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Now the great work begins
he writes, or is he dying?
Did he write with self
deluded vanity? Or irony?
Or simple accuracy?

Now the great work begins
and this “beginning”
is a machine (a “gin”)
for meaning or gains
all voices into itself.
Every great work, he said,
has the shape of a single word.

A word is spoken.
From silence
its attack,
then the segments of its sound
and all the formant zones
its sonants press from
to be heard by you,

envelope (urn)
of the shape.
And then the closure, stop or Wiederhall
or clouds pass before my eyes
reflected in the glass tabletop,
clouds fast and the word is spoken.

Now the great work begins.
Put iron ink in the pen.
Lean on the wedge-stick,
cuneiformers, the fine
smooth clay is ready for your lust.
The seagull laughs.

Now the great work begins,
parrots in the coffee tree.
Walk in wet sand.
Sun pardon us one week,
bright spell be broken,
too much light to see.

Now the great work
is beginning, the hard listening
holds (how?) somebody’s hand.
Road rivers, the harbor
thronged all weekend with masts
meek now. The character
of the clouds has changed
while I’ve been writing this letter.
Formally ragged cumulus
sailed fast from the west.
Now a wisper colony succeeds,
torn apart by some war in heaven
limps by our heads. That book
I sent you, did you read it,
really read it, to the end?

What could I have been thinking
sending you a book with no words,
no pages, just a quick elapsing
of cloud vapor in plain unflavored sky,
a text of mere lovely absences?

Have you ever done anything really wrong?
I began and began
and seldom finished,
yet even so finished
more than was needed.
I fled from sunshine
and normal weathers.
Rainwalla, I chose aloof.
But wrong every day.
In the Java Bean Coffee House
on the harbor in New Bedford
men without shame discuss poetry.
I wonder at the fate of language
to be spoken in a world of things.
Having neglected to invest in mutual funds
I never read Thackeray, I like
rivers better than lakes and ocean better than both
— a house is a breath between departures —
serendipity of male gender
all that self and baggage. Lazy,
I was lazy.

But now the great work begins,
released by ocean weather (les temps de la mer)
(a word drawn into feminine from Latin neuter
by consonance with the word for mother,
may we all be so drawn, lifted
towards the conscience so, a flower
in the Buddha’s hand, raised,
smiled with, offered
to some inconceivable all-pervasive
beyondness close inside,
offered to the wind.

A smile is the sky in your face,
He lifts the flower — what color, kind,
do you imagine it was, flower?
What color is the mind?
Let it be so — the great work
stirs in me as once
down Blake’s arm old Milton trundled,
made young again by going down,
into the speakable condition of the listening other,
and spoke, I feel it stirring,
deer-shy in suburban woods,
touch-me-not and I will come to you
and by calling give you comfort,
such comfort as a man dare have
on a blue planet, a house like this,
life quick and ruin hardy,
worry till I come. The work
begins my life was listening for
nervous at the door of the Exact,

the pedantic fit
which is the jewel’s 
glory in its setting,

that the stone fit 
the gold and gold 
take its shape 
from what it holds 
displaying it 
in the peace of form,

the marriage.

Now the word begins my sleep was hearing.

The clouds have slowed their paces now 
and a great bird flies overhead 
or is it a gull so close it darks the sun, 
a bird like a nun praying on the busy street, 
a bell ringing, a flag flapping, 
a bird like a bird?

For there is wind. The great work 
needs it, distended Dizzie Gillespie cheeks 
of the puffers by their alchemic fires 
ever huffing, between hard squeezes at the bellows,

o my love we live in the valve of the world, 
it all is breathing

and when we’re decent 
comes breathing through us

and through us the wind is wielded 
that cooks the everlasting broth,

the silver soup of the alchemists 
with globes of fatty gold in it,

uneasy to look at, thou must become. 
I also am the gleet of gold,
inspect me as it has been said before, 
aye, the great work has always 

been spoken or written before, 
inscribed in the nature of the place 

we wake to find. 
We wake to find. 

It is written and it must be read 
by writing down the wind until it falls, 

and then you find it, 
crack your cheeks and blow, 

the wind is faithful in its fashion, 
the treasures that wait in earth 

for us to answer them 
with melodious pronunciations of a hidden text. 

Now the island Pig Roast day 
is Saturday this year, on August 12th, 
old Lammas, when the blue 
faced Severn shepherds slew their sheep 
and set the head of each pointing out 
(northeast, northwest and south) to guard the world 
with the bale of their dead eyes.  No, 
it is not true, it is not Lamb-Mass, 
not so, the Mass of Lugh maybe, 
like Irish Lughnasa, the High God’s feast 

when Irish warriors plunge naked into kettles 
full of seawater, tepid, submerge and change 
their bodies into seals and dogs and hawks 
go screaming down the beer-hall 
to the far gate, the one they plate with gold 
and only let the sun in, but let 
these changed Men out.  No,
that’s a lie too, a lie as well, this Mass is Loaf’s Mass, high holiday of bread, holy heathen wheat. And from the spill of flour round the table we infer the names of those who come to love us this long year and the footprints of those who plan to die.

No, no, no/ shut up and eat your bread. For from the soft sensuous half-drunken tender crumb of it, easy as a first date, you taste: the likelihood of love on a fell star.

Tropismes. Holy tropes of Saint Eulaly, why I never thought the chanting would be done and now I hope it never ends: for this is reason and upon me prov’n, that every bit so long as the song lasts the world lasts with it and my beautiful wife, wearing a sweater tonight in the northeast wind, walks with me up the hill into a blaze of pink broad-rayed sunset slicing out like the Japanese war flag fifty years ago and Nagasaki. The chant continues us. Now the great work begins we thought of leaving and what I make for you is merry (holy) and awkward morrice-dancers klutz their shoon and cobbled stones and collops all trying to dance the pig to death they’ll roast come Lammas. The great work is full of islands. Gay fodder, feigned (ficta) history (gesta) deeds of the lowmen and their molls, a weather (seas 10-15 feet tonight, winds at 20 knots)
that is beauty and leaves us simply here.

The great work is beginning
the great work is done
she dances in the sky
and down here on the fence
that keeps deer off the lilies
(day lilies) and oregano
is perched a little what is it,
grey mousy with a bright
broad yellow tum, a warbler
or a whatsit, the book won’t help,
the bird is gone before it speaks.
It seems unfair
to have a woman
dancing in the air
and a bird down here.
But the bird is gone.

The book is closed, the great
work is beginning
(not about winning).
Game is the opposite of play.
Like like and love when in love.
Opportunities breed down here,
blue bonnet, planet of war.

Sometimes all night you hear the channel bell
or I’ve been listening to a scream you hear in dream
when the sea opens and the cloud comes down.
A charnel bell and no one listening.
Sometimes we die in the night and are reborn
no wiser but a little cleaner. Scoured sky
of ocean sunshine early. On this island
you can wake before the wind. “The great
work is beginning,” you think, the muslin
curtain billows in her window, a bird
you’ve never seen sits on the fence and doesn’t
say a word. Yellow throat and thorax,
soft taupe or mouse-grey feathers, an eye
on you. It means me. Opportunity.
The work that men were milk to manage,

anybody can. Innocents in bed, sparrows
bathing. In comes the sea for not the first time.
Cloudless, bleu souriant, islands playing tic tac toe
and the sea always winning. Mute archipelago!
Spider on my back, sunburn, heal!
(The great work is beginning.)

Interviews

with alchemists: say, beldame,
why your son left you to stir his porridge.
—Have no son and I am young.
These are the groats of gold,
this fire is negotiation,
the spoon seems made of horn to you
because light squeezes through it
but it’s a metal of another kind
from a planet where no one’s crucified,
not near this galaxy.
If you listen I’ll let you taste.

And you sir with the pitchfork in your hand
turning wet salty-looking hay along the shore
tossing hanks of it high in the wet breeze
like a devil winnowing sinners, who
are you supposed to be?

—I am the heart
of conversation, I speculate and gossip,
this matter that I agitate is humid fire,
blaze without the inconveniences of flame.
But all the qualities of heat you’d need
will come to you from this salt grass,
plus feed your sheep. I have to turn it
every hour to catch the fresh breath of the sea,
that superior furnace and eloquent alembic
where all things are processed —deeply and widely—
and the great work begins.

These two, once spoken, resume their disposition of the matter trusted to their care.
Or we have a tryst with matter, a little marriage, a long divorce.
Love. Charity. Sans espoir, though, except that breed of Hope that’s called Other People,
do what you do for their sake,

and for love
I keep the calendar,

setting down clear the name
and properties of every day
in case this day is the one

when love is born and grows
and needs to know its purpose
among the easy rocks at seaside

all our climaxes
listening to the red and mauvish roses
shiver in the wind.

Everything has something on its mind.
Everything has something to report.

In the glass top of the table I see reflected
the very eaves of the house that shields me
and the blue intensity above, here shown below.
Look down to see the sky.

(The great work is beginning.) what is the practice of the sky?
A scramble of blue vetch beside the highway,
a hawk, big, white patched underwing all else dark
brune or ruin, sways hovering
half an hour over the heart of the island.
Unusual bird. His appearance enters the annals — this
is the chemical we needed for the broth, sky-salt, alkaloids of danger.
(How sweet the world if men would sleep
or if they’d wake. How sad the intermede,
this war. No bank on the island,
the sky is made of money. No sheep but plenty wool.)

Wampum fantasies, your wealth in your lap,
in colors and most palpable. Dream again
that kindly cloud that banked the sun
deep in the alembic of the sky — the Other Vessel —
into each the other pours — interview
the Maiden lighthouse keeper, the Lady of the Valve
who merges the invisible water of the sky
with the invisible emptiness of sea. And conversely
coactive — like a kid in new sneakers —
sprints cautiously on the pink rocks between
sea-poppies, sea-roses, sea-peas and the sand.

Blue shadows in white curtains. There is a truth
that sounds like lie when spoken,
there is a lie in silence also
when lovers matched only in insecurity
play a guessing game but will not speak.
Annotate your pleasures, white man.

Does mindless talk or mindless music
more vex the decent demons of a place?
The talk is livem the music is recorded—
does that matter to the Earthlords, Landlords,
the spirits under and other? I wonder.

Suppose there were nothing but this gossip—
would that make it true? That, alchemists,
is what I’m asking you. You
with your earplux and your bellows, yellow
metals smelly waxes red reflections,
pale motivations, violet situations,
you with your beast horns and white shadows,
whiet shadows, you I’m asking with your gleet
and gyzm, cosmoses and chrism, rhymes and slimes,
you with a word for everything
and not a thing for me,
you with your peacock weather and slim-hipped dictionaries.

Far out a trawler works the Vineyard Sound.
And I’m waiting for an answer.

Sancta Euphoria ora pro nobis,
for we are sad with comeliness in a comely world.
And stepping up through bayberry
bushes and tall grasses
we reached the southern headland and
I sneezed on that cliff. The gulls
black and white wheeled screaming up
from their lodges on the crumbling edge,
shouted to heaven at a sound they never heard—
o human sneezes maybe now and then
but never mine before or one like mine,
I sneeze like Cyrano from a nose like Nile,

old hawk weary of the sun.

The new old old Revolution.
The permanent king
and his annual appointment
with the guillotine.
A dialogue of Christians
with the Chief of the Do-Ill Isles
summoned by Judge C to attend
—in silk and periwig—
the everlasting assizes of the skies.

Survive.
That’s all,
survive.

8 August 1995

The great work begins, the ant
is in the kitchen, the sun’s magnesium
breaks on the Cape flare, the old nylon flag
twitches in the cloudless wind,
haze over mainland, am I wrong,

are you dreaming? The hymn from the chapel
on Sunday night lingers in the rocks
through Wednesday, can’t catch the words,
music the same tune as the wind,

the meritorious sequencers of heaven
lift the Superior Man’s whiskers
in a light dawn breeze. The decisions
are all made. God is pure description.
Sophocles washes the ink off his fingers,
goes back to bed for forty winks, knots, needs
uncoil in us, let it be so,
the knots that are needs
are tight in us
the great work lets us untie. Die
is no answer to day.
These faux-amis, these sound-alikes!

To circumcise the globe! Hypothecate some notorious Idea
and then pay interest on it ever after with your thinking
with your wishing with your sex. And where will we rent
our wisdom when, and pawn our meek experiences then?
The great work is dull as a clam this morning,
the whales white and otherwise have sailed away
and the lights of New Bedford wink out in daylight,
delight, we are rescued by the commonplace, we thrive,
watch out, I have warned you before of these trivial resemblances.

The elegant alternatives that men are
to a better love. Sound effects
of rain falling on the moon.

All likeness is seduction.
The fairy at the cradle launches
the child with an unpronounceable name
to keep it safe ever after,
no one in the house of nowhere, sleeping.

A man caught in his name like a flag caught in the wind, we are danced. It looks like rhyme when poetry is signed between the mute and the surd, we are danced. The Bureau of False Measurements sends its inspectors everywhere, you meet them on the stairs, your feet don’t fit, the door dissolves, a wall wavers. We put our trust in the shimmeriest.

Clock time an hour after lesion. Right ascension perplex the house of your room. Each born into a licit but limited cosmos, each is meant to stretch the membrane out until the shimmer solids and the wake sleeps up—then, children, we are crusaders of the fact. Till then consumers in a dream of politics.

If only I could make you dream. Last night three rabbits by the schoolhouse lawn prudently white-tailed it off. Off is where fear takes me. Horizon hot, wind cool. People from the yachts walk up and down the hill in search of pleasure, to be seen in prospect from the highest place. I will not join the union. (Learn to swim, study fox trot — and then she had a child, she who had been all that dancing — litmus paper doesn’t alter what it measures— a song reacts to its occasion. Time never comes back. I will not sing. Be thankful for all blessing, the great work is beginning. Long Division, presidents of the United States, class patron saint — enough if schools would teach the names alone, the names, and let the things come later, plant a mute name and let it be a magnet in them
that draws ever after (*dorénavant*, the golden future)
a world to kiss its mirror. The referent
comes rushing through summer meadows to meet its label.

Theory of education.
Plant shadows in the garden
from which the sun will rise.
Teach dreams so daylight comes.
Don’t give contrived experience,
give authentic names.
The mysteries. Say words
and don’t explain. Let the word
be born in them and be flesh.
Don’t tell too much
lest they weary of all story.
Or delight too much in hearing
and be dull. Say a hard word
out loud and put thereby
an itch in their ears. A word
is waiting to happen.

Mythology is nothing but this.
Over the altar
they show an image of a ship,
a schooner with four saild,
you can see the dark hull
wallow in the sea.
Mosaic ship and sky and sea,
we suppose they worship that
as a sign of sheer going.
Pure vection. From this isle
by night set out and reach
some further shore
or sail forever in the raw
heaven of what happens.
Who knows what people want when they pray?

Just ask us,
the ghosts are saying.
Just ask us,
give us the money
to make an exception,
to be beautiful
in the Lord’s sight
or the Lady’s,
to be a ship and high
wallowing,
to be double and a thing,
to be everything,

to be a picture of a ship
cut from clam shell and mussel shells,
to be blue and fair weather,
to be forever,

to be wampum in your lap
or hand to hand set free
by changing hands,

the shipmaker god
and the wind who tears
your father’s sails.

9 August 1995

The great work begins with yesterday
and dies into morning. Dry dock of a man
trying to mean it. Who is my shoe?
Where did I wander?

The prayers I told the moon last night
were colorful and full of balsam,
reminded me of being born,
kept us warm on ‘Lookout Hill’

where the Welsh first saw America.
ApMeirica. The blue lagoon of fantasy
where crabs bite toes. Gulls are unusual,
being actual. And if you want to know
or know where oceans go and what things
there are in Manhome, just ask the gulls.
But Womanhouse knows something more,
only so much a mother can give her child,
then the poor strange chromosome is on his own,
basking a while in mother-light then
the boreal circumstance of history
shivers him and he is me. No better and no worse.

The great work is beginning, a lament
of gender, loss, gender is loss,
cities sacked and oceans smirked with oil,
rain forest with copper tailings,

this jewel unbezeled and befouled,
just like everybody else. I called myself Arkel
(what happened yesterday? Proust never reports
his weeks of small talk with the cadets at Doncières,
just the fact of conversation, the soothing framework
of immemorable jabberstance.) What happened
between the ribs of the ruined barges, sea-smoothed
the beams or jagg’d with sun, tree-big girders
with foot-long spikes rusted by salt-light, I saw the sun
spin on the axle of heaven, I saw the Mother
of Meaning clearly, I saw her hands in mudra balanced,
this silence is my meaning, I saw her children
kalpa after kalpa reeling from the harmless light
they teach to heal us. What happened over Egypt?
What happened in the little bull’s-eye (a boat)
over Church’s beach, or by the frog pond,
cool wind and no one dead? How does what
takes all our time not turn into history? Or who?
A spavined sentence is the one we speak,
soon forgotten, but not the mood of it,
the cloth he wore to say such things
and the moon tattoo’d on Doreen’s breast,
a slip of it inside the disk of sun like Osiris
hidden in his wife, we hide in one another,
no body is my meaning, as if all light is found in me
and rose from pain, I suffered for this sake.  
All islands talk about such tender things as these.

Ask the gulls.  Bach quotes Vivaldi.  
A long time the story’s been around, 
it’s been with us since before there was a moon.  
You know what’s different?  People 
don’t whistle anymore.  All 
our music is a drumbeat angry, 
or the tune vanishes from anxious lips.  
A whistle was a kind of kiss that speaks.  
Whose fault now is this missing hiss?

The moon, I’d say, who lost some brightness,  
and the fulminating sun —the world grows weary—  
rich Democrats, and gay Republicans  
and anarchist yachtsmen sailing ever further—  
we live out the karma of Nagasaki,  
Hiroshima, Dresden, My Lai, Tokyo  
and inherit the inquity of whatever we destroy  
—no sane man eats a tiger—  
and we eat Nagasaki.  Inescapable.  
There is only the world  
and no place for the consequences  
of my acts to go but here.  
They stay and stay and are me.

We have to turn away from things to see them,  
and from the corner of your eye catch the cause of all,  
the clothes she wore to show such things  
as danced —tone imbricated on tone and sound  
on body moving anvil’d— with the rhythm of her talk,  
language is our nature, noblest shadow of the mind.

Logs piled up to hold the hill in place.  
(What was that mouse-and-yellow bird?  And the vulture  
—is it?— sailing over our property just one more shade?)  
(And nobody whistles on the island,  
not like the Canaries where they talk  
from mountainside to mountainside with shrill entendres,
a meaning tumbling down an echo, a shadow on the hill)
some lies I heard in passing through the world.

Or Malory in jail, beside us, whispering.
This work offers you the flesh or timely pleasure
of a sustained conversation loopholed to make room
for your least remembrance or greatest thought—
come talk with me, this great work
is a walk along the clifftops
through bushes charged with blackberries,
near gull nests and a steady wind.
No land that way for three thousand miles
so plenty of time for us to say
all we have to say to one another
and all the silences we pass from hand to hand.
I have invented a conversation that never stops
and every line of it makes room for you.

Touch me or despise me or prize
the antic amble of my dog mind,
but come talk with me forever by the sea.

Forever. Come talk with me. (I have energized
your silences with song
but fear you would not talk.)
Come talk with me.
(A silence
is a line of poetry
better than the one you just read
but not so wonderful as
what rises in your heart to answer
in the space of time provided

between the opening and closing of the door.
Then the poem has another line to say.
The greatest poems ask the greatest answers in you.)
Come walk with me, the poem said—
and I am the first victim of its charm
forever answering.

10 August 1995
The great work is beginning
(we spoil things with our music)

   a ship of clam shells
   cut to tesseræ,
   their inner sides
   a breath of color.

I was wrong. Seen at noon, half-far on calm sea,
an ordinary schooner does look just like this,
as if its keelless hull floated on, not in, the water.
It has to do with shadow and reflection.
It has to do with light.

The church with clam shells on its altar
in the sign of a ship — turning evidence of death
into some powerful if unlikely journeying
— a ship, for Christ’s sake, where
could we go on a *ship*? —

over the narrow channel to another world.
Sea-bite and faery lore, the folded far dark pink
of sea roses and a few almost gaunt
sea-poppies, their lemony springtime darkened towards
ocher. We all come home.

Can any island be an ever?
O sky my looking glass
and earthly telescope
I see this rock
that bears my feet
or bruises me
indifferently,

under the lighthouse at Gosnold Pond
watching the keen Atlantic,
mother of oceans.

   Sea-rift
   and beach poppies, from the crack
in the base of the world
all substance continues to arise,
earth-gift and martyr-flow,
giver and giving lost in the seamist
before the sun burns off these measures,

but the gift is here.
We rise in our portions,
lovely as wet grass.
Dewfall
and renaissance surprises,
who is my body?
The knights set out to find it,
what else could a man be looking for,

a crow showed them the way,
a crow is always a beginning,
pharmacist in the sky, blood manners,
the look of sunlight through your fingers,

who is my body, will you tell me
or you? Why do I have to tie your hands
with a satin sash yards long
to make me an answer?

Why didn’t I understand the pain you choose
drives out the pain you fear?
I knew the words but the crows know the tune,
the knights set out to parley with the wind,

where is my body? His work is all beginning,
red sash for her sake worn snug
around his pectorals beneath the steel,
in his stupid iron helmet gilded

the crows he heard reverberated
croak by claw by call
until he thought their voices
were his own, his brain was breathing,
his eyes were calling, sun sweat  
dipped down his nose, he will find  
no body but his own, if that,  
the horse is eager, a hammer-hilted sword

hangs powerless to decide. But the crow  
knows, and if I listen tells  
where knights are going and who find they there  
and what they do together, clipping and kissing

till a stone would grow weary of their fire  
and break, and let stream out  
the necessary radiance at the heart of things.  
They will be silenced by what they see.

She will haul in a long scarlet sash  
slippery as a thought  
and they will tie them together.  
A new kind of bird they’ll be and the crow  
has seen it all before. The great

work is waiting to begin. The great  
work is waiting. The great work is beginning.

All week we’ve seen a hawk above the cliffs  
where gulls and terns and cormorants are usual.  
The great work is a sleeping man and a womans,  
the great work is in your hand. All week a hawk  
over the upland moors, shadow wheeling over bayberry thicket,  
all week a work is waiting,  
of course a poem’s work begins where the words end,  
begin in you, survivor of so many texts,  
it all, it all, is listening.

Only an elite wants to protect the poor. Absent grace,  
absent kindness, an electorate will kill.  
It is sober to recall the Orient Light  
our Jefferson supposed would bathe a people  
brought to the valvework, the deeds of opening.

Don’t be so serious. We’ll all die soon
and every death of course is premature. Till then
the great work is all we have, the stone
he breaks into music, the gulps of water
something still half asleep will quaff
standing barefoot at the kitchen sink,
the final priest of morning.

We are owned. The Turkish cymbal-makers in their polishing
have clashed the sun again over Martha’s Vineyard and shade came back,
the only thing we need sun for, long dance and shivaree of shadows,
the contradictions. In bed we find each other but where am I?
Why did I disappear from your dream, wandered off
down New Bedford’s cobbled streets to find the sailmaker’s loft
and have our torn sail sewn. And you wondered where I was,
and missed me, and awoke, and there I was beside you
but that’s not the same. Someone who goes in dream is gone.
In sleep though I will come back to you again. That’s why the knights
go pricking through the forests of the world in search
of what they carry with them. There is no territory to discover
but my body, no river but the ever-fluent feel of things
that runs my life. Crows see this, and there are no crows on the island.