ROMAN HISTORY

I certainly don’t know what the destination is
don’t even know where we started from
and who we are when I say here we are

but here we are it looks like a church but quicker
smells like the palms of my hands but there’s a wind
I hear your voice because the words are yours

the words are always yours and you bring them
from the moment when the body is balanced
between being alive and being dead what is that called

the minute when you hear at last another voice
saying And this is death so then I touch you finally
the way I always wanted to the touch called True.

6 December 2003
To be sick the way the old time was
and nothing in the mind
not to read or think or listen

but talk is pure talk is love
my love, talk tells me more
when everything I am is less

6 December 2003
It is a burro lurching down the Grand Canyon
or an old black man dancing for the whites
it is one of those two surely, or else it’s me,
I think it’s me, sure footed in a clumsy
old humiliated way, feel bad with me
I will take you to the bottom of the world.

6 December 2003
(The bottom of the world
means poetry)

I wish I could have translated that poem just now
from Spanish or from Portuguese
then I could respect the thing it says
knowing nothing of the “I” it means.

6 December 2003
Well yes maybe all my poems
are translations from I’d be the last to know

some language behind language
unknown to me it does its tricks

I write them down some sudden
accuracy pierces mindless dark.

6 December 2003
DOCTA IGNORANTIA

Not knowing which sign
or which design
transfixes the world

by which stone buildings
come to stand
such a long time such a long time

or an apparitional personhood
(the famous ‘you’)
stands among the ruins

lecturing anyone who listens
on the unchanging
beauty of the sign

Because I think
I’m listening
a little snow has fallen

sugaring the cornices
some things I don’t want to understand
the brittle part the color

how frail it always is
and winterly
the actual fact is always
Wanting to read again
that book of Mauriac
that had me in it

when I was young so frightened
the big wind coming by
God in all her dresses

big wind in dark churches
and every light in them
an accusing candle

God frowns at me
from the dark spaces
where the body folds

upon itself and opens
never, candlewax
listening hard

but still not hearing
the old priest mumbles
my instructions

is he talking to me
or just my sins
is there a difference
I live inside it
daring to smile back
in the same dark mind

That church is broken now
faux-marbre of 1950
gone as Joe Dimaggio

but the organ lasts
anybody can play
Mascagni, all those fingers

walk the sun-crazed courtyards
where jealousy makes men
think they are alive

how close the lictor is now
to the murderer
the procession of criminal justice

through the streets
with gilt saints and guillotines
maybe this is the hour of my trial

but it is over already
always already begun and ended
open and shut
arrêt de vie
the fragment in my hands
all I need is no fever

then words would work again
planisphere and alchemy
the special weather of not knowing

and it’s all right here
coming down to the river
heavy snow someone watches.

7 December 2003
Death is so much closer
already I begin to hear
his calm explanations.

7 XII 03
Can I already begin to have been
the other
footstep on the staircase
the best friend on her way
and I wonder what is walking in my chest
outside the window
it might be anywhere at all
it might be a street in Vienna it might be snow.

7 December 2003
sing me hwæthugu

I still don’t know how
I still try

answering the voice
is all the voice we are

8 December 2003
HUMILITAS

Sun gilt on woodpecker’s
scarlet poll
he keeps bending to eat seed.

8 XII 03
Somewhere this morning

between sleep and waking I saw Robert Duncan
step across my living room and bend to take
from the bookcase behind my chair my copy of
Brenda Maddox’s *George’s Ghosts*. He was fortyish,
as I knew him first, and was wearing pale pajamas
of the sort he lounged about in my apartment
in a winter forty years ago. I am returned to the book.
Tell Lisa this.

8 December 2003
AUCTORITAS

Tend towards
the lictor the toad
carrying authority
who breaks your street
into blue shadows
you’re left with
when the bluebottles
have come and gone
the lictor the nasty
man who authors you
a world of shame
every day the same
arguments of breakfast
belching Bessemer flames
like the beaches of Lackawanna
they laugh at my vocabulary

9 December 2003
the words have been hiding
rock rats in the desert

now it’s moon come out
now it’s moon come out

everybody has been said before
and you’re still here?
everything said and you still here?

9 December 2003
something simple
in your treasure chest
tell me daughter
something even I can fathom
someone I can believe
the snow is everywhere
everything is outside
we manage
by measuring
we find it hard to light the candle
from the moon you assure it can be done
I believe you, you mean a marriage
I came into the world before wax
and even wood was new.

9 December 2003
THE AMBER SEASON

the amber season
full of insistence
love this character & buy that
we live transactingly

but I could breathe
a sleepier merchandise
a thought released
from thinking

shadow of an idea
cool in sunlight
my head begins to turn
and number is meek need

a Russian prayer book
and every prayer subtends
a special god
and if you understand the words

you too must be the god
intended, you too are Aleph
and evening, date palm and lamb,
you too have geese.

10 December 2003
Vision also has to have a habit
to let the answers idle past
until the man who carries a door
carries on by, and the woman
who carries a house in her arms
opens it up and you can see
a cat on the walnut dining table
and an old creature by the hearth
and the old creature begins to talk
so you listen because you are the one
who carries his ears in his hands
wherever you ever go you ever have
with you Crescent Street busy with
curses and oranges, it is your only
honesty, your conjugal machine,
your shabby robe of authority.

10 December 2003
To see me in you
the way the heat of the sun
inscribes itself in stone
as the weight of the rock,

I want to be the bend in you
that rivers you
towards the deepest things
the shadow of a diamond
is made half of light

and go down there
I want my name
to be the tune you hum
when the market opens
the bronze gates
old wooden chifferobes
with shattered drawers
all wood dries out

spills a dozen stiff collars
you hold your hand
between the window
and the oil lamp
the read the lines on your palm
I put there, did you know that,
I wrote them in,
I change them every day

and then the window is allowed to break
the old motorcycle riderless rolls in
it captures you and off you go
through the bottomless hallways
full of eternal errands
a house is just a knot of streets
lost in themselves, anything
can happen, anybody
might be living in your skin,
we have to go together
and hide in the little room
high up the church steeple
where we study each other’s faces
dawn as we can
around us barren as sunlight.

10 December 2003