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A BOOK OF *AS IF*

I feel as uneasy as if a bus were
grinding up a long hill in my heart.

The skin on my shin looks as if some
old Dutch master got tired of his work
and threw his paint rag away.

The nape of my neck
feels as if it's raining in Portugal.

I feel as if a crystal ash tray
is falling off a table right now
and I can do nothing about it
though it's still in the middle of the air.

I feel as if a color postcard from Aix
bent like a skull cap
were stuck between my bone and my brain.

I feel as if each of my knees spoke a different language.

My fingers feel as if they're sailors,
members of the Mariners Union
at a contentious midnight meeting
shouting Marx and obscenities across the half deserted hall.

The rock on my table feels as if
he's a schoolboy taking a vital
exam in an empty room

My right ear feels as if the woman from the electric company
who came to read the meters lingered
on my sidewalk to picnic on camembert and wine
cooking her neat omelet over a blue spirit lamp

When the humid breeze touches his skin
he feels as if the train finally comes into the station.

When I put the telephone to my ear
I have a feeling in my right arm
as if a Japanese trawler were fishing illicitly
the bass-rich channel between Martha's
Vineyard and No Mans Land.
Or as if I'm having a heart attack.

This coffee tastes as if there were middle-aged yogis
on the other side of the mountain
taking a break together outside their pleasant caves.

My upper lips feels as if six rabbits
were crossing the lawn closely observed
by a wounded fox hiding in the hedge.

26 July 2002

IN THE WORLD OF SENSATION

the buses are crowded
but move easily through crowded streets
up towards the butte where you can see
all the slaves brought back from the coasts of Memoria
before the war ended colonies
and left us only here. Ourselves
in our place. Where touch is the only politics.

27 July 2002

THE CHOSEN

If you go there without me
it will hurt my feelings
but that's what feelings are for.

If you take me with you
there will be a woman at the door
who will stare into your eyes and bark
"You must belong to someone."

She will say it tonelessly
so you won't know if she means
a surmise or a command.

That is the great moment for me
when you interpret her.
I see the wheels spin. I feel
myself hoisted from the ground.

27 July 2002

HOTEL

We have to put more objects in the room,
an obelisk, a pair of trolley cars,
a clump of angry civil servants shouting,
a Wednesday market where one sells cheeses.
Priests walk content among scornful
citizens. A raincloud lumbers over Pelteuza.
Are you ready now? Take off your cloak.
Now a flight of greasy looking pigeons
sidles in over the old synagogue, the one
with a copper roof and broken windows.
A skateboarder looks out of place
having fun in the ruined cloister, a noise
like restaurant kitchens, or is it coal
sliding down a chute into the cellar
of a house where an old woman lies dying.
Take off your dress. Across from the fountain
zouaves in their old-fashioned uniforms
lounge barely upright in shadowy arcades,
acacias are still blossoming purple or white
and someone has brought a pony to the park
so children study it, run their clumsy
thick fingers through its lank mane.
You must be ready now. The colors shift
as the cloud methodically erases
sunlight from right to left across the plaza,
take off your underwear. A radio down there
pounds out bottom-heavy blues, archaic
as Attica, outmoded as a book
but loud, loud. I notice you still are

wearing shoes, please, please
eliminate them from the obvious.
A post office van scoots in from Adler Street
and parks right where the handicapped
try to cross the dangerous boulevard.
Lie down. The postal worker climbs out
carrying an expensive looking envelope
and heads this way. I'm waiting for you here
in the empty bed, take off
that silly necklace of seashells and amber
I gave you in another city another
frightened afternoon. Stay in my arms.
Let me hold you in a perfect world.

27 July 2002

A MORNING THICK WITH TIME

Handwriting is so old-fashioned.

Writing is old-fashioned,

that's the secret,

to write any word down

inscribes the past,

writing is always old-fashioned

no matter how new the fable or the form

the words bring their old age with them

old from the beginning.

Fashion itself

is old-fashioned,

fashion is old,

it makes you think: how young we are!

we are the newest people in the world!

So we feel we have to catch up

with this old new thing

someone thought up just before us,

last week in Paris, last night in Milan.

Trying to catch up with the fashions

is always running backwards,

that's why philosophers dress exclusively in rags.

Interesting as that may be, Olympe,
my point was about writing,

we used to think writing changes the world.

In fact writing restores it.

Writing with all its blurry dance of signifieds
always reinvents the past.

As long as we have writing
we will never change the world.

But without writing we would not know or notice
that the world has changed or hasn't, that it's still
waiting for us to finish our sleep.

When the gods or whoever gave us time
they gave us only writing to fight it with.

27 July 2002

THE PERMISSION OF THE LION

Anything. The permission
comes out of the ground.

Quince tree. Parable of the Lion. ∂

Break down the gate. Almond.
Or hold the city on your back
and carry it with you till you meet the woman.

The Rabbis tell us Adam's first wife
was Lilith, but they do not tell us
what he was like with her, sagebrush
they tell us, and hibiscus, a shady lawn,
quinces, they tell us these, and names,
names of women, pale-browed names
and night names they tell, but we need
to know who Adam's father was.

Beat the Bible till it tells you that.
Genealogy. Etymology. The rivers
of Paradise flow backwards towards the beginning.
Nothing ever started. Everything is just going on.
Four rivers flowed from Paradise,
we choose our sources, we live by evidence,
that glum courthouse word for all we see.

2.

So it is time for the Lion

to sing me to sleep,
if you don't sleep
you can't wake —
so the nursemaid said,

and she told me I'll see
you in your dreams
if you see me in yours,
our dreams slip in
and out of each other

like shuffling the cards,
go to sleep and dream of aces,
then dream you wake
and I'll be there
the nursemaid said,

I am the watcher in the shadows,
I taste my tender sleep
and share it with you
my favorite child, you feel me
inside you as you wake

rushing inside you to be out
and you wake up like an animal
leaping out of a cage
running through sunlight
scattering the crowds of men

till you hide yourself in the jungle of the day.

3.

Her song stayed me.
It led and leads me
into a different direction
always. I had
so many childhoods —
choose. I refused
to learn the names
of birds and flowers,
I knew who I wasn't
and what I needed
was India and far,
blue Himalaya cold
bare chiseled rock
the learned air,
circulation of the world,

the news per se
stripped of its dying.

Air sign in fire moon
burning. Air
we can see
only when it burns,
shows itself as fire.

The Lady dearly loves the Lion.
Rides on whose back,
strokes whose lips with her fingertips
encouraging roar,
teasing him to tell.

4.

Every poem is an autobiography, the Rabbis explain. Who else is in the room?

I don't know the answer, I barely
know the question.

But I've asked it,
that is the important thing.

Go find someone who will tell you his name.
Not his own name (he'll never know that)
but the father's father, the first
no and knower and unknown.

But that which is not known
can still be spoken, the Rabbis say.
Just as the one Word really known
can never be pronounced

הוהי

even when the Sun's in Leo
cool morning of a hot day
I bet it will be, a branch
fallen in the night, no milk.

28 July 2002

INVOCATION

The heat of the day piled high
on the western wall, trees bear cloud.
Some days have no movement.

If you are such a day, if you're hot,
if you are waiting for me, call my name
in an empty temple and I have come to you already

before the echoes fall asleep at your feet.

29 July 2002

BEDTIME STORY

What have I never told you?

The mosque in Toledo,
you see it far away across the plain,
first the minaret of course
and then the sheltering dome —
and that's the best way to visit certain beauties,
from afar, hurrying past in air conditioned cars
over truck routes towards innocent bazaars.

I seem to be offering you a sermon not a story
but sermons (the Latin word for conversations)
are even sleepier, n'est ce pas? That's Greek
for I'm crazy to use any language
but my own. But (are you sleeping yet?)
it takes so long to find one's own,
let alone a language that works for two.

Like you, obstinately vigilant,
barely holding down your pillow.
Think of all the birds from which its white
tickly feathers came, think what they saw once
riding on the morning: a great broad dome
spread over the green plain, and roads
flickered with quick traffic — one
of those streaking cars was mine.
I saw. I was seen. The world is naturally pure.

You're right. Chickens don't much fly.

It must have been some other bird, some other day,
but what I say they saw is right. I hope you get
the central issue here: there is a way of looking
at things, intensely, caring, but not getting too close.
Use this information when your dream begins
if perchance you are not sleeping yet.

29 July 2002

CARNIVAL

A big animal eating a big animal
but not much. Tough heart, tender liver,
a bite of buttock. It is how we make love,
leaving most of the body unconsumed,

saved for next time or some lesser predator.
Around every relationship prowl
lovers like hyenas ready to pounce
on bodies weakened from imperfect trysts.

29 July 2002

A SUMMER NIGHT

Light the citronella candles, honey,
I'm bringing my secretary home with me
and we'll work out on the deck. Plug
the laptop in so we'll be ready,
no drinks, just a Chardonnay
and two glasses. And she smokes
so be sure to put the crystal ashtray
right in the middle of the glass table.
Have Kevin skim the pool, make it clean
in case we need to skinnydip at midnight.
Remember we heard the owl call
but tonight it's supposed to be warmer.
If we're still working at dawn
call the office, tell them I'm in Rome.
Maybe put out a box of chocolates,
those Belgian seashells, but no real food.
When the sun is fully risen, please
open the beach umbrella over us.
Kiss my lips lightly and brush her hair
tangled from so much talking,
a moth might have gotten caught in it,
nature happens to us all the time.
Say good morning into my good ear
then call the priest, they're used to things.
He'll bring a different kind of candle
so lead the children out to say their prayers.
Swim if you want to, it won't disturb us,
the work we do has water of its own.

29 July 2002

