

8-1993

augD1993

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### Recommended Citation

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## A MOCKING BIRD ON CUTTYHUNK

Welkin alterer, spare  
self-conscious scholar of mid-air,  
I saw you stumble on an aspen branch  
then do your stuff

and you were parliament, all-bird,  
with nothing of yourself in all you did  
except the doing, and you were swell,  
late afternoon on a summer island,

a grey puffed wingy Chaliapin in a tree,  
after-image of human arts and measures  
amounting to not much, because of you,  
who sing beyond the differences, alone.

17 August 1993

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As if a kettle somewhere came to a boil  
and no one there, and magic personages  
poured it in the kettle and tea was made,

brewed long and accurate, strong  
so that (we said) the mouse could trot across it  
without wetting his feet, forget the mouse,

pour the tea, add milk and sugar. Yes,  
I relent, I will go with you to Ireland, I must,  
and I will enter Wales. All these years

(these dreads) I did abjure  
pedestrian entry to land sage-sacred in seed  
for fear of finding rock & roll and they have lost

the sacred arts of poverty that made them fine  
or made them mine, me theirs, a gene  
for anxiety and a gene for song.

In other words I was afraid the tea was cold.

18 August 1993

T A K E

three handfuls of whatever they gave you  
and mix in whatever they didn't

well, very well,  
in a terra cotta pot, unglazed, the kind  
that sweats on southern days  
and leaves a nasty pale ring on your dark wooden table  
as if a worm had coiled there

yech, take  
a bottle of straw wine and a blue glass  
and a loaf of carrot bread and a newspaper  
written in a European language you can't read  
(Estonian; Polabian; Manx)  
and fan the flames with that, only with that, oh  
only with that

a fire will never burn right  
unless it burns with words  
pure words  
not spoiled by understanding  
pure words  
not diluted by being spoken

let the fire under the skillet make sense.

So where does the egg come from?  
Depends on the culture. Open a book  
that tells you: we are met  
on the borderline.  
You soak the bread in the egg and milk mixture  
then rinse it out, and do it again,  
and again,  
until the bread is just loathsome sopping crumb  
squeezed in your fist, and this

you throw in the alchemic vessel with Oil of Regret  
scented with dried rue

until it splutters and hisses and finally quiets and fries.

You need friends to cook for  
and enemies to feed.

Now here it is ready to serve and you don't know what it is.  
That is all right, it's a new country,  
nobody knows, food is always a guess,  
some dry and some pickle and some freeze.

We import our peaches from Samarkand  
our rye from Russia  
our birdseed from the Ukraine.  
We import our milk from inside huge animals  
who walk into the barn and frown.  
Milking them causes our mouths to twist  
in such a way that normal languages  
suddenly become dialects.

Nobody is left, they all went home for dinner.  
And I remain alone, praying to the food.

18 August 1993

## MODERATELY AFRAID

I am surrounded by my enemy.  
Look where he has brought me  
watching the whores of Warren Street  
saunter in sunlight where the old tracks  
slice a corner off the hangout park.  
He has shown me the affinities of desire  
and laughed. Or I laughed  
and ran where I thought was away—  
north enough but still hot,  
the weather with nothing to do but change.  
My fear is natural.  
It might be my only skill.  
Or is that his propaganda too?

19 August 1993

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Having no choice is no excuse for choosing—  
drowning does not exonerate the ocean  
and Juan's sudden footprint seen is proof  
only of our capacity to feel surprise.  
They have been here with us since the start,  
tight-clustering, unskippable, days of our week.

19 August 1993

WITH INCREASED FEDERAL SUPPORT OF  
MEDICAL RESEARCH AND

With our health-i-tarian doodah disposition  
all ills will soon be healed all poverties  
of spirit and of life dismissed  
out of sight beneath the glittering pixels  
till AIDS reverts to clever love again.  
We are kings of distracting analogies,  
wishes that pinch hit for logic,  
thrifty ecologists we are of psycho-status-quo.  
!If only the government would cure diseases,  
soothe violence! quell youthful restlessness!  
if only sex would just sell cars,  
have white babies and go away,

if only money made its way back in the night  
like favorite pets forgotten in state parks,  
and there it is in our pockets again  
while we sign one more petition to the president.

20 August 1993

AIX, WYE, THE ZUIDER ZEE

Places  
I need to have been  
to be done.

and then the sloop  
sails in and furls its sails.

The alphabet is over. The night begins.

20 August 1993

## GRACE

Apart from grace there is not much to say.  
And it is waiting. The winos near the Chinese bridge  
in Honolulu, the words you can't pronounce,  
the disagreeable letter from the bank—

these understand you better than your mother.  
They see who you are as you walk by  
proudly in search of a taxicab to take you  
past the governor's palace to something even higher,

a feather cape made out of sunrays, a harem  
populated with voluptuous accountants.  
It is the fear. They see the fear and indignity  
you piece together to make a life.

We walk along and sometimes grace happens to the fear.

20 August 1993

*...scribere*

as has no reason  
as cloth has no trees

the fish have swum away  
into their directions

pick out the silver  
from the reflection

there are times of me  
no fleshier than a piece of light

this coward code.

20 August 1993

## RESCUE

On the first morning that speaks autumnese  
and hope comes back  
wearing the loose-fitting shirt of the wind

they start work early  
rebuilding the banks of our stream, our little river,  
walls of my Sawkill  
they grade and plough  
to bring (they call to say) the natural  
“back to life.”

I feel like one of those landed proprietors  
having an ornamental water cut  
into old sheep meadow  
while Inigo Jones surveys my fabric  
with italianish yearnings in his eye

but I own none of this,  
nothing but the seeing,

my world my eye.  
O world our endlessness!

It seems to be against loose-strife  
this whole campaign,  
they strive against lythrum, wicked  
(they call to say) the way  
it takes over, spreading its purple flowers  
by every stream, self-propagating,

and they rebuke it scientifically,  
they, whose only flower is to interfere.

21 August 1993

## NORTH

Sometimes on this narrow road  
to the deepest North it gets so crowded  
I cannot listen

even as with the morning, this,  
soft birds et cætera  
cool, relenting, no sound close

but still the noisy surfaces inside,  
clattering my china.  
The honesty.

On such days less is said.  
The Spartan silences—  
unlikely. Just not saying

much. Whittling the silence  
to a little word. Whittling noise  
into something soft enough to remember.

That kind of morning. The faithful shepherd  
nudging the clouds along and cars on 9G south  
breaking the law on their way to Mass.

22 August 1993

## WESTERMEN

Westernmen they called the island's  
first inhabitants the Irishmen  
the westernmost of all the old north world

who trooped after the sun, sentimentalists,  
passionate randomists following her course  
(grian is feminine) down the sky  
till they could go no further after

then stripped in the kerries waiting  
for her to come back. After two thousand years  
they found means to follow — Boston, Brooklyn,  
Chicago over the ocean of earth  
and the mortal sargasso of the prairies  
only to lose her again in Oakland  
when she set for the last time over Tamalpais  
and the whole world turned Japanese.

That's how far I got in my history when the crows  
began fiercely to explain, a bunch of them  
clear-voiced as nuns, in the maples between  
me and the rising sun herself,  
louder and louder in blackest Irish.

22 August 1993

## THE INTERROGATION

Sure of the ten directions the Chief of Security  
locks the door and screws the hasp tight with a nickel.  
Ocean is not far, change must not get in, time  
is not unlimited, addresses change, cars don't start,  
direct questions require elusive answers. He seeks  
simply (he thinks) for a house on an island, folded  
neatly in the sea, a house with a snug interior  
painted the color he remembers as his mother.  
Someone lives where it is always morning, kitchen's  
yellow, tiles are blue, the cat's asleep, the tea  
is strong and fresh. And he doesn't have to talk.  
And he doesn't have to talk. Of course the Chief  
of Security whenever he interrogates anyone  
is always examining himself. Who else would understand  
the endless questions, the infinite declensions  
of his subject finessing over any visible horizon  
till he hates the sound of his voice and no one answers.  
There is nothing more unanswerable than a question,  
a tone of voice. He turns from the gate and faces his car  
like a man switching the light on expecting to see rats.  
There are no rats. The car starts. He is  
but he is going. All going is dying, he thinks  
and then he realizes that this overwhelming insight  
is one more cliché new fetched from France.  
There is a taste in his mouth like poppy seed.  
Aluminum. Moonlight. Is everything in fact an answer  
waiting for his pertinent question? Doubt also is a star  
in a dark part of heaven waiting for a cloud  
to cover it, he thinks, and then he thinks, I know  
every cloud but I don't know the sky.  
The car understands him, but still goes.

23 August 1993