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NEW YEARS LETTER

At this even moment
a slight perturbation of
all I know
turns white.

It begins me.
Your pair of gloves
the dual number in Old Greek
mittens of meaning
in which the secret fingers move
invisibly and safe
crossing and making
spells
as if to ask
what lurks inside the sense
we have of ‘inside’—
inside what,
and who goes there?
Is the heart just the weary sentry
patrolling the precincts of
a walled-off garden
fountain of blood?
Let something be inside nothing
and the tooth of paper
welcomes the stick of graphite
that leaves on it the track or trace
of what some far-off mind’s hand
did in its long obedience,

‘because I was flesh’—
a zealot of compromise,

a wizard of defeat.

Too cold for gardens.

Only hope grows there now,
weed of stone wall and brick path—
nobody knows if Nature knows,
heartbeat in the desert—
sanctity to appease emotions
before the wind comes
in from those gaunt locales
mentioned in Deuteronomy,
no milk, no mud, no garnets.
The precise vocabulary of emptiness,
longitude of nowhere at all

we wandered, sheepless as stone,
no milk to pour out
on that big rock we stare at
reminded of something far away inside.
But who can say? It is too early
for the words to mean
what we usually do,
someone is making sounds in the arroyo
this me needs to investigate,
the burrow through the world that goes through us
too, the sounds inside us
constantly rising to confuse us with glory,
we heard our way here and now what,
suddenly I touch no one’s hand
and it feels warm.

Identity
is born just from sensation
repeated,
the long goodbye inside hello.
Now watch your mother being born.
Now ride this rock ridge—
shale your house and shabby weather,

what is she babbling now, priests,
in the thick fume of burning laurel.
write down every syllable
using what in these mechanic days
sounds something like a rhythm
flesh might move to,
every syllable
a person in this play,

as many words as people in the world,
will last till all are spoken,

the Bible begins with a girl alone on a rock.
How she grows,
divides her attention till he answers.
Then hand in hand with what she’s made
they traipse inside out to find
a set of probabilities—

    sand, hill, gorse

of Donegal—

    where we can be.
Wherever there is river.

You don’t realize—

    that is, make real to yourself—
how mysterious a river is,

    a vein, a going
right through us and with lives in it
and the shadow of the mountain
falls on the flowing water and the shadow stays.

Hunger is our difference.
Spill fire from the shell you stole,
heaps of them by Staatsburg shore,
Venus mercenaria, my life for yours
soft valvey interlude, soft door.

Come fasten the driver to the car.
This New Years letter
with no apostrophe
yet says its piece
to all, the sundry
emporium a language is—
listen to the fo’c’sle of your heart
to what the men are saying in you
the ones who signed on for the duration
of your blue voyage,

human,
the grizzled mermen, effete midshipmen,
angelo.

Listen to the light.
It flashes on the golden background
in Sienese painting,

it is a thing
like a beginning of what never ended,

a spiral elevator from the mezzanine

right through the afterlife

up to the weird

platform where the winter stars
take off their clothes and call you by name.

You have been here before, hombre,

the spies of your supper reach

up from the cities on the plain—

this is the place

where the inside and outside of the body are the same.

1 January 2009
Then someone waited.

*Hydrangea*

*artificialis*, sky-blue, posing

in the window – a Dutch thing, really,
to cheer the house inhabitants

and the stranger too who passes

along such narrow streets,

Omnibus, someone for everyone.

Sky is the second house

and earth the first—

say one set of priests

while others argue

sky came first and from it we sailed down

insouciant,

gull-like, bringing only appetite.

Sumus. And here we are,

a million years later and with Latin names.
But who was waiting?

Whoever he was, he was your mother
and the orchestra was loud, the pretty
violist from Lapland had a hidden
fifth string on her instrument,

\[ \text{anima} \]

\[ \text{terrestris} \], that weird flower,
soul of us on earth,

\[ \text{you hear it} \]

shimmering just past the ears, inside?

A middle-ear issue, outside, the jungle
noises waiting for you,

\[ \text{Assam on morning,} \]

those humdrum insects
you hear all day long and never see, see?

Was it the music waiting, a nutty elegy,

I am the opposite of nationality, she said,
cashews are poisonous between nut and husk,
did you know that,

\[ \text{I did, am I a politician} \]

to guess the mood of random vegetables,
leave me alone with your facts,
this is snow, snow,
   fallen yesterday and more to come,
Sibelius, tu sais?
   Before a fireplace a family
gathered in the shrill of silver flutes
to adore the new-born,
   what is the price
of peace, who brings it to the door?
And who pays that child when at last he comes,
and the doorbell rings the end of the world?

Someone cut paper flames
from orange crepe paper
and set them to blow
merrily this way and that
from a little table fan,
little black paper curls to look like smoke
moved in the same speed
same wind that moved the fire.
They were saying their prayers
hoping that everyone would get born,
right there in the middle movement
adagio, from the life I’m coming from,
for once among mortality,

at ease, men,

the battle will never begin.

We don’t besiege cities anymore—
lead your long-horned cattle home
deep into the borrowed book.

Only the reading belongs to you,
the words, the words are waiting.
But could it be snow, though,
soft on the back of my wrist,
the flex of weather, remember
when everything was a kiss,
a book by Proust, a Long Beach
afternoon?

That was a piece of paper,
fold it up and put it in your pocket,
you have no pocket, do you,
so put it where a pocket would be,
put it in your body,
muscle is memory,
the burnt-down church
you taste the ash from all your life,
the Mass that never ended,
and the Zoo is burning too,
the air belongs to fire, we only borrow it.

A while. A whistle. Something
silver. A German
woman standing at her silver window.
Still young, she arranges flowers,
how long they will last,
let them be blue.

Summer, summon Satan
your silly little kitten. Who are you?
Who are you?
Blessed be those
who call me by my right name,
you are someone climbing up the stairs,
like everybody else.

Here, I have a coat
for you, just to keep you warm.

It’s taken me my whole life to understand
summer is better than winter
and what shall I do now with what I know?

2 January 2009
A reasonable reaction
is a kind of fireworks
after all – blue spangles
up there where the aurora
was guaranteed
to anxious travelers
once in their lifetimes
to see the actual
animal of earth—
but one night instead
over Albany just one
of many, many lights,
the spirit of keyboard
hovers over sky – drunk
in the aisles on alphabets,
organ tones, then
safe landing, the last
miracle. Then ordinary
religion begins. Take
this cup and write me down.

2 January 2009
Tell me what you see
from up there where your body is,
old rock, castle underneath your thigh,
the valley stretching out towards Italy—
the ice we see down there.
So high we come and yet the car
brought us most of the way, a little
scramble up the hillside through the
what’s the California word for it,
chapparal, past blue gentian,
watch out for the lizards, and
can’t you see us too with all that
seeing? I can only see
through your body’s sense of place,
that’s what ‘here’ means in my language,
where you are, awake and feeling.

3 January 2009
Tell me more = Adore
the things around you that you see,
the rock beneath your seat,
the cliff from which falcons fall
into their wind-scything
swoop of kill. Love what you see
and make them all part of me.
By mouth and skin
resurrect the world. Be green
that way, where every ‘this’
already has your hand on it,
giving it to me, your infant
alchemist you must feed
me all my summers in one cup
could be bitter could be sweet
and the animals too are waiting
for you to make them breathe.

3 January 2009
Something silver
grew out of the trees
out from the trees
life escaping life
into the actual
fixed blue,
a trace left in the mind,
spoken.

3 January 2009
LAMENTATIONS

When you sit on a stone
you make it speak.
But are you listening?

The words ascend through skin
to find you, you wait
somewhere vague up there

until you taste them
at the back of your throat
then you must speak.

Then they do. You know
only what the stone
allows itself to tell you

you are a slave
of this learning
a disciple of the rock.
2.

Things need us
and you think about that.

How many mouths

have I coaxed to speak?
How many soft voices
endured my discipline?

You are a hundred of me
and none of you is mine
except the skin the stone shares
3.

The Roman bath house
had one room hot and one room cold
and one room in between

we ogled one another
the sizes of us, spring
and autumn, the godly water

leaves no skin untouched.
As if an elegy maybe
or something broken

drop of fresh blood on marble
love song of the littlest wound
are you still listening?
4.

Rough granite smooth shale
even tempered sandstone
tepidarium in between—

tell me what you hear
your whole life I’ve been
preparing you to listen

you need to be beaten
you need to be no one
for a little while

and then some other one
and then again until
you are nothing but hearing.
5.

I have tried to be your stone.
We do not stay in the same
rooms to each other

the stone you sit on
must always be the farthest place
like a rabbi crossing the street

or a lion leaving,

Where were we when we prayed?
Can you reckon where prayer goes?
6.

A rubber mask, a dental dam
the doctor works into your mouth
while the pretty assistant stands

here is your smile
here is your paper cup
here is your water

later, when the opera’s over
and you are back in Roman times
alone with your skin.
7.

We know there is nothing
inside the body
we know the space inside

and space outside is
one same universe
the parts of it we touch

are fantasies and children’s toys
it dreams up skin
to feel the dreamt-up stone.
8.

Can you trust me to play doctor
to open cavities you never had
and claim that they’re yours?

To make you feel
what I invented your body for?
Do you dare to feel

feel what I feel?
Frightened as you are I think
you’re the only one who knows my name.

3 January 2009