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HOW TO WRITE A POEM

Formal Instruction:

Erase the ending.

Cut off the beginning.

What's left should be
the poem.

Demonstration:

Cut off the beginning.

What's left should be.

Commentary:

The beginning and the ending are the Noisy Egoic Zones, where you have too much to do with 'your' poem. You're interfering there, clearing your throat to get started, emphasizing or repeating or interpreting or decorating at the close. The real stuff roars in between. The poem.

Objection 1:

But what about the First Line, of which you famously claim the rest of the poem is the reincarnation, explanation, *ta'wil*? If we throw away the beginning, we lose that line, we lose the root.

Answered:

(a) We don't lose what we never had. We don't lose what comes from that first line, the line we only understand through what it elicits. Whatever it is, it survives in the full

decent poem, as you survive in your little son, who doesn't have to bear his father's name or his mother's face to be intact, perfect, his own.

(b) Some poems begin by themselves, without you. These are the glorious exceptions, and every word is precious, including the first line. Which you have to keep. It is perfect and pristine and worth everything. Sometimes the last lines too.

(c) Telling the difference between the poems reflected in (a) and those few in (b) is almost the whole art of poetry.

Objection2:

But I mean something when I write. What becomes of my meaning if I take away what I say, the place I'm coming from, the thing I'm trying to say?

Answered:

(a) Give it to me. I'll take care of it for you, till you forget what you meant and what you mean, and you are free.

(b) Don't waste your time explaining the poem to itself. Explain yourself to me, maybe, at my house, later, after the show.

22 November 2002

THRENOS

1.

It is when no one's there
the voice is loudest.

November is a sentence by itself,
says all the births and dyings
the ewe lambs born and the man was sleeping
the clouds weeping

o you devil
language to let things rhyme the way they do,
endlessly trying to keep us in the system,

the mystery of how things are
before we get born among them

or how they were before the sand,
before Osiris died, November 17, 1,000,000 BC
when the world fell to pieces and became us
scattered from one another,
I wake and you sleep,
each of us a thousand miles away
in a place each of us calls here.

2.

It is sad to hear so many voices
and then not hear them,
sad to let the pencil fall
before the child's hand
finishes the house she's drawing,
it has its windows, maybe
that's a monkey looking out
or a kitten, she's sleeping
and no smoke comes out the chimney,
she fell asleep before she made the door,

how will we find
the place intended,

the conversation waiting for us
in the room with no door,
the conversation never ends
but is always interrupted,
the continuous imperfection of our means,
she whispers in her sleep maybe

snow comes down over this smokeless house
the kitten shivers and curls small
a dream will come that has the sun in it

what did she say
in her sleep
the mother wonders
who stands

in the real door listening

but it's no good

all our anxious hearing,

her daughter sleeps another language

where she is safe

and we too can conspire.

22 November 2002

I FIND THE OLEIC RESIDUES

There were people here.
I find their impressions
on beds and chairs
and from each of those depressions
a certain quantity
can be recovered of *oleum vitae*
the grease of other people's lives
my chemistry
knows how to analyze
identify, preserve.
Packed in crystals of rose ice
the oil grows thick and flaky
like spermaceti or coconut
or a ship sailing quick in creamy seas
or clouds over the Mohave
in a photograph, everything
very quiet. You remember
their bodies then, the ones
who are alive in your little pyx,
box, vial, phial, heart-shaped case
or small etui, the place
you keep your grease.
And that is them. You touch
them with your tongue tip now and again.

23 November 2002

RESEMBLANCES

Things look like other things
till they drive you mad.
Everything depends
of course, we all know that,
but resemblance is ridiculous.
This man waiting for the bus
your father. This cloud
that anything you please. A word
you saw writing in the fire
too quick to read,
a long word. Words
are the worst, they resemble
one another as well
as things outside they're supposed
to mean. Intolerable,
finding a reward in a drawer,
like a guitar with so many
signatures scribbled on it
you can't hear the music.
In my desk I found the sky.
All right. I will go to the sky.

23 November 2002

INEXACT METAPHORS SAVE POETRY

The irrational numbers of it,
the system
the not quite fit
they are. A banana
like a Chevrolet,
a blackbird speeding like a lettuce.
Or the opposite can help it too,
the universal simile. Like bread.
Heavy as bread, tender
as bread, fierce as bread,
fertile as bread, musical as bread,
drunk as bread, he smote
his wicked daughter with a sword like bread.

If we compare
everything in the world
to the same one thing:
by the end of that long day
we would know an infinite
amount about that thing.
More than we know now.
Next day a new simile.
Tomorrow. Try it.
The uses of poetry.

23 November 2002

TANTA
MOUNT
TOATA
BLEAT
ROPIC
ALSEA

23 XI 02

GOIN
GONT
WOLE
GSAL
LTHE
TOWN

23 XI 02

CLARINET FOR BREAKFAST

As one uncle to another
toast and overblow
some pieces by Berg
sausage and semaphores
all I can promise you
is music happens

the sonorous instances
renew my sense
of body, being
in a body
in a world of bodies,

love you, cello,
hiding from the police,
and you, my darling, a voice
lost in the prison of the world.

23 November 2002

METHOD

Method is a feminine word
because it has road in it

hodos, a road or path
method, according to a path
proceed by plan.

Or have no plan
and just keep going
wild as dandelions
and it's not even spring

feminine as a road is
as a tongue is
as a hand

oh language you tell us more than we can bear to know.

2

what do you mean by method
is it a warping
of one sound against another

a loom of shadows
that weaves an actual image
a shape you read against the wall

a person, standing?

or is it just one more cello
groaning gorgeously
beneath the orgasm of the viola

3.

It is simple, it is poetry.
Make things say other things.

But when they do,
who are you?

23 November 2002

NOVEMBER DAY

As far as I can reach
the small wind rearranges
leaves, neurotic
housewife, uncertain,
turning, certain,
where did I leave my house?

23 November 2002

SLOVENIA

Where we can fly
this flag forever
over the small hotel
The 2 Days
a company a crowd
we danced
our way up into the hills
the way dreams do
where the ashes
of the last King of France
are endangered
in a leaky sepulcher.
Give up only
what we are save
what we have been.

23 November 2002

MAASTRICHT

a circle of gold stars
impersonating our old colonies
thirteen
but soon the stripes will come
red and white, war and fear

the simple terror that brings peace.
Bread, geese, cauliflower.

23 November 2002

PAUL'S TIME

taken

away, his birthday

left to think about.

To miss the man.

Paul's churchyard it used to say

in the old books, books came out

where men are buried.

He died and went to Maine

selon mon rêve

and there I met him

on a winter's day.

The car wouldn't start

but the snow could fall

and all things run as smooth

as mice under the cupboards,

grizzled sky over Waterbury

with gashes of sun

this strange garment we wear

that is just like us

shredded with light.

24 November 2002

DOCUMENT

I dreamed a certificate I had to give
someone to prove something I professed
and it was given. Written in an Indic language
it attested to memorized prowesses,
ragas, color codes, calculus, correct apparel
for 300 different gods. I signed it
with a round rubber stamp and everybody knew.
Flimsy testimony of our senses, flimsy
evidence on which my life is based.
This important document was gone when I woke up.
Perhaps he has it, the graduate I awarded it to,
the dark young man who hangs around in dreams.

25 November 2002

NOT A SAY DAY

Not a say day

a hear bar

to drink in

what the other ones

distilled for lonely

ears, hours, us.

Where are my own

words sleeping these days?

25 November 2002

