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Nobody knows how to cast a bell.
We live just long enough to learn.
Then the bell is cast and then the bell tolls.

15 March 2007
What were they talking about
the rain the first snowdrops appear
only today the ides of March
and a foot of snow predicted
by wise men for tomorrow.
What were they talking about
the raindrops on my sleeve
my woolen hat its brim too
dappled with dribble sky
lets us down again the future
is the past turned inside out
the imagination is the past
mistaken for right now
forgive me for these small
white flowers I loved them
for a second in the mud
beside the roaring stream
crazy with the old snow
melting into the momentary
whatever you call this place.

15 March 2007
IDES OF IMPROPRIETY

Not one’s own at any rate
like music out of somebody
else’s radio, i.e., something
to be endured if not enjoyed.
Dine with Duke Humphrey
they used to say. Eighty-six
in other words, run out of them
too, no more words, just
Sirius music on some gizmo
in the middle distance, sky
in a Dutch painting, all those
people ever owned was sky.
Don’t you love the flat world?
Mountains romantic obstacles
at best. Chairlift to Parnassus.
Modernism rose to battle
entrenched academies, fell
before the infantry of MFA.
Modernism is too hard for them,
give them retro cheese of Self
or vanguard flarf, no words
left to our sweet nattering
my dear. Modernism meant
have no gimmicks, make
each encounter with the stupid
paint or paper a new thing.
New thing. One is older than
another. Time has some meaning
still it hides inside its sleeves
left for girls and right for boys
like an unsuccessful tattoo
that suppurates beneath the silk.
Once upon a word the time
meant the reproach a dying
person uttered to his murderers,
used to say them in church
around about now, Lenten-tide
and hot cross buns and why
are the old ladies weeping
thinking blood-soaked ashwood often? Rhetorical question. This is the day that Caesar got it. Even you, my son! he said in Greek. A strange language full of verbs, pine scented afternoons, a knife, no, I don’t speak it either, nobody does, they all died with Achilles and went north where Death keeps his lodging on the other side of the pool those people for some strange reason decided to call Kind to Strangers, they way we call fat men Tiny. The things we dare to do. Kai su, tekne, and then he fell, dozens of puncture wounds blossomed in his tyrant torso and so on, republicans like that sort of rhetoric, the man is dead now leave him alone, with Achilles aforesaid, by the salt marsh just this side of Odessa where God has a secret little dacha he spends His weekends in (He invented the week, remember, so it could end and He have a place to hide) while sectaries of divers sorts howl on the twin Sabbaths. Of course Death is forced to listen too. He’s the one who turned the damn thing on. It sounds like a Bach fugue played by a high school band.

15 March 2007 (The Poker)
AROUND

Silent dream. The clutch around the pericardium. Around around. As if as if. The carousel will not stop these days to let the children off.

How long before the little girl on the lion begins to doubt?

She chose this animal because of reputation, ferocity, dignity, gold mane.

But this is one of those that don’t go up and down unlike the frivolous ponies her glad pals mount. She sits ruling the world and bored. And the wheel goes round.

How long before I climb down from my seated dragon and try my luck with her, two shy imperialists together? All thumbs and sixes, not a seven in my hand, all bells and no whistles, all jacks and no trade.

Gimme a chance.

A clutch. A pericardial welcome like a catch of breath, spring on a Bic. A snick of something falling into place. A scapular round her neck with pictures on it slung low along her chest, holy house of Loreto flew up through
the actual air from Palestine to
Italy, no politics intended.

Even the houses go up and down
and she’s still there, sobbing now,
charging forward on her sleeping beast,
her sweaty fingers in his wooden hair.

16 March 2007
Who knows what might happen between there and then? Overboard like a dud torpedo. Or fall simply from the hand like an apple yesterday from the beak of a bothered crow, let fall at our feet, half-eaten Granny Smith, we almost picked it up ourselves, but knew better than to steal things from a crow. Who waited on his tree, ten minutes later we passed again and he was eating it, holding it delicately with one foot. He had come back to what he needs. They always do.

16 March 2007
NORTHERN COOKING

Of course in a sense worth making a fuss about the way women did when we were children, veils and powder and fuss, that’s how they were different from the sullen men bent over the piano punching out stride. Men said nothing and pummeled the piano or pinochle women wore Evening in Paris and tiny flower studded gauzy veils that swooped like bad weather from big hats. And who were we when they were they? Worth thinking about that, a garnet chunk beside a blue knife, what more does mankind need? Sweet potato pie. Manhattan clam chowder. Potato pancakes none complete without a scrape of knuckle skin from the ribeisen. You know who you are. Pig’s knuckles on Thursday with sauerkraut. Flounder. Or fluke if they weren’t lucky, blue faced fishermen at Broad Channel. A world made exclusively of aunts and uncles. And pianos. And cheese of a sort, soft, from yellow boxes.

16 March 2007
WE’LL GATHER LILACS

from New Zealand it says
this morning half a world
away a millennium ago Ivor
Novello songs Wellington
Marilyn Hill Smith singing
with a concert orchestra
crikey this is pretty music
why does it linger only
down there with sheep and
water going down the drain
the wrong way round
and snow about to fall on
us up here, we’ll gather
lilacs in the spring again
the radio explains, a voice
we tend to trust, anyway
we want it to be true
which is all you can ever
ask of music isn’t it, say it,
say it is or isn’t always so.

16 March 2007
There has to be a tendency to say less than you feel more than you know that is the pavement on the road or salt the men put down on snow the voice of your mother never far from being heard the way a star is close when the cloud expires like the offer from your broker you leave unregarded on your desk a fancy name for the kitchen table because you never do grow up the world is still at the breakfast stage and it mingles with all the voices of your unborn children singing sweetly from a nearby opera till you don’t know how to face the mirror and it begins to snow.

16 March 2007
If I believed in suicide you’d all be in trouble but I can’t think of anything smarter to do than go on in this long permission, day, night, day, night, it means as much as any wisdom does, the holy bible of whatever comes next.

16 March 2007
ESCHATOLOGY

Not sure it’s actually here yet
the lurker at the threshold you
keep worrying about or waiting for
it’s never clear, like the sky
one minute blue the next minute
and always far away. So far
you think you hear Bird playing
out of the corner of your ear
the way the distant traffic chants
of far and near but never here
for long and all the ones you
cared about so much are gone.

Highways rule. No name
sandwich with coffee hot
enough to substitute for taste.
Loose sugar in tall jars ago.
When it comes a waitress
will be the one to tell you:

“Look up from your stupid book
and watch it lurching by the cars
stepping up the cinderblocks
yanking the screendoor wide
and here it is at last, the one
we all knew was on the way,
we knew better than to say so
but you. You idiot. Catsup
on your upper lip, the sweet
remission called the philtrum
where I impose right now
like it or lump it your last kiss.”

16 March 2007
Human universe yes yet not secular. 
I touch your godforsaken hand 
and thrill undertakes us both. Not secular 
because the human proper is a god to find 
deep or shallow swaddled in the sense of self 
another who is you. That god.

17 March 2007
Encouraging likeness by crayon and soft rough paper dismays the raw aesthetes in second grade who already know a thing or two about Mirò, the art on freezer doors at home. How can I draw a house when a house has sides and all you give me to work with is some colors? Colors are an afterthought of space, a trick the sunlight plays on us. Give me a stone and a forest full of wood, give me union workers who know the difference between up and down. Colors have no insides. They sleep all the time.

17 March 2007
He didn’t mean to be cynical, it was the wind wuffling in his jersey that made him rude, boys are like that, ill-laundered and insecure hence full of noise and random ceremony waddling downtown mid their peers. Disgust enters the equation here. To drink in doubt until the sun goes out. To lie at home dreaming of another house, eat your bread dreaming of a crustier loaf, et cetera. These are the forgeries of infancy. What they dream will come to pass. That is the terrible truth about dreaming. Now the crowd of them shuffles through the snow, the noise is in proportion to their numbers, hobbled by decency they don’t do all the things they think. The god Mercury observes them from this or that lamppost and decides which of them should survive till morning. He too was young once and understands the drill, the ceaseless sub-clinical infection of dissatisfaction, the acne of the soul. They break things because every single thing around them is a sort of mirror.

17 March 2007
I hate morality. It has dust between its pages, it has webs strung between its breasts. It has ideas that go on thinking while I try to sleep, it has remorse that bites me when I watch the sea or any other passionately neutral thing, some thing trying hard to forget us who scratch along its borders digging out trenches to make towns. But I do like towns, the lines turn into avenues, they lead to you,
I do love you, whoever you are, standing there all beautiful and fresh even with that rulebook in your hand.

17 March 2007
There are sounds in my chest
like voices far away. That’s why
it’s so hard to get back to sleep
plus worrying about the snow.
Maybe they are voices. The Chinese
spoke of ‘voices in the valley’
that showed up in meditation
when you reached a certain stage.
I don’t think I’m there yet,
I think there are noises in my head
and chest and ears and belly
that may even be natural, even
be normal, not the chatty
envoys of arrogant diseases
busy scheming with my cells.
They may just be voices,
my friends inside, or soldiers
cheering each other up,
infantry in some scarlet-uniformed army that hurry
one blizzard after another
through empty provinces
feeding on fallen quinces.

17 March 2007
Basque *boina* on his head, beret to you or me, but black, black as history, brrr. It sits there like a close-capped mushroom above its pale stalk. But black, black as language, the noises that hump out of our mouths when we least expect it, which hearing we are most surprised to understand. And say again. Black, like bleak, all colors absent. Black, like the wool of a certain kind of sheep, like a close-woven felted cap snug on a weary traveler’s head. Let him find the way home.

17 March 2007
DISTILL

To turn a thousand afternoons
into one bright morning. The admiral
of terraces studies his vegetable sea.

The value of the character’s time
distills some violet-scented topiary
stands around such houses nine
generations.

Chessmen and elephants
with little flowers scenting at their feet.

Or one soft night. Cairo. Passion silk
or tattered linen after grabs of lust,
the old story. We are beasts after all.

What is that nice French word for lawn?
Or not so much lawn as the whole space
where people flounder to build a house
usually in the middle of, grass or no grass.

Table rapping in the salon annoys the
cleaning woman two rooms away. Soon
she’ll go home leaving the poets to their
play. She’ll gossip about these boring
but dangerous customs of householders.
Ouija boards. Reading books. Eating
food. But these days she lives alone.

17 March 2007

[sent to Eliza Douglas for her musics]