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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
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
TAKE

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
M O D E R A T E L Y  A F R A I D

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
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

Westermen 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