana, escra noa companiya! No co nyitu samana!  
It's all that endeth barely. It could not cut. It sang  
and sinking in that lake of sound his last poor real  
stretched under the pellucid emerald of her water  
until she saw me. A man carved out of echoes.  
And when he comes to right me, that Eight Ball  
unseen wandersman, he'll cheer you ruby too,  
the tolling bell in the warm center of his eye.  
So dark. A black man you would say to watch the words  
in all their honesty under (sudden!) standing your sense.  
My stance is fire. The thing that stands inside the stone  
causing the transparency of the whole, and that clear  
intense flame inside the stone the wise call *water*.

26 December 1992 [A section of *The Physiology of William Blake*]

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Try to keep this in mind  
reminders from the prompter's box  
breed doubt in low quarters  
but meant well  
has after all a certain  
effect. Berlin, the Spree boxed in ice.

26 December 1992

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Thing fall.  
That they fall  
or ember  
kindle

again  
to be a child  
of fire  
and breathe

a dangerous light!  
Everything rises  
without returning.  
The change.

The wink of an eye.

27 December 1992

## DARJEELING

The tea factory  
bearing like the mill  
the laudable extensions of the hill  
where the Nepali women  
straggle up the slope  
with only sixty pounds  
of this and that  
balanced on their napes

the labor of the settlement  
and Adam's curse.  
You see his footprint here  
a faint trace of it  
inside the larger deeper track the Buddha left  
when he too passed this way

in the second or third week after his enlightenment  
on his way up to Tibet,  
the first full human of this age.

It is done  
with seeing and not seeing,  
with knowing and ceasing to know.  
It is done with mind

and mind is nothing, never, nowhere and all.

27 December 1992

## FIRST LESSONS IN SWEDISH

When someone comes across the room  
all the way from the other  
side of her arm and holds

the air out to you  
simply  
like a glass

and you take it  
and it holds  
the both of you

in one long conversation  
not even your eyes  
can eavesdrop on then

then you have met.  
It is the only language  
we need to know.

28 December 1992  
for Mary Backlund



---

One ages into things, the way morning becomes afternoon  
losing nothing by it, darkening a little  
around the edges of the sky. But night's  
a gaudy gift too, with all its distant splendor.

Night's a gaud. Enough. The old houses in Tivoli  
by the railroad track console the river.  
Occult swallows dive into the dark.

29 December 1992

## Traits. 5.

Grey mere centers Adam's seed. Put your hand whole. From this headland a habit. Every night the goddess touch him. This by way of oak, all brown the winter. All elm the lost. See, he remembers too far.

Then the sparrows woke up from the river. As things seem, a blackbird too frequent. Then a wave on the water, or is the water. What is the difference between what it is and what it does?

Keep wanting there to be the answer. The picture is a stripe of umber. That is, the picture of a picture is what a head sees inside itself when it thinks with its inner eye of what it would look like if its own eye worked outside and looked back over, here, where the guessing game is always going on. Brown, and touch me. Green and soon come back. Yellow is whose favorite flavor.

Picture of a picture. A Pict. A thing to remember a thing to eat. A time to eat. Remembering is like a vivid forgetting, that is all. The girl held in his arms will not survive, he will not survive either, Alaska is far with its strident young housewives caught in someone's image. An image. A man with blue hands from striking repeatedly a demanding surface. A man with mud on his hands from balancing on a slippery path. Wash with oak leaves. Wash with maple.

Not all the colors have been drunk yet. There are still parabolas and azimuths. It is possible to describe with exactness what will not be experienced. Perhaps description obviates event. That would be the nature of mathematics. He wrote "There is in the fine print of a cheap Greek grammar more beauty than in the Louvre." He had never been in the Louvre, and now that he has, he's forgotten his conjugations, especially the  $\mu$  verbs. On the bridge nearby he watched a woman walk into the wind away from him, so he walked in the wind that had just left her. Somehow this pleased and excited him. He was eighteen and could smell nothing. The feel of wool. The color of a clarinet, some pieces by Alban Berg somebody was playing at Juilliard

— this is like a collage, see, like a Joseph Cornell nude made of the color blue and a few stars and a scrap or two of girl. He was older than he looked. It is all right to say the names, a name is almost everything and certainly a thing. A thing. A thing is a flag of a lost nation. A thing is the shadow of some going. Somely going, or goingly gone. Or by. A thing is gone by.

Photography has taught us to accept cropping. Pieces of things. *Recadrer le monde*. What we're looking at with such obsessive fascination, the eye does the cropping for us. *Recadrer*. When we look at something everything else even all the else of it itself fades from focus and is like a smoke or shadow drifting this afternoon over the marsh. They said fog was general over the Eastern seaboard.

That tells why the priest wears the chasuble and why his fingers drip with oil and who is speaking inside the cup. When the child was found, the pots and pans and teacups in the house when picked up gave out the low deep drone of conch shells blown by skillful musicians somewhere up above the earth. The property of a cup is this: that the deep of the dome is always up, the cup is always the sky, and when someone that holy gets born, the sky speaks, and sounds like a shell. So you see it is not the ocean you hear in any seashell, but the sky. But you have to listen close and put your ear into it, hole to hole, like Delphi. But in that house in Lhatok that day it was everywhere, the sound of the sky, from every curve expressed.

We wanted to express ourselves by staying up all night and touching every side of it. They called us the People who Eat the Dawn. Dawn eaters, we slipped along each other's skins, and travelled the dark silent subways of our clothes. To find the city hidden inside the city — the only place you could ever find it. Hide a leaf in a forest, hide the city in a city. And when he finally, years later, got to the city he found it a green and open place, with marshes that tended to the sea, and brownish birds with speckled plumage who kept their beaks pointed at the heart of the sky.

29 December 1992



EX ORE MACHINARVM

When the spell-check finds TIVOLI  
it suggests  
changing it to SHOVEL.

How well it knows us,  
this routine.

29 December 1992

## THE ELEPHANT

*for Charlotte*

The must of things, the elephant,  
Jane mixing tea and coffee  
Billie pouring cream until  
the coffee overflowed the cup and saucer  
slopped into lap, the accurate  
attentions we bring to our excess,  
the world, the tongue tip touched  
to seal the unwilling letter, the hand,  
the elephant, the compulsion  
to be on the side of things  
against the mere dying, the elephant,  
the things, the must of things  
marsh mist and my elbow winter rough,  
is there a privilege to feeling,  
the elephant the compulsion to feel  
anything and so we call  
and call, and call what goes on  
in the blank of the heart and the screen  
of the head and the box of the breast  
our feelings. The elephant. The feelings.

30 December 1992

## NEW YEARS LETTER TO THOMAS MEYER

The attempt to give pleasure by gasoline  
is to go

\*

Standing in air  
in our socks and understanding  
the one thing not to be:

those ambitious Americans in Victorian novels  
always so full of vim and ugly bounce.

Not be that. Not have  
a career have a lute  
as it may be,  
a harp in hand

or hand cupped to the lips  
to speak at midnight

and let the ocean listen in its endless lust  
if it cares to, if they

care to hear.

\*

Understanding Arnaud  
who swam against the stream,  
his pale face grown red  
from the effort of striving

his sinews to accommodate  
so slow an entrance

backwards into the world.  
The glory. Backsiders,  
face to the cormorant wind.

To have no ambition  
but this feeling.

\*

And when the Jesuits got through with him  
he was fit for nothing  
but poetry and Africa

and there the vultures waited  
gentle critical persons stooped to their cleansing task—

in sequined dresses, in sailor suits,  
it is time for all the fractals to come home.

2.

I wanted this to be collaboration  
like the thing in the bed,

a headache  
on a wet spring morning  
that happens to be the last day of the civil year,  
tell me  
the omens in your house,

your wet brown leaves  
almost black under four days rain  
the general mist—

the profits of TV. I am writing these days  
under my old name  
the one that fell out of the sky

a heel and a hearing  
and a heron over your head  
too, my friend—

too many imperial edicts  
have spilled our years



since we last met

and we persist in love  
still trading on the first mistake.

3.

Tradescantia, they call it,  
though ours died last year,

Wandering Jew, named for John  
who was the Queen's  
voluptuary of uncommon fruit,

no fruit on this one,  
spindly and elaborate,  
a plant made all of going.

4.

We could drive south  
or you east  
    (how is your opera?)  
we could hang up  
big jade-green placards  
    on the e-mail  
and wire each other bulletins of bliss.

Is the bliss with you?  
Lord how well you write,  
    and how much universe  
you have wantonly declared  
blond boy, with the flick of a finger  
    to be there  
instant with your say-so!

5.

It is New Years Eve day Nineteen ninety two  
forty two fahrenheit degrees  
and still everything is beaded with wet light  
the arbitrary hydrogen and nothing stirs.

O soft and comprehensive light  
I have worshipped all my life  
the skin of you you share  
with everything I've ever seen.

6.

We had to mow our ambition  
and from its sweet grass so cut down  
(fescue, rye, kentucky blue)

we bound up sheaves of hay  
to feed our simple beasts the years.  
Live on prophecy

alone, live on love.  
We worked for the sake of the poem alone,  
gave our lives to write it

and the gift was accepted  
by those articulate energies whose job  
is to receive such things

in endless answering.  
What other hope did we have  
but to speak our mind

and find it everyone's?

\*

This is a New Years Letter, isn't it, as if we were being Auden again and someone still had the right to speak. But none to answer. Ethiopia, Iceland, Spain — those unfashionable 1930s names.

This is me trying to praise you, and console you for the dismal but natural habit of the world: that hears without attending, that shovels in the food we proffer without ever saying grace. Don't worry, I'm trying to say, the year is always beginning, Janus sees everyone, our bodies are immense with feeling. Don't worry, nature has nothing to say except what we say. Thank you, I'm trying to say, thank you for what you say.

31 December 1992

## LAST POEM

The year's last  
word  
is for Charlotte  
and says forever  
forever. This word  
is not abstract  
or witty. It is a dark  
river  
through a large city,  
rats live near it  
rafts go down.  
There are industrial  
environments  
the lyric eye  
does not understand.  
Metal  
is to be a joy, smoke  
a kind of color.  
Things are made by it  
and go on.  
With my hands  
joined and easy  
on the warmest New Years  
of my life I  
wish us forever.

31 December 1992  
*for Charlotte*